

BRIDGING THE CLASS DIVIDE: THE QUALITATIVE EVALUATION  
OF A SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAM FOR LOW-INCOME  
STUDENTS AT AN ELITE UNIVERSITY

---

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Curry School of Education

University of Virginia

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

---

by

Barbara A. Schmertz, B.S., M.Ed.

May 2010

© Copyright by  
Barbara A. Schmertz  
All Rights Reserved  
May 2010

## ABSTRACT

This study qualitatively evaluates an elite university's summer bridge program, which is offered to low-income, academically talented, incoming first year students. The goals of the study were to provide an evaluation of a newly created summer bridge program and to explore the first-year experiences of low-income students at a selective institution. The study sought to understand how student participants' experiences differed from non-participants and how their perceptions of the program were aligned or misaligned with the views of the program administrators. The theoretical framework weaves together social reproduction and persistence theory to illuminate the students' stories and experiences before and within college.

The research methodology included observations of the summer bridge program and semi-structured interviews with five administrative stakeholders tied to the summer intervention. In addition, two sets of semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20, low-income students, which included 10 program participants, four waitlisted students, and six students who had been invited but did not respond. Evaluative and phenomenological methods were used to analyze the interview, observation and document data.

Findings reveal that participation in the summer bridge program did not eliminate the challenges students faced in their transition to and ongoing success in college. Instead, students' commitment to persist was tied to psychosocial characteristics, such as a sense of self-efficacy, and their ability and willingness to enact the highly valued social and cultural

capital necessary within the elite university culture. Students' pre-college experiences influenced their successful negotiation of the first semesters at the university. In addition, while financial aid served to help equalize students' academic and social experiences, reminders of social class differences remained.

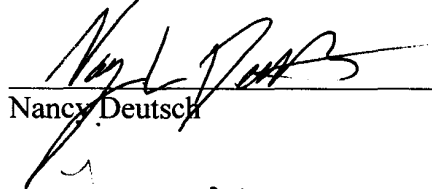
The summer bridge program was established with the aim of helping low-income students transition to college and attracted students who varied in their academic skills, and social and cultural capital. Recommendations include honing the process by which students are selected and re-aligning the summer bridge program's goals and content to better support the needs of the students it aims to target. In addition, the results of the study illuminate the complex pathways to and through college for low-income students.

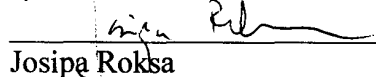
Department of Leadership, Foundations and Policy  
Curry School of Education  
University of Virginia  
Charlottesville, Virginia

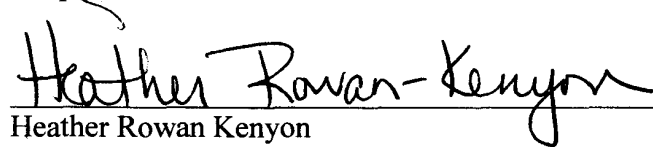
APPROVAL OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation, *Bridging the Class Divide: The Qualitative Evaluation of a Summer Bridge Program for Low-income Students at an Elite University*, has been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the Curry School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

  
Heather Wathington, Advisor

  
Nancy Deutsch

  
Josipa Roksa

  
Heather Rowan Kenyon

3-29-10 Date

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Helen, and father, Edward, for teaching me the value of curiosity, learning, and determination. I also dedicate this to my husband, Andrew, and son, Ian. Without your unfailing support, love, and encouragement, I would not have completed this work.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It's hard to know where to begin in expressing my gratitude when so many people have helped to make the completion of this work possible. First and foremost, I want to thank my dissertation chair, Heather Wathington. She provided the challenge and support I needed to continue to plug along at my research, writing and analysis, despite the frustrations and life-challenges I faced. Regardless of her own work demands, she always made time for me, and her feedback and analysis pushed me to produce a dissertation I'm proud of. I feel blessed for her ongoing commitment to my success.

The remaining members of my dissertation committee are strong, intelligent women who provided a model of how to strive for excellence in my work. Nancy Deutsch and Heather Rowan-Kenyon played a central role in my tenure at the Curry School, availing themselves to me and acknowledging the importance of seeking a life-work balance. I still remember me and Nancy meeting when my son was just a few months old; there he sat on her office carpet playing quietly while we discussed research and scholarship, and she didn't bat an eye. In addition, Josipa Roksa must be commended for being willing to serve on my committee after only meeting me briefly during her office hours; she asked me a few pointed questions, and I must have given satisfactory answers because she agreed to help me and continues to encourage me to strengthen and publish my work.

I gratefully acknowledge the institutional support I received over the years of my study. This includes EDLF funding, a Curry School of Education Foundation scholarship

and dissertation support from the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL). Travel funding from the Curry School made it possible to attend conferences and present on my work, both invaluable to my growth as a graduate student.

Other faculty at the Curry School and the University deserve great thanks. These include the early and ongoing voices of encouragement – Jennings Wagoner, Hal Burbach, Brian Pusser, Penny Rue and Peg Miller. In addition, the administrators I worked with in the Dean’s Office for the College and Graduate School of Arts & Sciences provided me incredible opportunities to learn and grow as a student practitioner. Individuals such as Lori Schuyler, Edward Ayers, Rachel Most, Nancy Bertram, Adam Daniel and Karen Ryan embraced me as a member of the dean’s leadership team and allowed me to thrive.

I express my deepest gratitude to the students who shared their stories with me. I’m honored to have met them and had an opportunity to cross their paths. They continue to be in my thoughts as I complete my work and I wish them all success in their educational and life endeavors. They were inspirations to me. The administrators I met with are so clearly dedicated to making Valley University a strong university regarding diversity and excellence. I would not have completed this project without them; special thanks go to Jenna Reese who provided me access to information and data that helped strengthen my research.

There is a large group of people to thank for those times when I thought I couldn’t type one more transcript, analyze one more interview or write one more word. These include, but are not limited to: Wynne Stuart, Vicki Hawes, Eleni Theodorou, Troy Buer, Shelby Radcliffe, Stacey Spangenburg, Betsy Nagle, Nicole Eramo, Amy Swan, Roger Catania and



Celestia Hollen. Special thanks go to my dear friends Jen Wood, Melissa Levy, Rebecca Blanchard, and Loren Intolubbe-Chmil; I met them in graduate school but feel I've known them my whole life. They gave me kindness, sympathy and laughter when needed in just the right doses.

My family has been incredibly encouraging, even when they wondered aloud why I was pursuing something as challenging as a Ph.D. The pride people like my Aunt Babs, mother, father and in-laws expressed to me regarding my work sometimes made all of the difference and pushed me to work harder.

I finish with sincere thanks and love to my husband and partner, Andrew, and son Ian. They are my world and the family I've always dreamed of. I am so happy to share my life with them.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
LIST OF TABLES .....	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xiv
CHAPTER 1 .....	
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Context of the Study .....	3
Purpose of the Study .....	7
Research Questions .....	7
Potential Significance of the Study .....	8
Applying Theory to Practice .....	9
Scope of the Study .....	10
Site of the Study - Valley University .....	10
Valley University – the VU Promise Program .....	12
Retention of Low-Income Students – The Stars Academic Program .....	12
Terms and Definitions .....	14
Organization of the Chapters .....	14
Conclusions .....	15
CHAPTER 2 .....	
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	17
Retention Initiatives .....	17
Summer Bridge Programs .....	19
History of summer bridge programs .....	19
Effectiveness of summer bridge programs .....	20
Factors that Effect Persistence .....	28
Pre-college Factors .....	28
Academic Skills .....	29
First-year Experiences .....	30
Financial Aid .....	31
Increased Faculty Interaction .....	32
Peer Networks and Student Engagement .....	32
Theoretical Framework .....	33

Persistence Theory .....	34
Validation theory .....	36
Social Reproduction: Social and Cultural Capital Theory.....	38
Conclusions .....	42
 CHAPTER 3 .....	
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS .....	44
Qualitative Methods within Evaluation .....	46
Theory-driven Evaluation .....	47
Researcher Paradigm .....	49
Researcher as Instrument .....	52
Researcher Role .....	53
Phenomenology.....	54
Site and Participant Selection .....	56
The Site .....	56
The Sample .....	58
The administrators .....	58
The students .....	59
Methods.....	60
Phase 1 – Observations and Interviews for the Stars Academic Program.....	61
Data collection: Interviews .....	61
Data collection: Observations .....	62
Data Analysis .....	63
Phase 2 – Interviews with Student Participants and Document Collection .....	64
Data collection: Phenomenological interviews.....	65
Data collection: Program documents and transcripts.....	66
Data Analysis .....	67
Phenomenology.....	67
Document and transcript analysis .....	68
Evaluation. ....	69
Creation of Archetypes .....	70
Incorporation of Stakeholders.....	76
Trustworthiness.....	77
Transferability .....	77
Credibility .....	78
Dependability .....	79
Confirmability .....	79
Ethical Considerations .....	80
Limitations and Concerns .....	81
Student Profiles .....	85
Peak Performers .....	85
Lead Climbers.....	86

Panic Climbers .....	87
Cliff Hangers.....	88
CHAPTER 4 .....	
EVALUATION OF THE STARS ACADEMIC PROGRAM .....	89
Why the Stars Academic Program Was Created .....	91
How Eligible Stars Academic Program Participants Were Selected and Invited .....	92
Stars Academic Program Goals .....	94
Administrators' Perceptions of the Program's Goals .....	95
Students' Perceptions of Program's Goals .....	101
Students' Decisions Regarding the Invitation to the Stars Academic Program.....	103
Should I Stay or Should I Go?: Voices of Students through Interview Data .....	103
Credits and Courses: The Stars Academic Program Post-Program Survey Results.....	107
Credit Differences: Students' Academic Data.....	110
Stars Academic Program Participants' Expectations.....	112
Stars Academic Program's Content and Messages.....	115
Administrators' Discussion of the Program's Content and Messages.....	116
Perceptions of Program's Content and Messages from Observations and Documents	119
Membership .....	119
Responsibility .....	122
Knowledge .....	124
Student Participants' Perceptions of the Program's Content and Messages.....	127
Survey data.....	127
Interview data.....	129
Perceptions of the Stars Academic Program's Effects .....	134
Administrators' Perceptions of Effects .....	134
Student Participants' Perceptions of Effects .....	139
Written evaluation results .....	140
Student interview data.....	145
Program Theory Conceptualization .....	155
Recommendations .....	160
Student Selection .....	161
Invitation and Initial Program Materials.....	163
Program's Content and Messages .....	165
Conclusions.....	171
CHAPTER 5 .....	
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENTS' PRE-COLLEGE LIVES AND THEIR	
WITHIN-COLLEGE EXPERIENCES.....	174
Students' Perceptions of their K-12 Experiences .....	175
Families Serve as Sources of Support and Motivation .....	193
Students' Experiences and Social Reproduction .....	200

Conclusions .....	212
CHAPTER 6 .....	
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENTS' WITHIN COLLEGE EXPERIENCES AND THEIR SUCCESS AND PERSISTENCE .....	214
Transition to College.....	216
Self-efficacy .....	216
Academic self-efficacy .....	218
Time Management .....	223
Faculty-Student Interactions .....	229
Academics and Persistence .....	233
Academic Progress.....	234
Grades and course-taking.....	234
Considerations of Departure .....	242
Social Integration .....	252
Communal Potential.....	253
Institutional Commitment .....	265
Validation.....	270
Validation Via Selection .....	270
Validating Agents .....	273
Issues with Validation .....	274
"I just try to be normal": Low-income Students' Perceptions of Their College Lives.....	276
Perceptions of Financial Aid.....	276
Perceptions of Class Boundaries.....	280
Trigger points.....	282
Students' Experiences and Social Reproduction .....	290
Evidence of Social Mobility Habitus .....	294
Social Networks and Social Capital Formation .....	298
Enacting social capital through peers .....	298
Social capital through access to formal institutional agents .....	300
Cultural Capital - Absence of Class Discourse Left Students Feeling Inferior .....	303
Conclusions.....	305
CHAPTER 7 .....	
DISCUSSION .....	307
Primary Findings of the Study .....	308
Relating the Findings to the Literature .....	316
Summer Bridge Program Interventions .....	316
Persistence and Success .....	319
Academic preparedness .....	319
College transition .....	320
Financial Aid's Role in Shaping College Selection and Persistence .....	321

Low-income Students' Experiences in Elite Colleges and Universities.....	322
Recommendations for Practice .....	323
Institutional Evaluation of Programming.....	323
Creation of Discourse around Aspects of Social Class.....	326
Recommendations for Further Research.....	328
Summer Bridge Programs.....	328
The Lives of Low-Income Students.....	330
Summary .....	331
REFERENCES .....	333
APPENDICES .....	355
Appendix A.....	
VU Promise and the Stars Academic Program Summary .....	355
Appendix B .....	
Email and Letter Correspondence to Student Participants .....	357
Appendix C .....	
Interview Protocol for Administrators .....	358
Appendix D.....	
Preliminary Theoretical Schema.....	359
Appendix E .....	
Interview Protocol #1 for Student Participants.....	360
Appendix F.....	
Interview Protocol #2 for Student Participants .....	365
Appendix G.....	
Informed Consent for Students .....	370
Appendix H.....	
Phenomenological Coding.....	372
Appendix I .....	
Schema for Students .....	373
Appendix J .....	
Stars Academic Program Survey .....	374
Appendix K.....	
Stars Academic Program.....	377

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 .....	
<i>Qualitative Paradigm Assumptions</i> .....	51
Table 2 .....	
<i>Creation of Archetypes - Academic Attainment and Persistence Measures Using Students' Academic and Interview Data</i> .....	73
Table 3 .....	
<i>Stars Academic Program Survey Results: Reasons for Attendance</i> .....	109
Table 4 .....	
<i>Pre-enrollment Credits Earned by Type of Student Participant</i> .....	110
Table 5 .....	
<i>Stars Academic Program Participants' Expectations: Interview Data</i> .....	113
Table 6 .....	
<i>Stars Academic Program Survey Results: Workshop Ratings</i> .....	127
Table 7 .....	
<i>Stars Academic Program Survey Results: Evaluations Statements</i> .....	141
Table 8 .....	
<i>Stars Academic Program Survey Results – Evaluation Statements</i> .....	143
Table 9 .....	
<i>Students Advanced Standing, Family Education and Cumulative GPA by Archetype</i> .....	180
Table 10 .....	
<i>Students' Cumulative GPA, Declared Major and Post Graduate Plans by Archetype</i> .....	235
Table 11 .....	
<i>Students' Semester-by-Semester GPAs (Summer 2007 – Spring 2009) by Archetype</i> .....	236

## LIST OF FIGURES

Preliminary Schema of Theoretical Frame .....	42
---	----



## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

...attending college isn't just about the classroom and activities. It is about finding a place where you can grow, express your individuality, and be a part of a tradition of success. The University wants each admitted student to be a part of the Valley University experience, regardless of economic circumstances...

From the VU Promise Mission Statement

Educational attainment levels are disparate for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and the gaps appear greatest at the most selective colleges and universities. Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin (2005) report that students from families in the lowest income quartile make up only 11% of elite college enrollments. There are differences in college completion rates for students from high- and low-income backgrounds as well. According to Carnevale and Rose (2004), among students who attend elite four-year institutions, those from the lowest income quartile have only a 76% chance of graduating. This compares to students from the highest income quartile, who have a 90% graduation rate (Carnevale & Rose, 2004). Their results mirror Bowen et al.'s (2005) findings that, eight years after matriculation, there is a 10-point gap in graduation rates of students from the bottom income quartile as compared to those students from the top quartile.

Low participation and completion rates for low-income students at the nation's top colleges are troubling in light of the growing importance of obtaining a college degree. Called a "gatekeeper" to a better life (Cabrera, Burkum, & La Nasa, 2005), a bachelor's degree provides myriad social and individual benefits, including greater income, employment

stability, and positive engagement in civic and political activities (e.g., Bowen & Bok, 1998; Krueger, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For example, median income in 2006 for Americans with a bachelor's degree or higher was more than double of those with only a high school degree (U.S Department of Education, 2008). Clearly, the acquisition of the benefits associated with a postsecondary degree hinge on a very important achievement: persistence to graduation (Adelman, 1999).

Despite over 20 years of research, student persistence and retention have been labeled a “puzzle” and an “ill-structured problem” (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). The complex nature of the problem demands multi-theoretical approaches and perspectives and diverse solutions (Braxton, et al., 2004). Tinto and Pusser (2006) note that challenges still exist in translating what has been found through retention research into policies and practices that institutions can effectively use to increase student success.

Institutional responses vary on how to address issues of retention. Successful intervention programs possess several common features including an institutional commitment to student welfare and a devotion of resources (personnel, funding, space) toward student retention and integration (Braxton et al., 2004).

In this study, I conducted a qualitative evaluation of a retention program aimed at high-ability, low-income students enrolled at an elite institution. I sought to evaluate the program by better understanding the experiences and outcomes for student participants' first year of college. In the remainder of this chapter I will provide a more detailed picture of the context of the study and its possible significance. After presenting the research questions, the

chapter concludes with an overview of the site of the study, a listing of pertinent terms and definitions and a summary of what the remainder of the chapters entails.

### **Context of the Study**

Although various forms of financial aid (institutional, state and federal) have been offered to students for many years, the rise in merit-based aid as a means of attracting high-achieving students has created a considerable gap in enrollment patterns, and these gaps are significantly pronounced at the nation's most prestigious institutions (Gelber, 2007). Today, elite colleges and universities enroll 75% of their students from the top income quartile and only 3% from the lowest (Carnevale & Rose, 2004).

In response to challenges that they are “reproducing social advantage instead of serving as an engine of mobility” (Leonhardt, 2004) by educating students who come disproportionately from high-income families (Fischer, 2006), many of the nation's prestigious colleges and universities have implemented aggressive financial aid policies meant to make college more affordable (if not free) to academically talented, low-income students, many of whom are the first in their families to go to college (Leonhardt, 2007, 2008; McPherson & Schapiro, 2004). These policies are meant to address issues of merit in admissions, using factors related to students' economic and family background in making admissions decisions (Roach, 2005).

The conversations around the merits of class-based or economic affirmative action in college admissions were stimulated by the U.S. Supreme Court's 2003 decisions in two landmark affirmative action cases, which limited the use of race-based admissions decisions (Fischer, 2006; Roach, 2005). That same year, Harvard, the University of Virginia and the

University of North Carolina all announced financial aid programs targeted at students from the lowest income quartile (Leonhardt, 2008). Not to be outdone, a number of top private and public colleges and universities followed suit, and today, over 45 selective institutions provide financial aid in the form of grants that, at the very least, cover the gap between the cost of college and what the family can afford to pay (Leonhardt, 2008; The Institute for College Access and Success [TICAS], 2010). Of these schools, a handful can offer free tuition (room, board and additional costs may be charged) or a fully cost-free education, with students and family having to contribute nothing toward the entire cost of attending (Leonhardt, 2008; TICAS, 2010). With these policy shifts come concerns from policy makers and higher education leaders regarding recruitment and retention of low-income students because these students are at a higher risk of leaving college before earning a degree (Tinto, 1998).

One primary question posed by researchers and administrators is whether there is a large enough share of academically talented, low-income students from which these colleges can recruit. Research (Bowen et al., 2005; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Hill & Winston, 2006; Wyner, Bridgeland, & DiIulio, 2007) demonstrates that there is a viable pool of low-income, high-achieving high school graduates, many of whom have aspirations to earn a degree. In fact, academically talented high school students enroll in college at rates above the national average regardless of family income, including 93% of students from the lowest income families (Wyner et al., 2007). In other words, nine out of every 10 high-achieving, low-income students enrolls in college. The majority of these students apply to less selective two-

and four-year institutions, with only a small percentage enrolling in elite public and private institutions (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Gerald & Haycock, 2006).

While this overall, higher-than-average enrollment rate demonstrates the commitment and aspirations academically talented, low-income students have toward obtaining a degree, a closer examination of retention and graduation rates reveals a troubling trend. National data reveals that only 59% of high-achieving low-income college students graduate from college; in other words two-fifths of these students leave college before graduation (Gerald & Haycock, 2006; Wyner, et al., 2007). These statistics shift for those low-income students enrolled in elite colleges, but there is still a marked difference in their completion rates (76% graduation rate) when compared to their higher-income peers (90% graduation rate) (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001).

Persistence to graduation hinges on success in the first year of college. Students who complete their first year and re-enroll in their second year are more likely to attain a degree than those students who leave (by dropping out or leaving and returning) in their first year (Horn, 1998; Tinto, 1993). But persistence to graduation can be difficult for students; over one-third of students who enroll in four-year institutions drop out of college in their first year, which is a greater proportion than in all later years (Horn, 1998). Although there are differences by institutional type (e.g., highly selective versus open enrollment), response from institutional leaders and commitment of resources can be key to preventing students at risk of departure from dropping out in their first year (Tinto, 1993).

While it is hard to demonstrate empirically why elite institutions have higher success rates than less selective schools, evidence shows that institutional selectivity can make a

difference in outcomes for all students, including low-income and first-generation students (Bowen et al., 2005; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Goodwin, 2006; Terenzini, et al., 2001). Selective colleges have the capacity to provide the financial, personnel and support services necessary to ensure students do not fall through the cracks. In addition, there are peer effects from attending college with highly motivated and skilled students; the access that low-income students have to social and cultural capital of their higher-income peers may affect their decisions to persist (Carnevale & Rose, 2004). Nonetheless, there is a considerable gap between high-income student persistence relative to low-income student persistence that must be ameliorated.

Completion of a degree consists of a longitudinal process, which includes aspiring to and enrolling in college (Choy, 2002; Braxton, et al., 2004). Retention theory attempts to capture the complex nature of what occurs for students within the institution's environment, but there is still much to learn about why some students persist despite difficult odds (Cabrera et al., 2005; Terenzini, et al., 2001; Wyner, et al., 2007).

Institutions have a responsibility to ensure their students succeed (Braxton, et al., 2004; Gerald & Haycock, 2006), and many implement retention interventions meant to address the needs of students who are more vulnerable to leaving college before degree completion (Terenzini, et al., 2001). With this responsibility comes a need to assess and evaluate specific institutional programs in an effort to determine successful practices (Braxton, et al., 2004; Goldrick-Rab, Carter, & Wagner, 2007; Tinto, 2002).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this evaluative study was to explore and understand the first-year experiences of the students who participated in a summer bridge program prior to fall enrollment. The goals of the study were to provide both an evaluation of a newly created retention intervention and to explore the first-year experiences of students from low-income families at an elite institution. The study sought to understand how student participants' experiences differed from non-participants and how their perceptions of the program were aligned or misaligned with the views of the program administrators.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions sought to explore the relationship between a specific institutional intervention program and the first-year experiences of low-income students at an elite institution.

The main questions guiding this study were:

Question 1) How do summer bridge program participants describe their academic and co-curricular first-year experiences?

Question 2) How do pre-college factors (e.g., academic performance, family background) and within college factors (e.g., summer bridge program, interactions with peers and faculty, academic performance) influence summer bridge program participants' persistence, perceptions of integration and validation, and access to social and cultural capital during their first year of college?

Question 3) How do these students' experiences differ from low-income students who did not participate?

Question 4) How do administrators and summer bridge program participants describe the summer bridge program? How do their descriptions compare or contrast with each other?

In answering these questions, I shed light on what aspects of the program were influential in addressing students' needs in their first year. By learning what the experiences were of low-income students who did (and did not) participate in a summer retention program, I provide greater insight into how a population of students perceived their experiences in a program designed to meet their needs and how low-income students experienced a highly selective college environment in their first year.

### **Potential Significance of the Study**

As stated above, the purpose of this study was to conduct an evaluation of an intervention program aimed at low-income students enrolled in an elite institution, and the possible significance of the study lies in how it can contribute to the literature both through its methodology and through its focus on the voices of low-income students. At its most practical level, the study provides evaluative data on an institutional program that has yet to be formally evaluated, which will both serve the needs of the study's institution and contribute to the larger corpus of work on retention programs. Secondly, the study adds to a slim body of research on summer bridge programs. Additionally, the study sheds light on the first-year experiences of low-income students at an elite institution. Much of the literature on issues of persistence for low-income students is quantitative, which uncovers important trends and statistics. There exist fewer qualitative research studies exploring the factors that result in student success and yet researchers and practitioners (Cabrera et al., 2005; Haycock, 2006; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2003; Wyner et al., 2007) are calling for this complementary work.



## **Applying Theory to Practice**

It is important to note the possible void that this study fills in bridging the gap between institutional practice and persistence theory. Higher education researchers and practitioners have advocated for programs that promote academic and social integration (e.g., summer bridge programs, learning communities, freshman orientation, first year seminars), which are thought to increase student persistence and produce positive student outcomes (Braxton et al., 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2002). Despite this charge, there is a gap between the volume of literature on retention theory and sound research documenting the effects of these policies and programs on student persistence (Goldrick-Rab et al, 2007; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). St. John (2006b) criticizes the lack of rigorous research that exists on institutional practices and policies and their effect on low-income student retention, noting that retention theories are frequently used to rationalize interventions but not used to evaluate the effects of an intervention. And while quantitative studies are necessary to determine effects, St. John (2006b) argues that studies that employ qualitative methods are “needed to build understanding of challenges and effects of interventions [and] to build an understanding of the reasons that interventions worked or failed as to reveal ways that practices might be altered to improve outcomes” (p. 98). Therefore, this study’s use of qualitative evaluation methods along with a theoretical framework consisting of retention and sociological theory adds to the body of both intervention and retention literature. Details of the theoretical frame are provided in Chapter 2, and the methodology is explored in Chapter 3.

### **Scope of the Study**

The bulk of my study spanned 18 months. I began collecting data in summer 2007, conducting observations of the program under study and interviews with administrators. I completed interviews with the study's student participants at two points in time; the first set of interviews were in August/September of 2008 after the completion of their first year, and the second interviews were conducted in November/December 2008, at the end of their first semester of their second year. I accessed student transcript data from summer 2007 through spring 2009. Although my study sought to better understand the path of students through their first year, I felt it was necessary to gather academic data for a full two years. In doing so I was able to not only see which students continued to persist, but what majors they selected, both important indicators of students' ability and willingness to persist to graduation (Chen, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

### **Site of the Study - Valley University**

Valley University<sup>1</sup> (VU) is a public flagship institution located in a small city in the south. Consistently ranked as one of the best public universities in the United States, VU enrolls approximately 14,000 undergraduates (Facts at a Glance, n.d.). In academic year 2007-2008, the overall first-year retention rate for undergraduates was 97.3 % (Facts at a Glance, n.d.). There were differences by family income level; for low-income students entering in fall 2007, the first year retention rate was 94.3% (VU Institutional Assessment report, 2010). Differences also exist by race/ethnicity, with varying rates among Asians (99%), Blacks<sup>2</sup> (95%), Latino/as (94%) and Native Americans (100%) (Data Digest, n.d.).

---

<sup>1</sup> Valley University is a pseudonym.

<sup>2</sup> Although the University uses the term African American, Black provides a more inclusive term for this study.

The university's overall six-year graduation rate<sup>3</sup> is 92.8%, and again there are demographic differences. Low-income students had a graduation rate of 91% (VU Institutional Assessment report, 2010). In addition, there are differences by race/ethnicity; Native American, Black, international non-resident students and Latino/a have the lowest rates at 80%, 83.5% and 83.3% and 90.7% respectively. Asian and White students have graduation rates close to 95% (Facts at a Glance, n.d.).

Valley University was founded in the early 1800s and has strong regional and national historic ties. The university began admitting women in the 1970s, and African Americans were admitted in 1950. For the entering freshman class for fall 2007<sup>4</sup>, 63% of the undergraduate student body was White, 11% was Asian, 9% was Black, and less than 1% was Native American (Data Digest, n.d.).<sup>5</sup> Latino/a and non-residential international students represented 4% of the student population each. The university consists of 45% males and 55% females (Data Digest, n.d.). VU has a strong culture of student involvement and an active student governance system. With over 600 student organizations, campus activities are seen as an integral part of the student experience, contributing to student learning and development (Facts at a Glance, n.d.)

In 2009-2010 tuition, fees, and room and board for an in-state student was approximately \$21,000 and \$43,000 for an out-of-state student (Facts at a Glance, n.d.). Of those costs, \$8,200 was room and board, which is mandatory for all first-year, first-time

---

<sup>3</sup> Graduation rate data reflect outcomes for students who entered in the 2003-2004 academic year.

<sup>4</sup> I purposely included the demographic data from the 2007 entering class because these are the students of my study.

<sup>5</sup> Approximately 7% were listed as unclassified .

students at Valley University (Facts at a Glance, n.d.). True to its public mission, VU enrolls over 69% of its students from in-state.

### **Valley University – the VU Promise Program**

In February 2004, the university's Board of Trustees approved the VU Promise program, a financial aid initiative with a goal to meet 100% of all student applicants' demonstrated financial need (see Appendix A for more details). VU Promise's four key components include providing low-income students grant-only aid packages (VU Promise Annual Report, 2007). Since the inception of the VU Promise initiative, the University has seen an approximately 50% increase in applications from low-income students (Heuchert, 2010). The percentage of low-income applicants who have accepted admission to VU has increased slightly since 2004-2005 (VU Promise Annual Report, 2007). In 2004-2005, low-income students made up 4.3% of the first time/first year students; in 2007, that figure had increased to 5.5% (VU Institutional Assessment report, 2010)<sup>6</sup>. Despite the small increase in enrollment of low-income students, Valley University committed institutional resources to ensure these students stayed enrolled and persisted to graduation.

### **Retention of Low-Income Students – The Stars Academic Program**

Valley University's efforts to retain low-income students include the Stars Academic Program, a summer bridge program for 20 incoming students. Established in 2005, this intervention program targets high-achieving, low-income students in an effort to expose them to (a) college course work [two summer session courses], (b) academic and institutional

---

<sup>6</sup> VU continues to see incremental growth in its low-income, first year/first time undergraduate student body; for 2009, 6.3% of the incoming freshman class was classified low-income.

resources, and (c) a network of peers and faculty to assist them in their transition to college (Heuchert, 2007). During its first two years, the student participants were hand-picked by the admissions and financial aid offices and invited to attend. In 2007, all eligible low-income students were invited and the first 20 were enrolled in the program. All costs of the program (tuition, room, board, books) are paid for by the university. The students' five weeks on campus allows them to take courses, participate in weekly workshops, and engage in social events with fellow students, faculty and administrators.

Fully funded by Valley University, the Stars Academic Program costs approximately \$7,000 per student, which covers the costs for all students' expenses (except travel) and the salary for one full time administrator who oversees the program's details from June through August (VU Promise Annual Report, 2007). Although anecdotally considered a successful initiative by administrators, the program has yet to be formally evaluated to determine whether it is a valid use of institutional resources. It is important at this early stage of VU Promise and the Stars Academic Program for Valley University to encourage experimentation and analysis of all initiatives in order to identify those strategies that effectively improve student outcomes (Tebbs & Turner, 2006).

Elite colleges provide a unique site in which to explore the experiences of low-income students for several reasons. First, these institutions devote resources to ensuring students persist and succeed (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). The programs and initiatives that they have in place for students are a part of the complex environment that affects student persistence. Insight into "what works" is key not only to

better understanding what elite institutions “do” but how what they do can be transferrable to other higher education institutions.

The following section includes definitions of terms pertinent to the study. I only include those terms that are not defined in detail later chapters.

### **Terms and Definitions**

*Low-income student* -Valley University defines “low-income” as those students whose family income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty line (estimated \$37,700 for a family of four). Low-income students are identified through the University’s financial aid office; it is from these students that the pool of students for my study was selected. Throughout the text I do use the terms “low-income” and “low SES” interchangeably.

*First-generation college student* – This is a student from a family where neither parent has more than a high school education (Bilson & Terry, 1982; Horn & Nunez, 2000).

*Persistence and retention* - Throughout the proposal, the terms persistence and retention are used interchangeably; like Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004), I do not place the onus for persistence or retention on the individual student but see the process of departure as an interaction between the student and the college or university. Due to the scope of this study, I only looked at persistence for students from their first semester to the end of their second year.

*First- year student/freshman* – Unless otherwise noted, it should be assumed that a freshman/first-year student at Valley University is a first-time college student.

*Integration* – Integration, both social and academic, are basic constructs of Tinto’s theory of retention and those subsequent theories influenced by Tinto’s work (Braxton & Lien, 2000). Students who are *academically integrated* not only meet the explicit standards for enrollment in the institution but their perspectives align with the beliefs, values and norms that make up the institution’s academic environment (Braxton, et al., 2004). Students are *socially integrated* when their attitudes and beliefs of the social community are in congruence with the social system of the institution. Accepting Tinto’s theory, both forms of integration affect the student’s commitment to the institution and his/her graduation (Braxton, et al., 2004).

### **Organization of the Chapters**

The chapters that follow provide more details regarding the study. Chapter 2 presents a review of the salient literature, including an overview of pre- and within-college factors

that influence persistence. A critique of the literature on summer bridge programs is included, and gaps in the current research are identified. Chapter 2 ends with a presentation of the theoretical frame, which weaves together aspects of sociological and persistence theory.

Chapter 3 presents the methodological framework for the study. Here I describe the methods employed to both complete the qualitative evaluation of the Stars Academic Program and conduct an exploration of the experiences of low-income students at Valley University. In addition, I provide details regarding the site, sample and analysis employed that support my findings.

Chapters, 4, 5 and 6 present the findings of my study. The evaluation of the Stars Academic Program is explored in Chapter 4, with recommendations for practice included at the end. Chapters 5 and 6 present the data on students' pre-college and within-college experiences, respectively. Through this organization style, the reader can see the relationships drawn between the lives of the students before they entered college and their subsequent experiences once in college. In these two chapters, the data are presented, for the most part, within four archetype groups that emerged from the data. The archetypes aid in both organizing the data and in revealing the commonalities and differences among and between students. I present more details regarding the archetypes in Chapter 3.

### **Conclusions**

With the implementation of new financial aid policies meant to address the needs of low-income students, institutions need to take a critical look at the impact their policies and programs have on the lives of students. It is imperative to learn more about the experiences

of low-income students and crucial to comprehend what they may need, beyond financial support, to be successful. This study presents the pre-college and within college experiences of 20 low-income students who have much to tell us about student success and student departure.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The purpose of this chapter is to present a review of the relevant literature and the theoretical framework that undergirds the study. The chapter begins with a brief introduction to campus retention initiatives, broadly defined, as a means to better understand the history and purpose of summer bridge programs. The chapter continues with a review of salient literature on the effectiveness of summer bridge programs, noting gaps in the research. This section concludes with a brief summary of factors that influence college student persistence. It is necessary to provide a review of relevant findings from these studies, for it is the results of such studies that have most greatly influenced the characteristics and goals of today's summer bridge programs.

The theoretical framework is presented in the latter half of the chapter. This frame weaves together aspects of theories of persistence and social and cultural capital as a means by which to further understand the experiences of low-income students who participate in a summer bridge intervention program. I conclude with a brief summary of how the present study extends what is known within both the literature and theories on persistence.

#### **Retention Initiatives**

In response to the pressure on public and private institutions to address issues of persistence and degree completion, many of today's colleges and universities implement retention initiatives to address the needs of students who are most vulnerable to leaving college. These programs can take numerous forms, including freshman seminars, mentoring

initiatives, summer bridge programs and learning communities and serve students considered “at risk” of leaving college before graduating. Targeted populations include ethnic minorities, first-generation, low-income, and academically underprepared students (Myers, 2003b; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While these retention interventions are diverse in their format, their common goals include increasing at-risk students’ academic and social integration and providing the basic skills necessary for academic success within an environment that encourages students to form relationships with peers and faculty (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Myers, 2003b). These programs are meant to mitigate the difficulty students might find upon enrolling in college; obstacles include a lack of knowledge about the campus environment and its bureaucratic structure, an absence of family support, and the exposure to a new, often daunting culture (Kezar, 2000; Thayer, 2000).

Many retention programs are “front loaded” in that they are offered either before students enter college in the fall or during their first year of matriculation (Myers, 2003b). Energy and resources are dedicated to these early months because completion of the first year of college is an important benchmark for students. Almost half of all students who leave college do so in their first year (Choy, 2002; Tinto, 1993, 1998). But departure patterns differ by socioeconomic status (SES), family background and racial/ethnic status. Students who leave four-year colleges or universities are more likely to be racial or ethnic minorities (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Nora, Barlow & Crisp, 2005), come from low-income families (Terenzini, et al., 2001) or from families in which one or both parents has not earned a degree (Choy, 2002).

## **Summer Bridge Programs**

Many colleges provide summer “bridge” programs as a means to ease the transition from high school to college for those incoming freshmen who may be at higher risk of leaving college before completing a degree (Ackermann, 1991a; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997; Walpole, 2008). Often summer bridge programs target academically underprepared students in an effort to provide them a head start on building academic and time management skills, developing the structure and discipline necessary to succeed, and forming an early connection to the institution (Maggio, White, Molstad, & Kher, 2005). It is believed that early contact with students who are more vulnerable to dropping out will result in their increased commitment to persistence (Garcia, 1991). Universities have also created summer bridge initiatives focusing on specific student populations such as AHANA (African American, Hispanic, Asian and Native American) students or students interested in pursuing math and science majors. These programs focus more on the transition to college than on study skills and remediation (Kezar, 2000; Myers, 2003b).

### **History of summer bridge programs**

Colleges and universities have been offering special courses and programs for students at risk of dropping out for almost 100 years (Kulik, Kulik, & Shwalb, 1983). More targeted retention initiatives were created in response to the diversification of college campuses in the 1960s and 1970s (Kulik et al., 1983; Maggio, et al., 2005). Enrollments for underrepresented minorities rose substantially, but these students were often ill-prepared for the demands of college coursework (Kulik et al., 1983; Maggio et al., 2005). High rates of attrition and low levels of degree attainment led college administrators to create remedial

education courses and summer high-school-to-college transition programs meant to assist students with their adjustment to the campus environment and their academic needs (Levin & Levin, 1991).

Summer bridge programs were established to provide an aggressive, proactive and time-intensive approach to addressing the needs of students considered “at risk” (Levin & Levin, 1991). Many of these programs offered remedial courses to prepare students for college coursework, thereby reducing the students’ need for remedial courses during the academic year. In the past thirty years, many four-year colleges and universities have eliminated wholly their remedial education courses and now rely on summer programs to fill that need (Damashek, 1999).

The 1970s also brought a change in focus on the research of retention and persistence. Early research had been primarily descriptive (who drops out?) or predictive (who is at greatest risk of dropping out?), both operating under the assumption that attrition was the fault of the student (Beal & Noel, 1980). In the 1970s researchers began to examine the relationship between the institution and the student and its effect on persistence (Beal & Noel). This trend has continued, with researchers utilizing more sophisticated quantitative and qualitative methods in an effort to unravel and understand the complex nature of institutional actions and behavior, and students’ decisions, experiences, and outcomes (Walpole, 2007).

### **Effectiveness of summer bridge programs**

A brief review of research on campus retention initiatives sheds light on the more specific research completed on summer bridge programs. What follows is a summary of

several meta-analyses of research on retention programs, broadly defined; the relationship between their findings and summer bridge programs is explored. The section concludes with findings from research on summer bridge programs.

Hundreds of studies have been conducted to test assumptions of theories of student departure (see Bean, 1990; Berger & Milem, 1999; Cabrera, Stammen, & Hansen, 1990; Pascarella, & Terenzini, 1980, 2005; Tinto, 1993), yet this extensive research does not provide empirical analysis of campus-based programs that address issues of student persistence (Patton, Morelon, Whitehead, & Hossler, 2006). A key finding of a meta-analysis of articles, both empirical and propositional, on college and university retention initiatives (Patton et al.) is the researchers' determination that a "dearth" of evidence exists to support the claims of efficacy for a wide range of campus-based initiatives; of the 100 articles culled from a review of several large electronic databases, they found only 16 that reported significant findings documenting the relationship between a program and student persistence. The majority of articles analyzed made unsubstantiated assertions as to the effectiveness of the programs under study without the use of a large sample, a control group, or detailed qualitative description of the retention-centered program.

This meta-analysis confirms what researchers have found in earlier meta-analyses of the literature on retention initiatives (Kulik et al., 1983; Levin & Levin, 1991; Myers, 2003a). Of 500 articles identified in a search of multiple databases, Kulik et al. (1983) found only 60 studies that fit their criteria. These criteria included the use of a control group and objective reports of program features and outcomes. In more recent meta-analysis, Myers (2003b) and Levin and Levin (1991) also reported that there is an overall lack of high-quality evaluative

research completed on retention initiatives. Criticisms of evaluations include: (a) no measurable or significant effects of the program (e.g., GPA, persistence), (b) the absence of a control or comparison group, (c) the use of anecdotal reports and accounts from participants and administrators, and (d) no efforts to ameliorate self-selection bias (Kulik et al., 1983; Levin & Levin, 1991).

Encouragingly, Patton et al.'s (2006) meta-analysis did identify several well-executed studies of summer bridge programs. Findings revealed that participation in a summer program positively affected students' first-year GPA and first- to second-year retention. While these summer programs varied in their structure and size, their central goals included helping students adjust academically and personally through programming, small group activities, and interaction with faculty (Patton et al., 2006).

From this meta-analysis and other empirically sound research studies, conclusions can be drawn as to the overall effectiveness of summer bridge programs. Research shows that academically underprepared students who participate in bridge programs are more likely to get involved in the college community (Buck, 1985), to perform better academically (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997) and to persist through the first year (Ackermann, 1991a; Chaney, Muraskin, Calahan, & Goodwin, 1998; Garcia, 1991; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997; Valeri-Gold, Deming, & Stone, 1992) than their non-bridge peers. Participants also have closer contact with faculty and peers during the first year and take more core curriculum courses than non-program students (Ackermann, 1991a; Buck, 1985; Garcia, 1991). In addition, participants have increased self esteem and locus of control, which in turn can affect students' persistence and success (Ackermann, 1991a; Fitts, 1989).

Research is inconclusive as to the effect summer bridge programs have on college GPA or achievement test scores, but results of studies provide evidence that these programs do have a significant effect on persistence (Ackermann, 1991a; Buck, 1985; Garcia, 1991; Suhr, 1980; Valeri-Gold et al., 1992). This synthesis of relevant findings provides evidence that summer bridge programs can be effective at assisting students with transitioning to and persisting at colleges and universities. What follows is a summary of several specific studies, selected both for the soundness of their methods and for how their results inform the present study.

Several studies that utilized comparison groups are helpful in understanding the effects of summer bridge programs. Suhr (1980) completed a study of the Special Transitional Enrichment Program (STEP) at the University of California (UC), Davis, comparing first-year academic performance and retention. STEP is a residential orientation and academic program that assists low-income and minority students in making the transition to the university curriculum and is offered to students in the summer prior to their first year or during their first fall semester. The study compared a group of summer program participants with a group from the fall semester. While Suhr found that summer students' first-year retention was significantly affected by participation in the program, similar findings were not significant for the fall participants. The author speculates that the summer students were exposed to campus services at a time when the full academic pressures of the fall were not competing with their time and attention, thereby allowing them to form a support network with faculty, administrators and peers that could aid them in their first year.

Unfortunately, the overall findings of this study are compromised by the considerable differences between the participant group and the comparison groups.

An additional study by Myers and Drevlow (1982) found that students participating in UC San Diego's three-week summer bridge program had higher semester-to-semester persistence rates than students in four comparison groups, exceeding by 31% the rate of a comparable group of low-income students. UC San Diego's summer program enrolls high-risk, low-income students in intensive math, English and study skills courses (Myers & Drevlow, 1982; Buck, 1985). It is not a remedial program but is designed to assist students in integrating into the college community through building peer networks and strengthening students' connections to the campus environment (Myers & Drevlow, 1982; Buck, 1985).

More recently, Walpole and colleagues (2008) and Wolf-Wendel, Tuttle and Keller-Wolff (1999) completed single-institution evaluations of summer bridge programs. Both studies used a control group and results were similar. Walpole et al., (2008) found no significant differences between the program participants and the control group in GPA after following both groups of students through their junior year. In addition, although the summer bridge participants' retention rate was higher than their control group peers, the difference was not significant. Similarly, Wolf-Wendel et al., (1999) reported no significant differences in retention or GPA between the two groups, but results of a survey instrument revealed differences in students' perceptions of self-efficacy. Specifically, they found that participants with lower academic preparation (as measured by ACT scores) showed significant improvements in their social and academic self efficacy (as measured by valid self efficacy scale instruments) when compared with a comparable control group.



These cited studies attempt to address common methodological problems through the presence of a control group and equality of treatment length, yet they do not identify and isolate the components of the programs that account for differences among groups (Levin & Levin, 1993). Maggio et al. (2005) completed a multi-institutional study in an effort to learn what pre-college student characteristics and summer bridge program factors had the greatest impact on participants' academic achievement and retention. They found that program size had an effect on student achievement and retention; the larger the program enrollment, the lower the participants' cumulative GPA and the fewer semesters they completed. The additional significant finding that high school GPA had a direct positive effect on student academic achievement and persistence confirms past research (Adelman, 1999; Horn & Nunez, 2000) that high school achievement is a positive predictor of college success.

Maggio et al.'s (2005) study leaves us with more questions than answers. They found no significant direct or indirect effects of several popular summer bridge program components on participants' academic achievement or ongoing persistence. These components included mandatory on-campus residence, credit availability, counseling services, and social and recreational programming. Among their recommendations for future research, they suggest that qualitative research may provide data on the complex interaction of summer program variables on student achievement and persistence. Results of successful qualitative studies could then better inform future quantitative work. Unfortunately, there are few qualitative studies that provide more than administrator or student accounts on either the effects of a summer bridge program or the identified factors of a program that are of greatest value to students (Kezar, 2000; Myers, 2003b).

While Goodwin's (2002) longitudinal qualitative study of 23 low-income students enrolled in an elite private college in New York did not focus solely on the institution's summer bridge program, her work sheds some light on the experiences of bridge program participants. Admitted under a special statewide program (HEOP), the students were academically talented but had tested poorly on standardized tests and were in need of additional remedial coursework to prepare them for their fall matriculation. All students participated in a mandatory, three-week summer bridge program and took a set of requisite math, writing, academic skills and computer classes. In addition, they participated in weekly workshops to familiarize them with how to navigate the college's administrative system (e.g., register for courses, declare a major, join student organizations).

Results of Goodwin's (2002) study reveal that the summer courses and workshops assisted the low-income students in building "academic capital" – the skills and strategies necessary for the students to "compete on more equal footing with students from more 'advantaged' backgrounds" (p. 100). Students reported the summer courses set a foundation for what was expected in the fall, but some students realized, upon entering college in the fall, that the summer program did not adequately prepare them for the competitive pace necessary to survive among the larger student population. In addition, Goodwin found that for some students, the exposure to faculty and administrative resources in the summer did little to ease their discomfort with re-establishing and building these networks during the remaining academic year. Goodwin describes the students' hesitancy in using office hours or other means of developing relationships with faculty, noting that the low-income students' defense mechanism was to withdraw instead of placing themselves in a position that risked

being criticized or rebuffed by professors. Goodwin's overall findings demonstrate the value of the summer bridge program for the student participants and its role in helping the students develop academic skills and build relationships with members of the university community. In addition, her work explores the meanings the low-income students ascribe to their experiences and focuses on the multiple contexts in which they live.

While Goodwin's methods are sound (e.g., triangulation of data sources, intensive time in the field), her study does not completely fill a much-needed void in the summer bridge evaluation literature. The focus of her study was not on the summer bridge program but on the experiences of students over a four-year period at an elite institution; therefore, she did not capture qualitative data on low-income students who *did not* participate in the program. By seeking perspectives from participants and non-participants a researcher is able to parse out those perceptions and experiences that are influenced by the program, thereby shedding light on those aspects of the program that are most effective.

In summary, the gaps in the summer bridge research are two-fold. First, few rigorous qualitative studies exist (Myers, 2003a; Myers, 2003b; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Peglow-Hoch & Walleri, 1990); those that have been completed often only include data collected from participants and do not include a counterfactual comparison group or attempt to capture the theory of action that may inform the success or failure of the program (Kulik, et al., 1983; Kezar, 2000; Levin & Levin, 1993; Myers, 2003b). The absence of qualitative research that explores the relationship between summer bridge programs' inputs and activities and student experiences and outcomes is surprising in light of the contribution these

methods can make to getting inside the “black box” and better understanding and clarifying the function and utility of a program’s components.

Secondly, few studies exist on summer bridge programs aimed at helping academically talented students with issues of college transition and success; many programs under study targeted remediation of underprepared students (Myers, 2003b). As more colleges measure the cost-effectiveness of implementing summer bridge programs as part of a more comprehensive plan to attract and retain high-achieving, low-income students, evaluative research must be in place to help shape those decisions (Green, 2007).

### **Factors that Effect Persistence**

Because studies on persistence and attrition have directly influenced the philosophy behind and the components of summer bridge programs, it is important to briefly review the literature on factors that affect student persistence and success. The following section summarizes findings on the pre-college and within-college factors most salient to the present study.

#### **Pre-college Factors**

Summer bridge programs benefit students who may be academically underprepared or are the first in their families to go to college, and the programs’ goals include trying to address the gaps in students’ preparation and acquaint them with college resources in an effort to provide them a foundation from which to build when they enroll in the fall. For many participants, their academic and family backgrounds may affect their persistence and success. Research has demonstrated that pre-college academic achievement and the rigor of the students’ courses in high school are the most important indicators of whether students

enroll and persist in college (Adelman, 1999; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Perna, 2000). An additional powerful factor is the level of parents' education. College-educated parents are better equipped to assist their children in negotiating the process of attending college (Choy, 2002; McDonough, 1997, 2004) and can provide tacit knowledge about college (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Pike & Kuh, 2001). Students whose parents did not graduate from college are less likely to understand the value of a college education (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999) and are twice as likely to leave college in their first year as their peers whose parents did graduate college (Choy; Horn, 1998; Horn & Nunez, 2000).

What happens to students after they matriculate holds far greater influence in students' persistence decisions than the background characteristics they bring to college; therefore colleges and universities have an important role to play in promoting persistence once students are enrolled (Terenzini et al., 2001). The remainder of this section reviews literature of factors that influence students persistence once enrolled.

### **Academic Skills**

One of the primary goals of many summer bridge programs is to assist students in learning how to be effective scholars. Programs are designed to teach studying and test taking skills and may provide sessions on time management and research skills because of the tested assumption that academic success is key to student persistence (Myers, 2003a; Thayer, 2000). Students' college grades are positive predictors of persistence from one semester to the next, even when controlling for students' pre-college characteristics, financial aid and selectivity of the college (Adelman, 1999; Heller, 2001). Both single school studies and research using national data demonstrate that academic achievement in the first year

directly effects persistence to the second year (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Nora, & Cabrera, 1996) and reduces the chances of dropping out (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

### **First-year Experiences**

The characteristics of students' first year of college have an important effect on their persistence (Tinto, 1993). For many students the first year is a period of adjustment as they locate peer groups, identify academic areas of interest, and learn to navigate the bureaucratic processes of college (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Not surprisingly, academic performance in the first year is an important factor in influencing students' decisions to persist to the second year (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In addition, approximately two-thirds of the academic gains students make in reading, math and science occurs in the first two years of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

For low-income students, many of whom are the first in their families to attend college, the first year can be overwhelming as they adjust to a different environment and transition to their new role (Bilson & Terry, 1982; Tinto, 1993). Some students experience a "breaking away" (London, 1989) from their families and feelings of invisibility and anonymity in their first weeks and months on campus (Arzy, Davies, & Harbour, 2006). A lack of integration and connection to the larger university community can leave some first year students at risk of leaving college (Tinto, 1998). Institutional response to encouraging persistence beyond the first year includes first-year seminars, learning communities, and

mentoring programs, which aim to provide new students opportunities to integrate into the social and academic life of the campus (Tinto, 1998).

### **Financial Aid**

Findings are consistent that students who receive financial aid are as likely to persist as their peers who do not receive aid (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). What is less clear is which forms of aid – grants, scholarships, loans or a combination of these – have the greatest impact on persistence. After controlling for demographic, academic and background factors, some studies (Dynarski, 1999; Heller, 2003) show that need-based grants can positively affect persistence over time. Other research (Desjardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; Kaltenbaugh, St. John, & Starkey, 1999) found that need-based aid has less impact than scholarships on persistence. Paulsen and St. John (2002) found that grants and loans had a negative effect on persistence for low-income students; they speculate that both forms of aid were not enough to cover college costs and students were discouraged to persist. Working, middle- and upper-class students were not as sensitive to all forms of aid. Not surprisingly, upper-class students were least sensitive to price of tuition and the size and type of their aid package.

The “nexus” between financial aid and perceptions of financial barriers has arisen from research as a key consideration. Both students’ access to financial aid and their perceptions of their ability to pay for school affect persistence decisions (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, et al., 1990; St. John, 2006a; St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996). These subjective and objective components work together to influence students’ initial

and ongoing commitment to school (Cabrera et al., 1992; St. John, Cabrera, Nora & Asker, 2000; St. John et al., 1996).

### **Increased Faculty Interaction**

Summer bridge programs provide students exposure and access to faculty through the formal coursework, and some programs provide workshops and other planned activities in which students have opportunities to informally interact with faculty. This is important because the frequency and level of quality of student-faculty interactions has a significant effect on persistence for students from their first to second year, even when controlling for student and family characteristics and college experiences (Astin, 1993; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). In addition, students' perceptions of faculty members' interest in and availability to students has a significant effect on persistence (Mallette & Cabrera, 1991). Although it is unclear how the student-faculty interactions affect persistence, it is speculated that faculty provide students validation as valued members of the campus community, which in turn legitimates their presence and encourages their continued engagement (Kuh, et al., 2006).

### **Peer Networks and Student Engagement**

Students who participate in summer bridge programs are given a head start on forming relationships with other college students, who can serve as powerful socializing agents in influencing social integration and persistence (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Astin (1993) suggests that peers affect students' psychological and sociological integration. Students seek to identify with others who share their beliefs and values. In



finding a community in which they feel connected and comfortable, students are more likely to stay in school (Kuh et al., 2006).

Social integration and student engagement have a positive effect on student persistence (Astin, 1993; Berger & Milem, 1999; Horn, 1998). Students who are involved in formal student activities (e.g., clubs, intramural sports, student government) earn higher grades and are significantly less likely to leave college than their peers who do not get involved (Fisher, 2007). Extracurricular involvement has even greater positive effect on students who are the first in their families to go to college than for those who come from families where one or both parents went to college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). While research is not conclusive regarding whether these effects are direct or indirect, it is evident that forms of engagement and integration are central to student persistence. Low-income students integrate in college in different ways than their high socioeconomic status peers (Berger, Milem, & Paulsen, 1998; Walpole, 2003, 2007). They spend less time in student clubs and more time assisting faculty with research than their higher-income peers (Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2003, 2007).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework draws upon several strands of retention theory and social reproduction theory. After a brief introduction to the foundational work of Vincent Tinto, the theoretical framework is presented, which ties together aspects of Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon's "revisionist" theory of retention and Laura Rendón's theory of validation. Bourdieu's theories of social and cultural capital are also included as they relate to low-

income college students and the possible effects of an intervention program. A schema of the original theoretical frame is represented in Figure 1.

### **Persistence Theory**

Described by researchers as “near paradigmatic,” (Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton, 2000), Tinto’s interactionalist theory (1987; 1993) posits that student departure is a longitudinal process wherein students’ interactions with the formal and informal structures of a college or university form and re-form their perceptions of the institution and their place in it (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1987, 1993). Students’ entry characteristics, along with their initial commitments to the institution and their goals affect their levels of integration, socially and academically. The greater the students’ level of social and academic integration, the greater their ongoing commitment to persistence. This interaction between integration and commitment increases the likelihood the student will persist in college (Braxton, et al., 2004; Tinto, 1987, 1993).

Although Tinto’s theory is not explicitly woven into the study’s theoretical frame for this study, it must be mentioned because of its dramatic role in influencing the constructs of today’s summer bridge programs (Myers, 2003b; Peglow-Hoch & Walleri, 1990). The theory has been used to inform selected practices and as a lens through which to assess program effectiveness (Levin & Levin, 1991; Myers, 2003b). As was discussed earlier, summer bridge programs are meant to ameliorate the effects of students’ backgrounds, thereby preparing students to succeed once enrolled in the fall.

Despite the prominence of Tinto’s theory in retention literature and discourse over the past 20 years, scholars have questioned both the extent of empirical support for Tinto’s

theory (Braxton et al., 2004; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997) and its viability when applied to more diverse populations (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendón, 1994; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Recommendations have been made (Braxton, 2000; Braxton, et al., 2004) to dramatically revise Tinto's theory or abandon it and explore new theoretical perspectives.

In a move to revise Tinto's theory, Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) formulated a "revisionist" retention theory based on empirical studies that come from economic, sociological, psychological and organizational perspectives. Of the six factors that Braxton et al. (2004) identify as influences on student retention and persistence, several are of importance when considering the experiences of low-income students for this study. These are: students' ability to pay, commitment of the institution to student welfare, and what the researchers term "communal potential" (p. 22). The theory posits that the ability to pay, or in the case of low-income students in this study, the ability of the student to secure grants to cover most if not all of their financial needs, affects students' initial commitment to persist. Once enrolled in school, these students are more likely to integrate socially into the college community if they perceive that the institution is committed to their well being and success. This institutional commitment can be demonstrated by tailored programming like the summer bridge program, the relationships students form with faculty and advisors, and the response students receive from administrators and faculty when facing challenges. Lastly, students need to identify that the school has communal potential in that they can find a subset of students who share similar values, beliefs and goals. This community of peers can provide students support and encouragement. The summer bridge program exposes students to a

subset of peers with whom they can form friendships and networks. These fellow students can provide the support and encouragement students need not only as they participate in the summer program but as they enter the fall semester.

While empirically supported, Braxton et al.'s (2004) work is not specifically directed at understanding the unique challenges that students from diverse backgrounds might face. No retention theory addresses the specific experiences of low-income students (Walpole, 2003), but aspects of the work of Laura Rendón in the area of non-traditional and minority student retention may be applied to this specific population.

**Validation theory.** In response to efforts to move beyond a “one size fits all” approach to retention theory, Rendón developed a theory of validation (1994; 2002) through her studies of non-traditional and Latino/a college students. Rendón's theory is based on findings from the Puente Project, a bridge program targeting educationally disadvantaged high school students in an effort to get them to enroll and graduate from four-year colleges and universities. Her work reinforces other research (Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Terenzini, Rendón, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, & Gregg, 1994) that students are positively affected by validating experiences such as encouragement, support and affirmation. Rendón (1994; 2002) asserts that non-traditional students (e.g., older, low-income, first-generation) arrive on campus with doubts about their ability to succeed and negotiate the college environment. But unlike traditional students, they are particularly vulnerable to the interactions they have with peers, faculty and staff. These students have not received the support and encouragement from family, friends and mentors as to their ability

to succeed in college and therefore respond well to the validation they get from inside the college community (Rendón, 1994).

Rendón (1994) defines validation as “an enabling, confirming and supportive process” (p. 44) stimulated by in- and out-of-class “agents” who encourage students’ academic and personal development. A promising result of her studies indicates that faculty and administrators can “transform” vulnerable students into empowered learners through validation and encouragement. The frequency and quality of the validation experiences allows the student to have more fruitful and satisfying academic and personal experiences (Rendón, 1994).

Social and academic integration and validation are linked. Traditional retention theory establishes integration as the responsibility of students with the institution fostering integration in a passive way. Rendón (1994) suggests that students become more involved in their academic experiences when an individual (e.g., an administrator or faculty member) takes an active interest in them. She states “it appears that non-traditional students do not perceive involvement as *them* taking the initiative. They perceive it when someone takes an active role in assisting them” (p. 44). Therefore, engagement from the institution must be active wherein faculty and administrators reach out to these students and support them in their endeavors (Rendón, 1994; 2002).

For low-income and first-generation students entering an elite institution, their ability to locate and connect with validating agents may be key to their persistence and success. For some students, this may come naturally through the course of engaging in classroom and extracurricular activities. For others, interventions such as a summer bridge program might

provide them the means to create a community of peers, teachers and administrators they can rely on to affirm their presence in school. Regardless of whether these students participate in intervention activities or whether they choose to integrate socially and academically in other ways, their persistence may rest on the validation they do or do not get from faculty, peers and administrators.

While retention theory sheds light on the possible mechanisms in place that affect low-income and first-generation college student retention, sociological theory provides a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of underrepresented students on college campuses and the possible effects of programmatic interventions like a summer bridge initiative. It is important to take this multidisciplinary approach in trying to understand the complex phenomena related to college student persistence because often the voices of the students themselves are lost within retention theory; students' traits – social, psychological or economic – may be theorized but their perspectives and stories have received much less attention (Hermanowicz, 2004).

### **Social Reproduction: Social and Cultural Capital Theory**

The concepts of social and cultural capital build upon economic and sociological theories (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1988). Cultural capital can be seen as “institutionalized, widely shared, high status cultural signals (e.g., attitudes, formal knowledge, behaviors, credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). In other words, cultural capital is a system of characteristics that defines one's status and can aid in upward mobility (Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan, & Shuan, 1990; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Bourdieu (1977a) described cultural capital as a symbolic resource that

middle- and upper-class families provide to their children, replacing or enhancing their economic capital to maintain status and privilege.

Higher education is an example of cultural capital that middle- and upper-class families value as a means to maintaining economic security. It can be posited that these families encourage their children to attend elite institutions in which they will have opportunities to maintain and expand their cultural and social capital. Because students from lower income families may not know about these strategies, they are at higher risk of either not attending these elite schools or not succeeding once they are enrolled (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; McDonough, 1997). Once in college, these students may be at a disadvantage because their lack of access to valuable cultural capital may exclude them from social-class linked resources that can aid in their success and persistence in college (Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

Social capital relies on the structures of individuals' relationships with each other. According to Bourdieu social capital consists of "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (1986, p. 248). Membership within this network enables individuals to gain access to cultural and other forms of capital in addition to support and institutional resources (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1988).

Within higher education, highly valued social capital can be constructed and strengthened by affiliation with an institution or with networks within that institution. The volume of networks denotes high social capital, but the existence of these networks is a product of the energy and commitment of institutional agents and students. In other words,

networks are the result of targeted strategies, conscious or unconscious, aimed at establishing and maintaining useable social relationships (Bourdieu, 1977a).

Low-income and first-generation students rely heavily on institutional resources to provide them access to social capital because they may lack the information and guidance from their home communities (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2006). Stanton-Salazar (1997) argues that underrepresented students must learn how to interpret the cultural expectations of school by establishing meaningful relationships with institutional agents. These agents have the capacity and commitment to aid in transmitting resources and opportunities and can include professors, administrators, and fellow students (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; 2001).

Habitus refers to internalized and transmitted outlooks and beliefs about the social world that people receive from their environment (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Habitus is relative to a person's social context and helps shape perceptions and decisions. Institutions such as colleges are more responsive to the habitus of the dominant class. These orientations, such as high achievement or aspirations, are rewarded and required within a college environment in order to succeed. Therefore, first-generation or low-income students who have aspired to attend and been admitted to an elite institution may be at a disadvantage when competing for academic reward because of the differences between their habitus and that of the dominant classes. In order to succeed these students may turn to institutional agents, who can play a role in aiding these students in learning how to negotiate the elite environment.

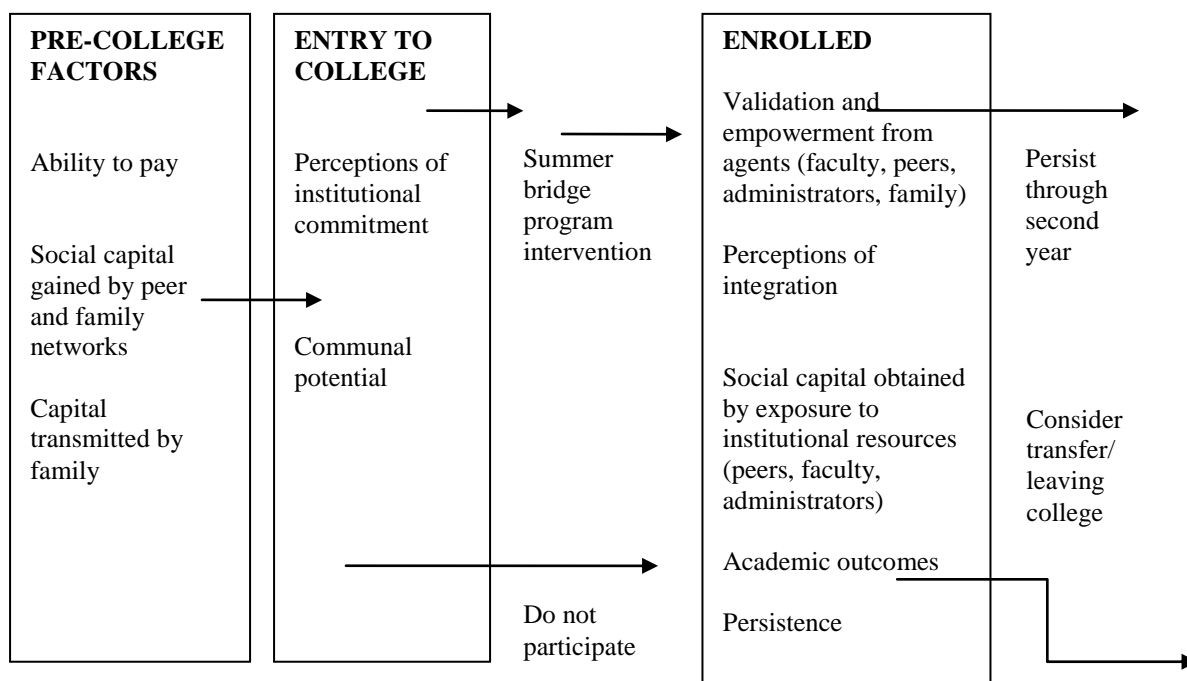
Because low-income students may bring little highly valued social capital with them when they arrive on campus, they may be in need of specific interventions in which to gain



access to these resources. Through purposeful programming (e.g., workshops on accessing academic resources, events with faculty), intervention programs like a summer bridge program can expose students to the valuable agents and resources. In addition, the peer networks gained by working, learning and living in a small, intimate setting can aid students as they transition into their first year of college and beyond.

It is possible that low-income students who do not participate in such an intervention either gain access to capital in different or in less immediate ways. There may be other opportunities during their first year in which they form networks and find institutional agents. For them, the transition to college may be more difficult and they may face greater challenges in accessing the resources necessary to persist. It is also possible that the “capital” that they do bring is sufficient and the opportunity for additional support through an intervention program is unnecessary.

Figure 1

*Preliminary Schema of Theoretical Frame***Conclusions**

The research on college student persistence is multidisciplinary and vast. Despite the large body of work and the tremendous focus researchers have placed on understanding college student persistence, gaps exist (Braxton, 2000; Cabrera et al. 2005; Goldrick-Rab, Carter, & Wagner., 2007; Walpole, 2003). Much of the current work is compromised by the national and institutional data sets used, which either cannot track students longitudinally or do not capture data that can be operationalized easily (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 2001). More salient to the present study is the criticism that few evaluations of retention program effectiveness exist (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Despite the

large volume of work on student retention theory, there is comparatively little research tying the theoretical constructs to the programs and policies put in place by institutions to address issues of retention (Green, 2007; Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Lastly, there is call by researchers (Deil-Amen & Turley, 2007; St. John, 2006b; Terenzini et al., 1994; Terenzini et al., 2001) for qualitative research to be completed on issues of retention as a means by which to complement the large body of quantitative work. As Cabrera et al., (2005) state in their opening paragraphs “*we still do not know what specific factors lead some low SES students to succeed on their path to a college degree despite overwhelming odds*” (emphasis original, p. 157). Qualitative evaluative inquiry provides a lens by which to understand and explore these students’ experiences, thereby better informing the rich body of literature on persistence and bridging a gap between theoretical constructs and institutional practice.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand? (Spradley, 1979, p. 34)

The purpose of this qualitative evaluation study was to explore and understand the first-year experiences of the students who participated in a summer bridge program. The goals of this research were to provide both an evaluation of a specific university program and to explore the experiences of a set of students whose voices are often unheard within a university community. This study focused on the students' first year, often considered the academic year most crucial for student retention and persistence (Tinto, 1993). I sought to answer four central research questions. These questions allowed me to achieve my goals of both exploring a phenomenon and performing an evaluative study. Subquestions are embedded within the main questions.

Question 1) How do summer bridge program participants describe their academic and co-curricular first-year experiences?

Subquestion 1A) What meaning(s) do these students ascribe to their experiences as low-income students at an elite university?

Question 2) How do pre-college factors (e.g., academic performance, co-curricular involvement, relationships with peers and faculty, family background) and within college factors (e.g., summer bridge program, interactions with peers and faculty) influence summer bridge program participants' persistence, perceptions of integration and validation, and access to social and cultural capital during their first year of college?

Subquestion 2A) How do the students describe their community of support?

Question 3) How do these students' experiences differ from low-income students who did not participate?

Question 4) How do administrators and summer bridge program participants describe the summer bridge program? How do their descriptions compare or contrast with each other?

Subquestion 4A) In what ways are the participants' and administrators' perceptions of the program's stated and implicit goals similar and different?

Subquestion 4B) How do the administrators' assumptions about the program's effects align and differ from the student participants'?

The first two questions allowed me to explore the experiences of those students who did participate in the summer bridge program, and the third question provided for comparison between the two groups of low-income students. The final question sought to gain insight into the perceptions of administrators and how they are similar or different than the students' perceptions of the program's purpose and aims.

This chapter provides a description of the methods I used to answer my research questions. I begin by discussing the use of qualitative methods in evaluation and my selection of theory-driven evaluation as a method by which to conduct this evaluative study. Second, I describe the qualitative paradigm, presenting both my stance as a constructivist/interpretivist and my use of phenomenology as a primary method of researching the students' experiences. Third, I provide details of the site and participant selection and follow with a description of the phases of the study. In each phase I explain the methods for data collection and analysis. Here I introduce the four archetypes I used throughout the findings chapters to illuminate and explore the experiences of the students. I also describe the steps I took to ensure the

trustworthiness of the study and to address the ways in which ethical issues that arose were addressed. I briefly touch on limitations to my study also.

### **Qualitative Methods within Evaluation**

Evaluation is an “action science,” informing decision making and applying knowledge to solve problems (Patton, 1990). Key to evaluation research is both the systematic, empirically sound methods employed to complete the study and the distribution of the knowledge gathered from the study to those who can make use of the information (Patton, 1990). Evaluative studies of interventions that use qualitative methods are imperative to social science research and policy makers because the results can illuminate the linkages hypothesized by theory and provide explanations for the effects of policy on institutional interventions (Patton, 1990; St. John, 2006a).

The constructivist nature of qualitative methods lends itself to evaluative study (Greene, 2003). Qualitative evaluation research utilizes multiple methods and allows the researcher to enter the research setting in an attempt to interpret or make sense of the phenomena as those people being studied bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Weiss, 1998). The data produced from observations, interviews and document analysis provide depth and detail about the various stakeholders’ experiences and viewpoints. Direct quotations and rich description give the reader a contextualized understanding of the program of study.

According to Patton (1987), using qualitative methods in program evaluation is of value when (a) the program emphasizes individual outcomes, (b) there is a need to develop a program theory established through observations of program activities and treatment in an

effort to determine the relationship between these and the outcomes for participants, (c) information is needed as to what the participants experience and how the program is organized, and (d) decision makers are interested in understanding the program's strengths, weaknesses and overall processes.

This study focused on learning about students' experiences and elucidating the program theory; I sought to understand both the processes of the program under study and the influence the program had on first-year outcomes for student participants. I attempted to link both an implementation evaluation and an outcome evaluation, which is a strength of using theory-driven evaluation (Patton, 1990). I explore the concept of theory-driven evaluation and how it was utilized in my study in the following section.

### **Theory-driven Evaluation**

Program theory is widely used in program evaluation as a mechanism by which to understand the beliefs and assumptions underlying an intervention or social program (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Weiss, 1997). Theory-driven evaluation allows researchers to better understand the transformations that occur for program participants. In addition, the researcher can investigate the relationships between political and organizational contexts, the program's goals and actual outcomes, and intended and unintended effects, thereby creating a holistic picture of the program (Chen, 1990; Lipsey & Pollard, 1989; Patton, 1990). Within this study, I sought to explore participants' transformations and find if gaps existed between the administrators' and students' perceptions of the program's impacts and effects.

Proponents of theory-driven evaluation (Chen, 1990; Chen & Rossi, 1987; Rossi, 1978; Weiss, 1998) argue that efforts by evaluators to explicate the theory or theories that

undergird a program will provide a framework by which the researcher can explore the chain of assumptions that may lead to particular outcomes for participants (Weiss, 1998). In contrast, atheoretical, “black box” or input/output evaluations can limit understanding of the underlying mechanisms that affect program outcomes and leave unexamined the assumptions of the program’s creators and administrators (Lipsey & Pollard, 1989). Methods practiced in “black box” evaluation are centered more on determining how inputs affect overall outcomes (e.g., assessing a treatment method on drug addict behavior) with little, if any, focus into the mechanisms happening within the program (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004).

Tacit theory, or implicit program theory, exists when the underlying assumptions about how the program operates have not been fully articulated by its creators and stakeholders (Weiss, 1997). While stakeholders may not have created a program with specific social science theory in mind, there exists a shared conceptualization (Rossi et al., 2004). This program theory, or “espoused theory” (Argyris, 1982) consists of assumptions and expectations of how the program should work in order to reach its goals. The evaluator works with both the espoused theories and what some call the “theory-in-use” (Argyris) or “theory in action” (Weiss, 1998); both are terms used to describe the theory derived once the evaluator has collected enough data to learn what aspects of the espoused theory are being acted upon within the program (Weiss, 1997; 1998). In qualitative inquiry, the program’s theory in action often is discovered throughout the course of the study (Weiss, 1998). It is common for the researcher to develop preliminary frameworks in the early stages of fieldwork and to conduct ongoing data collection to determine the nature and size of the gap between the intended goals and outcomes and the real ones (Weiss, 1997, 1998).



In this study, the program theory was implicit; the program's administrators and creators did not develop the Stars Academic Program by researching and using established social science scholarship to aid them in constructing its design. Therefore, I took steps within the study to explicate the program theory or theories that informed the intervention program. Explication of program theory involves: (a) interviews with stakeholders and other informants, (b) site visits and observations of the program, (c) document analysis, and (d) review of relevant social science literature (Patton, 1990). This process was iterative, and these resources informed each other (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Patton 1990; Rossi et al., 2004).

Throughout this chapter I use the term "stakeholders," and it is important to provide a working definition. Evaluation stakeholders are any individuals that have a vested interest in the evaluation's findings; these can include policy makers, politicians, community leaders, administrators and program clients (Patton, 1997). For this study, I defined stakeholders as the university administrators who made decisions about the Stars Academic Program's operations and the students who participated in this study. In addition, I acknowledge my position within this study and further explore my paradigmatic stance in the section that follows. I also present my ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions

### **Researcher Paradigm**

A paradigm can be defined as a "set of basic beliefs...[and] represents a worldview that defines for its holder the nature of the 'world,' and the individual's place in it" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). Paradigms encompass theories and methods researchers utilize and help in better understanding phenomena (Creswell, 1994). There is ongoing debate amongst researchers as to the value and use of two competing paradigms, logical positivism and

phenomenological inquiry (Patton, 1990). Logical positivism uses quantitative and experimental methods to test deductive theory, and phenomenological inquiry applies qualitative and naturalistic methods to understand human experience inductively (Patton, 1990).

Qualitative research is distinct in that (a) it takes place in a naturalistic setting, (b) the researcher is the instrument, (c) data are drawn from multiple sources, (d) data analysis is primarily inductive, (e) the focus of the research is on the participants' meanings and perspectives, (f) the researcher tries to identify and represent the complex, holistic picture of the problem or issue under study, and (g) the interpretive nature of the inquiry asks the researcher to acknowledge his/her own background, history and prior understandings (Creswell, 1998). The naturalistic inquiry of the qualitative paradigm has a set of assumptions quite unlike those of the quantitative paradigm. These beliefs shape how the researcher views the world and are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

*Qualitative Paradigm Assumptions*

Assumption	Question	Method – Qualitative
Ontological Assumption	What is the nature of reality?	Reality is subjective and multiple as seen by participants in a study
Epistemological Assumption	What is the relationship of the researcher to that researched?	Researcher interacts with that being researched
Axiological Assumption	What is the role of values?	Value laden and biased
Rhetorical Assumption	What is the language of research?	Evolving decisions Personal voice Informal Accepted qualitative words
Methodological Assumption	What is the process of research?	Inductive process Mutual simultaneous shaping of factors Emerging design – categories identified during research process Context bound Patterns, theories developed for understanding Accurate and reliable through verification

Adapted from Creswell, J.W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Within the broad construct of the qualitative paradigm are a number of philosophical perspectives that present the evaluator with a diverse set of approaches to help guide practice (Greene, 2003). Greene presents four broad approaches to qualitative evaluation, noting that the boundaries of these categorizations are clearer on paper than in actual evaluative practice.

Of the four she identifies (postpositivism, pragmatism, interpretivism/constructivism, and critical social sciences), I align myself with interpretivism/constructivism. As a constructivist, my interest was in understanding the contextual and personal experiences of the students (Greene, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Stake, 1995), and I sought to privilege their voices. Interpretivist, constructivist inquiry is “unapologetically subjectivist” wherein the researcher’s worldviews, experiences and biases are part of the meanings constructed and presented (Greene, 2003).

### **Researcher as Instrument**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The human instrument is “constantly searching for that which is unique, atypical, different, idiographic, individualistic...[and] refuses to manipulate his environment, seeking rather to understand how the environment acts on itself, as well as how the inquirer causes it to behave in different ways” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 129). Within qualitative evaluation, the researcher is a partner with the stakeholders in creating and interpreting the evaluation data (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Characteristics of the inquirer as instrument include responsiveness and adaptability. By being responsive and adaptable, the researcher can interact and react to the shifting contexts of the field and of the study’s participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Also, to the researcher in naturalistic inquiry, the world is viewed holistically, and he/she is challenged to make sense of the whole through immersion and reflection. Because of the holistic nature of qualitative work, the data collected are mediated through the researcher, which necessitates

the identification of biases, personal values, and assumptions (Creswell, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

### **Researcher Role**

My interest in completing an evaluative study has been shaped by my experiences in higher education. For my entire tenure as a Ph.D. student I served as a graduate intern in office of the Dean for the College and Graduate School of Arts & Sciences at the University of Virginia. Through both my work in the Dean's office and my previous professional position as a full-time administrator for the university, I have been interested in the intersection of institutional policy and student experiences. During my tenure as an intern, I participated in the development and implementation of policies and procedures that affected both graduate and undergraduate students; I had the unique opportunity to look at policy and program implementation through my lenses as a student and as an administrator, often noting the challenges faced by those implementing and those affected by policy decisions. It is in my internship role that I became interested in the Stars Academic Program at VU, having an opportunity to learn about the program through a visit the dean completed to Valley University.

I established a professional relationship with administrators at Valley University during my tenure as an intern, both via email, campus visits and phone. Through these relationships I was able to obtain access to the university's personnel and to the SAP. While conducting my study, I was aware of and reflected on what ways, if any, these relationships shaped my data collection, analysis and discussions of findings.

It is also important to note that my interest in low-income and first-generation college students stems, in part, from the experiences of both friends and family members who found persistence in college compromised by their lack of access to financial and information resources. Through my study, I sought to give voice to students who may be marginalized within the culture of an elite university.

As an evaluator utilizing qualitative methods, it was imperative for me to reflect on the changing nature of the relationships I had with all stakeholders – both the student participants and the administrators. It was also my responsibility and challenge to negotiate what questions were addressed and whose voices were heard; these negotiations were value-based, therefore making it necessary for me to disclose my positioning and influences. Evaluation is inherently political (Greene, 2003) and is performed in an environment where the “powerful and powerless” (p. 592) stakeholders have a vested interest in the outcomes (Greene, 2003).

As discussed earlier, my study is both an evaluation and an exploration of students’ experiences and perceptions during their first year. To obtain data necessary to answer those research questions, I relied on methods informed by the philosophy and practices of phenomenology. I turn to a discussion of that next.

### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology refers to both a philosophy and a research method (Richards & Morse, 2007). To understand the complexity of the method and philosophy it is important to understand its historical roots. Phenomenology is grounded in the work of early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and others (Barritt,

Bleeker, Beekman, & Mulderij, 2001; Moustakas, 1994). Husserl believed that phenomenological philosophy, using the intuition and imagination as tools, would allow for a better understanding of human experience and the essence of consciousness (Barritt et al., 2001). To Husserl, consciousness, or intentionality, is a process not an object; it is an activity that is inherently intentional (Barritt et al., 2001; Moustakas, 1994)

Existential philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau Ponty agreed with Husserl that phenomenology should be grounded in the everyday experience, but they extended his philosophy through their exploration of the concepts of meaning (Creswell, 2007). To them, “meaning resides unanalyzed in the experience and is directly accessible [and] language doesn’t mediate the experience: it is the whole experience” (Barritt et al., p. 219).

Another important concept in the area of phenomenology is hermeneutics, an area explored by philosophers Martin Heidegger and Max van Manen. Hermeneutics means interpretation, and hermeneutical phenomenologists and philosophers believe that knowledge comes from language and understanding (Richards & Morse, 2007). Hermeneutic phenomenology supports the idea that the world is “a text that must be read” (Barritt et al., p. 219). To read the world, a phenomenologist must place himself in the context he wishes to understand and must acknowledge that, like the participants under study, he is an interpreter seeking to find significance and meaning in the everyday world (Barritt et al., 2001; Richards & Morse, 2007).

Several assumptions underlie phenomenology. First, perceptions provide evidence of the lived world for individuals. The lived experience of those being studied is crucial to

phenomenology. The second assumption is that human experiences are meaningful; the phenomenological concept of “being in the world” acknowledges that human behavior occurs within a context of relationships among people, events and situations (Richards & Morse, 2007). Phenomenology also assumes that there is a structure and essence to experiences and that those experiences can be narrated (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Therefore, data collection in phenomenological studies consists of multiple in-depth interviews with participants, all of whom have experienced the phenomena under study (Creswell, 2007). While there is no guarantee that participants’ descriptions will be generalizable, phenomenologists believe that there are similarities among people’s experiences that can be uncovered. In addition, phenomenologists recognize that significance can be found in those experiences that are uncommon (Barritt et al., 2001). I provide a detailed description of how I collected and analyzed the phenomenological data I obtained in the Methods section of this chapter.

### **Site and Participant Selection**

#### **The Site**

The site for the study is the Valley University (VU), a public flagship university in the south. Valley University’s efforts to retain low-income students include the Stars Academic Program, a summer bridge program. Established in 2005, this intervention program targets low-income students<sup>7</sup> and provides 20 student participants full funding to enroll in two courses during the summer term preceding their first fall semester. They receive full room and board and are required to participate in weekly workshops and dinners in which information is

---

<sup>7</sup> The University defines “low-income” as those students whose family income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty line (estimated \$37,700 for a family of four).



provided on faculty and administrative resources available. The goals of this summer intervention program include increasing student persistence and students' comfort in accessing university resources throughout their four years (Heuchert, 2007). All students who attend the Stars Academic Program are admitted through the University's financial aid access program, which meets 100% of students' demonstrated financial need. Students from the lowest socioeconomic status receive grants (see Appendix A for a description of Stars Academic Program and Valley University's financial aid initiative).

Valley University's Stars Academic Program (SAP) was created in response to the university's larger commitment to enroll and graduate a greater number of low-income students (Heuchert, 2007). VU is among a small cadre of elite public and private institutions offering income-targeted financial aid to low-income students and creating additional programming to assist these students with their transition to college.

Unlike many summer intervention programs, the Stars Academic Program is aimed specifically at easing transition instead of remediation. The SAP targets high-achieving, low-income students as participants. Although the students participate in formal workshops and other events during their five-week tenure at the university during the summer, they do not take part in prescribed, remedial or transitional courses. Instead, they enroll in two courses from the standard summer session course catalog offered by the university. Therefore, SAP participants have the opportunity to pick from a wide variety of courses. The aim is for students to begin to chip away at required core curriculum courses or to explore various interests. For example, in the summer of my study several students took philosophy, religion or history courses (200 or 300 level), and others focused on language requirements (e.g., 200

or 300 level Spanish courses). No two students in the program are guaranteed to take any of the same classes during the summer bridge program.

Cost of the program is primarily covered by the program. Students are responsible for travel to and from the campus for the program and are asked to bring a small amount of spending money. Otherwise, housing is provided in dormitories, and dining costs in the university's dining halls are covered. In addition, students are taken to the university's bookstore once they are enrolled in classes so that their books for the summer can be paid for by the program.

### **The Sample**

I collected data from both administrators affiliated with the creation and administration of the Stars Academic Program and from a set of students (SAP participants, waitlisted students, and students who did not respond to the invitation). I discuss how I selected both sets of study participant below.

**The administrators.** I sampled purposefully (Patton, 1990) from the university's 12-member VU Promise program steering committee; when selecting my administrator interviewees, I considered the person's administrative position at the university and the level of involvement he had in establishing and providing input over the program since its inception in 2005. All four of the interviewed stakeholders were deeply invested in the success of the Stars Academic Program and the university's access initiative. I also used snowball sampling (Patton, 1990) by seeking recommendations from my interviewees regarding other administrators I might include. This led to my interviewing a graduate

student who has been responsible for overseeing the day-to-day details of the Stars Academic Program since its inception.

**The students.** I collected data from three sets of students for this study; these included students who participated in the SAP, students who were waitlisted for the SAP and students who were invited to the SAP but never responded. I partnered with the university's administration to identify these students.

The university's financial aid and admissions offices identify eligible program participants from the pool of entering first-year, low-income students. Eighty-five students received invitations for the 2007 program. All were told that the program enrollment was based on a first-come, first-served policy; the first 20 students who signed up for the program were sent an email and follow up letter confirming their place in the summer program. Six additional students responded to the invitation and received an email informing them of their placement on a waiting list.

Ten of the 20 students in my study came from the 2007 SAP participant pool. An additional 10 students were selected to form a comparison group. Four members of the comparison group came from the six students placed on the waiting list and six others came from the list of students invited to participate but who did not respond to the invitation. Neither the waitlisted students nor the students from the non-participant list participated in the Stars Academic Program. The use of the waitlisted students and the non-participant students as a comparison group enabled me to examine possible differences between the three groups of students, which strengthened the credibility of the study (Maxwell, 2005).

The sampling strategy varied for the three sets of students. I employed random sampling to obtain the 10 participants from the Stars Academic Program by assigning each student a number and using a random number generator to select the participants. I also utilized this strategy to select the students from the non-participant pool. Due to the small size of the wait list, I was not able to randomly sample among those students. Instead I contacted all six students to request their participation, and four waitlisted students agreed to take part.

All student study participants were contacted both by email and personal letter sent to their primary address. Contact information was provided by the university. Letters and emails were sent in the summer of 2008; any student who did not respond to the first round of communications was sent a second email. If students did not respond to this second email, I removed them from the sampling list and employed the sampling methods discussed above to select new participants. (See Appendix B for the email and letter communication) All study participants were offered a financial payment for participating in my study. Of the original 20 students contacted, 17 responded, requiring me to only reselect for three spots.

The student participants of the study were a diverse group. Of the 20 participants, five were out-of-state residents, and the remaining 15 were from in state. All were between the ages of 18 and 22, and none were transfer students; there were eight males and 12 females. Six of the participants were Black, six were Asian, seven were White and one was Latino. I have included brief biographies of all the students at the end of this chapter.

### **Methods**

In the following section I describe the two phases of the study. Within each of these phases, I explain the data collection, instrumentation and analysis I employed. After both

phases have been described, I conclude with a discussion of the techniques I utilized to ensure the trustworthiness of the study and an explanation of limitations not previously mentioned.

### **Phase 1 – Observations and Interviews for the Stars Academic Program**

Upon obtaining Institutional Review Board approval to implement exploratory research in the summer of 2007, I traveled to VU and completed a set of interviews and five weeks of observations of the Stars Academic Program. The interviews informed my evaluation of the Stars Academic Program. I was able to build the groundwork for my future exploration of links between what the program administrators thought the summer bridge program was accomplishing and the experiences of the students who did and did not participate (Weiss, 2000). Through observation, I collected data on the day-to-day workings of the program. I was able to begin to build relationships with the program's stakeholders; this work aided later phases of the study and was key in building rapport with both program participants and administrators.

**Data collection: Interviews.** During the summer of 2007, I completed one-on-one interviews with four administrators affiliated with the Stars Academic Program (see Appendix C for my interview protocol); each interview lasted approximately one hour.

My semi-structured interview protocol consisted of a small set of open-ended questions, and I used follow-up probes as necessary. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. I distributed completed transcripts to the interviewees in fall 2007 as a form of member checking. I received signed materials release forms from all five interviewees giving me permission to use the data from their interviews for future research.

Interviews with stakeholders were a valuable means by which to collect data for an evaluation (Patton, 1987). Through interviews, I learned about how participants and administrators viewed the program and captured the complexities of their experiences and perceptions of the program (Patton, 1987). Interviews were a means by which to collect large amounts of data in a short amount of time and complemented the data collected through observation, allowing me to paint a more complex portrait of the phenomenon of study (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The semi-structured format ensured that all questions were covered in the interview, thereby allowing analysis of comparable data (Weiss, 1998).

**Data collection: Observations.** From early July to mid-August 2007, I served as an observer of the Stars Academic Program. I observed during the program's half-day orientation and the workshops and formal dinners held throughout the students' five weeks on campus. I also joined the students at the dining hall each Monday evening. These dinners provided students an opportunity to meet informally with the graduate student who ran the program. I completed approximately 25 hours of observations and used a small notebook for recording field notes. I typed up notes and a reflective memo at the end of each day of observations, taking time to include details regarding the processes observed during the workshops. Field notes for the dinners included recollections of conversations I participated in and observations of interactions among students and administrators. My reflective memos included impressions I had of the "messages" that were conveyed during both the formal and informal events.

All of the students were aware of my role as an observer and researcher; I did not serve in an authoritative position and would defer to the program's staff when asked questions about processes or rules. Although my role was primarily of observer, I did interact with the students in an informal manner; conversation topics included their course work, their families, and their general experiences during their five weeks of classes.

Observation provided me a powerful way of learning about individual's behavior within the context of the study site and complemented the interview data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Maxwell 2005). The purpose of observational evaluation data was to describe the program with descriptive detail (Patton, 1987; 1990). Direct observation provided inductive and contextualized data, giving me an opportunity to learn about aspects of the program that may not have arisen through other qualitative methods (Patton, 1987).

### **Data Analysis**

After my summer 2007 observations and interviews, I completed a preliminary analysis of my field notes, reflective memos and interview data noting themes in an effort to develop a preliminary outline of the program theory. All field notes, memos and interview transcriptions were read and re-read several times.

I used the qualitative program ATLAS.ti™ to analyze these data (and all data from my study. ATLAS.ti™ helped to automate and accelerate the coding of the data; its strengths lie in its use with many forms of data (video, primary documents, audio and text).

From my initial readings, I created a list of preliminary codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After creating a set of basic codes, I began analyzing the results of this work, looking for patterns and developing category systems (Patton, 1990).

From the coding and category development, I was able to create a preliminary process/outcome matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). In qualitative analysis, program processes are derived from the data, and the researcher searches for common words and phrases used by those interviewed that best captures the essence of a particular process (Patton, 1990).

From the process/outcome matrix, I developed an initial model of the espoused program theory, using words and phrases from the interview data to populate the diagram (see Appendix D for the preliminary model). Due to the iterative nature of qualitative evaluation, this basic construction of the program theory was used as a starting point for further exploration. By comparing the espoused theory with the data collected from participants and non-participants, I was able to determine the similarities and differences between the espoused theory and the theory in action.

## **Phase 2 – Interviews with Student Participants and Document Collection**

Phase 2 of my study began in the summer and fall of 2008, after the June 2008 defense of my dissertation proposal. This phase focused on completing a series of phenomenological interviews with the student participants. Because the goals of the study were to both investigate a phenomenon and complete a qualitative evaluation, it was necessary to combine the strengths of phenomenological methods within an evaluation framework. Therefore, I merged the results of my phenomenological data collection and analysis with other forms of qualitative data in order to answer the more pragmatic evaluative research questions regarding perceptions of the program's effectiveness. As Greene (2003) notes, qualitative "evaluators rarely practice a 'pure' form of their craft, either



philosophically or methodologically. The complex, pluralistic demands of evaluation field contexts evoke instead multiple, diverse frames for guiding practice and invite dialog among them” (p. 600).

**Data collection: Phenomenological interviews.** Due to the nature of phenomenological interviews and my interest in exploring in-depth the experiences of low-income students, I conducted two sets of interviews with each student. The first set of interviews occurred in August and September 2008. I completed interviews with two students by phone, and the remaining 18 interviews were conducted in person early in the fall 2008 semester. See Appendix E for protocols. I tape recorded and transcribed the interviews, and the transcripts were shared with the students for their consent.

The second set of interviews with all 20 participants was conducted during in at the end of the fall 2008 semester. These were done in person at a VU location of their choice. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Again, I provided each student a chance to read the transcription as a form of member checking (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A second protocol was used that built on the results of the first set of interviews.

There were several benefits to holding multiple interviews over a longer period of time (Kvale, 1996). First, two interviews provided rich data that more deeply explored the phenomenon of my study. Second, I analyzed the data from the first set of interviews to guide the protocol for the second set of interviews; although I used a protocol for the second set of interviews (See Appendix F), I was able to tailor my second interview protocol for each student, thus giving me an opportunity to explore the unique experiences of each student. Lastly, by staggering the interviews over the span of several months, I provided the

students an opportunity to reflect on their experiences after their first year and again during the fall of their second year.

Interviews are a traditional method of collecting phenomenological data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological interview is conversational and uses broad, open-ended questions to guide the process (Moustakas, 1994). I found broad questions helped me to obtain rich, substantive descriptions of the participant's experience with the phenomena under study (Kvale, 1996; Moustakas, 1994). I relied on the interview protocols as guides, but was comfortable at allowing the interview to digress and develop (Munhall, 2007).

Due the sensitive nature of the questions of my study and the risks inherent with a small participant sample, I employed all means possible to ensure confidentiality. Each student I interviewed was given a pseudonym used for the transcriptions and data analysis and I discussed the informed consent document with each student before collecting their signatures. See Appendix G for the consent form.

**Data collection: Program documents and transcripts.** I collected primary documents including newspaper articles and materials from the university's website. I also collected institutional reports, correspondence to the program participants and a set of surveys completed by the students who participated in the Stars Academic Program in summer 2007. In addition, with students' permission, I collected transcript data on all 20 students, which included advanced standing credit, course enrollment, major, semester grades, and cumulative GPA. This data was useful in identify patterns among and between students in their academic progress. As mentioned earlier, I gathered transcript data from

summer 2007 to spring 2009, which allowed me to analyze the data from several key points in the students' academic trajectory. These data were collected from the student database with the cooperation of an academic administrator.

### **Data Analysis**

**Phenomenology.** For the analysis of my phenomenological data collected from both sets of student interviews, I followed the processes discussed by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2007) (see Appendix H for a diagram of phenomenological coding). I began by describing my personal experiences with the phenomenon under study. This first step, called bracketing or “*epoche*,” allows the researcher to make known his or her personal experiences so that the participants' experiences can become the focus of the study. I found it necessary return to this step of analysis as I delved deeper into the data, and my work took the form of journal entries, with little concern for grammar or the “right” words.

I then worked with the students' interview transcriptions to develop a list of significant statements that represented how the study's participants experienced the phenomenon under study. In this phase of “*horizontalization*” my efforts were to treat each statement equally and worth further exploration. As I worked in this phase I wrote memos in order to explore my own biases and impressions. In this phase I began coding using emic codes that emerged from the data. I also shared my codes and sections of interview data with my doctoral reading group and had them code my data in an effort to validate my findings.

After working with the significant statements, I began to create textural descriptions by clustering the significant statements into themes or meaning units (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). I began to organize them into thematic conceptual matrices (Miles &

Huberman, 1994) but found the exercise unwieldy in my chosen spreadsheet program. Instead I used several features in my analysis program, ATLAS.ti™, to link significant statements. I created printed reports of significant statements and refined and reanalyzed as needed. I also continued to create memos in this phase. It is in this phase that I incorporated students' drawings I obtained during the second set of interviews (see Appendix F) into my analysis.

As I worked to find themes in the students' data, I began crafting individual case synopses for all 20 participants. I used the themes that arose as guides regarding what to include in each case. From these synopses I developed a narrative using cross-case matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Upon completion of the synopses and the cross-case matrices, I wrote a narrative of how the experience happened for the students, allowing me to reflect on the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced by the study's participants.

As a last step, I developed code families, which helped me move from smaller theoretical pieces to larger concepts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These code families allowed me to span both the original interview and observation data and the students' interview data. I used accompanying memos in order to organize my thoughts and explore biases and hunches.

**Document and transcript analysis.** Documents gathered in the final phase of the study were read and re-read in an effort to extract themes and categories; additional codes were created if needed. Results from this analysis were used to create a richer, more contextualized picture of the program's intended and unintended messages and effects (Guba & Lincoln,

1981; Patton, 1990). In addition, I analyzed the SAP survey data looking at students' responses to key questions around their reasons for attending and their goals and perceived outcomes of the program.

The transcripts were analyzed for quantitative data (e.g., cumulative GPA) and qualitative data (e.g., course taking patterns, declared majors). In addition, transcript data were used to help shape a set of student archetypes developed to explore and explain my findings. The analysis and calculations are described in detail in the "creation of archetypes" section of this chapter.

**Evaluation.** Qualitative evaluation is a narrative craft, and it is the responsibility of the evaluator to tell the stories of the participants (Greene, 2003). In this final phase of my study I analyzed the phenomenological stories of the study's participants in relationship to the administrator and observation data collected and analyzed in the earlier stages of the study. I coded the data using emic and etic codes and rearranged them into categories developed inductively from the open codes and deductively from existing social science theory (Maxwell, 2005). Etic codes included constructs derived from the theoretical frame, and the emic codes emerged from the data.

The descriptive analysis for the evaluation attempted to answer basic questions like: What were the goals of the program? What were the activities of the program? What happened to the people in the program? My data interpretation involved answering "why" questions and putting the resulting data into an analytic framework and so I could begin to build linkages, offer explanations, impose order and test rival explanations (Patton, 1990).

This interplay was an important step in the iterative evaluation process (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

During this second phase of the study, I re-visited the data analysis from Phase 1, using the additional data collected to further inform my work. I was able to identify the nature of the commonalities and gaps between the administrators' perceptions of the programs goals and outcomes and the students' perceptions (Weiss, 1998; 2000).

My aim was to present the students' stories within a holistic description and analysis of the meaningful connections between the students and the summer bridge intervention (Greene, 2003). Detailed description and direct quotations were used in an effort to provide a better understanding of the program and the students' experiences (Patton, 1987).

Although the description regarding my data analysis is presented here in a linear, logical fashion, the real process of data analysis was much more "messy" as I moved through the data seeking themes and patterns in relation to my questions. As I read and re-read the students' data I began to see patterns emerging and after writing memos and writing the students' narratives, I found organizing the students' data around archetype groups would not only serve as useful means of presenting the data but would allow readers to see the storied threads of the students' lives more richly. I describe in some detail how I created the archetype groups and provide the parameters that define them.

### **Creation of Archetypes**

The four archetypes I created are derived from the data. In the following section I will provide details regarding the establishment of these archetypes. This description reveals that

I was able to triangulate my interview data with students' academic data, thereby increasing the credibility and transferability of my work.

The archetypes arose because, during my analysis, I began to see patterns regarding the students' descriptions of their pre-college experiences. These similarities continued when they discussed their lives in college. Once these data were coupled with the academic information I received on the students, I realized that my "hunches" had substance. Although the boundaries of the archetypes do not hold for all the students at all times in my work, they are helpful in both discussing the data and understanding the complex experiences of the students in my study.

The primary constructs for the archetypes revolve around issues of student persistence, success and integration. I began by placing the students on a continuum in relation to their descriptions of their pre- and within-college lives. Factors I considered in this continuum included aspects of their access to resources in high school, their families' commitment to education, their considerations of departure from VU, and their academic and personal struggles and achievements in college.

Knowing I needed to substantiate this work, I turned to the students' academic data. Using SPSS, I entered the students' cumulative GPAs, credits earned, and advanced standing credits<sup>8</sup>. I derived the mean and standard deviation for all three of these variables. For each variable, students' scores were divided into three equal sections by calculating half of the standard deviation and adding/subtracting that to/from the mean. Using the three brackets, I scored each student on these three variables, giving a value of 1, 2 or 3 to the lowest, middle and highest thirds respectively.

---

<sup>8</sup> The cumulative GPA and credits earned spanned from summer 2007 to spring 2009.

After calculating these scores, I turned to students' self-reported data regarding their college experiences. Specifically I focused on students' discussions regarding their considerations of departure and self-reported extracurricular activities. The departure score was dichotomous, with those who admitted to considering departure from VU or those who left VU getting a score of 1 and those who, when asked, said they had not considered departure a 2. Involvement scores were derived from the students' interview data; I gave a score of 1 to students who reported no activities or one activity where they held no leadership role nor had to make a longer time commitment (e.g., intramural sports, one-time fundraising events). Students who either had several activities or held a greater role in one activity received a score of 2; this included students who were officers, participated weekly or bi-weekly in activities and/or had made a longer-term commitment. Those who received a score of 3 were engaged in two or more activities wherein they made an ongoing commitment through a semester or academic year.

Lastly, I used the students' semester by semester GPA data to calculate a GPA change score. Specifically, I calculated the difference between the students' spring 2009 and fall 2007 GPAs. All the students who had a negative change received a score of 1; those who had no difference got a score of 2. All the students who had an increase in GPA from fall 2007 to spring 2009 received a score of 3. The logic behind these scores is tied to research (McGrath & Braunstein, 1997; Temple & Polk, 1986), which shows that students' persistence and success is linked to their ability to maintain or improve their academic performance over time. Conversely, those students who falter academically and see their grades decline are more likely to leave college (McGrath & Braunstein, 1997).



I totaled these six scores and divided by the number of variables with values; this achieved parity among all scores especially since Mary's variables are different than other students. The results of these calculations can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

*Creation of Archetypes - Academic Attainment and Persistence Measures Using Students' Academic and Interview Data*

	Rel. to SAP	GPA Score	Credits Earned Score	Credits brought Score	Involve. Score	Departure Score	GPA Change Score	Total/# Variables
Sophia	P	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
Nicholas	P	1	1	1	2	1	1	1.17
Sean	NR	1	1	2	1	1	1	1.17
Julia	P	2	2	1	1	1	1	1.33
Dana	P	2	2	1	2	1	1	1.50
Rebecca	NR	2	2	1	1	1	2	1.50
Michael	NR	1	2	1	2	2	2	1.67
Jackie	P	2	3	1	1	2	1	1.67
Lila	P	2	2	2	1	1	3	1.83
Daniel	WL	3	2	1	1	1	3	1.83
Kelly	WL	2	2	2	2	1	3	2.00
Max	NR	3	2	3	1	1	2	2.00
Mark	NR	2	2	3	1	2	3	2.17
Elena	P	2	2	1	3	2	3	2.17
Courtney	WL	3	2	2	1	2	3	2.17
Stacey	WL	3	2	3	1	2	3	2.33
Julian	NR	3	2	2	2	2	3	2.33
Jenny	P	3	3	2	1	2	3	2.33
Mary	P	3	3	3	1	0	3	2.60
Marcus	P	3	3	3	3	1	3	2.67

P=Participant; NR=Non-respondent; WL=Waitlisted

Note: Mary received a score of 0 regarding departure because we did not discuss the subject in our interviews

What emerged from the results of these analyses served as the guidelines for the four archetype groups. I did not rely solely on these scores to draw the boundaries around the

groups, but combined these results with the qualitative analysis to develop a richer portrait of the student archetypes. This explains, for example, the difference in archetype groups for Michael and Jackie, who have the same score from the statistical calculations yet are in different archetype groups. For these students, and all the students within each archetype, I analyzed the interview data looking at the ways in which the students described their first semesters at VU. In the case of Michael and Jackie, Michael presented himself as a student at greater risk of isolation and possible departure. Whereas Jackie had found a faculty mentor, sought support from a peer group, and seemed to be gaining her footing at VU, Michael admitted to withdrawing from his friends in an effort to stay on top of academics. In addition, he was considering becoming *less* involved (resigning as a representative for his one student group) not seeing any value to his extracurricular activities beyond resume building. Although connected to an advisor, Michael had not sought out other faculty for assistance. Therefore, I placed Michael in one archetype and Jackie another group; despite their quantitative similarities, their qualitative differences tipped the scales.

The four archetypes represent a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis. I briefly describe all groups (see student profiles at the end of the chapter for more information on each student). All four archetype names borrow from the mountain theme connoted by the use of Valley University as a pseudonym. Each archetype reflects the means by which the group of students negotiated the “peaks and valleys” of college access and attendance, with some students having both the tools and skills to move easily through the journey and others almost paralyzed by their circumstances. As such, I used the four names, PEAK PERFORMERS, LEAD CLIMBERS, PANIC CLIMBERS and CLIFF HANGERS.

PEAK PERFORMERS, as their scores indicate, were at less risk of departure from Valley University, in part due to their success in their courses and their interest in and ability to engage with the larger university community. PEAK PERFORMERS seemed to have a strong sense of their own abilities and appeared to thrive almost immediately after arriving in the challenging college environment. LEAD CLIMBERS were very similar to PEAK PERFORMERS but were placed in this group because of factors related to considerations of departure, academic performance, and/or perceptions of self efficacy. Several of these students had thought of leaving VU, and many were put off by the challenges they faced in transitioning to college. LEAD CLIMBERS seemed to take a little longer to hit their stride in college. The third archetype, PANIC CLIMBERS, struggled to maintain the grades they had become accustomed to in high school. VU's challenging environment tested their abilities, leaving several of them to consider departure. For many, their struggles with academics and transition left them feeling hesitant to get too involved. Lastly, CLIFF HANGERS either left VU or were at serious risk of departure due to very low grades. These students struggled mightily with academic performance and transition, leaving them to question if VU was the right place for them. Both PANIC CLIMBERS and CLIFF HANGERS were often frustrated, overwhelmed and stressed, not knowing how to best proceed to ameliorate their situations. It is important to state outright that there are no discernable patterns of who is a member of what archetype based on participation in the Stars Academic Program.

These archetype groups will be explored in more depth in Chapters 5 and 6. I did not use the archetypes for the evaluation chapter because it was necessary to present the data primarily through the voices of those students who did participate, which, as stated above,

was not organized around any of the archetype groups. In chapters 5 and 6, I try to focus on two or three students from each group so the reader can see patterns and themes. In addition, there are sections of these findings chapters in which archetype boundaries are either permeable or non-existent. I state these incidences outright.

### **Incorporation of Stakeholders**

In applied research such as evaluation, the stakeholders play an important role in providing feedback of the preliminary findings and subsequent analysis (Patton, 1990). As an additional form of member checking, I provided administrators and students an opportunity to provide feedback on the preliminary results of my analysis. Their input served as means to test emergent understandings and explore alternative explanations of my conclusions (Patton, 1990). For the students, I created a schema that captured the data exploring their transition to college and their experiences in their first semesters. I sent this schema to 10 of the 20 of the student participants along with a detailed email describing my work and listing specific questions for them to consider. I also sent them an accompanying link to a YouTube video I created describing the schema in fuller detail. Four students responded to my request, providing edits and feedback to my work (See Appendix I for the schema). In addition, I sought the feedback of an administrator stakeholder, providing her a preliminary report of my evaluative findings. I incorporated some of her feedback into my final evaluation findings chapter.

These steps were necessary both for the integrity of my work and the resulting usefulness of my findings. I now explore other means I employed to ensure the trustworthiness of my results.

### **Trustworthiness**

Within the positivist paradigm, four constructs are seen as imperative to ensure the soundness of the study: external validity, internal validity, reliability and objectivity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced four alternative constructs which are considered more applicable to the naturalistic inquiry of the qualitative paradigm. These are transferability, credibility, dependability and confirmability (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994.) I explain each in the following section, noting how I addressed these constructs in my work.

#### **Transferability**

The concept of transferability assumes that the study's conclusions could be useable within other contexts and situations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). While the nature of qualitative research does not lend itself to generalizations, there is value in ensuring that the study can be assessed and utilized within a larger body of scholarship and research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In an effort to make my work transferable, I employed such actions as tying my results to existing theory and triangulating my data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition, I triangulated my methods of data collection (e.g., observation, interviews, document analysis) in an effort to broaden the utility of my findings. I included thick description (Geertz, 1973) from my data, pulling in students' narratives with as little editing and trimming as possible (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994). All these strategies assisted in broadening the scope of my results of the evaluative study, in an effort to move beyond the boundaries of the study site to extrapolate the findings to other settings and participants (Patton, 1987).

## **Credibility**

In pursuing credibility in a study, the researcher is trying to obtain “truth value” (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and seeks to answer the questions: Do the findings make sense? Are they credible to the stakeholders? Are the results authentic? A researcher can employ a number of practices to guard against threats to credibility. These include many of the same strategies that helped ensure transferability, such as triangulating my methods and sources (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Triangulation helps establish credibility wherein the researcher seeks convergence among a number of different sources in order to form categories or themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Denzin (1978) identified four types of triangulation: across methods (e.g., interviews, observations, documents), sources (e.g., participants), theories, and between different researchers. By triangulating methods and sources, I was able to seek corroborating evidence and reduced my reliance on any single incident or data point (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Comparison between the groups of students also helped address credibility threats (Maxwell, 2005); the use of a comparison group aided in exploring the “counterfactual” circumstances to learn more about what happened to the students without the presence of the intervention (Maxwell, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994). I also explored negative cases and alternative explanations in an effort to ensure credibility (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Dependability**

The underlying concern regarding dependability lies in whether the study was conducted in a consistent manner. Insuring dependability involves aligning the research questions with the study's design, collecting data across an appropriate time span and through a large enough sample, and producing findings that are consistent through various data sources (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The iterative process of reviewing and analyzing my research questions and theoretical frame as they related to the data I collected assisted me in addressing issues of dependability. In addition, my use of observations, document analysis and interviews staggered over a several month period were consistent with a sound evaluative study design (Patton, 1990).

**Confirmability**

I employed several tactics and strategies in an attempt to limit the risk of bias in my interpretation of the data. These steps included working with my doctoral reading group members in critically assessing my data analysis. In addition, I maintained an audit trail, which outlined the research process and the evolution of codes, themes and other aspects of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In addition, triangulation of the data sources, as addressed earlier, also assisted with bias reduction. Lastly, the reflection employed in phenomenological studies allowed me to write about my own assumptions, biases, and values and how they may have affected the study. This transparency aided in strengthening the confirmability of my work.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Using qualitative methods in evaluation merits an awareness of risks of violating ethical boundaries (Weiss, 1998). It was essential that I was clear with staff and participants as to my role as an evaluator, explaining my goals and the possible risks of participating in the study. My aim was to earn the trust and respect necessary to collect valuable data from all participants.

In an effort to conduct my study within the highest ethical standards, I used the American Evaluation Association's (AEA) Guiding Principles for Evaluators as a standard to conduct my work. According to the AEA, an evaluator should "construct and provide the best possible information that might bear on the value of whatever is being evaluated" (AEA Guiding Principles, 2004). Key aspects of their principles include: (a) transparency in discussing methods, outcomes, strengths and weaknesses of the study's design and implementation with all stakeholders, (b) displaying the cultural competence necessary to work effectively and sensitively with a diverse group of stakeholders and participants, and (c) abiding by regulations regarding confidentiality, informed consent, and possible risks to participants.

Throughout my study I took steps to address ethical concerns as they arose. First, all participants were given a pseudonym as was the program under study, the university and other aspects of the data presentation in an effort to maintain confidentiality. In discussing the student participants and their backgrounds, I did not use the real names of such things as home towns, high schools and names of parents or siblings.



Several ethical concerns arose during my study. These involved my relationship with Valley University administrators and the sensitive nature of the materials I collected from the students I interviewed. The biggest concern was a result of the size and nature of my student participant pool; there was a risk that the administrator who provided me academic data on the students would possibly link the data presented in the study to participants of the SAP. I believed the risk of this was small in light of the valuable data obtained through students' academic records.

I also recognized that my inability to ensure anonymity along with the sensitive nature of the research questions may have increased the feelings of vulnerability or exposure for the student participants. I selected a set of students who might already feel "othered" by the larger university community. My aim was to bring sensitivity and empathy to my work. As my introductory quote states, I sought to learn from the students and understand the world from their point of view.

### **Limitations and Concerns**

There were aspects of my study that may have affected the credibility and generalizability of the study.

#### **Single Institution Study**

Because this study took place at one institution, the findings are limited in generalizability. Although I believe that some broader conclusions can be drawn about both summer bridge programs and the experiences of low-income students at elite colleges and universities, the unique context of study's place and time must be taken into account. Issues to consider include Valley University's history and culture, the creation of and ongoing

discourse around the VU Promise program, and the goals and aims of the Stars Academic Program. These factors, and more, contribute to the study's unique nature and must be taken into account in extrapolating the findings. By its very nature, program evaluation can be a localized, site-specific type of research (Patton, 1990). It was my aim through both the various methods employed and the study's theoretical frame to explore and understand a phenomenon and evaluate a specific program.

### **Aspects of the Student Participants**

As was discussed earlier, my sample included students who participated in the Stars Academic Program and those who did not. The non-participant pool included students who had signed up on a waitlist and students who did not respond to the invitation. This mixed comparison group is a limit to my study. I was not able to rely solely on the waitlisted students as my comparison group because of the small size of the waitlist. Instead I tapped into a group of students who did not respond, thereby not fully being able to control for selection bias. In other words, one can hypothesize that the waitlisted students had many of the same characteristics as those who wanted to participate, making them an ideal comparison group to study. One can also hypothesize that the non-responders possessed different characteristics than the participant population, thereby limiting comparisons made.

In addition, students I studied were at a higher risk of dropping out of college or transferring to another institution than their higher socioeconomic peers (Choy, 2002; Horn, 1998). In fact, one of the students who participated did leave Valley University soon after our second interview. I was unable to contact this student after his departure. While his leaving did not affect the original scope of my study, his reasons for doing so would have illuminated

my study. In addition, the sensitive nature of the study's questions might have inhibited participants from fully disclosing their experiences and feelings to me. I asked the students to reflect on their experiences of coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds, which is a highly sensitive subject. As a white, 40-year-old, middle-class graduate student from a different institution, I may have seemed untrustworthy to the student participants, especially those I had not met prior to the interviews.

### **Nature of the Stars Academic Program**

The specific nature of the Stars Academic Program limited my opportunities to complete observations of the students within the program. Students were brought together several times a week but the remainder of the students' time on campus was highly individualized. Each student enrolled in different academic classes during their five weeks on campus and followed their own personal schedules for time spent studying, relaxing or socializing with friends and other members of the program.

### **Conclusions**

The following three chapters present the findings of my study. My evaluation work is presented in chapter 4 and is meant to be fairly all-encompassing in providing both data analysis and recommendations for the program moving forward. Chapter 5 presents the students pre-college experiences as they relate to issues of college persistence, integration, validation and their access to social and cultural capital. The last findings chapter, chapter 6, provides insight into the students' experiences once in college, noting the students' progress from their first semester at college through to the beginning of their sophomore year. Lastly, I end with my conclusions chapter, which illuminates the primary findings of the study and

provides insight into how the work contributes and extends existing research and practice in higher education.

## Student Profiles

### Peak Performers

**Marcus** is from Baltimore, MD and is the first in his family to attend college. He went to a magnet high school, in which he participated in college preparatory experiences, including Upward Bound and AVID. Marcus is Black and has one younger sibling. He was offered admission to Cornell University, but VU offered a more generous financial aid package. Marcus participated in the SAP, and his career goals include becoming a professor and holding elected office.

**Mary** attended high school in a rural town in the state. She indicated her family moved around a great deal during her childhood, mostly within the state. She is the oldest of four girls and the first in her family to attend college. Mary's father and mother emigrated from Iran. Although admitted to Duke University, Emory University, and Georgetown University, Mary selected VU because of the financial aid and the reputation of the university's undergraduate business school. Mary participated in the SAP, and she would like a career in business.

**Jenny** grew up in a suburb of a large city in the state and attended school in one of the best school districts in the U.S. She applied to approximately nine schools, including Emory University and was admitted to the majority of them. She selected VU, in part, because the university offered her the most financial aid. She is White and the younger of two children; she is the first in her family to attend college. Jenny participated in the SAP and, in her second year at VU, she studied abroad. She plans on becoming a dentist.

The daughter of Black Haitian immigrants, **Elena** was raised in a city in southwestern Connecticut with a large Haitian population. Her father worked as professor, having earned a degree in Haiti. Her mother worked in the restaurant industry after graduating from culinary school. Elena admitted that neither parent was able to continue their professions in the U.S. Her father works in ministry and her mother has worked sporadically, finding acquisition of English difficult. Elena did not mention any siblings. She attended a public high school in Connecticut, applying to both VU and the University of Connecticut. She chose VU because of its reputation and the financial aid package. Elena participated in the SAP and she plans on becoming a nurse after graduation.

**Stacey** is White and is the oldest of six children. Both her parents are teachers at a newly created private school in her hometown, which is approximately 70 miles from Valley's campus. Stacey was admitted to VU as a Millers Scholar, a Valley University honors program that provides special opportunities for students including priority registration, a common first year living experience, access to specialized advisors and the opportunity to explore an interdisciplinary major. This honor, in combination with her financial aid, shaped her decision to attend VU. Stacey's area of emphasis is English, and she hoped to study

abroad in England her third year of college. Stacey would like to enter the field of editing after graduation. She was placed on the waiting list for the SAP.

**Julian** is the son of undocumented immigrants. His parents fled Colombia before he was born and currently live in suburban Miami, FL. Julian has two younger siblings; his brother started his first year at the University of Michigan in 2008, and his sister planned on attending Harvard University in fall 2009. Julian was admitted to St. John's University, the University of Miami, and American University and chose VU because of the generous financial aid package. Julian did not respond to the invitation to attend the SAP. Julian's career plans include working for the government.

**Courtney** is White and from a mid-sized city approximately 70 miles from the university. She is the first in her family to go to college. Her father runs the presses for the local newspaper and her mother is a homemaker. She has one younger sister still in middle school. Courtney was admitted to VU and another in-state public university; both offered almost identical financial aid. Courtney selected VU so she could attend the university's education school. Courtney plans on becoming a math teacher after graduation. She was placed on the SAP waitlist but did not participate.

**Mark** grew up in a large city in the southeastern part of the state. His parents emigrated from Taiwan before he was born, and he is the younger of two children. His sister graduated from a less selective state university and works as an art teacher. His mother earned a degree in sociology in Taiwan; there was no mention of his father going to college in Taiwan. Mark applied to VU early admission but was considering several other in-state schools if he had not gained admission to VU. Mark was unsure of his career plans. Mark was invited to the SAP but did not respond to the invitation.

### **Lead Climbers**

**Jackie** is the youngest of four sisters and grew up approximately 100 miles from Valley University in a small city near a larger urban hub. Jackie's mother emigrated from Liberia before having children. There was no mention of Jackie's father. Jackie and her sisters are the first in the family to attend college; all four women have graduated or are attending college. Jackie's sisters have been influential in her life. Her older sister closest in age was a fellow VU student, and was very helpful in Jackie's transition to college. Jackie selected VU because of its reputation; she also received the largest financial aid package from VU. Jackie participated in the SAP and hopes to become an obstetrician.

**Max** is White and grew up in a rural part of the state, attending a small public high school. His father graduated from the state's land grant institution and works as an arborist for a small-sized state university. His mother graduated from a regional university and is a teacher. His two older sisters both attended college and earned teaching degrees. He has one younger sister, who is 12. Max was admitted to several universities, including the school that his father is employed. Max decided to attend VU because of the large financial aid package and

its reputation. Max plans on becoming a doctor. Max was invited to the SAP but did not respond.

**Daniel** emigrated with his parents from Hong Kong when he was in middle school. He and his parents moved into a large house in Brooklyn, NY where they live with an extended family comprised of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. With his move to the US, his parents enrolled him in a private Catholic school; he received a partial scholarship to attend. Daniel's older brother graduated from SUNY Buffalo. Daniel was waitlisted for the SAP and hopes to work in finance when he graduates.

**Kelly** is Black and grew up in the state's capital. Up until the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, she attended a private high school on a partial scholarship. When her mother needed a kidney transplant, the family faced a larger financial burden and could no longer afford her tuition for school. She transferred to a city public school for the last two years of high school. Kelly is the older of two children and the first to attend college. In addition to VU, Kelly was admitted to a small, private college in her hometown. Both offered similar financial aid packages but Kelly selected VU because it was more racially diverse. Kelly's career plans included becoming a teacher. Kelly was placed on the waiting list for the SAP.

**Lila** is the only child of parents who emigrated from Ethiopia. She is from an urban area approximately 100 miles away, which is known for its outstanding school system. In addition to her parents, there is a set of aunts, uncles and cousins living nearby, who also emigrated from Ethiopia. Lila only applied to in-state schools, with Valley U. giving her the most generous financial aid package. She chose VU over other schools because of the financial aid offered. Lila participated in the SAP and her career goals include becoming a psychiatrist.

### **Panic Climbers**

**Dana** was raised in a suburban area outside a large city in the state. The daughter of immigrants from Vietnam, she is a first-generation college student. Her older brothers attended a college close to the family home so Dana was the first child to leave home to attend college. Dana received admissions offers, with similar aid packages to VU, from two other state schools. Dana participated in the Stars Academic Program, and her career goal is to become a dentist.

**Julia** is the daughter of immigrants of China and was raised in a wealthy, suburban city outside a large urban hub. Her father died when she was three years old, and her mother raised her and her sisters on her own. Julia graduated from a highly regarded public school. Her older sister attends Valley University and another sister graduated from the University of Maryland. Julia participated in the SAP and selected VU because of the financial aid package. Julia is unsure of her career plans.

**Michael** emigrated with his family from Taiwan to the United States in 2003 during his first year of high school. His parents and older sister went to college in Taiwan and Michael is the

first member of his family to attend a college in the US. He has one younger brother who is in his first year at a university in Georgia. His father is a businessman and his mother does not work outside the home. They live in a small city 30 miles from a large urban center; the area is known for its strong school system. Michael entered Valley on the pre-med academic track with the intention of graduating and possibly attending medical school. In his second semester, he enrolled in the Engineering School, where he is studying chemical engineering. He has not abandoned his pre-med track but is completing coursework in both areas.

**Rebecca** is the older child and the first to go to college. Her father died when she was 11. Her mother worked for a large grocery store chain and was demoted after being on disability leave. Rebecca grew up in a town of approximately 1600 people in the northern part of the state. She is White. Rebecca only applied to VU. Her career plans include starting a business. She was invited to the SAP but did not respond.

### **Cliff Hangers**

**Sophia** was raised by her single mother in a small, rural town in the state. She is the older of two children and is the first in her family to attend college. She is Black. Sophia was admitted to several schools, including an in-state HBCU and a small college in New Jersey. She selected VU because it offered the most generous financial aid package. Sophia participated in the SAP and, at the time of our interviews, she was undecided about her career goals. Sophia was placed on academic probation for two semesters at VU.

**Nicholas** is White and grew up in a working-class city in central Pennsylvania. His parents did not attend college. His father emigrated from Serbia and died in Nicholas's senior year of high school. Nicholas attended a small, private Catholic school. One of two children, Nicholas' older brother graduated from VU, and Nicholas was accepted at VU and a large, in-state university. Nicholas selected VU, in part, because of the full grant aid he received. Nicholas was placed on academic probation and took an academic leave in spring 2009. When we interviewed, he was unsure of his career plans.

**Sean** is White and grew up in a rural part of the state. He is the first in his family to go to college. His younger sister enrolled in an urban, in-state college in fall 2008 but quit after a few weeks. He attended public high school. His mother and father work in manufacturing. Sean withdrew from Valley University after his third semester.



## CHAPTER 4

### EVALUATION OF THE STARS ACADEMIC PROGRAM

The following chapter provides the findings for the evaluative questions of my study. My methods allowed for me to complete both an implementation evaluation and an outcomes evaluation. The manner in which I conducted my evaluation of the Stars Academic Program was influenced, in part, by the questions and concerns the administrators I interviewed had about whether the program was “making a difference” or “having any kind of impact.” In addition, I was motivated by my own desire and interest in the program’s mechanisms and its target population. Anecdotally, the program was considered a success by the larger university population, but other administrators wondered about its real impact and speculated as to the experiences of all the students who *did not* participate in the program. These concerns and curiosities guided the research questions for this aspect of my study. To review, these research questions were:

- How do administrators and summer bridge program participants describe the summer bridge program? How do their descriptions compare and contrast?
- In what ways are the participants’ and administrators’ perceptions of the program’s stated and implicit goals similar and different?
- How do the administrators’ assumptions about the program’s effects align and differ from the student participants’?
- How do the participants’ perceptions compare and contrast with low-income students who did not participate in the program?

These questions were created in concert with my awareness of the needs of administrators and my own desire to learn more about a population of students at Valley

University. I used the data collected from the administrators and institutional documents to help focus the outcomes I selected. The iterative nature of my methods allowed the perspectives of the students to guide this process as well.

Although I discuss the program's history in Chapter 3 and Appendix A, I begin this chapter with a brief analysis of data collected from administrators regarding the impetus behind the program because it sheds light on the overriding goals of the program and the assumptions leaders at the university had about the needs of low-income students coming to Valley University. I continue with a discussion of the program's goals as seen by both the administrators and the students in my study noting the similarities and differences in perspectives and the ways in which students' perceptions influenced their decision to attend or not. Embedded in this section of the evaluation chapter are the voices of the student participants of my study who *did not* attend the Stars Academic Program. From them, one gains a greater perspective of the effects of the program and adds context to the perceptions of the administrators as to the value of the program. I then present findings related to the content and messages of the program, as seen through the administrators, students and my own observations. These provide a mediating link between the perceived goals of the program and the perceived effects and helps get inside the "black box" of the evaluation. Lastly, I turn to the perceptions of the effects of the program, again as seen by both administrators and students who participated. In looking at the intended effects and the experiences as reported by the students, one can see where the program achieved its goals and where it fell short. I conclude with a discussion of the program theory matrix and provide

recommendations, in an effort to aid the administrative stakeholders at VU in making decisions about the future of the program.

### **Why the Stars Academic Program Was Created**

As was discussed in Chapter 3, the Stars Academic Program started in 2005 as part of the larger financial aid initiative meant to address the needs of low-income students. The administrators were worried that, after “enticing” low-income and first-generation students to VU with generous financial aid, that the university was remiss in not providing other support services for these students. According to Carolyn McClintock, director of financial aid, the assumptions that supported this initiative were that, through VU Promise, low-income and first-generation students “would come [having] never set foot in the university at all, or set foot on any campus, never been in a huge library, didn’t understand finances and what to expect, just all sorts of things, and that orientation wouldn’t be enough.” There was a sense of urgency that administrators needed to do more than offer financial aid to students, and the program was established in several months’ time.

The majority of the administrators I interviewed mentioned this quick action as a demonstration of the university’s commitment to the students coming into the university through the VU Promise program; in addition, Dean Tim Keasey (Dean of Arts & Sciences) pointed out that the Stars Academic Program, “like so many of these initiatives...grew out of an adaptation of an existing program and a very pressing immediate problem rather than a blank sheet of paper and a study of what needed to be done and I think it’s fair to say that it grew out of in some ways of what also happens in a university environment in which different units who are responsible for different kinds of things decide to collaborate.”

As Dean Keasey's comment reveals, the university administrators believed that it was necessary to take quick action to respond to an identified need. Patterning the SAP after an existing program was seen by administrators as a logical choice and speaks to the common practices of administrators on today's college campuses (Bamberger, Rugh, & Mabry, 2006). They often make decisions within short time frames and are given few staffing and financial resources to implement their ideas. It is important to consider this larger context when evaluating the Stars Academic Program because knowing the motivation and reasons behind its creation not only informs how the program's goals were created but provides information that is valuable for planning for the program's future. These same arguments can be made as to the value of discussing the process by which students were selected and invited for the SAP, which I turn to next.

### **How Eligible Stars Academic Program Participants Were Selected and Invited**

In 2007, Stars Academic Program invitees were identified by the university's financial aid office; all students who met the "low-income" requirement for full financial aid were invited<sup>9</sup>. Due to the timing of financial aid offers (spring and summer), Valley University admissions offers (April 1 mailing for May 1 decision) and invitation generation for the Stars Academic Program (early May), some students who were eligible for the program in 2007 did not receive invitations. This was primarily caused by delayed financial aid information getting to the financial aid office (e.g., students were contacted by financial aid due to mistakes/omissions on their financial aid applications), which in turn may have caused some students who eventually became eligible for full financial aid to miss the invitation for the

---

<sup>9</sup> 2007 was the first year in which all eligible students were invited on a first-come, first-served basis. In 2005 and 2006, student invitees were selected by administrators from the pool of eligible students.

Stars Academic Program. While this was of some concern for Carolyn McClintock (director of financial aid), most administrators involved with this program believed that the majority of students who were eligible received invitations.

Eligible students were sent identical letters and email invitations; both stated that the students were “selected from a group of highly talented individuals who are also recipients of financial aid” (invitation letter 2007). In addition, the letter indicated that the program would provide students a “head start on the academic year” through their earning six credits in summer session classes and participating in programming (weekly workshops and dinners) that would give students “a solid introduction to the resources of the university.” Through these workshops and dinners, students would get a “chance to meet and interact with select faculty and administrators” from around the campus. In addition the students were told that there were 20 slots available and that enrollment was first-come, first-served. In addition, the students learned that all costs (e.g., tuition, room, board, books) were covered except transportation to and from VU, spending money, and school supplies. (invitation letter, 2007).

Upon acceptance of the Stars Academic Program invitation, students were sent a packet of information in the mail, confirming their attendance and providing details about start dates, suggestions of what to pack, program expectations, etc. The timeframe for these activities began in mid-April (invitation); students were to respond by May 7, 2007 regarding their interest, and participants received information packets in late May and June with a start date of July 10, 2007. The shortened timeline was a result of multiple factors. These included the short amount of time between the university’s deadline for admissions offers and the

students' submission of complete and accurate financial aid applications. Students not only had to accept admission to VU, but they had to have their financial aid information verified by the financial aid office to be eligible for the program.

As explained above, the invitation process in 2007 had been altered and this was primarily due to the administrators' desire to learn more about student demand for the program. By establishing the invitation as first-come, first-served (with a waiting list), those who administered the program would be better able to assess (a) whether the program should grow in size, and (b) how many interested students (by means of the waitlist) were not getting served. The first-come, first-served process revealed that demand was limited, which resulted in questioning whether there were changes that needed to be made to the invitation and the selection process (e.g., considerations of returning to hand picking the participants from their admission applications). More importantly, it stimulated discussion as to why more students did not respond and what those students' experiences were like in their first year. In addition, it put into question whether the goals of the program were being communicated effectively because administrators felt that the non-responders were likely having a more difficult time adjusting to college than those students who participated. Within this chapter, I will attempt to address these concerns (and others) and begin with an exploration of the program's goals.

### **Stars Academic Program Goals**

It is important to explore the goals of the program both as a means of determining where consensus lies and gaps exist among the perceptions of the administrators closest to the program and the students who did and did not participate in the program. In short,

administrators created the program with certain goals and aims in mind; learning about them and then comparing and contrasting them with the students' perceptions can serve as way of better understanding the perceived effects of the program. In the following section, I review both the administrator interview data and the results of an analysis of press releases and public statements regarding the Stars Academic Program. In addition, I include the students' perceived goals of the program sharing the perceptions of both participants and those students who were waitlisted.

### **Administrators' Perceptions of the Program's Goals**

In the following section I explore the administrators' perceptions of the program's goals. These goals were, in part, influenced by their perceptions of the needs of the low-income students coming to Valley University through the VU Promise program and I briefly discuss these below. Doing so illuminates several aspects of the program, including the goals, perceived effects and overall beliefs and visions the administrators held of the program.

Administrator interviews reflect some assumptions regarding the students' families, especially in light of the large representation of first-generation college students in the SAP participant pool. In our interview, Jenna, an administrator who helped establish and manage the program, stated it most starkly:

Some of these students have done this completely on their own, some have done it with... a sort of emotional support from parents but no good knowledge base from parents and some have done it against the wishes of their parents. Really on their own, fighting all odds...of "I'm not helping you if you are going to college".

She continued by explaining that the SAP program ideally targets this last group of students, who do not have family resources and support to rely on.

In my work, I used the code “student portrait” to capture these data because they often were told to me as portrayals of students’ experiences. Based on the context of these portraits, I can assume that they were affected by the administrators own experiences in financial aid, admissions, teaching and administration. For example, financial aid director Carolyn McClintock’s sense of the low-income students’ experiences at VU was shaped by the students with which she has most contact, often those facing difficult financial situations and needing personal attention from financial aid officers. As the head of admissions, Gary Addison’s portraits were informed by his years of work recruiting students in the far reaches of the state, where he experienced public mistrust of VU and its programs. Jenna Reese, who played a crucial role in creating and implementing the SAP, confided that her own experiences as a first-generation student influenced her perceptions of the students she worked with through the Stars Academic Program.

Most telling were the portrayals of the students’ pre-college lives and their families both because of the assumptions that undergird them and because of how they compare and contrast with the experiences of the students of my study. The primary themes that arose centered on the students’ educational backgrounds and home communities. While administrators acknowledged the diversity of the low-income students attending VU and coming through the SAP program, there were some commonly held ideas about family college knowledge, students’ ambitions and the resources of the students K-12 schools. I believe, in turn, these ideas influenced the administrators’ perceptions of the program’s purpose, goals and ideal outcomes.



Despite the administrators' efforts in their interviews to delineate and acknowledge the risks of stereotyping the low-income students, common characteristics often arose in their descriptions of the students' pre-college lives, and the influences these experiences had on the students' present lives. For example, Gary Addison's work in admissions informed his perspectives, especially in light of the families and potential students he met while traveling in the rural areas of the state recruiting for the VU Promise initiative. He stated:

They [low-income students] wonder if they'll fit in...they don't have the clothes, their tastes are different. I think culturally and socially if they are coming out of school districts where very few students have come here, or going to selective colleges... students don't really come [to schools like VU] because they think if they come, if they go off somewhere, they can't return, though, because there won't be a job there. That they'll be sort of overeducated for the community. I've seen that in so many communities in [the state]. Um, so there's that. There's the fear of leaving home. There's the concern about not being able to return, fitting in, whether or not they'll be able to make friends, get comfortable.

Other administrators discussed characteristics they felt the low-income students possessed that affected their pre-college and within college lives. Often described as "resilient" or "driven," the students were seen as individuals who had overcome a number of challenges to get accepted at VU. The following excerpt from Jenna Reese interweaves both the students' past and present lives as it related to their success at VU; she was speaking specifically of the SAP students she had become acquainted with over the years.

I haven't seen any that don't come in ambitious. [Interviewer: Really?]. Yeah. And I think to get here and do the work it takes to get here. To find out about VU Promise, to fill out all of the forms, to do the FAFSA, to do it all, to sort of survive in a low-income school probably and also in a low-income family. They've worked pretty hard to do this on their own. And some of them have done it, like I said, completely on their own with no parental support. I mean against the wishes of their parents. And that's an issue for a lot of low-income families is that they don't want their kids to go off to college and be better than they are...I mean some do...some will say, "I want you to do what I could never do" but there are issues of now you are going to be better than me.

This quote reveals the perceptions administrators had about the students' family and past education. First, parents were sometimes portrayed as serving more as a barrier than an aid to students. Others described parents as trying to help in "any way they can" although their lack of knowledge and information about college was seen as a limiting factor in the parents' ability to really help their students. Jenna's quote above also includes reference to the students' K-12 education, and the possibility of low-income students at VU coming from under-resourced schools.

Gary echoed Jenna's sentiments when he speculated:

I think those kids... they're going to surpass the typical student who comes here, because they've come so far...I don't agree with the notion that they spend all their time catching up. I think they probably will exceed the typical expectations that people have for most students coming out of their schools.

Jenna, Gary and others who discussed the students' past education recognized that a number of VU's low-income students came from well-resourced school districts in the state or wealthy private schools, acknowledging that the students who received stronger educational foundations likely might not need programs like the SAP. Carolyn McClintock expressed that she felt that the SAP was "meant for the student who hasn't had the exposure...that will lead to greater success." In other words, she and the other administrators I interviewed felt that the ideal students for the SAP should come from first-generation families, with access to few resources and having attended under-served schools.

To summarize, the administrators interviewed carried with them ideas and beliefs about the low-income students attending VU. These were based on aspects of their own personal and professional lives and influenced their perspectives of the university students

and of the SAP, its goals and its possible effects. Administrators' underlying assumptions about the lives of low-income students affected their perceptions of what the participants needed and what the SAP should try to achieve. These perceptions, in turn, affected the goals that they set for the program, which I turn to next.

The administrators interviewed were in agreement regarding the goals of the Stars Academic Program. Jenna Reese, the administrator who created the program and oversaw its administration each year, stated that the goals of the program include providing students opportunities to become familiar with the university, meet and talk with faculty and administrators, form friendships and support networks and, in general ease the transition to school so that in the fall students "would be very comfortable here." Jenna went on to list other goals such as obtaining credits and accessing information and resources through the workshops and dinners. Gretchen Smith, the graduate student who ran the program, echoed many of Jenna's statements, adding that the program ideally builds a "sense of confidence and that sense of belonging to the community." Jenna and Gretchen's remarks reflect their personal knowledge of the mechanics of the program because they both played such a large role in creating and administering it day-to-day. The remaining administrators I interviewed spoke more broadly about the intended goals. Dean Tim Keasey stated that the program participants get a chance to "build networks, make friends, just sort of get a head start...[obtain] keys to understand how [the university] works beforehand," which provides the message to students "...here's an advantage for you to make the most of the place." Admissions Dean Gary Addison shared that one important goal of the program is to help the student participants persist by helping them adjust to college in a comfortable setting and

develop a foundation for their success throughout their four years. What is evident from the administrator data is that they all see the SAP as a means to provide students with the tools necessary to succeed in college and a supportive environment in which to form relationships and begin to develop a sense of community, which, in turn, would positively affect their persistence to graduation.

A review of press releases and other documents regarding the Stars Academic Program echoed the administrators' stated perceptions. As was shown in the content of the invitation letter, students were informed that the program would give them a "head start" and a "solid introduction" to the university and its resources. These ideas were communicated in a 2007 university press release, where Jenna Reese shared:

These students don't necessarily need more academic support. They might be first-generation college; they might be from a family that has little or no support for going to college. The feeling is if we don't give them resources here, there may be nobody at home to answer questions of what college is about and how to navigate the system. So this creates a sort of safe place, because they all feel comfortable with each other, to ask all their questions that they might not ask otherwise and that probably no one at home can answer. What's a midterm? How do you pick your classes? How do I declare a major?

What Jenna implies through her comment is that students who participate in the program can rely on the program to provide them a safe forum in which to get answers to questions and concerns about college attendance. In addition, her belief is the program's content can fill a void for students in regard to familial college knowledge and support. Ideally, students would come out of the SAP with the tools and resources necessary to navigate their first years successfully.

In summary, the administrators I interviewed held a common understanding of the intended goals of the Stars Academic Program. These were shaped, in part, by their

perceptions of the low-income students enrolling in Valley University, including the students' family background and quality of their K-12 education. The administrators who helped create the program intended for it to provide a foundation for the students' entry into VU in the fall, both in terms of exposure college classes and in establishing connections with faculty and students. These ideas are reflected in the responses students had to my questions regarding the program and I turn to that next.

### **Students' Perceptions of Program's Goals**

When students in my study were queried about their perceptions of the goals of the program, a number of them repeated the same ideas and thoughts about the program's goals and overriding philosophy as the administrators. Jenny, an SAP participant, admitted she was not completely certain what the program's goals were but she speculated, "Maybe it was to make us more comfortable coming into the fall and just like showing the resources out there so we're not intimidated coming in the fall with all the students from so many different backgrounds. And I guess showing that there's resources [that] are available and so we should ...everyone should feel comfortable here." Jenny's impressions that the program was to help ease the transition and make students feel comfortable was echoed by another SAP participant, Lila, who shared her thoughts of the program's goals:

I think it's to familiarize the new students with the college environment, their ...the resources they can use, with the campus, um...I...get them, get the students familiarized with how college classes are like during the summer, which is in a more "relaxed environment" and I guess put them at ease if they have fears or concerns. So they can voice those fears in a more intimate way than...because they might be intimidated when the year starts and everything is overwhelming.

While discussing her perceptions of the goals, Lila put quotes around the phrase "relaxed environment" because her experiences with the summer courses and program requirements

(namely the workshops and dinners) left her quite stressed and overwhelmed. In retrospect, Lila regretted attending the program and, instead, wished that she had used the five weeks to relax and reflect on her goals and aims for her first year of college.

While Lila and Jenny discussed how the program served “new” students, other SAP participants in my study added a socioeconomic component to the discussion. Elena stated that she thought the program was to support those students “who probably wouldn’t be able to afford an opportunity” like a summer program. Marcus speculated that the program would “help the people on the grant aid come in and be able to adjust to the university - adjust to like a culture shock, you know...being in a more privileged environment and also help in their academic preparation, their academic transition.” Even Daniel, who was waitlisted and never participated in the program, speculated that the goals of the program were to “bring the level of these low-income students up to - at least as high as those who are from middle-class or upper-class ...giving them support like tools to, how to navigate around the campus and...how to use the resources from the school to accomplish their academic goals.” The nature of the interviews with those students who did not respond to the invitation did not allow for much, if any exploration, of their perceptions of the goals. For the majority of them, their answers regarding this question were brief, and they usually commented that they had not given it much thought since they were not interested in the program.

The data explored reveal that the SAP invitees and the administrators were aligned in their perceptions of the program’s intended goals. I believe the students’ perceptions of the goals were primarily shaped by the invitation materials they received in the mail. In addition, a number of students either were invited to similar programs at other schools or participated

in high-school based initiatives held afterschool or in the summers that mirrored the SAP in general outreach to minority and/or first-generation students; these experiences would possibly inform their understanding of the goals of the program. As we will see, the students' perceptions of the goals influenced their decisions to attend or not. I explore this in the next section.

### **Students' Decisions Regarding the Invitation to the Stars Academic Program**

In the following section, I provide student data on students who did and did not respond to the 2007 invitation to participate in the Stars Academic Program. I use the data collected from interviews with students who did and did not participate in the program in addition to the results of a post-program survey distributed to all participants<sup>10</sup>. By using both the data collected in interviews with students who *did not* participate in the Stars Academic Program and the broad results of the program survey, which includes the perspectives of students *not* in my study, I am able to include more diverse viewpoints and voices. This is of value because it adds additional context and detail to the students' stories; I am able to capture the students' attitudes and opinions from immediately after the program's completion as a complement to the students' perceptions once further into their college lives. I begin with a discussion of the results of my interviews with students, using primarily the voices of SAP participants.

### **Should I Stay or Should I Go?: Voices of Students through Interview Data**

When I interviewed students who had participated in the SAP I found that their decisions to attend hinged on a combination of their desire to obtain credits and early

---

<sup>10</sup> All 19 SAP participants completed this evaluation form on their last day of the program. Ten of these 19 were participants in my study; therefore, the data examined from these evaluation forms were collected from students not in my study. All forms were anonymous.

exposure to the university campus and the encouragement they received from family members. SAP participants such as Julia, Elena and Nicholas remarked that the advantage of early exposure to VU through the summer program outweighed their other summer options. Upon receiving her invitation, Julia weighed the pros and cons of attending and realized that, while she did not want to do schoolwork in the summer, she was attracted to the head start she would receive. She stated, the “pro was like, you know, I would get to know the campus before school actually starts and I would just know my way around things. And I guess like the six credits...then I asked my mom and she was like *oh why don't you do it* and I was like *okay*. And then my sister was like *yeah, you should do it* ...and it kind of pushed me over.” Julia’s remarks reflect what others also shared – that they weighed their decisions as to how to best use their summer months and consulted family and/or trusted mentors before responding to the invitation.

As an out-of-state student, Elena saw the program as a way to make friends, earn additional credits and become acquainted with the university. This early exposure would reduce her worries in the fall and, she shared “I just thought it would be good to get a feel for what classes would be like and to start getting my mind on what the work load I would be doing throughout the year. just to get myself to a good start.” Nicholas, another out of state student, echoed Elena’s remarks. He said, “It was two classes that I got to take, six credits already out of the way...and just the fact that I would be two months ahead of the rest of the first years as far as adjustment to the campus.” Despite Nicholas’s previous exposure to VU through his brother, he recognized that an early introduction to the university might help him. That the students’ reasons for attending are multilayered is not surprising in light of the



reality that taking two regular summer session courses would also allow students to get used to college level work and provide them exposure to the university setting before the fall matriculation.

Students who were placed on the waitlist also revealed their reasons for their attraction to the program. Courtney admitted to not being interested in the program when she first received the invitation, but she changed her mind. She said, “I first got the letter and I was like, you know, it’s summer this is the first summer I don’t have AP homework and I want to relax all summer. And then like towards the end like when the deadline to respond I was like it might be good to get a couple credits in before I go to college and then I decided to respond and got placed on the wait list. So mainly I was doing it to get some credits.” For Kelly it was a combination of coursework and early exposure to the university setting that attracted her. Daniel and Stacey echoed her sentiments, recounting that they wanted to “get used to the atmosphere” and “get a head start” as reasons that they responded. For all waitlisted students, time played the biggest factor in their being placed on the waiting list instead of the participant list. All admitted that their position on the waitlist was likely due to their initial hesitation; often this was a result of the fact that they were still weighing their admissions decisions when they were invited to the Stars Academic Program.

Although some non-respondents in my study discussed scheduling conflicts and a wish to relax for the summer as primary reasons that they did not sign up, several students discussed their impressions of the program as it related to their lack of interest. Their perceptions of academic readiness combined with their wish to not be singled out as different influenced Max, Sean and Julian’s decisions. Max compared the SAP to “camp” and “Head

Start,” admitting that the selling points mentioned in the invitation letter (e.g., extra credits, exposure to college) felt unnecessary for him because of the number of credits he was bringing to VU and his familiarity with college due to his family background. While he was drawn to meeting fellow students before enrolling in the fall, he did not feel that was a strong enough reason to accept the invitation. Sean shared that his concern about the program was that it would hinder his ability to “fit in” in the fall. His perspective is of interest, both in light of his departure from VU and because it reveals the possible risk students feel at being singled out before the academic year. He shared:

I figured that to just go to orientation, just like every other kid did, would be better than starting early and maybe not being able to fit in as well, like not being ready for it as much. And I felt that I should just stay in town and be with my family as long as possible because pretty much once you go to college, it’s completely different after that. So family played a lot in to it. I felt like it would be more interesting just to take the college experience as everybody else did, instead of as just a few who take it differently.

Sean’s admission demonstrates the complexity of students’ feelings as they gear up for college. His wish to be with his family – and his belief that departure from his home would render him “completely different” - was linked to his fear that, if he did not enter college as the majority do (via orientation in the fall) he would feel different than his peers, too.

Although Sean was the only student to reveal such sentiments and fears, his insight can provide valuable information to program administrators as they consider how the act of selecting students based on family income background may feel stigmatizing. While the recommendation from this is not to change the tenor or tone of the invitation, it is encouraged that Sean’s story be used to add context and meaning to what the feelings of those students who choose not to participate in the SAP may be.

Julian, whose family lives in Florida, briefly considered attending but in the end decided staying home one more summer was of greater benefit. He shared his thought process regarding the invitation.

I did receive the invitation and at first it was obviously interesting because I didn't get to campus for Welcome Days and the plusses were I get to see where I'm going, it's a jump start...definitely a jump start and I'll get used to how the college work is and whatnot and again, familiarity, getting to know [the city]. Then looking at the drawbacks, I'm like I'm already going in with 14 credits, I think I'm ready as it is to handle college. I mean,...I had friends...I had already gone to the local schools, FYU, and they told me *yeah it's a lot of reading* but that is exactly what I could do a lot. I don't mind reading. I can do that so it was the simple fact that I really don't need to work during the summer. Let me rest, I've already done 12 years of public school, this is another job. I might as well take my rest because you never know what it's going to be like up there and just relax.

Julian also revealed that the costs for transportation to and from VU would have been too much for his or his parents' budgets, especially in light of his need to return to the campus two weeks after his departure from the SAP. No other student specifically mentioned the cost of transportation as a reason not to attend. It's possible that like for Julian, transportation costs may have come into play in students' decisions, but these costs were not likely the whole story. Instead, it appears to have been a combination of factors, including distance, a desire to have "one more summer" before the rigors of college began, and feelings of college readiness, including college credits earned before enrollment. These data, in combination with the SAP survey data and the study's student participants' academic data, reveal the role earning college credits played in shaping students' decisions. I turn to survey and academic data next.

### **Credits and Courses: The Stars Academic Program Post-Program Survey Results**

As mentioned in Chapter 3, all of the SAP participants in 2007 completed a survey on SAP during the last session on the last day (see Appendix K for sample survey). The survey results reveal that the over one third of the student participants (7 of 19 students) ranked “earning six credits” as their top reason for attending. Eighty four percent stated that it was one of the top three reasons for attending. The other top reasons for attending are summarized in Table 3. As is demonstrated in the table, students’ primary interests in the program revolved around aspects of college preparation along with the practicality of earning credits.

Table 3

*Stars Academic Program Survey Results: Reasons for Attendance*

Top reasons for attending the SAP	Ranking
To earn 6 credits	1 <sup>st</sup> choice (36.8 percent)
	2 <sup>nd</sup> choice (15.8 percent)
	3 <sup>rd</sup> choice (31.6 percent)
	cumulative 84.2 percent (16 of 19 students)
To learn more about the university before I start in the fall	1 <sup>st</sup> choice (26.3%)
	2 <sup>nd</sup> choice (47.4%)
	3 <sup>rd</sup> choice (47.4%)
	cumulative – 84.2% (16 of 19 students)
To get used to college level work before the first year	1 <sup>st</sup> choice (31.6 %)
	2 <sup>nd</sup> choice (15.8%)
	3 <sup>rd</sup> choice (26.3%)
	cumulative 73.7% (14 of 19 students)
To meet new people	1 <sup>st</sup> choice (5.3 %)
	2 <sup>nd</sup> choice (21.1%)
	3 <sup>rd</sup> choice (15.8%)
	cumulative 42.2% (8 of 19 students)
I had no choice	1 <sup>st</sup> choice (0%)
	2 <sup>nd</sup> choice (0%)
	3 <sup>rd</sup> choice (10.5%)
	cumulative 10.5% (2 of 19 students)
Better than my other options	1 <sup>st</sup> choice (0%)
	2 <sup>nd</sup> choice (0%)
	3 <sup>rd</sup> choice (5.3%)
	cumulative 5.3 % (1 of 19 students)

A much smaller percentage of students indicated that they were motivated primarily to participate in order to meet new people, and few students participated unwillingly. These results support what was discussed previously; students wanted to attend the SAP to get a head start on credits and become more familiar with the campus before the fall semester.

The study participants' academic data – especially credits earned before enrollment –

demonstrate the attraction the SAP participants might have had to the offer of six additional credits, especially at no additional cost to them.

### **Credit Differences: Students' Academic Data**

As an additional point of context, I have provided in Table 4 academic data collected on the participants of my study. These data reveal that the average number of credits brought in via Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB) and dual enrollment<sup>11</sup> for the participants was 6.7. The average number of credits for the waitlisted students was 12.25 and the non-responders brought in an average of 15.66 credits prior to enrollment<sup>12</sup>.

Table 4

#### *Pre-enrollment Credits Earned by Type of Student Participant*

Type of participant	Average pre-enrollment credits earned
SAP participants	6.7 credits
Waitlisted	12.25 credits
Non-responders	15.66 credits

These findings are of interest, especially in light of the larger university culture at VU. The university's academic expectations place pressure on students to graduate in four years, and university statistics reveal that 84 percent of students do so. In addition, admissions materials

<sup>11</sup> The Advanced Placement program and the International Baccalaureate program offer high school students college-level courses and exams across multiple disciplines. Valley University offers advanced standing credit (max. 60 credits) for eligible scores on both AP and IB examinations. Dual enrollment allows students to earn both high school and college credit through taking courses at an accredited college or university. VU accepts eligible dual enrollment credit as college credit, which is recognized as "non-VU credit" on a student's transcript.

<sup>12</sup> The average Advanced Standing credit for the entering, first time first year class of 2007 was 12.2. The average for low-income students from the same class was 7.8.

(e.g., the office's website and prospectus) reflect the university's normative expectations that students take advantage of earning advanced standing credit, perhaps triggering concern for those incoming students who have not done so.

Taken together, the data reviewed above support the finding that the students who did respond to the invitation may have felt pressure and motivation to earn additional credits so as to ease their credit burden in their first years. It is interesting to note that only one of my study's program participants (Mary) earned credit through dual enrollment prior to attending VU<sup>13</sup>; whereas, four of the six non-respondents earned dual enrollment credit. It is possible that the students who did not respond to the invitation were less attracted to the offer of additional credits or early exposure to college classes because they felt that the dual enrollment courses addressed both needs. Therefore, as students weighed their decisions to respond to the invitation, it was not enough to offer credit and college preparation as reasons to interrupt their summer plans.

This exploration informs the program administrators who wondered aloud in our summer 2007 interviews as to the reasons students did not respond to the program invitation. Several administrators mused that students likely had to stay home and earn money, either for their families or for themselves. As the data reveals, the students reasons for responding to the invitation (or not) hinged more on their own perceptions of their college readiness. For those who attended (and on the waitlist) their desire to participate overshadowed other concerns they had about their summer plans. For those who did not respond, they weighed the pros and cons, and with the information that they had about the program, decided their other summer commitments and wishes would not be sacrificed for the five-week program.

---

<sup>13</sup> One of the four waitlisted students (Kelly) earned dual enrollment credit as advanced standing credit.

As we will see in the next section, communication was unclear for the students who did respond to the invitation because they were unsure of what to expect in the five week Stars Academic Program.

### **Stars Academic Program Participants' Expectations**

As reviewed earlier, students and administrators were aligned in their perspectives regarding the overall goals of the Stars Academic Program. Despite this agreement, students in my study revealed that they were less clear as to how the program would operate. What follows is a brief exploration of their areas of confusion. I begin by presenting in table form (see Table 5) a compilation of student data on their perceptions of what the program would be like. This is followed by a brief analysis of some of the themes that arose from their responses. I also make suggestions as to how the information gap might be addressed, which echoes my earlier recommendations regarding multiple forms of information.

The following table includes remarks from each of the 10 SAP program participants in my study. I did not include waitlisted students or those who did not respond to the invitation because few of these students discussed their expectations about the program in any great detail. This is likely due to a combination of time and their lack of involvement in the program; it was hard enough for the students to recall the invitation to the program after 14 months time let alone their expectations of what the program might have been like.



Table 5

*Stars Academic Program Participants' Expectations: Interview Data*

Name	Comments
Dana	<i>I thought... this is going to be a fun thing. I guess it was fun during the week like going to dinners... I wasn't expecting classes to be that hard and I didn't think that there would be a lot of other programs taking summer classes. So I thought most of us would be in the same classes.</i>
Elena	<i>Well it met my expectations in that I did get to know just the different deans that did come in and just the different people that talked about who you can go to for what, getting to meet other people who would be here during the school year and just taking classes. The [classes] were great because they were really challenging...It just really opened my eyes to different possibilities... I feel like it met my expectations in kind of like every way.</i>
Jackie	<i>It actually turned out better than what I expected. It wasn't what I expected, it was actually better...Everyone wanted to meet each other and were really eager.</i>
Jenny	<i>I kind of wondered what things we would be doing besides class. I didn't think that we would just be taking classes all day. So I wondered what am I supposed to do all day but sit in my dorm? And they didn't give us much information on that so it was kind of.. I almost didn't have any [expectations]. I was really confused coming into it.</i>
Julia	<i>I guess I thought it was just like a bunch of students living in like two dormitories and just taking classes. I didn't think that we were going to have like you know those meetings and what else we did.</i>
Lila	<i>I don't think I had an idea of what summer classes were going to be like.... I guess I knew we were going to have the workshops and stuff. I had that idea but I didn't think the workshops and my classes would conflict as much as they did. The schedule was a little tight.</i>
Marcus	<i>I didn't know what to expect in terms of how, outside the classroom, the program was going to be like...how structured it was going to be. Like if we were going to have supervision or anything like in the dorms...it didn't, which I think was a good thing...</i>
Mary	<i>I didn't really have many expectations... they didn't give us much to envision I just knew that I would be taking classes..</i>
Nicholas	<i>I honestly can't think of any way that it didn't meet any expectations. Then again there weren't a whole lot of expectations. I mean, I expected to go to classes and meet new people and that's basically what happened.</i>
Sophia	<i>I gathered it would probably a meeting of all students together, there would be introductions, sign up for classes. And I thought I would pretty much be on my own from there. I thought it was like "hi, this is the program, this is what we are about, here are your classes, have fun."</i>

Many of the SAP participants shared with me that they had few expectations of how the five-week program would unfold. They admitted that they were aware that they would take classes but were unclear as to how the remainder of the program would function. The most common areas of ambiguity were around the summer coursework; several students, like Dana, Marcus, and Jenny discussed their misperceptions of how the classes would operate. They assumed that they would be taking their summer courses with the other Stars students, thereby allowing them to go to class, study and learn together. Students also were unclear about how they would spend their non-class time.

Other SAP participants did not discuss these areas of confusion, which may demonstrate the different ways in which the students read and interpreted the Stars Academic Program materials sent to them prior to arrival on campus. Despite these differences, the gap in knowledge by some students indicates that a possible solution is to either make the materials regarding the program even more explicit or complement the mailings with either a follow up email containing brief, bulleted text explaining the program's content, a password protected website or some other form of communication so that administrators do not rely solely on the mailings as a means to inform students.

In addition, since many of the students who chose to participate in the Stars Academic Program are the first in their families to go to college<sup>14</sup>, it is important to look at the material distributed to students with an eye for the assumptions made about what an incoming student may or may not know about how the summer program and summer sessions, in general, operate at Valley University. This will be addressed, in part, through an

---

<sup>14</sup> While I do not have data on all 19 participants, the data I have on the 10 SAP participants in my study reveals that all 10 are in the first generation to attend college. Several have older siblings that are either still in school or recently graduated.

exploration of the program itself, which I now turn to. I provide an analysis of the interview data, and my field notes (including workshops, dinners and other events during the five-week program). In addition, I look at the materials distributed in workshops and messages communicated by those who are a part of the program.

### **Stars Academic Program's Content and Messages**

Data on the Stars Academic Program's content and messages were collected from several sources, including my observations, and interviews with both students and administrators. I will not explicate the program's schedule and operations but point to materials in the appendices (see Appendix K) for those details. Instead, what follows is an exploration of the thought processes that went into the program's content, and the perceptions of the intended and unintended messages communicated through program's format and content. I begin with a discussion of the administrators' data, focusing on their comments of what messages they believe get communicated to the participants. In addition, I include materials from my observations and field notes from the five weeks of the 2007 program. Lastly, I briefly explore the students' data on the content, taken from our interviews in the fall and winter of 2008 and from the survey completed by all 19 of the SAP participants. Combining the sources of data allows for a richer understanding and helps answer the research questions related to both the perceived goals and effects of the program. The content, as discussed by the administrators, reflects their intentions and goals for the program. My observation data adds context to these intentions and goals. Finally, the students' perceptions of the content, both through the interview and survey data, exposes the ways in which the content was interpreted and provides useful insight into the strengths and

weaknesses of the program's content. I begin with a brief discussion of the administrators' perceptions of the program's content and messages.

### **Administrators' Discussion of the Program's Content and Messages**

Only two of the administrators, Jenna Reese and Gretchen Smith, discussed the program's content in any great detail. The other administrators were less familiar with the structure of the program because their role had been more as creators and supporters.

Gretchen discussed the program in terms of the order of the workshops and the intentionality of who the students met and what the students did in their five weeks on campus. For example, the Welcome Session on the first day provided the participants exposure to a number of important administrators. Gretchen felt that these administrators served two functions: first as sources of information about the university and its operations and second, as signals to these students that they were important and worthy of the administrators' time. Gretchen explained the relationships between the presenters and the students:

They [the administrators] are so excited to come to this group of students. I can't sort of underestimate the fact that the students grow off of that excitement and that sense of, that sense that someone's really willing to be open to their needs and really happy to be...talking to them, and to be in touch with them and...to have a personal connection with them. Having a personal connection with some of the administrators and some of the various presenters I think is one of the most important aspects of the program.

She speculated that the 'personal touch' the administrators created had a lasting affect that students remembered and utilized as they continued their years at VU. In addition, the hope was that students would learn to see the administrators and faculty with whom they met as approachable individuals, further easing their transition into college.

As the schedule in Appendix L reveals, the students' weeks in the program were peppered with workshops, social events, and dinners. Workshops served as the primary source of "college knowledge" and information for the students. Jenna explained that some consistent messages emerged from the various content areas. She said

We pretty bluntly tell them "this is a really big place. You are here to learn your way around in a smaller setting. When the fall gets here, it's going to be overwhelming." We tell them...."we expect you to be responsible, we are not going to hold your hand, if you need help, you need to come ask for it" and I think they get the same message from student affairs and from residence life and that is pretty much the message of the university is there is a lot of help here across the university in a lot of different formats and venues and we are very good when they self identify. We are not so good at finding who is struggling and it's pretty easy to hide so we are trying to give you the tools so that you know somebody everywhere.

These messages were communicated throughout the sessions, and the weeks culminated with a workshop on student leadership and involvement. Here, an administrator who works directly with student organizations discussed how the participants could become engaged students. Gretchen shared that the timing and content of this workshop was intentional because "it really focused on how can you find your niche to express yourself at VU ...that it is sort of the message that you gotta find your way to be a leader in the community and that there's so many opportunities out there." Gretchen continued that by ending the five weeks with this session, the students were encouraged to "take this [message] forward and do something with everything that you know."

Gretchen revealed that the content of the program, while fairly consistent over the years of its existence, had changed to address concerns of the students and the perceptions administrators had about what students needed. For example, a second workshop was added by a financial aid administrator so the students could receive more detailed information about

student aid, budgeting and money management. In addition, Gretchen planned more informal opportunities for participants to meet fellow students and receive exposure to the campus and nearby town through social events like movies and concerts. The intention behind that, said Gretchen, was that these fun activities show the participants:

The possible social connections that are here, it helps calm them down, it gets them to know older students, which I think is really crucial, and that was definitely in response to some of the, you know, desire to get to know not only the physical campus, but just get to know sort of the VU community a little better.

The personal relationship that students formed with Gretchen was another key component of the SAP. She oversaw the program's daily operations, making announcements, introducing presenters, addressing issues and keeping the program running. In addition, she joined participants every week in the dining halls and had weekly individual meetings with each student. Jenna Reese explained, "students know that they can see her and ask her anything really, which bus should I ride, where is the bookstore, where's...how do I use my arts dollars, anything that they want to ask...it's very informal, she's just there for about an hour and a half and as people come through they can just sit with her and have dinner." Jenna continued that this kind of personal attention was important because the participants, "have no support at home...it's the emotional support, it's not just the financial or academic but the emotional support for what it means to go to college" that was important for Gretchen to provide. Gretchen described her role, "I can be a little bit of, you know, a friend, mentor role, I can put them in touch with any information they need to know. But they end up opening up to me about, you know, different struggles they have in their life." Both Jenna and Gretchen recognized the centrality of Gretchen's role in forming closer relationships with students. Support for this is found in the student data, which I discuss in a later section.

What is evident from the data explored is that the administrators responsible for the program's oversight and operation identified the basic content areas that they felt needed to be covered (e.g., introductions to the library, technology, financial services) and the ways in which the program could be responsive to students' feedback and requests. In addition, we hear in Gretchen and Jenna's comments that the program strove to establish both challenge and support, basic tenets of student development theory (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Sanford, 1962). The participants were given exposure to supportive messages from supportive messengers and they were also encouraged to take charge of their co-curricular and academic experiences at Valley University. With the tools in which to operate within the university, knowledge of the support systems in place and development of relationships with peers, professors and administrators, the Stars Academic Program participants ideally would enter their academic year prepared and confident. It is important to contrast and compare the administrators' perspectives with the students' input, both through the interviews conducted and the surveys completed at the end of the program, all of which are explored in the following section.

### **Perceptions of Program's Content and Messages from Observations and Documents**

General themes arose from my analysis of the field notes and documents obtained during the five week program. These themes revolve around aspect of community membership, a sense of responsibility and the acquisition of knowledge. I explore all three below.

**Membership.** Within the first few moments of the first day of the Stars Academic Program, the participants received messages that they were considered members of the university community. One way this was achieved was through the language used by the

presenters. Administrators like the Dean of Students and Vice President for Student Affairs encouraged them to “find your place” at “your university,” welcomed them to “our community” and congratulated them on being “selected.” (Observation 1). Throughout the remaining weeks, presenters often began their sessions with welcoming remarks, and the very nature of the materials covered in the sessions reinforced this membership. For example, students were provided personalized worksheets from the associate director of financial aid with their award package, spending money, family contribution and other pertinent information, which they used in one-on-one exercises on creating and managing a budget. This student-specific information and the nature of the exercise likely gave students a sense of the university’s considerations of their individual needs and the tools they needed to be successful.

In addition, students were given opportunities to meet and socialize with members of the university community, including faculty, upperclassmen students and recent alumni. In these settings, the students were encouraged to talk with these people and learn more about VU. For example, at the scheduled dinners each week, seating was arranged so that current SAP participants sat with other invited guests (e.g., current faculty, former SAP participants). In addition, many of these events were “hosted” by administrators and welcoming remarks were made encouraging the SAP participants to enjoy and make the most of their time at VU. As was discussed previously, the hope with these events was that interactions of this nature would begin to demystify the world of the university and its members, making professors and fellow students seem more approachable.



These efforts at positive messages regarding community membership culminated with the final workshop on leadership and student involvement, conducted by administrators in the dean of students' office. The content of the session included exercises in which students were to reflect on their "passions" and how they could use them to contribute to the larger university community. One of the presenters concluded with a discussion of university citizenship, telling the students that membership in the culture of VU required several things from them. These included "practicing leadership through self-governance," becoming involved, committing to lifelong learning, and respecting their peers.

Another aspect of community membership stems from the intended goals of having the students find connection with each other, both as a means of making the most of the SAP and as resources and sources of support in the fall. From data previously discussed, it is clear that the administrators intended for the program to provide students with peer connections and friendships. Although data collected via observations demonstrated that students formed friendship groups during their five weeks, these relationships for the most part did not extend into the regular academic year. Several factors may have influenced this, including the students' housing and the lack of explicit messages or programming options that encouraged friendship. Due to a housing mistake, the SAP participants lived in several separate dormitories, which Gretchen Smith speculated may have hindered group cohesion and a sense of peer community (Observation 3). This situation, coupled with the fast pace of the program and the lack of explicit messages about forming friendships with each other may have contributed to a greater feeling of disaffection amongst the members. These ideas are captured in a memo I wrote in Observation 3.

So far, the administrators haven't talked as much about the intent of the program being that the students see each other as resources - there is more of a 'take care of yourself...what do *you* want to get out of school'...kind of message...not about leaning on each other for support...so although relationships are being formed, they may not be as close because these students are just trying to survive.

As will become evident in the exploration of the students' data on the program's messages and effects, many of the SAP participants did not form strong relationships with each other over the course of the summer or upon returning in the fall semester. This may have been in part because the housing assignments left students scattered across several dormitories, possibly making informal connections impossible. This factor, in addition to the program's tight schedule, likely contributed to the difficulty participants had in forming friendships. Despite that, the program's content did include messages, both explicit and implicit, communicating ideas of community membership. These were often coupled with messages regarding responsibility and knowledge acquisition.

**Responsibility.** The theme of students' responsibility arose in a number of sessions during my observations, with messages regarding their responsibility to themselves and the larger community being reinforced. One of the first sessions on the first day was conducted by the vice president for student affairs; in it she commented that students needed to "ask" for assistance because the administrators were "not going to do it for" them. In addition, active verbs like "learn," "develop" and "participate" were used in her discussion of how the SAP participants could engage in the life of the university. Later during the welcome session, the head of residence life conveyed that the participants had "a responsibility to make a difference" and "a unique contribution" within the university community. She continued that if they did not take on that responsibility, they were "not fulfilling" their

obligation to the institution. She and others stressed that involvement and being an active member of the community was very important to the university's culture, reiterating that the university "relies" on the students to help govern the university, a unique feature of the campus culture.

Student responsibility was also promoted as it related to their burgeoning adulthood. Presenters reminded students of the responsibilities that came with being more independent from their parents and home communities. This idea permeated several workshops, including the ones on money management, computer and technology set up, and campus safety and security. In all, students were reminded that with the freedoms of the university lifestyle (e.g., attending classes, managing time, and making choices) came risks and challenges.

The program's structure itself required participants to be responsible (e.g., attending workshops, classes, social events on time; completing workshop and class assignments), and students who were frequently late or acted against the rules of the program were reprimanded either by Jenna Reese or Gretchen Smith. Over the course of the five weeks, I observed several students who were consistently late and/or left events early. These students were scolded several times, and one student, who dropped a summer course without getting permission, was threatened with dismissal from the program. It seemed clear to the administrators that they expected the students to behave responsibly and the administrators questioned, at times, whether that had been clearly communicated. Although I never spoke with any students specifically about these incidents, I concluded that one possibility was that those who had difficulties were testing their new-found independence and learning for themselves what it meant to be a responsible student. Also, the students may have had

trouble with time management; this was a struggle for many of the students in my study and paramount to achieving success in the first year. In addition to the themes of community and responsibility I also noted the frequent messages to the students about the acquisition of knowledge and the power that students might feel once they had become more knowledgeable members of the university community.

**Knowledge.** Throughout the program, interwoven into the messages regarding community and responsibility were concepts of knowledge acquisition. A number of the presenters the first day acknowledge the students' lack of familiarity of the university and how it operates, assuring them that by the time they left the program, they would be "experts." The content areas of all the workshops supported this premise, with topics covering a number of the "how to's" of negotiating campus bureaucracy.

In addition, participants' remarks and questions during workshops and informal events demonstrated their own lack of information and experience. For example, during the first day, one of the presenters queried the students on what they were thinking about as they prepared for the first day of classes. The participants admitted that they were nervous regarding how classes operated, how they would perform on tests and with homework, and what the professor would be like. A memo I wrote after the first day of observation reflected these feelings.

Students are scared about the details of what their life will hold in the next 24 hours. Many questions asked were regarding specifics of what happens in classroom. But the faculty were encouraging bigger steps - engage, learn, think, question, challenge - and the students want to know about the mechanics (does a bell go off? do professors keep you late? how do you know if you are doing well? what is my professor like?). It will be interesting to see how this unfolds after they are in classes (Observation 1).

Once the students were fully engaged with classes, they appeared better able to focus on the content of specific workshops. That said, I often observed students doing other things during these workshops like writing emails, texting on their phones, resting with their heads down and talking quietly with each other. In addition, when talking with me or amongst themselves, the participants sometimes questioned the utility of the various workshops, often expressing a sense of pressure to use their non-class time to prepare for their next day's classes instead of devoting 1 ½ to 2 hours to program content. Therefore, while the presenters intended to impart knowledge to the participants, there were barriers to their effectiveness.

Despite these barriers, students completed the SAP expressing feelings of pride, gratitude and relief. During the final formal dinner, participants were asked to take turns in giving a brief statement of their experiences in the Stars Academic Program. The theme of knowledge acquisition arose with students saying statements like "I know what I'm doing now," "I'm ready for the fall" and "I do not even feel like a first year." Comparing these sentiments with their earlier expressions of fear and nervousness reveals an alteration in the students' feelings of confidence and readiness. What I found was that this confidence, for some, was short-lived, as participants negotiated the complexities of their first year.

These findings support the administrators' data regarding the content and messages of the program. Their intention was for participants to receive both challenge and support in the smaller setting of the summer program. One can argue that these messages of responsibility, knowledge and membership were not unique messages communicated only to the SAP participants, but were common concepts presented to the larger incoming freshman class. A quick review of the university's fall orientation schedule reveals many of the same presenters

covered many of the same topics. What is unique was the forum in which the students were provided these messages. Because the program was so small, participants were given opportunities to ask questions, presenters were able to engage in more tailored and time-intensive activities, and both students and administrators could interact in ways that were meant to help ease students' fears and worries about college. As the creators of the SAP indicated in our interviews, the program's activities were to be but one way in which students received messages. Gretchen Smith believed that the collaboration among administrators and their enthusiasm regarding the SAP made it special and unique and communicated a sense of membership in a caring community. Referring to the administrators, she said "everyone's so excited to... do what they can to make these students excited, successful, to know their way around the bureaucracy and whatever they have to know, and I think that's really an amazing aspect." She went on to compare the similarities and differences in the regular orientation that all incoming students attend and the personal setting of the SAP: "anyone who speaks to the [students] at orientation for the broader student body is going to have...excitement, but in small group...it's so much more personal to them that they'll have someone really looking over their shoulder and asking for their concerns." Gretchen's comment reflects the themes explored above; the personal nature of the program and the way in which the content was delivered was meant to provide the students a knowledge base that would give them a head start in the fall. When considering the students' feedback and perceptions of the program's content, one finds that pace of the program felt overwhelming at times and that the nature of the presentation format left them wanting. In addition, students sometimes interpreted the intended messages of the program's content differently than the administrators hoped.

### Student Participants' Perceptions of the Program's Content and Messages

I complete this section with an analysis of the students' data, both from their interviews and the participant surveys completed by all 19 SAP students. Again, using the detailed interview data in complement with the results of the post-program survey brings more voices to this chapter. I begin with the survey data, which provides a more concrete assessment of the program's content and workshops.

**Survey data.** In the post-program survey, the 19 SAP participants were asked to rank the workshops in order of most helpful to least helpful in ascending order. They were also given space to explain their rankings and overall impressions of the program. The results of the session rankings are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6

#### *Stars Academic Program Survey Results: Workshop Ratings*

Sessions in Ranked Order	Rankings - Percent of Participants Who Rated Workshop in Top 3
Student Financial Services Workshop 1 (presentation and personalized financial aid summary)	63.2 % (n=12)
Leadership, Getting Involved and Using University Resources	57.9% (n=11)
Academic Advising	52.6% (n=10)
Welcome Session (various presenters)	47.4% (n=9)
Library Workshop 2 (using library databases)	36.8% (n=7)
Student Financial Services Workshop 2	31.6% (n=6)
Library and Technology Support Workshop 1	26.3% (n=5)

The results of these data reveal that some workshops were seen by the majority as helpful, and others either had broad distributions within the rankings or were ranked as less useful. Participants seemed to appreciate the utility of the information discussed in the financial services workshop and found the discussion regarding getting involved in the university community motivating. Those workshops that received lower rankings were critiqued for being unnecessary or repetitive. In addition, one-third of the participants specifically mentioned the workshop formats in their comments, noting that many of them were not interactive or engaging. This is mirrored in the results listed above; the most interactive sessions were the top ranked ones. The first financial workshop allowed participants to review their personal financial aid summaries and to learn about budgeting their money; the leadership session presenter had students complete exercises related to setting and achieving goals. My observation data reflects the differences in participant engagement throughout the sessions. I noted that in those that were less interactive there were several instances of students dozing off, performing other tasks or, in general, not appearing alert and interested in the materials being presented.

Participants also expressed concern over the timing of workshops and other events. As Appendix K reflects, the workshops, dinners and social events were scattered through the five weeks, with regular dining hall dinners with Gretchen every Monday and one to two workshops per week in the afternoons; other events also were held in the evenings. Students balanced these time commitments with their two summer courses and expressed frustration about this in their surveys. Eleven of the 19 students discussed their concerns about the schedule. These comments included, “less workshops mid week, they tended to conflict with



studying and assignments,” and “there were times when we had too much to do in the evening (workshops followed by dinner) and that didn’t allow enough time for homework.” Several students specifically mentioned the one-hour gap between the workshops and the other evening commitments, noting that this time felt wasted. While administrators did not specifically note in our interviews about the decisions regarding the time schedule, I can imagine that the timing of workshops and other events were structured as they were to address issues of presenters’ needs, resource access (e.g., classrooms, dining facilities) and other details. In addition, the administrators might have considered the program’s schedule a realistic mirror of what students would face in the regular academic year so any “practice” they could get regarding how to manage time would be useful. This idea was reflected in one student’s comments; the student wrote “I think the general structure of the program was my greatest support. It forced me to get my affairs in order, to meet deadlines (and showed me that I had to work on that).”

In sum, these data reveal that the students found the workshops useful to a varying degree; their opinions were shaped by their previous knowledge of the material and the ways in which they felt engaged in the learning. Also, the students’ comments regarding the frequency and timing of the workshops and other events reflect the pulls they felt with time management in general.

**Interview data.** Student participants’ reflections of the program’s content provide a useful context in which to look at the administrators’ data, the observation data and the survey data because it adds depth to the findings. What follows is a brief exploration of their remarks regarding the program’s content. I sought specific references to workshops, social

events, and dinners or the students' overall feelings of the program's content. Embedded in this are revelations of the ways in which individual students experienced the program, although often students discussed their perceptions of the program's content and messages in light of their later experiences in their first year.

As was reviewed earlier, one of the primary messages of the program was to encourage participants to feel comfortable seeking assistance from administrators and faculty. Through exposure both to university representatives and useful information (e.g., how to use the library), the intent was to demystify Valley University, thereby easing the students' fall transition and general incorporation into university life.

Results from the interviews with the participants reveal the complexities associated with the students' transition to college and the role the program played in that process. Some participants felt that the program provided helpful tools and clear messages regarding how to be successful students; others felt that the program fell short in these areas and, with the perspective of time and experience, left them wishing for more.

Two students made clear associations between the program's messages and their ability to be successful students at Valley University. Elena credited the ease of her transition with what she learned during her five weeks of the Stars Academic Program. She said:

During the summer they were just like get to know your professors, network, just get to know people because you never know how that person might be able to help you. Just the idea of getting to know people around the University; they might be resources for you down the road you never know...them telling us to make sure to go to office hours, make sure you ask for help, make sure you get to know your professors and stuff. .. I feel like that was mostly addressed throughout the program.

Sophia echoed Elena's sentiments by recalling specific workshop topics and how helpful they felt to her. She also mentioned the dinners and other events that helped them "make

connections, get to know people.” To both of these students, the activities and messages were salient to their continued experiences in the fall and they were able to draw direct associations between their summer and fall semester experiences.

What is striking is that, while Sophia acknowledged the usefulness of the program’s content, her ability to act on her “connections” was limited by a number of personal and environmental factors. Her comments reflect the gap between students learning what they “should do” and acting upon that knowledge when necessary. This is also illustrated in the comments of another SAP participant, Jackie. She acknowledged, in retrospect, the utility of the program’s workshops and expressed remorse that she did not recognize the value. She said, “I didn’t take advantage enough of the information sessions that we used to have. I used to go to them and I knew the information was valuable but I never really put it to thought.” Other participants considered the program’s content, in retrospect, not “necessary” or particularly “helpful” because they found they did not use the information taught to them during their first year on campus. Jenny credited her time on campus during the summer as easing her transition in the fall but admitted that what she learned in the workshops did not contribute to that sense of comfort. One other student, Dana, acknowledged that she did not feel she needed to use any of the resources she learned about during the SAP because her “problems weren’t really big problems.” Despite the students’ perceptions of the relevance of the program’s content, almost all admitted that the possession of the information – even if they did not use it – reassured them and made them feel like they “had an advantage.”

What arose from several students’ comments was a sense that the program content lacked relevance for their lives and they had trouble linking what was presented with what, in

the end, they felt they “needed to know.” This may be a result of the paths their college lives had taken to the point of our interviews. None had officially declared majors, few had encountered significant snags or problems in their college lives, and many were just beginning to seek out opportunities in the larger university community. It is possible that as they continued in their later years of college, the tips and skills gained in the SAP would have more relevance.

I conclude this exploration with data collected from Lila, who provided some thoughtful answers to the questions I asked regarding the program. Upon reflection, Lila had concluded that attending the SAP had not been the best use of her time. Her first year had been very stressful when she found the academic barriers to pursuing a pre-med track felt too difficult to overcome. During that time, she felt lost, confused and a bit helpless. As a first-generation student, Lila shared that she had few family resources to which to turn, and despite her experiences in the SAP, felt lacking in how to figure out what to do to solve her problems. Therefore, her comments and recommendations are rather specific to what she wished she had gotten from the SAP. When asked about the program’s messages, Lila shared:

I feel like they [the administrators] told us what to avoid and what to fear...the dangers or the things that were waiting for us, but I feel like we weren’t exactly explained to how to deal with them, you know. They gave us these red flags - you should watch out for this and you should watch out for this but not exactly how to approach them.

Specifically, Lila wished for opportunities in which she could have received more personal attention from faculty or older students. She recalled that the program had dinners with faculty and students but she revealed that these events were “not the best environment to be

like ‘ok well I want do *this* in life, you know. What class should I take?’ It’s kind of an awkward situation because you don’t know what to talk about and you don’t know what is appropriate.” She suggested, instead, that small sessions be held where faculty from different schools or departments meet in small groups with participants and talk about coursework and majors. Several other students I interviewed specifically mentioned the awkward nature of these formal dinners with faculty and expressed a desire to either have the dinners be less formal or find other ways in which to talk with faculty. They all recognized the utility of getting to know faculty but found the format in which this was attempted uncomfortable.

Lila continued speculating out loud about what the program communicated to her about seeking out assistance from faculty. She said,

I guess the message of the program was trying to tell us that we had to go for...we had to take initiative for our interests or, if we had questions, we had to take initiative and ask the particular person involved in whatever, but you know it never really sinks in until you are in that situation. Until you realize ‘I’m a bit alone and I have to figure things out myself.’ I mean I do remember being told we needed to talk to faculty and not to be scared. To take initiative... but once again, I don’t know, I feel like some things you do need to experience it.

In her remark, Lila discussed a key stumbling block for several of the students of this study; she knew, from being told, that she needed to take initiative and seek help, but acting on that knowledge was difficult and overwhelming. Also, her comment reveals that, in the end, just knowing what she *should do* was not enough in helping her feel less fearful. As will be discussed in later chapters, this interaction of students’ perceptions and the university environment reveals how the students negotiate learning and adjusting to the culture and norms and what their success at VU can hinge on.

Looking at the program's content and messages from varying perspectives allows for a more complex picture of how the program's goals are acted upon and received. In addition, it sheds light on a useful part of evaluation – what parts of the program might work best and what may need to be altered to better meet the needs of students. In addition, administrators can determine what messages they want to ensure get communicated and in what manner. Lastly, as stated earlier, the content and messages serve as a conduit between goals and perceived outcomes. I turn next to the perceptions of the program's effects, as seen by administrators and the students who participated in the SAP.

### **Perceptions of the Stars Academic Program's Effects**

Determining the impact of a program is an important aspect of evaluative study (Patton, 1990). Due to the nature of my work, I focused on the viewpoints of both the program creators/administrators and the students. In comparing and contrasting, I was able to identify where their perceptions align and diverge. A great deal can be learned from both areas. With alignment I was able to get a sense of what the students took from the program, both in actual content and the messages communicated. Where perceptions diverge, one can obtain a better understanding of where gaps lie between the administrators' intentions and the participants' experiences. What follows is an exploration of both perspectives and I begin with the administrators' interview data. I conclude the section with an analysis of the students' data.

#### **Administrators' Perceptions of Effects**

Administrators' perceptions of the effects of the Stars Academic Program focused on several broad themes, which included students' exposure to the college environment, their

sense of belonging and community, and their transition in the fall. In addition, they speculated on possible longer term and more far reaching effects of the program. All will be explored below.

Those administrators closest to the operations of the program provided insight into the “black box” of what they believed happens with the students during their five weeks on campus. Jenna Reese, creator of the program, stated:

The expected results are that at the end...the students feel really comfortable here, they have gotten a head start on credits, they know faculty, they know administrators, they know their way around, and that when they move into the regular dorm room on move-in weekend, they feel like they own this place as much as anybody else and that they have a place here.

Her perspective is based both on the intended goals of the program and the informal feedback and information she has received from past participants. She explained that past participants entered the fall semester knowing “where everything was and people went to them, which made them feel very empowered.” She continued:

By the end of the summer they [the SAP participants] are so much more empowered and they know the university and they are much more comfortable here so it's this...it's almost like the transition from your first year to your fourth year all in one summer...and that's not to say that they are at the same point a fourth year would be, but it's the same...if you took an incoming first year and looked at where they were when they left it's that same kind of transformation over the summer where they just feel in control and feel comfortable and you know they don't feel like the freshman and know their way around.

Other administrators echoed Jenna's comments about the transformations that occur. Carolyn McClintock, director of financial aid, also commented in terms of what the students gain over their weeks in the summer. She said:

I think what we have at the end of the summer is what you would have seen six or eight weeks, or even more like at the end of the semester, so you've got this student who is, you know, knows where the library is, knows how to look things up, knows

and has met all these different administrators, .... I think they're confident. I think they feel knowledgeable. I think they feel very much a part of the institution.

Gretchen Smith, who oversaw the program's operations, also shared her views of the impact of the program. She stated, "A lot of the students arrive...really nervous... they enter with such a sense of being given a great opportunity that they really develop a confidence, all of them develop confidence at the end." It seems evident from the data that the administrators believe that the SAP participants experience much of the nervousness and worry of any student arriving on campus for the first time, but the program provides them an early and safe forum in which to obtain the confidence and tools they need to carry them through the first semester and beyond.

As evidence of these experiences, in separate interviews both Jenna and Gretchen told a similar story of an SAP participant from a previous year who, after several days on campus in the summer, told the administrators that she wanted to return home. Her feelings of homesickness overwhelmed her and she was scared about attending college. According to both administrators, the student also confided in her fellow participants of her desire to leave. These students convinced her to stay, providing friendship and support. In the end, the student completed the program and Jenna speculated that without the program, the student would have "packed up and gone home" in the fall. In addition, Gretchen explained what happened with the student and how her experiences buffered her in the fall. She shared:

[The student] left the program really grateful that she stayed, you know, even though she was very close to not remaining in the program, and I think it's that confidence that I can handle first year, I know what to expect, um, I am not scared about it, I'm not scared about living with a roommate, I'm not scared about living in the dorms, I know how to handle my day-to-day life, and I know who to ask if I run into troubles, that sense of confidence and responsibility for yourself.



To both administrators, this example revealed the power of the program to provide the participants opportunities to test themselves in the new college environment, easing their transition in the fall.

In addition, the majority of administrators in my study believed that these feelings of confidence and empowerment provided the SAP participants with a foundation from which to build their larger college experience. The SAP participants' sense of membership in the university community enabled them to connect with professors, seek out extracurricular opportunities and move with ease through the bureaucracy of the institution. Frequently, the administrators discussed past participants' involvement and engagement with the university as evidence of these effects. Jenna and Gretchen, who sometimes maintain relationships with the SAP participants after the program is over, spoke of SAP alumni they knew who were orientation leaders, members of student government, resident assistants and spokespersons for the VU Promise financial aid initiative. To them and other administrators interviewed, these students' deeper involvement in the university – and as faces and voices of low-income students at VU – reflected the power of the program to engage the students as “active participants in the life of the place.” (Tim Keasey interview).

Although only Dean Gary Addison spoke of it directly, it was clear through my conversations with the administrators that student academic success and persistence were intended effects of the SAP. Although no formal tracking of the retention rates of all VU low-income students was taking place at the time of my study, Jenna monitored the academic records of past program participants as a measure of the program's impact. Jenna and others were quick to add that the program did more than give students an academic foundation,

noting that ideally the program provided students an environment in which they feel a sense of overall comfort in the university, which translated to them having a satisfying overall experience. Gary Addison speculated that the SAP participants “engage with the university like most students do... I think that’s a measure of happiness and I think that the students that are involved here usually feel good about themselves and that often translates to their academic success.” Gary Addison’s comments illuminate the ways in which the university culture supports and encourages students’ pursuit of both academic and co-curricular engagement and the interrelationship of both.

For the administrators, a natural byproduct of discussing the possible effects of the program was to speculate as to what students who did not participate in the program felt and experienced as freshman arriving in the fall. When comparing the first semester and first year of non participants, Jenna hypothesized:

My guess is that even if they [non-participants] are doing just as well on paper it was a lot harder for them. As it would be for any first year student...it’s a huge advantage to come here in the summer and get a head start on credits and learn your way around. You just feel so much more comfortable in the fall. And you’ve got a support group from the friends that you made in the program and they live in the dorms with other students so they meet other students.

Gary Addison imagined that non-participants got “off to a slower start” in the fall and, more specifically, they did not feel “as comfortable right away in going to see a professor...to take advantage of our wonderful faculty.” His belief was that the less formal nature in which SAP students received exposure to faculty and administrators (through workshops and dinners) provide them with a comfort and ease to build relationships with them during their remaining four years.

Jenna Reese acknowledged that the program appeared to affect the students' sense of belonging, as demonstrated by extracurricular involvement. She stated that past SAP participants seemed to:

...be pretty involved in the life the university. They are orientation leaders, they are university tour guides, some of them are interested in being college guides when they graduate, they work in the admissions office, they work in [the student union]...they participate in intramural sports, in plays, in vocal groups, so it's not just getting them here and the academic piece but making sure that they have the support and the knowledge they need get involved in the extracurricular piece, too.

For Jenna and other administrators, the ideal outcome would be for SAP participants to maintain good grades, become involved in the university community in some way, and take advantage of the variety of courses, events, social networks and opportunities that the university has to offer. In short, they hoped that the students would move smoothly through their four years and find success, as the majority of VU students do. Jenna said that ideally the program allowed students to “find their way and they don't need the support and they are involved in other ways, and their courses are going fine. I don't feel like they need to...that is actually what we want, that they blend in with the rest of the student body and sort of go their own way.”

When one turns to the students' data, a richer portrait is painted as to what happened for the SAP participants both short and long-term. This exploration follows.

### **Student Participants' Perceptions of Effects**

All of the students who participated in the Stars Academic Program discussed the positive benefits they felt they received from the program. The most frequent discussions regarding effects centered on the students' sense of comfort and knowledge regarding Valley University. Students discussed “knowing the campus” and a general “comfort and familiarity

of getting around and knowing resources” as positive effects of the SAP. In addition, participants mentioned their appreciation of knowing members of the university community as they entered in the fall. Again, these relationships helped students feel more comfortable than they imagine they would have felt without knowing the people and places of campus.

In discussing the students’ perceptions of the effects of the program, I will begin with an analysis of the results of the student participant evaluation (see Appendix J for the evaluation form). The evaluation form had both Likert scale questions and short answer questions, which allowed students to express more detail about their feelings and experiences.

**Written evaluation results.** Overall the program received high marks from the participants (see Table 7 for results from evaluation).

Table 7

*Stars Academic Program Survey Results: Evaluations Statements*

Evaluation Statement	Data – Cumulative Percent
The Stars Academic Program increased my self confidence regarding entering college	68.4% strongly agree (n=13) 26.3% agree (n=5) 5.3% neutral (n=1)
The Stars Academic Program taught me about the university resources to seek out if I have questions	68.4% strongly agree (n=13) 21.1% agree (n=4) 5.3% neutral (n=1) 5.3% disagree (n=1)
The Stars Academic Program helped me develop relationships with faculty on campus	47.4% strongly agree (n=9) 36.8% agree (n=7) 15.8% neutral (n=3)
The Stars Academic Program helped make me feel like a member of the community	31.6% strongly agree (n=6) 47.4% agree (n=9) 21.1% neutral (n=4)

Most striking of these results is that 18 of the 19 students indicated that that the program increased their confidence for entering college in the fall. A strong majority of the respondents also indicated that the program provided a foundation regarding university resources they could tap into when and if needed. In looking at the one student who indicated that the program did not help in learning about university resources, it is unclear what that student experienced that generated such a response. In fact, the participants' general comments included "the program was very accommodating and is one I enjoyed," and "I have become more acquainted with the institution I am going to be spending the next four years at." One can conclude that, despite the overall positive experiences, the student left the

program either lacking in resource knowledge, or was already quite informed about the university's resources and the program provided little that was new. What can be concluded in general from the results displayed above is that students left the program feeling like they had gained in both knowledge and community membership during their five weeks, with some students feeling more strongly regarding the positive effects of the program.

Several items in the written evaluation asked students to provide feedback of their feelings regarding their comfort, family support and general feelings as they departed the program and prepared for the fall. Table 8 summarizes the results.

Table 8

*Stars Academic Program Survey Results – Evaluation Statements*

Evaluation Statement	Data – Cumulative Percent
I am glad I chose to attend Valley University	73.7% strongly agree (n=14) 15.8% agree (n=3) 10.5% neutral (n=2)
I am worried about how I will do academically in the fall	5.3% strongly agree (n=1) 36.8% agree (n=7) 21.1% neutral (n=4) 21.1% disagree (n=4) 15.8% strongly disagree (n=3)
My family is supportive of my coming here this summer	68.4 strongly agree (n=13) 26.3% agree (n=5) 5.3% neutral (n=1)
I am worried about affording college in the fall	10.5% agree (n=2) 15.8% neutral (n=3) 10.5% disagree (n=2) 63.2% strongly disagree (n=12)
I know I have friends here	73.7% strongly agree (n=14) 26.3% agree (n=5)
I am excited for the next year of school	63.2% strongly agree (n=12) 21.1% agree (n=4) 15.8% neutral (n=3)

There are several striking results in these data. Most interesting is the students' response regarding their feelings about the upcoming fall semester, specifically their feelings of academic readiness. Almost half (8) the students in the program were concerned about how they would do academically in the fall, and slightly fewer (7) were not concerned. In reviewing the evaluation forms of those students who expressed concern, there are no clear

indications through answers to other questions to further illuminate what they were feeling. Many students used the short answer section to thank staff, discuss their excitement for the upcoming fall and give specific feedback over aspects of the structure or content of the program. In addition, there seems to be no evidence that the students who were concerned about their academic performance were the same students who felt a lack of support, had financial worries or general anxiety about either attending VU in general or returning for the fall.

Another notable result of these data is the high percentage of students who felt they had both strong family support and a community of friends at VU. The perceptions of family support run counter to the administrators' perceptions regarding the level of commitment parents, siblings and other families provide these students. As was discussed earlier in the chapter, the administrators' had perceptions that one goal of the SAP was to ameliorate the affects of familial lack of knowledge and support. Although some administrators saw the students' families as potential barriers to student success, the data from the survey show that the students themselves described their families as providing strong emotional support. Details of the role family plays in these students' lives are explored more deeply in the following chapter. What is important for the evaluation of this program is that these students felt that they were attending the program with their family's blessing and that family did play a role in the students' success during the summer session and beyond.

I conclude this section of data analysis with a discussion of some of the written remarks made by students on the evaluation forms. When asked to note who served as the biggest support during the summer program, the majority of students named Gretchen Smith,



the administrator of the program. In addition, almost all students named their fellow SAP members (often calling them “new friends”) as very important. In the comments section, students remarked: “I’m so used to this university it seems like home already” and “I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to participate in this program.” Students expressed excitement for the fall, often noting that the five-week program had given them “practice” at being a student that they imagined would help them in the fall and beyond. When looking at these sections of the written evaluation as a whole, I am struck by the optimism, excitement and gratitude expressed. The student participants were likely feeling the effects of a very positive final session on goal setting, coupled with their overall sense of accomplishment at having successfully navigated five weeks of college coursework. As was discussed previously, the students received messages encouraging them to continue to build strong relationships within the university community once they arrived back on campus in the fall. Despite these positive messages, students varied in their ability to sustain the momentum they felt at the end of the program. In reality, the transition to college for many of the SAP participants – and the other students of my study – was actually quite challenging. I now turn to the students’ interview data, which reveals the students’ perceptions of the program’s short- and long-term effects.

**Student interview data.** The interview data adds context and nuance to the written evaluation findings, which I will explore in the following section. For many students, they cast their feelings about the effects of the Stars Academic Program in comparison to what they imagine would have happened if they did not attend and had arrived on campus for the first time with their fellow freshmen. Jenny admitted, “if I hadn’t taken the Stars program, I

would have been...it would have taken me longer to get used to the university and talking to professors. And also I'm really bad with directions so I would have been so stressed out getting to classes. I just felt...I wasn't as stressed out as other first years were...they were nervous and I wasn't nervous at all." Marcus echoed Jenny's comments by reflecting that the benefits of the program included "getting around...knowing resources, you know, knowing where to find your classes. I think everything would just be harder. Yes I would probably...wouldn't have done as well in my classes" in the fall. Mary realized that the program helped her in "knowing how to get places and where you are...I remember the first week in the summer it was really...Everything felt so much bigger than it really was so I was pretty lost." When I probed as to what she imagined what it would have been like if she arrived in the fall like the other students she replied "it would have been more stressful."

At least one student, Jackie, realized that, while the program was helpful in and of itself, her adjustment in the fall would have felt similar because of other resources she had in place, namely her sister. When I asked her if her first year would have been dramatically different without the program she admitted, "No just because I came here knowing others that were going to the University also. So I mean maybe if I didn't have my sister here.... I probably would have had a much different lifestyle most likely." Jackie maintained weekly contact with her sister, often having lunch with her and her friends. Only Jackie and Julia had older siblings who were still students at Valley in 2007. For both, their relationships with their sisters provided the primary support and guidance they relied on during their first year. Although both discussed their appreciation of getting to know other first year students, they did not place as much importance on their peers as the majority of other program participants

in my study.

Several students discussed the relationships they formed with other students in the program as a positive effect. Whether students found friendship or just felt reassured that they had people they knew, experiencing the program with other freshman students was a positive aspect. Elena who was from out of state credited the program with building her group of friends and acquaintances for the fall, including forming a close friendship with her present roommate. Dana recounted that the program “kind of helped to meet more people during the summer so once you do go to school you can be like hey I know you. It’s kind of cool.”

Mary indicated that getting to meet people before school began was “the best part.” She continued “because it was more, like, intimate than the normal college setting because it was less people in a concentrated setting so that was nice.” These interview results support the written evaluation data that students who participated enjoyed getting to know and befriending a set of other freshman students. What is striking is that despite the students’ expressions of friendship and connection made via the written evaluation, these relationships, for the most part, did not sustain over time. In our interviews, Nicholas, Sophia, Mary, Jenny, Dana, Jackie, Julia and Marcus all discussed how the connections among the participants from the program were important in the first weeks on campus but became less intense as they made new friends.. Nicholas’s explained “in the beginning of fall... I went to dinner I think twice with the most of the Stars people but after that it just kinda fell off....” which was a common story told by many.

Interestingly these students, despite the 14 months since they had participated in the

program, remembered how important those connections were during the summer and how the fellow Stars students played a role in their fall transition, but for all but Elena and Lila, the students' relationships did not continue once they found their own social niche. The salience of these relationships, however fleeting they were, was apparent. The students likely relied on the fact that they "knew somebody" on campus as they made their way in the first days and weeks of the fall semester. That these friendships, for the most part, did not last is not solely the fault of the program but likely a result of the ways in which students form friendships and connections once they are among the larger social milieu of the other entering first year students.

Although the social relationships formed within the program appears to be a beneficial outcome of the program, findings demonstrate that the relationships formed serve a purpose for students and have the potential to change over time. Administrators made clear that an important goal of the program was for students to gain a sense of community, and results show that students left feeling that they had a community of people to rely on. Realistically, students are likely to find friendship groups in a much more organic process, and it would be expected that friends found during the program might get lost in the excitement of starting college.

Another important result of the program was the students' perceptions of how the program affected them academically. Some students found the rigor and pace of the summer classes good preparation for the regular academic year. Julia commented that, based on the summer, she "expected like the workload to be insane" in the fall. She added, "I guess it kind of prepared me for like the amount of work I was going to get. But then when it turned out

that it wasn't that much then I felt relieved." Marcus commented that he liked "having to take the classes in such a high-paced environment where you're studying basically every day for like four or five hours depending on which type of classes you take. I think that is a very big benefit when you come here for the school year." Elena added that the experiences in the summer helped her learn about professors' expectations. She said, "The Stars program really did show you this is what classes are going to be like, this is the teaching style, this is how you need to participate in class. Kind of like the papers...what was expected of you." These students learned not only about their own capacity for the demands of VU coursework but had the opportunity to gain an understanding of how professors operate. Even Mary, who had participated in a program at Harvard the summer before, discussed that the SAP allowed her to find out how VU professors operated and gained experience meeting their standards. Sophia, who met with academic challenges during her first two years at Valley, discussed how the coursework she took in the summer made her feel more prepared. She said:

I kind of knew what professors expected out of me in some way, shape or form. Like I got used the format of class even though they were small because of the summer time, it still gives you a preview to what is expected of you even though I didn't meet those expectations. I wasn't nervous anymore - I knew the professors expected me to think critically, generate your own ideas...So just being prepared for professors' expectations was the main thing that I took with me.

Sophia, despite her ongoing academic struggles, recognized that the exposure to classes prior to fall enrollment eased her nervousness. We read in her comment above that she purposefully made a distinction between professors' expectations and her inability to meet those expectations and what that reveals is Sophia's perspective regarding her overwhelming sense of responsibility and guilt over what she perceives as her lack of willingness and contribution. Sophia's feelings of academic inadequacy are salient to much of her

experiences at VU. Strictly from an evaluative standpoint, Sophia's comments reveal the perceptions of the role she played as a member of the SAP; the professor provided expectations and it was her obligation to try to meet those expectations. As clear as that delineation is in theory, the ambiguity that lies between instructor expectations and student performance contributed to Sophia's struggles in school.

Two other details of the students' perceptions of the program's effects are notable for their absence from the majority of students' interview data. First, Dana was the only student to discuss specifically how the program affected her course selection once enrolled in the fall. Dana commented that participating in the SAP and experiencing first hand two, reading-heavy humanities courses gave her an "advantage" in selecting courses once in school for her freshman year. She admitted "All the other semesters I can see which classes are going to require a lot of reading and stuff like that so I guess it (the program) kind of gave me an advantage." Although other students did not mention these details outright, one can imagine that an outcome for many summer program participants was an ability to better assess what a class might demand from them based on what they experienced in their first classes. Secondly, only two (Marcus, Lila) students mentioned earning additional credits as an effect of the program even though the student participants discussed this as a main draw for attending. Again, it is possible that students did not discuss this at length because it was such an obvious result of attending the summer program. All students, even those who withdrew from one class, left the Stars Academic Program with at least three credits.

What the results of this analysis reveal is that there was general agreement among students who participated in the Stars Academic Program that they felt the program provided

positive benefits overall. Even into their second year of college, they were able to reflect on and acknowledge the program's effects on their college experience, both academically and socially. Despite the overall agreement among participants of the program's positive effects, students' stories of their first semesters of college reveal that the effects of the program were not entirely long-lasting. What follows is an exploration of the more nuanced experiences of the participants, specifically their academic experiences once they were enrolled in their first full year. The data reveals some unanticipated results of the program, which may or may not be able to be addressed through the program's content and messages.

Because one of the program's intended goals is to help ease the students' academic transition into the fall semester and first year, it is worth exploring the students' perceptions of the relationship between their first year experiences and the program. The majority of students found the transition to college classes difficult despite their "practice" with the program. Only two students admitted that their adjustment to the academic expectations and demands of the first year went fairly smoothly. I begin with the students' discussions of their difficulties. Here we can learn what the program might be able to do – through purposeful programming and overt messages – to improve in its efforts to ease their entry in the fall semester.

The majority of students, when asked about how the program related to their experiences in the fall and spring of their first years, admitted that the pace and demands of the summer courses felt "completely different" than their first fall courses. My interview with Mary typifies what was expressed by others.

Interviewer: In retrospect do you think that what you experienced in the Stars Academic Program was realistic in comparison to what you experienced in the fall?

Mary: No. the summer classes were totally different. I mean, I don't know, the whole structure. It is like in the summer, it's really intense and focused. It was just different...it is just different how summer classes and regular scheduling goes.

I: What did you...would you say one is better than the other? Easier?

M: Um...both are harder for different reasons...both have their advantages. The summer ones advantages like everything together so...you are only focused on two classes. Not like five or four or however many you take in the fall. But it's also really fast paced and really rigorous and every night it's like hours of work. And in the fall...I mean you take more classes and it's more spread out. But then again it's more spaced out so it's harder to keep...it's just different...I don't know....It's not really the classes that were a problem - in fall everyone...it's just more like a real college environment so that also meant that you need more time management in your life.

Mary's comments were echoed by Jackie, Jenny, Julia, Lila, and Sophia, who all mentioned the sharp contrast between the summer and fall in terms of pace, expectations, extracurricular activities and the time management that that environment demanded. Most of these students admitted that the fall "felt easier" because of the perceived expanse of time but these same students admitted that the additional freedoms left them scrambling to figure out how to manage their time effectively.

Interestingly some students admitted thriving with the summer's intense academic schedule, which mimicked their high school environment. They saw the daily classes and the nightly homework as a means of forcing them to get their work done in a way that was harder to achieve in the slower pace of fall. As Mary's comments reveal, many also saw that first summer as providing fewer temptations of the "real college environment," which they grappled to balance once they returned in the fall and started becoming more engaged with the university culture. Not surprisingly, the students who struggled most academically during the regular academic year found the rigor and pace of the summer courses, upon reflection,



“easier” than the fall. Nicholas shared this view, “I think during the summer when it was like, I didn’t have anything going on other than classes and it was so easy to just go to classes and just sit there and take notes and just get into the classes. But for fall the classes...it was almost completely different. It’s almost a complete turnaround.” Nicholas admitted he found the summer session pace more to his liking because the daily classes forced him to structure his time, unlike the regular semesters, which left him feeling untethered.

In contrast to these students’ perceptions about the dramatic differences between summer courses and the regular school year, there were two students who felt that the experiences within the summer courses were not strikingly dissimilar to what they experienced in the fall. Marcus stated that “studying every day for like four or five hours” for the summer courses was something he tried to maintain once in school for the fall. When asked she felt the Stars Academic Program prepared her for the fall semester, Elena stated “As far as classes goes I felt like I knew what I was getting myself into in a way and...I did feel well equipped.” When pressed regarding any difficulties with the transition in the fall, Elena said she did not feel that there were any notable differences. Despite her feeling equipped for the fall, Elena admitted that she still struggled with time management issues. She said, “I was really involved with different things so I had to really practice with time management. And that was kind of hard. So it was mostly time management and getting things done. I just always felt like I was behind no matter how much I did. It was a little rough getting adjusted to.”

Later she shared that the summer courses, both the intense daily schedule and the fact that there were only two classes, forced her to structure her time to meet both classes’

demands. Once fall arrived and she had six courses, deciding what to do and in what order became more challenging. She stated, “during the summer it was two classes. So it was just like okay if I have to today I’m going to work on this. And then there’s the other half. But when you have six classes it’s just kind of like where do I start. Do I read this first?” Elena admitted she has been successful in figuring those time management issues out.

When you compare Marcus and Elena’s academic records (e.g., cumulative GPA, changes in GPA over time), they are not strikingly different than the other participants interviewed for this study. Both students saw a dip in their GPAs from summer to fall 2007, as is the case for all 10 students but Jackie. What is interesting, therefore, is their perceptions of how they transitioned into the fall and how the program served to prepare them. Other students’ perceptions weren’t that the program failed them in some way, but that the very nature of the summer courses was different enough to challenge their preconceived ideas of “what school was like.”

While many would assume that students might easily comprehend that summer courses are inherently different than what students experience in the fall, it is important to remember that the Stars Academic Program offers the *first* classes at VU that these students take and therefore, they have little prior knowledge or exposure to college academics. Add to that that many of the participants were first-generation college students and it stands to reason that the participants’ knowledge of college coursework and differences between intense summer courses and drawn out regular semester courses would be limited.

Students’ struggles with time management are a key aspect of the study’s findings. What is important from a program evaluation perspective is to consider how this pervasive

student challenge could be addressed within the program. In addition, one must consider whether the messages participants receive regarding the ease of their transition is misguided. One possible unintended result is that students may blame themselves when they struggle to adjust in the fall, thinking that the summer program was to have prepared them adequately for the transition. While I believe the students need to be reassured during the program that they are developing a foundation for their fall semester and beyond, that message needs to be tempered with cautions that the regular semesters will look and feel quite a bit different.

In this chapter, I have explored and explicated the perceptions of the administrators and the students regarding the goals, content and effects of the SAP. I now turn to a discussion of the program's theory, using a modified matrix format to examine the similarities and differences in the program's intended and unintended outcomes of the program.

### **Program Theory Conceptualization**

In keeping with my proposed effort to explore and discuss the program's theory I used a modification of a theory matrix utilized by Funnell (2000). The intention is to provide a means of systematically looking at intended outcomes (or goals of the program) and the program (and non-program factors) influencing the successful (or unsuccessful) achievement of these outcomes. Instead of using a matrix format, I have chosen to explore four intended outcomes in an outline format. I will present each intended outcome, and the outline that follows each will include: (a) success criteria (when applicable), (b) program factors affecting success, (c) non-program factors affecting success, (d) sources of data. Each section will be followed with brief comments.

# **1. Intended Outcome - Positively influence student's semester-to-semester**

## **persistence<sup>15</sup>**

- a. Success criteria – continued enrollment at VU; maintain a satisfactory (at minimum)

GPA

- b. Program factors influencing success – enrollment in 2, 3-credit summer courses;

“practice” at academic environment and expectations via VU courses.

- c. Non-program factors influencing success - skill set brought from high school regarding how to navigate first year of college; existing scaffolding at VU; “signals” from VU regarding academic progress (e.g., grades, academic warnings, ability to declare a major or transfer to selected school within VU)

- d. Sources of data – academic/transcript data; student and administrator interview data

Comments: The Stars Academic Program (SAP) intends to aid in influencing students' semester-by-semester progress. Using the data from my comparison group, I can make no strong claim that the program influences persistence. In fact, while I have too small a sample size to make inferences, it is worth noting that the two students most at risk for departure at VU participated in the SAP. Indeed, both SAP participants and non-participants struggled with many of the same things that affected their commitment to persist. These included (but were not limited to): time management, a sense of self-efficacy, quality of their high school education, relationships with faculty, determination of a major, and signals they received from the university environment regarding their academic success (e.g., grades, faculty interactions, academic warnings). Non SAP

---

<sup>15</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss students' persistence to graduation since I only study the students through their first semester of their second year and access academic data through spring 2009.

participants relied on existing scaffolding at VU in an effort to persist, which included the Office of African American Affairs (OAAA), College Advising classes, the writing center, and faculty office hours.

## **2. Intended Outcome - Develop relationships with faculty and students**

- a. Program factors influencing success – living and working with students for five weeks; meeting faculty and older students through programming; engaging with faculty in coursework.
- b. Non-program factors influencing success – opportunity to develop relationships with peers through fall housing assignments, involvement in student groups. Steps taken to seek out faculty through office hours, small seminars, etc.; existence of other peers (e.g., high school friends, older siblings, cousins) to provide social networks.
- c. Sources of data – observation and interview data

Comments: Almost every student in my study formed their closest friendships from the people they met in the fall semester. Of the 10 SAP participants in my study, only two reported having close relationships with other SAP members. The remainder discussed staying in touch with SAP members for the first few weeks until their close friendship groups formed. Students who participated in the SAP seemed more comfortable forming relationships with faculty than non-participants. All students in my study recognized the importance of establishing these connections, but a greater number of SAP participants reported having made close connections more quickly into their first 18 months than their non-SAP peers.

### **3. Intended Outcome - Utilize materials learned in workshops for navigating college in fall and beyond**

- a. Program factors influencing success – relevance of messages and content for students’ situations (e.g., learning budgeting from financial aid report); feelings of participants regarding demands of summer academic coursework (e.g., students distracted or overwhelmed because of academic demands)
- b. Non-program factors influencing success – internet resources, support systems at VU (RAs, peer mentors, administrative staff), siblings, friends from high school, existing knowledge of “how college works”
- c. Sources of data – administrator and student data; observation data

Comments: SAP participants in the study were mixed on the utility they found in the workshops. Several admitted to not needing to use many of the resources they learned about (e.g., financial aid budgeting, library research), but some speculated that the topics might be useful for their later years or if they ever ran into trouble. They seemed to like knowing that the resources were there. A positive result of these workshops was that they symbolized to the SAP participants that the university cared for them and their well-being. For those who did not participate in the SAP, they relied more on existing sources of information (e.g., RA, advisor, VU website, parents) to help them navigate the college terrain. The majority of non-participants reported these sources were sufficient, although a subset of these students (primarily the waitlisted students) speculated that the Stars Academic Program might have provided more personal attention than they received from these other sources. Lastly, all students in my study reported varying levels of difficulty

transitioning to college, regardless of participation in the SAP. Their ability to adjust quickly seemed to stem more from their ability to re-align their academic “toolkit” established in high school to the new setting.

#### **4. Intended Outcome – “Be active citizens of the university” through leadership and involvement**

- a. Program factors influencing success – efforts to establish comfort with university setting and culture; purposeful programming around leadership and engagement by Dean of Students office
- b. Non-program factors influencing success – student self-selection based on perceptions of the university’s culture and possible student “fit”; ongoing messages communicated to students regarding self-governance, involvement; existing structure of student-run organizations; presence of effective messengers such as RAs, peers, friends, siblings.
- c. Sources of data – observation and interview data

Comments: The SAP extends the messages given to students through campus tours, summer orientation, and the university’s website (to name a few) regarding the culture of involvement and engagement at VU. Selective programming at the end of the five weeks delivers this message overtly, asking the students to think about how they want get involved in their four years of college. For non-participants, they receive this encouragement through other programming, including fall orientation and the fall activities fair.

In summary, this section was meant to try to explore several of the primary goals of the program and how they were achieved. In addition, the data from my comparison group adds

context to what impact the program may have had overall. My findings suggest that the SAP served as a form of support, scaffolding and instruction for its participants, but non-participants accessed resources and transitioned to college in much the same way that participants did. For example, the SAP participants frequently mentioned how important it was for them to know how to physically navigate the campus when they arrived in the fall; this small bit of knowledge empowered them. Non-participants discussed how much they enjoyed exploring the campus with new-found friends, finding this a comfortable and common topic for conversation that they could have with fellow freshman. They liked taking time to find out how bus routes worked and which paths to use for class; the discovery of the new terrain was exciting to them. From this small example, we realize that students have the potential to adapt to new situations. They are resilient, creative and resourceful, which were likely the skills that helped them to get accepted for enrollment at VU. I now turn to recommendations.

### **Recommendations**

I divide the following section into two primary parts. First I present recommendations based on the continued existence of the Stars Academic Program and explore ways in which administrators can possibly alter the selection, invitation and content of the program. I also make suggestions of ways in which the administrators and their colleagues who interact with the students can shape the overt and covert messages that they want the students to take with them to help sustain them into their first year at VU. I also include brief paragraph of recommendations if administrators decide to dramatically alter the SAP or re-direct resources to other needs on campus. I begin with a discussion of altering the existing program.



## Student Selection

Inviting all eligible students on a first-come, first-served basis has its strengths. First, it is administratively easy in comparison to selecting students on certain criteria from their VU application documents. In addition, sending invitations to all students and asking those who are most interested to respond allows for a more fair process in which, ideally, the students who most want to be in the program will attend. Conversely, inviting all students in this way risks that the students who are already well-equipped in terms of college knowledge and who happen to respond fastest will take a slot from a student who might be more in need of this program. As the findings from my work suggest, some students recognized the Stars Academic Program mostly as a means of gaining additional credit and had other resources they could tap into regarding learning about college culture and transitioning in the first year. Tailoring the invitation list to an identified subset of the low-income students coming to VU might help the program respond best to these students' needs. To that end, I make three recommendations, listed below, for possible targeted student populations. Each of these suggestions brings with it changes of focus to programming content and intended messages, and I address these at the end of the section.

### *1) Students with few, if any, advanced standing credits*

As my findings reflect, the participants of the SAP were primarily drawn to the program because of the additional college credits they could earn. In addition, the credits data (Table 4) on all of the students in the study reveal that those who did not respond to the invitation to the program brought over twice as many advanced standing credits as those who did attend. By bringing students with lower advanced standing credits to campus for

the summer program, administrators could target those students who need to address this very practical aspect of their academic record, and position them so that their academic burden is lighter in their first two semesters of college.

2) *Students from out -of-state*<sup>16</sup>

Students in my study who were from in-state frequently relied on friends and acquaintances from high school to assist them in their transition to college. In comparison, the students from out-of-state did not have this built in peer group.

Therefore, the summer program could bring together these out-of-state students as a means for them to form relationships with other incoming freshman.

3) *First-generation students*

Several administrators I interviewed admitted that the Stars Academic Program best served students who were the first in their families to attend college. I would contend that the program could provide needed support for first-generation students who are truly the first in their families to attend college. In other words, a number of the students in this study had older siblings who had forged the path for college going and a great deal of valuable information and college knowledge was transmitted from them. By inviting a first-generation/first-in-family subset of students, administrators could assist students who, from my research, appeared to have the greatest difficulty adjusting to college life at VU. I realize that this suggestion requires a greater administrative burden for admissions staff and others in identifying these students in a timely and efficient way.

---

<sup>16</sup> I recognize that targeting this population of students would likely necessitate setting aside funds to help defray the costs of transportation. This could be achieved by either slightly reducing the number of attendees or seeking additional funds from the university.

These are but three recommendations on how to tailor the student selection process. As stated previously, these suggestions bring with them possible alterations to programming and content. For example, if administrators specifically targeted out-of-state students or first-generation students, the summer's five weeks could integrate programming meant to help the students form friendships with each other and communicate more overt messages of the importance of relying on the subset of peers for their transition to college. If the administrators tailored the program for students needing additional credits, the workshops and sessions could provide more focus on tips for time management or study skills, which students could use put into practice during their summer courses and remaining college career. Next I turn to some suggestions for altering the invitation and preliminary materials the eligible students receive. These recommendations are tied to the existing framework for selecting eligible students, but could be adopted even if the student selection process is altered.

### **Invitation and Initial Program Materials**

Students in my study were fairly unanimous in their lack of clarity as to what the goals and aims of the SAP were. I suggested in this chapter that this problem may have been due, in part, to the invitation email/letter that they received in the spring of 2007. In turn, I believe that this may have influenced whether students responded to the invitation or not. Some small steps in terms of supplying eligible students with pertinent information might make a difference in both student self-selection and the dissemination of clear expectations and goals for the program. These steps could be taken both in the initial invitation process and also once the students have signed up. These ideas are summarized below.

*1) Create print and electronic materials that are clearer regarding the SAP's purpose, mechanisms, and expectations*

In 2007, the eligible students received a brief email and an identical letter in the mail inviting them to attend the program and giving a brief description of how the program worked. Based on the student interviews, the emails were read the most, which is not surprising in light of the students' use of and comfort with technology. That said, several students said that the letter helped them to have conversations with their parents regarding the program, as the parents were more likely to see the students' mail than their email. I suggest that the email still be brief but instead of sentences, perhaps bulleted copy that clearly states the goals of the program and how the SAP operates. The mailing could be more detailed and include a letter and an additional document with perhaps a FAQ section, testimonials from past participants or some other information that might both communicate more about the program and get the students' attention.

*2) Rely more heavily on technology*

Although I do recommend that the students' receive a mailed invitation packet for the SAP, I believe that the primary means of maintaining communication with the students should be through the internet. This recommendation likely is best suited for the 20 students who have been accepted to the SAP. Specifically I recommend that the administrators create a Facebook group for the attending students before they arrive on campus in July so that they may start communicating with each other. In addition, the administrators can use the group as another means by which to communicate with the group as the arrival date approaches. These could be simple "keep an eye out for an

email” post to the group, or a welcoming “X number of days until you are here!” By relying on this popular social networking site, the administrators can utilize a tool that the students are very comfortable with. In addition, it’s easy to set up and maintain, and privacy settings would limit others accessing the group. Lastly, if the Facebook group took hold, it could be used by administrators after the program to stay in touch.

These suggestions regarding the invitation and early communication to eligible students emerge from an analysis of the documents and student interviews in this study. While not exhaustive, they reflect the perceived needs of students for timely, clear communication utilizing multiple media. I am mindful of the limits the administrators may have in time and resources, especially in light of the fact that the SAP does not have dedicated staff but instead relies on the efforts of several administrators and graduate students from around campus. Next I turn to some recommendations regarding the programming and content of the SAP.

### **Program’s Content and Messages**

I begin with a discussion of pragmatic changes to the content, including workshops subjects and a rethinking of how the material is presented. Secondly, I consider the importance of creating covert and purposeful messages that can be communicated to students throughout their five weeks.

#### **1) *Re-conceptualize the formal programming***

A number of the SAP participants who completed the evaluation form wrote that they had wished for more interactive workshops in which they would engage with the material, other students and the presenter. The results from the survey evaluation materials ranking supports this wish in that the workshops that received the highest rankings were more

interactive. With a few small changes to the existing workshops, I believe students' attention to the content would increase and they would likely retain the information for use during their first year. For example, instead of having the Information Technology and Communications (ITC) presenters use an overhead screen and computer to show students about the various technological interfaces at VU, the presenters could conduct the session in a room with computer terminals so students could begin to access important information themselves and learn to negotiate these sites. For other sessions, it could be as easy as asking students to participate in small groups for practical or reflective activities. Not only would this provide students a means of thinking about the presented material, but would allow for the participants to get to know each other better.

Another suggestion for the formal programming is to create a workshop specifically tailored for the students to reflect on the strengths they bring to VU and strategize their own plans for making the transition for the fall. I believe that by having purposeful programming that allows students to reflect more on how their five weeks at SAP is linked to their fall, the students will have the opportunity to connect their summer and fall experiences in meaningful ways. Another way to approach this idea would be incorporate reflective exercises into the various workshops throughout the five weeks. It might be as easy as having presenters ask aloud (with opportunities for students to reply) "what about this workshop do you think might help you in your specific situation in the fall?" or "what did you learn today that really resonates with you? Why?"

In addition, I suggest that the administrators of the program consider ways in which to have students and faculty interact in ways that help students feel less intimidated by

faculty. Several students in this study mentioned that the formal dinner was awkward and uncomfortable. And yet students I interviewed clearly wanted to engage with faculty outside their summer classes. One suggestion would be to make the dinner less formal, having pizza and soda in a comfortable common area. Faculty could be charged with seeking out students, who might naturally group together instead of going up to faculty ahead of time. Also, students could spend some time in an earlier workshop brainstorming about how to make the most of the upcoming dinner. That way, they might be equipped with some questions or conversation topics ahead of time. All students seemed interested in talking with faculty about majors, fields of work, etc., and these might serve as topics of interest to start discussion.

Administrators should also reconsider who to bring on as presenters. Talking with and having sessions led by older VU students might be an effective way in which to help demystify college. If, for example, SAP participants hear from fellow students about effective time management skills or the importance of talking with faculty, the messages might resonate more with students. In addition, these older students could be seen as resources for SAP participants once college starts again in the fall.

Lastly, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the administrators are encouraged to reshape programming if they decide to tailor their invitations to selected subgroups of students. Programming needs might be different for first-generation students than for students needing additional college credits. It is important for the administrators to help shape a tailored program, and I would argue that giving some additional thought to the

covert messages that they want communicated to students is a worthwhile activity. I turn to this area next.

## 2) *Create Purposeful Messages*

There is clear evidence that the administrators who created the SAP were thoughtful in their consideration of the possible needs of the students invited to the program. As was discussed earlier in the chapter, the participants had positive feelings for the program and left after their five weeks expressing gratitude for the program and excitement for their upcoming year. That said, I believe that the administrators need to reflect on what they really want the students to understand about themselves, the VU culture and the students' transition to the fall semester and first year. This would be an especially useful step to take now that the program has been in existence for several years. I do not believe it would be especially time consuming to try to answer the questions: "What do we want students to know after their five weeks?" "How do the values we hold about this program get reflected in what presenters discuss?" "What do we want the workshop topics, formal and informal events to communicate to students?" From the results of this step, administrators could then contact the various presenters and request that they tailor their programming to stay on message. In addition, Jenna and Gretchen talk to the students daily, and their comments could reflect this purposeful messaging.

My second recommendation is for the administrators and presenters to discuss the students' transition to the fall semester in more complex terms. The participants in my study were nearly unanimous that the fall semester was difficult in terms of adjustment of time and academic demand. I believe that by telling students of the clear differences



between the summer and regular academic year environment and stressing that, despite their time in the SAP, they will likely find the transition different (and possibly difficult) will help students to realistically anticipate their fall. As was discussed earlier, the SAP participants left the SAP full of confidence and excitement for the fall, but for the majority, that confidence did not last as they realized that the fall was completely “different.” In addition, the student participants revealed that they had difficulty acting on what they knew they “should” do (e.g., go to professor’s office hours, contact administrators with questions). One way to address this gap between knowing and doing would be to incorporate older students into sessions who can provide both the empathy and possible strategies for success the student participants need.

Lastly, I suggest that the administrators need to take into account the important and positive role that families play for the majority of the students participating in the SAP. Regardless of parental education background, the students of this study found parental encouragement and emotional support paramount to their success in college. Almost every student consulted parents regarding the decision to attend the SAP, and their parents continued to serve as counsel in their first year of college. By communicating to the SAP participants how valuable their parents can be in their college lives, the administrators (and additional presenters) can help the students recognize their families’ importance, especially as they enter their college careers and deal with the complexities of staying linked to their home communities while establishing their own identities as adults.

The recommendations explored above are by no means exhaustive but do represent what was most salient from my findings. They are meant to serve as a starting point for reconsideration of the program and for stimulating conversation among administrative stakeholders. I believe that the Stars Academic Program was built from a useful, existing frame and was successful in meeting its goals for students. I also believe that the program can be improved to better meet the needs of the students it aims to serve.

If administrators decide to dramatically alter the Stars Academic Program and re-direct resources, I believe that the university still needs to take specific targeted steps in helping to support the low-income students coming to VU through the financial aid program. This could be done through relying on the existing infrastructure at Valley University, such as the Office of African American Affairs (OAAA), the Dean of Students Office, Residence Life, and the student run group *Students for Open Access*, whose mission includes “increasing socioeconomic diversity at VU and in higher education in general” (organization website, 2010). Both the SAP participants and the non-participants utilized these resources as they navigated their first year and credited them with being of most help in times of trouble.

The likelihood that administrators at Valley University will eliminate the Stars Academic Program is slight. The SAP is currently part of a larger fundraising initiative aimed at diversifying the funding streams for VU Promise and its auxiliary programs. In addition, the program is lauded by the university’s Board of Trustees and seen as a necessary aspect of the scaffolding currently in place to support VU Promise students. Therefore, I focus my concluding remarks on what can be considered moving forward with the existing program. This inquiry ideally uncovers points of “leverage” from which small changes can

result in opportunities for improvement (Friedman, 2001) and can allow for an exploration of what contributes to the administrators' "framing" of the problem (e.g., college adjustment and persistence) and the solutions (Schon, 1983; Schon & Rein, 1994).

### **Conclusions**

At its most basic, evaluation of a program helps to answer the question, "Should the program exist?" (Patton, 1990). Yet, as the data presented in this chapter demonstrate, evaluation can be used as a means of analyzing and assessing what works and what does not work with the aim of informing administrators' practice. Negative or unintended outcomes can be embraced as learning opportunities wherein administrators can either redistribute resources or alter programming to address students' needs (Friedman, 2001).

Based on what I have discussed in this chapter, one can see that the students who participated in the program perceived it as beneficial to them and their transition in the fall. In addition, the students who did not participate reveal that their experiences in their first year were similar to SAP students, leading one to conclude that the program is helpful for those low-income students who are concerned about their college transition and success. Conversely, for those students who do not participate, they had qualitative differences that affected their perceptions of what they needed and wanted; the opportunities afforded to them in the regular academic year met their needs.

Students who were invited to the program may have been most attracted to the program because of the possibility of earning additional credits; those who didn't respond may have perceived that the costs of attending (time away from family and job) were not

worth the gains of the program (credits, familiarity with campus). They may have perceived that the exposure they had to courses in high school prepared them adequately for college.

Once in the program, participants were exposed to intended messages from administrators aimed at welcoming students into the university community. Through the five weeks, students were provided workshops and other sessions aimed at demystifying college life at VU. Although the students seemed to benefit from the messages, their hope had been to be more actively engaged in workshops instead of passively receiving materials and information from university administrators and staff. A number of them questioned the value of the programming, especially in light of the immense time pressures they were under to complete the work for their two summer courses.

When we compare the first year experiences of those students in my study who did and did not participate in the program, we find that there are few distinct differences between groups. All students struggled with transitioning to college, and their success and challenges fell along a continuum tied more to high school and family background than program participation. One area in which SAP students seemed slightly more comfortable, in comparison, was in reaching out to faculty. This may be due to the exposure these students had to faculty and administrators during their summer.

When we look specifically at the issue of persistence – an area of focus for the SAP – we find few differences among participants and non-participants. As is evident in Table 2 (page 73), SAP participants were scattered throughout the four archetypes; it is these archetypes that give us a clearer sense of risk of student departure. What is discussed in the chapters that follow is that student persistence did not appear to be tied to participation in the

summer intervention at VU but instead on a set of psychosocial and sociological characteristics that influenced the students' perceptions of themselves as active agents within a larger social world.

In summary, I recommend a reassessment of several key factors of the program. First, I suggest reconsidering who gets invited to the SAP, noting that tailoring it along certain criteria might better meet the needs of students who could really benefit from the program. I also recommend clearer communication to the students invited and the resulting respondents, suggesting that relying on different forms of media might be more effective. Lastly, I recommend that the administrators reconsider some aspects of the programming content, both in the way the program sessions are structured and the messages the administrators want to communicate.

In the following findings chapters, I will explore both the pre-college and within-college experiences of all the students in my study. These areas of investigation reveal the important role family, schooling and environment had on the students' success and persistence their first year. I rely on the archetypes described in Chapter 3 as a means of presenting my findings. As this evaluation chapter reveals, there were few differences between the Stars Academic Program participants and the non-participants in their paths toward and into college. The lines of difference are more clearly demarcated around the boundaries of the archetypes, hence my reliance on them to frame my work.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENTS' PRE-COLLEGE LIVES AND THEIR WITHIN-COLLEGE EXPERIENCES**

College student persistence is complex and hinges, in part, on students' experiences before they arrive on campus (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Tinto, 1987; 1993). Summer bridge programs are meant to ameliorate some of these effects in an effort to assist students in persisting to graduation. As discussed in Chapter 4, my findings reveal that the Stars Academic Program (SAP) held only limited power over the students' commitment to persist and other factors related to the success at VU. Ideally, when comparing students who did and did not participate in the SAP, one would find that those students who did participate had markedly more success in their first year of college and their feelings of integration and connection would be higher than those who did not. In addition, one would imagine that they would have accessed powerful forms of social capital due to the ways in which the program introduced them to resources. Unfortunately, the findings of my study are not that clear cut. Instead, what arose from the data were groups of students – regardless of participation in the SAP - who seemed to, for the most part, have similar characteristics, perspectives and experiences that affected their persistence and success. For this reason, I have put all of the students into four archetypes. To review, these are PEAK PERFORMERS, LEAD CLIMBERS, PANIC CLIMBERS and CLIFF HANGERS.

These archetypes were introduced in the first chapter and further discussed in Chapter 3. I use these archetypes to explore a number of themes that arose from the data

around the students' pre-college experiences, and will focus on several students from each archetype, bringing in the voices of other students as necessary. These archetypes illuminate the differences (and similarities) among and between the students.

I begin with an exploration of the experiences these students had during schooling, focusing primarily on their high school years. I continue with a discussion of family relationships and background. I conclude by examining the students' access to social and cultural capital during their pre-college years. It is in this section that aspects of validation arise, primarily through the linkages students formed with validating agents.

It is important to note that the archetypes are most clearly delineated around issues of their K-12 experiences and the boundaries soften considerably when I discuss the role of family on students' pre-college experiences. This is not surprising in light of research (Adelman 1999, 2006; Cambiano, Denny, & De Vore, 2000) that shows strong linkages between students' pre-college experiences and their persistence to graduation are tied to their academic worlds. The archetypes are useful for looking at aspects of social reproduction, but the distinctions really fall between dividing the CLIFF HANGERS from the remaining students in the study. I begin with students' experiences in school.

### **Students' Perceptions of their K-12 Experiences**

It is important to consider the relationships between students' pre-college educational experiences and their perceptions of college success and persistence because it is often in these earlier years of schooling when students establish the academic "toolbox" from which they build once they are in college. In these K-12 years, their curriculum is, at best, meant to provide them a foundation for their college classes and opportunity to learn skills in time

management, study habits, critical thinking and writing. Borrowing from Adelman (1999; 2006), I use the toolbox analogy in an effort to communicate how students' success seems to hinge on the tools, skills and academic foundation that they built prior to college.

Evidence suggests (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) that there are large gaps in the K-12 curriculum and what a student needs to be a successful college student, and yet, these studies often aggregate all stratum of college students, instead of focusing on the K-12 experiences of those who gained admission to elite universities. A comprehensive study that tracks students from high school into selective colleges in the US (Massey, Charles, Lundy & Fischer, 2003) found that students' persistence through their first semester at college was positively affected by their self-perception of how their high school education prepared them for college, in addition to their sense of self-efficacy and self confidence. In addition, Massey et al. (2003) found that there is a positive relationship between the students' high school rigor and course-taking patterns and the students' success in college. The researchers found that the students who either avoided or were not offered a rigorous high school curriculum struggled academically in their first semester at college thereby leaving them at risk for college departure.

Adelman's (2006) "academic momentum" concept is of use here. He posits that students' academic momentum begins in the K-12 years – specifically in high school – and students' commitment to persist to graduation from college finds its roots in their access to and utilization of an "academically intense" high school curriculum. His findings (1999, 2006) demonstrate that students who participated in academically intense high school coursework were most likely to persist to college graduation. Conversely, Adelman observes



the deleterious effects on students' persistence from the possible disjuncture between their high school curriculum and the demands of the college academic environment (2006). This seems to be a particular vulnerability for low-income students attending under-resourced schools (Long, Iatarola, & Conger, 2009) and researchers posit that this may be due to the variation in rigor and quality of the learning environment in "college preparatory" classes across the high school spectrum.

Adelman (2006) explains that "academically intense" high school courses are best suited for preparing students for college. What Adelman (1999; 2006) and others (see Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2006) criticize is the lack of uniformity regarding the quality of the students' middle and high school courses. Adelman (2006) notes the disservice done to students attending under-resourced schools who enroll in "honors" or AP courses in high school assuming that by their very title, the classes will provide the students a strong foundation for school. Instead, students are at risk if the instruction is poor and the curriculum diluted.

These criticisms can be supported from the results of my study. Despite the high academic standards for admission to VU, the students of my study discussed incredibly disparate college preparatory experiences. Some students attended high quality schools in one the best school districts in the nation, others graduated from high schools where a lack of teachers resulted in large classes and a handful of "honors" courses. Adelman would argue that not all courses are created equally; in other words, although students from well-resourced and poorly resourced schools may have taken courses with similar monikers (e.g., honors math), the likelihood was that the rigor of the course was quite different. Students and

their families are unaware of these discrepancies, and often it is not until college that students begin to recognize how the intensity and rigor (or lack thereof) of their secondary school coursework influenced their ability to succeed in college. It is within the college environment, for example, that students learn that not all “honors math” courses were created equal as they compare their foundation of knowledge with their peers.

All the students in my study met or exceeded the high standards for admission into VU. Their admission indicates that they had high GPAs, performed well on the SATs<sup>17</sup>, participated in high school extracurricular activities and, in general, had the characteristics that admissions officers seek in crafting a class. These include demonstrated intellectual curiosity, service to others, leadership and motivation (Laird, 2005). These were likely measured by the students’ application materials, including essays, grades and achievement test scores (Laird, 2005).

Despite the criticism of relying too heavily on standardized tests (Blau, Moller, & Jones, 2004; Freedle, 2003), colleges and universities place an increasing emphasis on test scores for admissions decisions (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2006). Critics argue that standardized tests do not measure aspects of students’ performance such as imagination and intellectual curiosity and hold little predictive power regarding future academic success (Bridgeman, Jenkins, & Ervin, 2000; Camara & Echternacht 2000; Crouse & Trusheim 1988; Geiser & Studley 2002; Rothstein 2004). High school grades are seen as stronger predictors of college academic performance because grades can measure

---

<sup>17</sup> The average SAT for the first-time first year students in 2007 was 1307 and 94% were in the top 20% of their high school class (Data Digest, n.d)

achievement and cognitive ability, and can capture behavioral factors such as tenacity and time management (Blau, Moller, & Jones, 2004; Farkas, 2003).

There is logic to these results – those students who learn how to perform such skills as studying, managing their time, and thinking critically in high school can tap into those same skills in college. That said, what quantitative studies do not demonstrate is the complex nature of how students past successes in high school are entwined with how they think of themselves academically as they enter college and move through their first and second years. The section below will briefly explore the linkages between the students' high school experiences and their perceptions of themselves as students at VU. I use all four archetypes as a framework to discuss this theme.

Using my archetypes, clear demarcations can be found between those students who were at the smallest and greatest risk of departure from Valley University. In other words, the students in the PEAK PERFORMER archetype credited their K-12 preparation for not only helping with the academic rigors of college but in developing such important skills as time management, connecting with faculty and seeking additional resources when needed. In contrast, those in the CLIFF HANGERS group recognized, often in hindsight, that their schooling before college did not provide them a strong foundation from which to build a successful college career. The parameters for the remaining two archetypes are less distinct, and members of these two groups resemble the PEAK PERFORMERS or CLIFF HANGERS in some ways. What does distinguish them is the ways in which they translated their secondary school experiences into success and persistence in college. The students in these two middle archetypes were slower or less successful in adapting the tools in their academic

‘toolbox’ to the competitive college setting at VU, whereas the PEAK PERFORMERS adjusted to college fairly quickly and easily and credit their secondary school experiences with aiding in that. See Table 9 for students’ characteristics by archetype.

Table 9

*Students Advanced Standing, Family Education and Cumulative GPA by Archetype*

Student	Advanced standing credit	Family education	Cumulative GPA ( as of Spring 09)
<b>PEAK PERFORMERS</b>			
Courtney	11	First-generation	3.7
Elena	3	First-generation*	3.0
Jenny	10	First-generation	3.5
Julian	14	First-generation	3.4
Marcus	8	First-generation	3.4
Mark	27	First-generation	3.3
Mary	23	First-generation	3.4
Stacey	20	Both parents earned degrees	3.6
<b>LEAD CLIMBERS</b>			
Daniel	4	First-generation	3.9
Jackie	0	First-generation**	2.8
Kelly	14	First-generation**	2.8
Lila	15	First-generation	3.1
Max	38	Both parents earned degrees **	3.5
<b>PANIC CLIMBERS</b>			
Dana	4	First-generation	2.8
Julia	0	First-generation **	3.0
Michael	0	First-generation*	2.6
Rebecca	3	First-generation	2.8
<b>CLIFF HANGERS</b>			
Nicholas	4	First-generation **	2.0
Sean	12	First-generation	2.4
Sophia	0	First-generation	2.0

\* = one or more parents earned degree in native country

\*\* = student had older sibling(s) who had successfully navigated college

Note: Cumulative GPA for students spans the first two years of college - from fall 2007 (summer for SAP participants) through spring 2009

PEAK PERFORMERS like Marcus and Julian discussed their efforts to make the most of what their middle and high schools had to offer. Marcus's college trajectory began "in 5<sup>th</sup> grade" and he found his middle school particularly influential and rewarding. He shared, "I really liked my middle school - it was an academy and so they offered four specialized programs. One for environmental science...one for visual arts - and that was the magnet I was in and so we did a lot of computers, painting stuff and I really enjoyed that." Once in high school, Marcus sought out opportunities like the programs Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) and Upward Bound, honors courses and extracurricular activities as a means of engaging in a college-going culture. He credits his school curriculum and his involvement with the program in helping him feel ready for college. He said, "I think I was prepared academically. I think... high school [and]...my own activities like Upward Bound ...was good preparation." Marcus grew up in the suburban ring right outside Baltimore, noting that his aim had been to make the most of his schooling and to surround himself with likeminded peers.

Despite moving around the Miami area frequently during his early schooling, Julian shared that he was "lucky" because his parents bought a house in a neighborhood that had a good high school. When asked about his perceptions of his high school preparation, Julian listed several classes that he felt were a good foundation for his college performance. These included AP calculus, economics and honors history. The content and rigor of his high school curriculum shaped his college course taking direction, including his passion for history and politics. In addition, Julian credited his deep involvement in high school ROTC with keeping him on a college-going track. He shared, "I worked myself hard...I did my schoolwork, I did

ROTC, I did what I had to do to put me in the position to be accepted into this university.”

And although he did not continue his involvement with ROTC at VU, he recognized that being surrounded by peers who were aiming for higher education (including the highly selective military academies), positively affected his aspirations and his maturity level. He recounted a difficult period in his high school years where he struggled with aspects of his self identity and overcame a bout with depression; the result was clarity of how he wanted to pursue his goals. He shared, “That maturity from 11<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade that was a revolution that I had in myself about what I wanted to do with my life.” Julian credited this “maturity” as helping him adjust to his college coursework and to find balance between academics and extracurricular involvement.

PEAK PERFORMER Elena, in hindsight, believed the gaps in her high school education – specifically around advanced sciences and math – left her at a disadvantage once in college. She admitted to feeling quite confident regarding her preparation when she first started at VU, but once she compared her education to peers who attended well-resourced schools, she realized that some coursework that others saw as review were concepts she was “learning for the first time.” Although these subject-specific issues served as barriers at first, Elena felt her high school education had provided her a strong foundation for other important academic skills. She shared, “in high school....I learned a little bit about time management...to balance my work and to prioritize...and that kind of thing. So from high school, I feel I definitely got that kind of preparation to deal with college life.” These sentiments were echoed by other PEAK PERFORMERS like Mary and Courtney who found the academic adjustment to college fairly easy. When I asked Courtney if she felt prepared

academically for college, she replied, “yes...the work load was a lot, a whole lot more when I got here [to VU], but it didn’t seem harder. The work itself didn’t seem harder.”

Like many of the students of my study, Mark, a PEAK PERFORMER, enrolled in “lots of AP courses, lots of dual enrollment, college prep, all of that stuff...all of that material that you would expect to take to prepare for college.” But he noted that, “the way they teach it in college, it’s just a little bit more lecture based - it’s more a bunch of students here, teacher up there, professor starts to speak, you take notes, you go back, you study and there you go.” After struggling a bit with college expectations, Mark surmised that the college preparatory curriculum he participated in may have fell short of easing his transition to college. He found college “quite challenging” and he stated, “I had preparation but probably not as much as I thought I had or hoped I had.”

What the data from Marcus, Julian and other PEAK PERFORMERS reveals is that it was the combination of an academically intense junior and high school curriculum in addition to gaining transferable skills like time management and strong study habits that they credited with easing their transition to college and their ongoing success. The discrepancies between them and the LEAD CLIMBERS are slight. There were few distinct or notable differences in the perceived quality of their middle and high school educational experiences. What is somewhat more distinct is the differences between these groups of students in the ways in which they utilized the tools they gained in high school and their response to adjusting to a new environment. To continue the toolbox allusion, the majority of the LEAD CLIMBERS had fewer or less useful tools in their toolbox than their PEAK PERFORMERS’ counterparts. For those who came with a more robust toolbox, their inclusion in LEAD

CLIMBERS may have had to do more with their difficulty in using their toolset in new, often very challenging situations once enrolled at VU.

LEAD CLIMBER Lila was able to take advantage of a well-resourced school system growing up. She participated in a rigorous college preparatory program, the International Baccalaureate program, (IB) which is a highly regarded college preparatory academic program (Martinez & Klopott, 2005). When I queried as to her feelings of college readiness, she replied, “Academically yes...because I was in the IB program in high school so I was familiar with the work load and the amount of stress that comes along with this kind of level of academics.” The IB program is seen by education experts as an exemplar in college preparation and academic rigor (Martinez & Klopott, 2005). The interdisciplinary curriculum helps prepare students for college-level work because it is well aligned with the rigor and demands of higher education (Martinez & Klopott, 2005). Lila was the only student in this study who had participated in IB; this is not surprising since it enrolls only an estimated 165,000 high school students nationwide (NCES, 2005).

Despite Lila’s rigorous high school curriculum, she felt ill-prepared for the difficulty she faced in making academic decisions in college. In her first year at VU she pursued a pre-med academic track and, despite consistently low grades and a strong dislike for the chemistry and math required, she continued both because of immense pressure from her family and a lack of practice at “trusting [her] gut feelings.” She recounted “my best subjects in high school were in English, and history. And then I came to college and studied math and chemistry” wherein she received bad grades and risked admission to medical school. Lila



realized that, because in high school she had been “good at everything” she had little practice at distinguishing between what she liked and what she was skilled at.

Another LEAD CLIMBER, Kelly, attended both a selective private high school and an under-resourced urban public high school. Although on scholarship, Kelly left the private school before 10<sup>th</sup> grade because her family could no longer afford the partial tuition they were paying. She enrolled in an urban school near her home. These dual experiences gave her a unique perspective on what her K-12 education did provide her. She shared:

Even though when I was in private school I hated it just because it was so hard, I feel like it was still an enjoyable experience because each year I walked away with so much new knowledge and I felt like my year was worth something, I learned something and I felt like going into the next year, I just felt like a whole new smarter person. And so I feel like with public schools that whole component of college preparatory courses isn't really pushing you to be the best that you can be.

Kelly felt she obtained a love of learning in her K-12 education that extended into her college years. She credited this foundation with aiding her despite some academic setbacks she faced in her first semesters at VU.

Another LEAD CLIMBER, Daniel, immigrated to the US when he was 15, and he enrolled in a private Catholic school in Brooklyn. He found high school academics fairly easy, and took IB and AP courses throughout his high school years. When I queried him regarding his perceptions of his college preparation, he replied that transition to college felt easy, and he credited his move to the US and his few years in his private school as contributing to that. He said, “moving from Hong Kong was a bigger transition for me than going to college” and therefore, what he learned about himself and his ability to be a successful student in American schools helped ease his transition to college. Like Julian, Daniel alluded to a sense of maturity gained from his middle and high school years as a

source of confidence and assurance in college. Daniel's inclusion in the LEAD CLIMBER archetype stems mostly from actions he took once in college that affected his commitment to persist at VU.

As stated earlier, the boundaries that distinguish the LEAD CLIMBERS from the PEAK PERFORMERS in relation to their descriptions of their K-12 experiences are somewhat permeable. The majority of members in both archetypes transitioned fairly easily to college, and felt that a foundation of "soft" skills like time management, study habits, and successfully meeting the demands of their hardest high school courses helped them in their transition to college. The boundaries that divide these two archetypes become more distinguished in the exploration of their within-college experiences.

As one moves from the LEAD CLIMBERS to the PANIC CLIMBERS some qualitative and quantitative differences emerge in their K-12 backgrounds and educational foundations. Fewer students in the PANIC CLIMBER archetype attended well-resourced schools whereas in the LEAD CLIMBER and the PEAK PERFORMER groups the majority of students discussed schools in and outside the state that are highly regarded. One characteristic that is distinctive is the PANIC CLIMBERS' lack of advanced standing credits brought to VU (see Table 9). When compared to the students in the LEAD CLIMBER and PEAK PERFORMER archetypes, these students brought few, if any, credits to college. Although several of the students participated in the college-preparatory track in high school in well-resourced high schools, their efforts did not translate to earning a substantial number of AP, IB or dual enrollment credits. Commonality among the PANIC CLIMBERS also extended to how they transitioned to college, and the findings reveal that they were less

skilled at using the “tools” gained in high school to their advantage in their first years of college. Lastly, PANIC CLIMBERS were unanimous in their perceptions that their K-12 experiences did not prepare them well for college.

Dana, who attended a high school in one of the best school districts in the state, felt that the demands of high school did not match what she encountered at Valley. She said, “I don’t think high school really prepared me academically....I feel like it was kind of easy in high school. Like I didn’t work as hard to get a good grade as I do in college so I feel like I had to work more, of course, here because it’s college but I don’t think high school really prepared me academically.” Starting in middle school, Dana participated in a college preparatory program through a local urban college where she supplemented her school curriculum with classes meant to assist with developing necessary college success skills (e.g., study skills, time management skills). Despite this additional support, Dana found the transition to VU difficult and had trouble adjusting the demands of her pre-med coursework. Like other members of the PANIC CLIMBER archetype, Dana discussed her frustration that the study habits she had implemented in high school did not translate well to the new setting, and yet into her second year, she was still employing these strategies. Another PANIC CLIMBER, Julia, discussed the same idea, commenting that in her first year, she kept trying to work “harder” like she had in high school and well into her second year had learned that she needed to work in a more strategic way, which included changing her study habits, accessing course resources and seeking out help when necessary.

When I asked PANIC CLIMBER Rebecca whether she felt academically prepared for college, Rebecca admitted “Academically, not so much. [I went to] a small school [the kind

that] if you do your homework, you're going to pass with an A type deal... I definitely feel I have the drive to be here but book smart is not my thing. I wouldn't say I was that prepared for it even though I took college-bound classes." Rebecca credited her drive as one of her greatest strengths in persisting in college and she felt it had served her well as she considered several academic majors in her first two years. Like Julia, and other PANIC CLIMBERS, Rebecca felt she had to learn new strategies for being a successful student at VU and it took her into her second year to find her footing.

The final archetype, the CLIFF HANGERS, consists of three students who have several common characteristics. First, they all attended under-resourced schools; for Sophia and Sean these were schools in a rural part of the state. The third student, Nicholas graduated from a private catholic school in a rural part of Pennsylvania, which Nicholas was quick to point out was "not like the usual private school" in that it did not offer a particularly resource-rich education. Secondly, the students in the CLIFF HANGERS archetype were most at risk of departure, based, in part by their perceptions of the disjuncture in their middle and high school educations and the demands of college. Sophia and Nicholas were both on academic probation throughout their first two years at VU and Sean left VU after the first semester of his second year.

Sophia's high school, situated in a rural poverty-stricken part of the state, lacked resources. Sophia was aware of this problem in high school and it became apparent for her fairly quickly into her tenure at Valley that she might be at a disadvantage. She stated:

My school is not a totally bad school. They did make do with what they had, but I was unprepared academically - I was used to just retaining information and putting back down on the quiz or test. We worked...most teachers try to but because they were bounded by the [state's standardized tests] and certain requirements, they could

only teach certain things at a certain time and I don't feel we were taught to analyze or to generate our own thoughts about certain things.

Sophia's experiences with her first classes at Valley made her realize that she was expected to think critically about the material taught and do more than perform rote memorization and regurgitate facts. Through both of our interviews, Sophia shared with me the strategies she was employing in order to "relearn" being a student, and she was putting great pressure on herself to adjust to Valley's high expectations. Sophia was placed on academic probation in her second semester at Valley and was fearful that she would not be able to persist despite her efforts.

Sean, another CLIFF HANGER, echoed Sophia regarding his perceptions of his high school preparation. He also attended a rural school which he described as having limited resources and few teachers allotted to teach AP courses. He shared, "Where I went it was hard to get more like a regular course curriculum because there wasn't a lot of teachers who could teach the harder stuff. So you had to either just learn it from a computer or not learn it at all." Sean reflected on how his high school's environment affected his feelings of academic preparedness. He said, "Academically, I just...with just the workload of what I had to do in high school and sort of my understanding of what college would be like from what people said in high school was completely off. I had no preparation mentally for the workload." Like Sophia, Sean shared with me the process he had gone through (and was still going through) to learn to be a successful student at Valley; his lack of preparation in high school left him at a disadvantage from those students whose high school experiences provided them tools to utilize once in college. As was discussed in the students' biographies, Sean left VU at the end of his fall 2008 semester, soon after we had had our last interview.

Sophia and Sean attended high schools that they perceived as under-resourced, which, in turn, did not provide them the foundation they felt they needed to be successful students at Valley. It is not surprising that despite this knowledge, they placed a great deal of onus for their academic struggles on themselves. They did not question the inequity of their situation, as they studied and struggled alongside students at VU who had had access to innumerable resources. They did not question that their K-12 system had possibly failed them, buying into, instead, the perceptions of many struggling students that it is they, not the system, which needs to be fixed (MacLeod, 1995).

In summary, all students discussed the importance of both the academic rigor of their high school experiences but also the perceptions of workload and coursework expectations. For the most part, those students who found the greatest ease in transitioning to college saw a similarity in the way they were expected in high school to manage time and coursework, working independently like in a college setting. Few named the curriculum content or *what* they learned as being relevant to what they were learning in college; instead, they pointed to things like thinking critically, being engaged learners, and managing their time and teacher expectations as things they learned in high school that were serving them well in college. Surprisingly, only one student participated in national college readiness programs (Marcus participated in both Upward Bound and AVID), which is offered to students who may need assistance in preparing for college (e.g., first-generation, ethnic and racial minorities). Other students pointed to school- or region-specific programs that they participated in. For example, Mary participated in a summer program at Harvard, Dana enrolled in a local

program that ran from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and Sophia toured regional colleges via a statewide program; all of these exposed the students to varying aspects of college preparation.

Many of the students of my study also discussed how, despite their efforts to take the courses in high school that would best prepare them for college (e.g., AP, honors, dual enrollment), what they gained in these courses fell short of what they felt they needed to be successful students at Valley. Students' observations of their high school experiences and their participation in advanced standing courses indicate that they overestimated the benefits of these courses. Some of the students in this study believed that the AP courses would improve their college readiness and the study skills and overall self-discipline needed to succeed in college.

These findings support the work of Klopfenstein and Thomas (2009) who found that after controlling for factors like family income, race and gender, AP course taking does not predict first year academic success or persistence into the second year of college. Students often see AP as college preparatory when, in fact, the curriculum of AP courses is not meant to help strengthen students' study skills, time management skills and other tools necessary to succeed in college (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009). Research (Hayward, Brandes, Kirst, & Mazzeo, 1997; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996) shows that programs like AVID and Upward Bound, which have a curriculum tailored around these goals, are much better at helping students navigate the transition from high school to college than high school courses.

What can be concluded from this exploration is that it is not just a matter of whether a student does or does not participate in an academic rigorous high school curriculum; all students in this study took AP or dual enrollment courses, and a few of them participated in

additional college readiness programs, taking advantage of opportunities to not only challenge themselves academically in high school but go the extra mile of seeking additional resources in an effort to be well prepared for college. These students did many things “right” in their path to college and still a number of them felt that, in retrospect, their K-12 experiences did not do quite enough in easing their transition to college academics. That the majority of the students in this study faltered academically in their first year of college despite their academic backgrounds is an indication of the complexities of the transition to college and the disjuncture between what is learned in high school courses and what is needed for a successful college career. In the end, the students whose academic transition went most smoothly are those students who were able to utilize such skills as note taking, time management, and the intellectual discipline that they developed regardless of the quality of their college preparatory curricular experiences.

In addition to secondary school experiences, students in my study referenced the role family played in their pre-college lives. Research demonstrates the powerful influence family life has on children’s social, emotional and intellectual development (see McLoyd, 1990). Therefore, it is important to consider the students’ perceptions of family in their pre-college years, for many of these students were embarking on an educational journey few, if any, in their families had taken. Despite many of the students’ first-generation status, family played a central role in shaping the students’ paths to Valley University. I explore the role of family for all four archetypes in the next section.



### **Families Serve as Sources of Support and Motivation**

Family relationships were very important to the students of my study. Students often discussed the positive aspects of their relationships with siblings, parents and extended family, sharing stories of the influences of older siblings, parental encouragement and support from extended family in the pursuit of a college education. They also related experiences in which family circumstances and challenges left them wanting for something different than what they had faced growing up. Their stories demonstrate the dual roles that families played both as sources of support and sources of motivation for change. As Table 9 (page 179) reveals, almost every participant was a first-generation student although I note in the table some subcategories of first-generation student. Some students had one or more parents who had earned a degree in the country the family emigrated from; others had older siblings who had navigated college, thereby serving as guides through much of the process of going to and staying in college. It is important to be mindful of the students' family backgrounds in relationship to the following section even if the students' do not directly reference their family's educational foundation. By the nature of their first-generation status, many of the students discussed the emotional/ psychological role family played in their lives, relying on those outside the family regarding college preparation. Family members and school personnel also served, for many, as validating agents, helping students see themselves as college-going material.

Again I rely on the archetypes as means of discussing the data. It is important to note that the differences among the students among the four archetypes are shades of gray; the 20 students in my study had common stories of familial support and encouragement combined

with the acknowledgement, by some, that their impetus for education was affected by familial challenges and hardships. I begin with the PEAK PERFORMERS archetype, focusing on Marcus and Julian.

Marcus described himself as a “self-starter” in school whose family members served more as cheerleaders than sources of information on college-going. He shared:

I’ve always been kind of bright and a good standout in my family and in school. My family’s always been more of the encouragers. Pushing...trying...making sure I stay on task and doing what I want to do...and go to college. So they were very pleased once I started applying and getting into places like VU and Cornell when they didn’t even go to college.

Marcus was pleased with the pride his family felt, mentioning that his mother displayed her VU sticker on her car and shared stories of his successes at college with her colleagues at work. Later, he shared that, while his family’s encouragement was important, he noted that growing up they did not do “extra stuff” regarding strengthening his academic skills. These comments arose as Marcus discussed his own actions in high school in teaching himself about geography, literature, and math as a complement to what he was learning in his high school classes.

Julian’s discussion of family centered more on the responsibility he felt towards helping his parents. The son of undocumented immigrants, he wanted to graduate from college so that he could be self-sufficient and help carry some of his parents’ burden of supporting the family. He used the allusion of a web to describe the relationships among himself, his siblings and his parents.

I’m tied to them [my family] as much as they are tied to me. I mean, which is why I’m trying to do as much as I can in here so that way I can go as high as I can....we are all connected; if one of us fails, we all fail pretty much. I could fail and then my

whole family fails because my brother could be in the Navy but then he has to look after me and my sister. Everyone is in the web.

Julian later described his parents' hope that all three children (Julian and his two younger siblings) get into college and set a course of financial independence. He says, "I think we are all in the position - the three of us - that we are old enough that we could survive a possible deportation of my parents." At the time of our interviews, Julian's brother was in his first year at the University of Michigan (and active in ROTC), and his sister, a high school junior, had set her sights on Harvard University. Julian's mother had been caught and deported when Julian was a young child. She returned to the US (illegally) three years later; the memory was salient to his family's daily life and a source of motivation for him and his siblings to do well.

For Marcus and Julian, family served as an impetus for success, whether their motivations were stimulated by encouragement or fear. Other PEAK PERFORMERS discussed the added complexity of being the children of immigrants. Elena, whose parents emigrated from Haiti, credited her cultural background for her persistence in college. The messages she received growing up included, "don't ever stop learning, just grab whatever opportunity you have to keep learning and learning and just... The more you learn...the better job you have." This message motivated her to not only to perform well academically but to also balance her life with church and community work.

There were common stories from many of the students in the other archetypes regarding familial support and encouragement while growing up. Lila, a member of the LEAD CLIMBERS archetype, was the child of immigrants from Ethiopia. When I inquired as to the role her family played in her higher education goals, she replied:

They have really high expectations I guess. So I am motivated to finish college and...to inspire my younger cousins to get to a position where I am in...like going to college and getting scholarships. I also, my parents are immigrants so I see their struggle...well because they've been struggling for me to get here. It inspires me to move on with my education and finish and get a good career and become independent and help them out, too.

For Lila, family extended beyond parents to include uncles, aunts, cousins and siblings. She admitted that she was raised by her “whole family” and, as such, “everyone is involved” in her education, investing time, energy and care into her future.

The children of immigrants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds like Julian, Elena, Daniel and Lila often view education as a way to improve their lives and are motivated to create better life situations for themselves than what their parents have (Lopez, 2001). In addition, culturally these students may embrace a more collectivist perspective regarding their responsibilities toward family than their non-immigrant peers (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

As children from working-class and low-income families, Julian and Lila alluded to the relationship between their witnessing their parents' struggles and their wishes and plans to graduate, succeed and obtain financial security that their parents don't have. For some, their family background served as an impetus for setting post graduate goals that would enable them to be more financially secure than their parents. This motivation came from bearing witness to the struggles of the family or more overt messages, as was indicated by Lila, that they needed to help support the family.

Some students referenced their family's challenges as a means of creating a resiliency that served them well in high school; they credited this resiliency with helping them in

college, too. Daniel, another LEAD CLIMBER, emigrated from Hong Kong to Brooklyn, NY when he was a teenager. When I asked him how he felt in his transition to college, he said,

Socially I didn't find it to be difficult because I told you that I was from Hong Kong so that was a bigger transition for me than going to college and emotionally - it wasn't particularly exciting for me, like going to college, I wasn't really, really excited like some of my friends were but I was prepared emotionally. I was kind of independent when I was back home so that wasn't too much for me.

Daniel shared that he was given a great deal of freedom once his family arrived in the United States. He described his parents as overwhelmed with adjusting to life in America, which provided him opportunities to exercise new-found independence. It was this independence that he credited with helping him adjust to college life at VU.

Family struggles with finances also served as an impetus for students' commitment to succeeding in college. Rebecca, a PANIC CLIMBER, lost her father when she was 11, and she and her older brother were raised by her single mother. In both our interviews, Rebecca mentioned her mother's issues with money, sharing that her mother often made "wrong" decisions regarding money that resulted in missed car payments and unpaid utility bills. Rebecca was determined to get accepted in VU's undergraduate business school in an effort to obtain a lucrative career in finance upon graduation. She recounted what messages she received from her family life and the relationship they had to her commitment to finish college. She said,

I was never pressured to do anything. I just I wanted a better life than what I was living and I'm sure there were other ways to go about it but I knew if I went to school, to college, that I could get a good job. I guess that's where my drive came from. I just wanted a different life.

Rebecca compared herself to her mother, noting that her mother's "willpower isn't as strong" as Rebecca's. Rebecca noted that her "drive" and "willpower" motivated her to perform very well in high school, which in turn positioned her to be accepted into VU.

**PANIC CLIMBER** Dana is the daughter of Vietnamese immigrants, and she grew up in a suburban ring outside a major city in the state. Like several other students in my study who were the children of immigrants, Dana's parents were committed to her education and created opportunities for her to participate in activities that would position her for admission to a top college or university. When Dana applied to schools, she was admitted to both VU and a school much closer to home. Both offered similar financial aid packages and, in the end, she selected VU, despite her parents' wish for her stay close to home. She shared, "I felt really bad because I felt like I was stripping something away from my parents by me [sic] going away because they raised me. I feel like I am not there for them anymore." Dana described herself as "selfish" for choosing VU although Dana and her parents felt that VU was the better academic choice for her because it was a more selective school.

**CLIFF HANGER** Sean described his parents as "motivated" to help him position himself in high school to enroll in and graduate from college. When I pressed him as to what was the source of their commitment, he shared,

I feel like they want me to succeed ...and actually be somebody, or actually be the first person out of this generation to go to college. And just to see me prosper, I mean, I don't know, just to make the best life out of...most of my family just stayed in the town that they lived in all their lives, and worked in the same factory most people work in. So they don't want me to have to go through that.

For **CLIFF HANGERS** like Sophia and Sean family was central to their emotional support despite the gaps in their parents' educational experiences and their own. Sean's initial

commitment to persistence, in part, was influenced by his and his family's wish for him to "be somebody" with that hopes that a college education would set him on a path that was different from many he grew up with. Sophia spoke in similar terms regarding her mother's support. She shared that her mom has "always been about the grades. I wasn't pressured but she always stressed that it is important to do well." Sophia felt that message communicated from her mom was "I'm going to try to give you the best opportunities I can so you can do better than what I did." For both students, their family background and support while in high school provided the foundation for them to succeed and gain admission to VU. In addition, both students felt immense pressure to fulfill this commitment to succeed, seeing their achievement as a way to give back to their parents for the support received.

As stated previously, the stories of the students of my study and their families hold more commonalities than differences. The boundaries around each archetype soften and blur, revealing the strength of individual stories and the common experiences of these low-income students. From them, one learns that family was important in influencing students' lives before they enrolled in college; for some, the influences came from siblings as role models and parents as "cheerleaders" and for others, their parents' struggles during their childhoods loomed large in their stories of their lives before college. As was discussed in an earlier section, several of the students participated in college readiness programs, and the data reveal that these actions were oftentimes done with the support and approval of families.

According to Massey, et al. (2003), "under the precepts of human capital theory, parents invest in their children in the same way that entrepreneurs invest in a company, seeking to maximize the ultimate payoff – in this case, happiness, productivity,

socioeconomic status and prestige” (p. 5). Certainly there is evidence that the parents of the students in my study used their financial means, limited as they might be, to invest in their children’s futures. Beyond human capital investment, families played a role in the students’ access to social and cultural capital during their pre-college years. In addition, schools played a large role in exposing the students of my study to a college-going culture and peer group that influenced the decisions they made and influenced their paths to Valley University. In the following section, I use a Bourdieuan framework to explore these two aspects of the students’ pre-college lives and again focus my discussion on students among the four archetypes. These archetypal boundaries serve as means of discussing the relationships drawn between capital access and students’ successes or challenges preparing for college, but as stated earlier, this exploration is most distinct in looking at the disadvantaged position of CLIFF HANGERS as compared to the other students in my study.

### **Students’ Experiences and Social Reproduction**

As was explored in Chapter 2, my study incorporates a Bourdieuan framework to help explain the experiences of the students in my study. In the following section, I present the students’ descriptions of their pre-college lives using the concepts of habitus, cultural capital and social capital. The strength of these constructs is that they allow for a discussion and critique of the interplay between the students’ lived experiences and the social world in which they operated. I present brief definitions of these constructs to illustrate how I understand and utilize them in the study.

Habitus, according to Bourdieu (1977b), is a “strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever changing situations...a system of lasting and



transposable dispositions, which, integrating from past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions” (p. 72). A person’s habitus exists on a subconscious level and shapes her perceptions about available options and resulting actions. These perceptions are held by members of the same social class, which in turn affects members’ educational aspirations and responses to and expectations of successes and failures (Horvat, 2001). Walpole (2003) argues that habitus is dynamic and exposure to the habitus of those members of a higher social class can affect low-income students’ behaviors and aspirations. Habitus shapes a person’s acquisition of cultural and social capital in unconsciously structuring what the individual perceives as possible and able to be acted upon.

I concur with Lamont and Lareau’s (1988) definition of cultural capital as “the institutionalized, i.e., widely shared high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” (p. 156) which are primarily transmitted within families but also within schools. For this study, cultural capital can be seen as the specialized insider knowledge regarding preparing for and gaining admission to elite colleges. Students from middle and upper-class families maximize their cultural capital by: (a) participating in competitive, college preparatory high school curricula, (b) participating in numerous extracurricular activities in high school and (c) aspiring to enroll in a highly selective college (McDonough, 1997; Walpole, 2007). In a Bourdieuan framework, cultural capital sorts structures, educational opportunities, and outcomes. I will explore the ways in which some of the students in my study attempted to acquire the college-going cultural capital of their higher income peers through unconsciously

mimicking their actions in their high school environment. In addition, students' families shaped their access to cultural capital by investing financially and emotionally in their children's education.

Social capital comprises the student's individual connections to legitimized networks, and those networks are context-based (Bourdieu, 1986). These networks may be converted into other forms of capital, such as financial capital (Bourdieu, 1986), human capital (Coleman, 1988), and valuable forms of cultural capital (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Walpole, 2007). Children of upper-class families obtain access to different, and often more far-reaching, interconnected networks than their lower income peers (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). These interconnected social capital networks can provide students access to information on the complexities of college going, such as financial aid and admissions applications. In addition, social networks can give students access to validating agents (Rendón, 2002) who can foster academic and personal growth. While Rendón's theory of validation focuses on the experiences of college students, one can argue that the presence (or absence) of validating agents for students while in secondary school contributes to their path to college. In this study, students varied in their ability and opportunity to tap into the networks and resources that helped them move forward in their goals.

Taken together, the concepts of habitus, cultural capital and social capital provide a theoretical frame that is useful for exploring and explicating the lives of the low-income students of my study. Using Bourdieu's (1986, 1992) theory I posit that low-income students are influenced by their habitus in accessing valued forms of social and cultural capital necessary for the college-going culture. Habitus shapes their actions toward and aspirations

for college. As social institutions, schools are environments in which students who have highly valued forms of capital are rewarded through access to college-going resources. Those students from low-income or working-class families who do not possess valued forms of capital face more challenges in these social institutions, limiting their participation (Bergerson, 2009; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Some of the students in this study, with the aid of their families and schools (as institutions shaping their habitus and capital acquisition), employed strategies much like their middle and upper income classmates. Other students possessed less valued forms of social and cultural capital useful for college transition, thereby making the navigation through high school and into college more difficult. Habitus is the mediator of the students' actions. It "provides the possibilities we can envision and determines how we might enact or spend our capital" (Horvat, 2001, p. 209). Therefore, students assess what is possible and probable through the context of their friends and family and exclude (or include) themselves from a set of college-going paths based on class based dispositions – their habitus - derived primarily from family and school.

The most compelling findings from the data reveal the differences between the CLIFF HANGER students and students in the remaining three archetypes. Students in the PEAK PERFORMERS, LEAD CLIMBERS and PANIC CLIMBERS shared many similarities regarding capital formation and access, and their perceptions reflected a more middle-class perspective and habitus. In addition, whereas CLIFF HANGERS faced numerous barriers to highly valued cultural capital, the other students enacted the capital formation similar to those in the middle- and upper-class.

I believe the similarities among the majority of the students can be explained, in part, by the students' place and time in their lives. As students from working-class backgrounds with aspirations to attend an elite college (the domain of the middle and upper-class) they straddled two class positions (Lubrano, 2003). Like Brimeyer, Miller and Perucci (2006), I see these students in the "process of [class] formation" in that they come from limited income backgrounds but aspire to "white collar futures" (p. 472). Certainly, their access to resources shaped their opportunities, but as individuals striving for the wealth and privilege of middle-class life, their class perceptions were under construction (Swidler, 1986). I do not argue that the students were positioned to abandon their family background, but instead this world view combined with that of their aspirations; this position of "straddling" (Lubrano, 2003) shaped their perceptions of their ability and willingness to navigate the college-going culture.

As such, the majority of students' perceptions of their opportunities demonstrated (a) the "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2003) displayed by their parents, wherein they invested in their children's educations in many of the same ways as middle-class parents, and/or (b) the power of the schools to shape students' paths through such actions as "tracking" high-achieving students into college preparatory paths, thereby giving lower income students access to similar resources as their middle-class peers. In turn, the students' experiences in family and school shaped their habits, which affected what they considered the size and scope of their options and opportunities. It is likely that many of the students of my study learned in their earlier lives the "unspoken codes and subtle symbols that indicate class membership" (p. 225) in which those of the non-dominant class were reminded of their differences from

the norm (Cookson & Persell, 1991). Like the prep school students of Cookson and Persell's (1991) research, feelings of exclusion the students in my study experienced were something they were willing to tolerate in order to gain social mobility. Therefore, in some of the students' stories we hear echoes of feelings of difference, despite their common paths with middle-class students.

What follows is an exploration of the students' stories whereby I group the students from the first three archetypes – the PEAK PERFORMERS, LEAD CLIMBERS and PANIC CLIMBERS – around common themes and characteristics the majority held. I contrast this set of students against the members of the fourth archetype, the CLIFF HANGERS. Because of this re-grouping, I do not refer to students' archetypes. I look at students' discussions of perceptions, choices and opportunities as they reflect their access to capital and their habits.

A common characteristic in the student data was the descriptions of their high school experiences, and more specifically their access to many of the same resources as their middle-class peers. For some it was consciously choosing to mimic the actions of their college bound, non-first-generation peers. For others, it was finding one or two individuals who could serve as allies and guides through the process of selecting high school courses, choosing extracurricular activities and setting a course for college.

Marcus admitted to mimicking the actions of his middle-class peers in high school in an effort to position himself as well as he could for admission to an elite university. He shared, "I [saw] other students - people who I feel like naturally [joined a lot of activities in high school], I was drawn to that activity and people who did that - all of them were going to college. So it was a common thing, like, if you joined the National Honor Society, of course,

you were going to college.” In Marcus’s efforts to copy his college-going peers, he not only tapped into potentially useful social capital network, but he immersed himself in their environment, thereby influencing his cultural capital. Marcus’s use of the word “saw” implies an observer positioning, reflecting his unconscious perceptions of himself as “other” to the middle-class students in his school. Although Marcus replicated many of the same actions of members of the dominant class, he recognized he was not a member of their group.

Like many of the students, Elena benefitted from the attention she received from her counselor, an insider who’s social capital networks and cultural capital possession was transmitted to Elena. She shared:

She got to know me beyond academics. She got to know my family and she was just always like there and she’d always encourage me and she did invest a lot of time and just helping me to pick the right college and you know she’d find scholarships and she’d send them to me and stuff. She was just always there for me and I felt like I could go to her for anything.

This counselor served as a validating agent in Elena’s life. Situated within the middle-class, college-going culture of her high school, Elena received validation and affirmation from a legitimized member of the school community who could assist Elena in negotiating the process and giving Elena confidence that she was college material.

In addition, Elena’s habitus was influenced by her parents, who had attended college in Haiti; despite the barriers they faced in the US to continue using their college educations for employment, they held high standards for Elena’s work and intervened when necessary with school agents regarding classes. In these ways, her parents enacted the highly valued cultural and social capital of a college-going culture, likely affecting Elena’s perceptions of college and career aspirations.

Other students such as Stacey and Mary discussed being raised in an environment in which attending a top university was seen as an expectation, not an aspiration. For Stacey, this was influenced by her parents' college attendance and careers as teachers. Mary referenced her high school peer group as influencing her, and a sense of entitlement permeated our discussions. For example, when we discussed applying to colleges and receiving aid, she stated, "I just always thought it was common knowledge that at most top schools if you could get in they would finance you based on your financial background. I don't know if most people don't know that but I thought it was common knowledge." As we know, the intricacies of financial aid are not "common knowledge" among those less familiar with college-going, and Mary's assumptions regarding this reflect her habitus and cultural capital. Although Mary and Stacey came from financially limited families, their habitus and capital were middle-class in nature. This aided them in strategically positioning themselves for admission to top colleges such as VU.

Like Stacey, Max's parents and older siblings graduated from college, strongly shaping his goals and aspirations. Although a "low-income student on paper," Max saw himself as holding middle-class perspectives. Surrounded by middle- and upper-class students at high school, and embedded in a family possessing social and cultural capital of the middle-class, Max was able to convert his accumulated capital in order to gain access to an elite college environment.

Most students of my study had to seek out institutional agents in gaining access to social capital networks. As immigrants, Daniel's parents' struggle to make a living in New York City left them little time to focus on his academics and college plans. Despite this, his

mother insisted he attend a small private high school for which he had earned a scholarship. He noted that because of the size of the school, he got “lots of attention.” There, he was surrounded by students with aspirations for college and found two allies within the school’s faculty. First, he had a guidance counselor who spent time with him in college planning, looking through college handbooks and national rankings publications trying to find schools that would meet Daniel’s needs. At the same time, Daniel’s physics teacher took an interest in him and encouraged him to apply to highly selective colleges. Daniel said:

I was really not confident about anything and he really boosted up my confidence a lot and he helped me during the application process for college....we are not supposed to look at the letter of recommendation and he said, *you can look at it because there is nothing negative I am writing about* and then he wrote [sic] really, really nice recommendation letter for me. Even the counselor at the time said he had never seen a teacher write such a good recommendation letter....he definitely helped me a lot and...before that I didn’t think I can [sic] actually enter university as top 25 in US or something like that. I thought about community college and then get a decent job at home and stuff like that...

From Daniel’s story one learns that his parents recognized that a private school might allow Daniel access to powerful forms of social and cultural capital necessary for success in college. In turn, the school environment and intervention from two institutional agents provided Daniel access to valuable cultural capital in the form of specialized insider knowledge not possessed by his family. Like Elena, Daniel’s relationship with validating agents “boosted” his confidence regarding his considerations of college. One can see in Daniel’s description of these events, his aspirations regarding his educational path reflect those of more middle and upper-class means. One can surmise that the direct intervention of school agents helped shape these aspirations.



Like Daniel, Julia, Dana and Michael were first-generation Americans with parents who had high expectations for their education; they all spoke of feeling pressure to excel in high school as an avenue to social mobility. Despite the pressure, these students recounted not being able to rely on their parents to help them navigate the college preparation process. Instead they found assistance through social capital networks formed through school. Michael and Julia discussed teachers, guidance counselors and tutors assisting them with applications, letters of recommendation and financial aid forms.

Another commonality among Julia, Dana and Michael's stories about applying to college was that their aspirations seemed lower than the other students within the first three archetypes. Valley University was not the college any of them had expected to attend, having applied to it only as a "reach school." So whereas students like Marcus, Max, Jackie, and Mary applied to, and were accepted at, a number of elite institutions, these three students had lower aspirations. One can argue that their perceptions were bounded by their habitus. As they considered what "people like" themselves did in terms of college going, they subconsciously constrained themselves.

As one considers the stories of Sean, Sophia, and Nicholas, one finds the greatest disparities lie between them and the other students in the study. These three students were limited in their access to legitimized forms of social and cultural capital, thereby shaping their perceptions of what was possible.

Nicholas, Sean and Sophia faced limits to their access to college-going social and cultural capital, mainly because of their lower-resourced schools. If the high schools students attend influence the "social distribution of possibilities," (p. 4) then these students were at a

distinct disadvantage (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). As we know, they did not have access to a great number of resources, especially compared to the other students in this study.

These students also reported the least parental involvement of the students in my study. Although all saw their parents as supportive, none could point to specific actions that could be seen as aiding in the activation of the social and cultural capital necessary to successfully negotiate the college process. Whereas the remaining students in the study discussed having (a) involved, informed parents, (b) well-resourced schools with a college-going environment, or (c) both, Sophia, Nicholas and Sean had access to few advocates and agents with whom they could receive valuable forms of social and cultural capital regarding college.

Sophia described a high school environment in which encouragement to go to college was meted out amongst a few privileged students. She shared, “The guidance counselor would only encourage you know, I guess the smarter students to take the [AP] classes.” She went on to describe the college-going culture at her school. She said, “At least 30 to 40 percent of the students applied and went to college. I know a lot of the students, either their minds [were] set that college is not for me and they can’t wait to get out of high school or they ended up dropping out of high school.” Sophia had benefited from the attention of a few teachers and a guidance counselor, who assisted her with navigating her high school path. She credits them with her getting into Valley University.

Despite Sophia’s success in positioning herself for admission to Valley University, she was acutely aware of the disparities in opportunity afforded to her and other high school

students. When I asked Sophia about what might be transmitted to her own children because of her going to college, she replied:

So I feel like me having the experience of actually going to college will definitely help the child a lot because, my roommate, she is on a whole different level. She already knows what she wants, she has her goals set in mind, she is a go-getter like...she...there are so many things for her because she had the parents who went to college, who had the knowledge of how to get in, who had the financial resources, and she went to a good school so....

In this reply we see Sophia's perceptions of the valued cultural and social capital benefits afforded to those students who come from middle and upper income, educated families.

Sophia's roommate's life was in stark contrast to Sophia's, and Sophia's perceptions of what economic capital could "buy" in terms of good schooling and the entitlement that helps people "get ahead" reveal the role of habitus, and social and cultural capital in rewarding benefits and opportunities.

I would argue that the data explored here reveal students' access to and utilization of social capital networks influenced their ability to accumulate valuable forms of cultural capital, such as knowledge of how to negotiate the process of gaining admission to an elite college. Their habitus shaped their perceptions of what was possible for them and their actions in pursuing a college education. My findings support Stanton-Salazar's (2001) research which revealed the presence of at least one institutional agent in the social capital networks of a student from a working-class or low-income background provided "transformative power" in that child's life by mediating the effects of poverty. He noted "the inclusion of one institutional agent in the social network of a youth from a working-class or low-income family carries far more potential transformative power than such an inclusion would carry in the social network" of someone from the middle-class (2001, p.163). For many students in

my study, these institutional agents played a significant role in their trajectory to college and their efforts to apply to competitive, elite colleges like VU.

In addition, I believe that viewing these students as “straddling” two social classes works in concert with Bourdieu’s frame in that their perceptions – the students’ *habiti* – were shaped by the students’ larger social worlds. These social worlds were strongly influenced by their school environments. While the schools may have been sites of social reproduction, the students of my study, in some ways, were not hindered by these forces. Instead, their aspirations for upward mobility placed them in a position much like their middle-class peers, thereby influencing their perceptions of what was possible and necessary in order to gain access to a different social class than their families’.

### **Conclusions**

This chapter explored several aspects of the students’ precollege lives most influential on their subsequent experiences at Valley University. I examined the role of the students’ K-12 experiences, focusing on their perceptions of what their educational foundation did or did not do to help support their later experiences in the first months and year of college. In this section, the archetypes were more distinct and one saw the relationship between what the students gained in their secondary education and their ease of transition to college. I discussed the students’ “toolbox,” noting that the most useful tools gained in middle and high school had more to do with college preparatory skills (e.g., time management, note taking, critical thinking) than high school course content. Next, I turned to the students’ discussions of their families, specifically as sources of support and motivation. Here one learns that the students’ experiences held more commonalities than differences. Many spoke of having the

emotional support of family, with parents, siblings, and other extended family serving as cheerleaders. For some students, immigrant children in particular, there were discussions of feelings of responsibility for wanting a college education so that they could provide financially for their parents and extended families. Lastly, I examined the students through a Bourdieuan frame, noting the similarities among many students regarding their access to and utilization of the social and cultural capital valuable for the elite college path. Those whose *habiti* were influenced by middle- and upper-class norms were well-positioned for success in college.

The work of this chapter provides a foundation for the following findings chapter, in which I explore the experiences of the students of my study once they are in college. By presenting the data in this manner, I demonstrate the varied pathways of under-represented students into Valley University. In addition, because these students all met the high standards of admission we can assume basic similarities in their achievement. Thus the findings cannot be explained by differences in academic ability. This leaves room for an exploration of the variation in perceptions regarding their academic progress and success and the relationship these perceptions had with their desire and wish to persist at VU. In addition, the following chapter examines the students' sense of agency, affiliation and connection to VU by looking at both their individual experiences and their perceptions within the wider social context of VU.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENTS' WITHIN COLLEGE EXPERIENCES AND THEIR SUCCESS AND PERSISTENCE**

Pre-college characteristics play an important role in understanding what influences students' success and persistence in college, but what happens to students once they enroll in college has a great influence, too (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). What my research reveals is that students' success in college hinges on multiple factors related to their perceptions of themselves, their ability to adapt, adjust and reflect on themselves as learners in a new environment, and their interactions within and perceptions of the culture of Valley University. It is important to consider what the students, as actors and agents, do in their own lives in order to succeed at VU; from their stories we can obtain insight into what students need to persist and graduate. In addition, one learns a great deal from the students' perceptions of the social world around them, recognizing that many students are forging into territory few if any of their family has ever experienced.

Using the student archetypes as a means of organizing and presenting most of my findings, I begin with a discussion of the students' transitions to college, focusing on aspects of self-efficacy and time management. I then analyze the students' academic records, with a discussion of students' course-taking patterns and their decisions regarding their major areas of study. Here, too, I discuss the students' considerations of departure. Next, I turn to an

exploration of the students' social integration at VU, with a focus on students' sense of their ability and opportunity to connect with peers and the larger university community. In addition, I discuss the students' perceptions of validation, both through their selection to VU and their engagement with institutional agents. Whereas in Chapter 5, validation was explored within the social reproduction frame, here I discuss it separately as a means of teasing out the students' perceptions. From here, I share the students' stories of being "labeled" low-income within the university's culture of wealth and privilege. Lastly, I discuss the students' experiences using a Bourdieuan framework, focusing on their habits and access to social and cultural capital as it relates to their interactions with the university community and culture. The archetypal boundaries become much less distinct in these last sections so I do not use them to present the data.

The chapter's areas of focus emerged from the data and inform my research questions. In this chapter, we learn about how the students experienced their first semesters in college and what their lives were like as low-income students within an elite culture. In addition, it is in this chapter that we see that, while high school and college were separate and distinct phases in the students' educational paths, the influences of students' past actions, attitudes, experiences and behaviors were tied to what happened to them in college. Despite these linkages, by no means were these students' paths deterministic; they demonstrated their ability and willingness to be reflective and adaptive. In learning about the barriers students faced and how they attempted to overcome them, we discover both student characteristics for success and their perception of the social world in which they exist.

### **Transition to College**

The transition to college is difficult for most students, and ongoing persistence to graduation is tied to their success in the first semesters (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Astin, 1975, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987). Psychosocial factors that affect students' transition to and experiences in college include students' sense of self-efficacy and their skills as self-regulated learners. What follows is an exploration of students' sense of self-efficacy and their skill at managing their time. In addition, I discuss the students' efforts to seek out faculty members for assistance and guidance because their comfort with these actions seemed tied to their sense of efficacy and academic control. These themes emerged in data analysis as I explored the differences and similarities among and between students' paths toward and into college.

#### **Self-efficacy**

Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (p. 391). Individuals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to be motivated and achievement-oriented than those with lower self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is domain specific in that people's self-efficacy is specific to certain tasks and is context-based (Bandura, 1977). For example, one may feel one has high academic self-efficacy in math but struggle with English composition (Zimmerman, 1995). Although context specific, self-efficacy can influence students' motivation to try to tackle problems in novel or difficult areas, thereby transferring the "motivational effects" of efficacy to other tasks (Zimmerman, 1995). In addition, students with positive self-efficacy perceptions are more likely to use a variety of



adaptive tools and self-regulating behaviors, thereby allowing them flexibility when facing challenges (Valentine, Dubois, & Cooper, 2001; Pintrich & de Groot, 1990). Self-regulating behaviors include creating a productive work environment, seeking out assistance from teachers or peers, and holding positive self-beliefs about one's abilities and the value of learning (Schunck, 1994; Zimmerman, 1989). Effective self-regulation motivates students to achieve their long- and short-term goals (Bandura, 1986); therefore students regulate their actions and the underlying motivations tied to their achievement-related thoughts and intentions (Schunk, 1994).

Bandura (1977) posited that efficacy beliefs affect the intensity of effort, persistence and choice of tasks for students and is strongly influenced by comparisons to other students (Bandura & Jourden, 1991). In addition, students who have lower self-efficacy may attribute their successes or failures to factors which they feel they have little control (e.g., professors, luck, or peers) instead of ability or effective use of strategies (Schunk, 1994). In addition, self-efficacy is related to stress and anxiety in that those who perceive themselves as less efficacious have higher levels of stress than their peers (Zimmerman, 1995).

In this chapter, I focus on aspects of students' sense of academic self-efficacy as it relates to their transition to college because this area of self-efficacy is most salient to their within-college experiences and their overall persistence. In their stories one gains insight into how the shift from high school to college was tied to their sense of their abilities and the new strategies they employed. In turn, we also what students found to be less and more effective and students varied in their responses to lessons learned.

**Academic self-efficacy.** The archetypes are useful in exploring aspects of self-efficacy in my study. In this section, I focus specifically on academic self-efficacy as it relates to students' transition to college and success in their first year, both key points in the students' persistence timeline.

As is demonstrated in Tables 10 and 11 (pages 234 – 235), the students' academic records varied, and I argue that their academic performance was due, in part, to their sense of self-efficacy, which shaped their actions, attitudes and responses to challenges. These responses varied, with students who felt lower levels of self-efficacy discussing their anxiety and stress and the choices they made to alter their situation. From my data, I was able to look at students' perceptions of themselves in relation to their academic life; these included their stories of solving academic problems, challenging themselves, testing their limits and setting goals. In other stories one hears expressions of frustration and a lack of confidence over their ability to affect change in their academic paths.

PEAK PERFORMER Marcus's sense of self-efficacy was high, and he found great pleasure in challenging himself in order to learn about his capacities. In our first interview, Marcus discussed his thought process for the two summer courses he took during the Stars Academic Program session. He reported that his perspective was "Let me just open it up and take some class and I... wanted to challenge myself and see if I could take this Calculus class, which ended up being very difficult once the summer started." Later he shared that he also took a 300 level anthropology course at the same time, which he had been cautioned by a program administrator was "pretty high for a first year." He earned an A in the

anthropology class and a B- in the Calculus course, and he expressed pride that he had “met the challenge” with success.

When I asked Marcus to share a story of how he solved an academic problem at VU, he recounted an experience he had his first fall semester. He recalled that during a religion course he received a grade that he “didn’t think was representative” of what the project deserved, and he went to the professor’s office hours to learn more. They discussed the grade and the professor “told me the problems with it and so I worked it out” and Marcus renegotiated his grade, ending up with a B+ for the course.

Marcus’s positive experiences in his courses reinforced his sense of self-efficacy. He employed self-regulating strategies and set challenging but realistic goals for himself, both of which he assessed from his past experiences with academics. The majority of PEAK PERFORMERS described aspects of this same kind of feedback loop; the students perceived themselves as competent learners, employed existing and new strategies in response to the demands of college, received feedback from professors (e.g., grades, comments on papers, in- and out-of-class interactions), and adapted their strategies in response to these signals (Gore, 2006). In addition, these students viewed their academic lives as challenging and exciting. This aligns with research that shows students with high academic self-efficacy are more likely to see the demands of the first year of college as a challenge and not a threat (Blascovich & Mendes, 2000; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). What makes PEAK PERFORMERS stand out in terms of self-efficacy is the ways in which their sense of confidence and skill helped them quickly adjust to college demands. Many LEAD CLIMBERS displayed the same traits but their adjustment to college moved more slowly.

For the majority of LEAD CLIMBERS their sense of academic self-efficacy was tested in their first semesters of college. Lila's sense of self-efficacy was shaken as she pursued the coursework necessary for the pre-med track. Despite her efforts, she was earning low grades in her science and math courses. During her first year, Lila questioned her selection of medical school as her ultimate aim because she was terribly unhappy in her courses and at school. With a great deal of reflection, Lila concluded she needed to alter her path to medical school by abandoning the typical pre-med track (e.g., a course load heavy in sciences and math) and focus on her skills and interests. Lila shared with me that this was a painful step for her to take. She said, "the most challenging part is realizing that if you don't take the time to be honest with yourself and outline your strengths, your weaknesses... no one can really figure that out for you." After her decision, her grades improved. She shared "Now...I feel a lot better. Now I just feel dumb for not making that decision earlier." Lila's self awareness, combined with the grades and feedback she was receiving from her professors, allowed her to regain her academic footing and find success.

For LEAD CLIMBERS, setbacks in academics seemed to trigger a cycle of self assessment and an adaption of strategies. For example, Daniel struggled with his English papers, received lower grades than he was satisfied with, and met with his instructor, who pointed him toward the university's writing center. Daniel sought the aid of a writing tutor and improved his writing. These students used adjectives like "competent," and "successful" to describe themselves, and their past challenges seemed to reinforce their confidence.

If PEAK PERFORMERS and LEAD CLIMBERS viewed academic life at VU as a challenge, PANIC CLIMBERS were more apt to see it as a threat. For students like Dana, adjustment felt difficult and she had trouble assessing why it was happening and how she could change. As she reflected on her struggles, she admitted that the competitive nature of VU left her questioning her own skills. Her feelings were exacerbated as she compared herself to fellow classmates. She shared, “you gauge how well you do based on how well other people do. I guess the thing is with college I don’t know what’s good and I don’t know what’s bad. You know what I mean? In high school I’m so used to an A or at least a B plus. And now I have to settle for a B.” As discussed, students’ perceptions of self-efficacy are influenced by their context and social world. As Dana adjusted her self-perceptions and study skills to a new environment, her sense of her ability to succeed as a student was shaken. In addition, Dana was hesitant to change her study strategies despite the lack of success she was having with them; instead she shared with me she was going to “try harder” with few concrete ideas of what to do beyond that. While PEAK PERFORMERS demonstrated flexibility and adapted readily to feedback, the PANIC CLIMBERS were less responsive. A key aspect of students’ reliance on feedback loops is their ability and willingness to adapt and adjust (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). Dana shows evidence of being resistant to both. Like Dana, PANIC CLIMBERS Julia and Rebecca discussed feeling overwhelmed by their academic struggles, feeling hesitant to seek out professors, TAs, or other academic resources on campus. Both expressed an aversion to asking for help, hoping instead to solve their problems independently. As Chemers, Hu and Garcia

(2001) suggest, students with a lower sense of self-efficacy are less apt to employ help-seeking behaviors.

CLIFF HANGERS seemed more willing to make adjustments to their practices and behaviors, but their anxiety left them at risk of stasis. Sophia admitted to “feeling overwhelmed” her first year; her academic probation felt like a wake up call and she shared with me her strategy for adapting. She said, “I’m trying to do everything I didn’t do last year...classes, meeting new people...trying to keep my grades up.” When I pressed her to talk more about what she struggled with she admitted, “well,...I’m really organized. I make all these detailed plans of what I’m going to do but I don’t do them because I put it off.” Within the few minutes of this discourse, I noticed that Sophia’s physical demeanor changed; as she discussed her strategies for improvement, she was animated and looked me in the eye. When she admitted that her detailed plans rarely were carried out, her shoulders sagged and she sighed. This shift in demeanor suggests that Sophia’s behaviors and sense of efficacy were interconnected in such a way that a change of actions on her part, without an accompanying sense of empowerment and confidence in her ability, was going to have little effect.

Although Sophia was the most reflective of the CLIFF HANGERS in terms of her sense of self-efficacy, all three students in the archetype recognized the gap between their actions and perceptions and the high academic outcomes they hoped for. Like Sophia, Nicholas was trying to change his actions and behaviors in the hopes that, in turn, he would feel more efficacious. He had enrolled in a study skills course but expressed anxiety as to whether the skills he learned could make any marked difference in his academic trajectory.

Sophia's experiences and the stories of the other students demonstrate that self-efficacy is tied to the sense of control the students felt they had over their academic progress; this academic control shaped their beliefs and their actions and helped in their decision making about the use of time and other resources at their disposal. I turn to aspects of students' time management in the following section.

### **Time Management**

Time management refers to a set of skills, tools, and techniques used to manage time and plays a role in educational achievement for college students. Empirical studies of student learning use measures of time management within the larger context of exploring academic self-efficacy and school achievement (Britton & Tesser, 1991). Although high school achievement (as measured by high school GPA and SAT scores) is important for the high school to college transition, researchers (Anastasi, 1988; Britton & Tesser, 1991) estimate that pre-college aptitude scores predict approximately 20% of the variance in college grades, leaving other factors related to the students' experiences to account for the remaining 80%. These include psychosocial variables such as self-efficacy and perceived academic control. Perceived academic control involves students' beliefs on the degree to which they can influence their own academic success, including their ability to manage their time. Research (Perry, 1991; Perry, Hladkyj, Pekrun, & Pelletier, 2001) shows that students who perceive themselves as having higher academic control are more likely to practice behaviors that lead to academic success than their peers with lower perceptions of academic control. In turn, students with higher academic self control employ problem-focused behaviors and strategies to assist them when they meet with academic challenges (Clifton,

Perry, Stubbs, & Roberts, 2004; Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000), which include effective time and task management.

Every student in my study discussed the challenges of time management in college, and no student transitioned to academic life at VU without having to adapt, adjust and relearn skills for the new environment. Despite this commonality amongst all 20 students, there were variances in time management practices and perceptions of academic control between the four archetypes. Like many areas of my study, the greatest differences were between those in the PEAK PERFORMERS and the CLIFF HANGERS, but students from all four groups provide useful data regarding this aspect of academic life.

As has already been discussed, academic transitions in general came easiest to the students in the PEAK PERFORMER archetype. When asked about their adjustments, all eight students mentioned some aspect of time and task management as one of the largest hurdles to overcome, but these students seemed to adapt more skillfully and quickly to the new environment.

PEAK PERFORMER Stacey's description of her transition to college regarding school work and time management is reflective of other students' interviews. When I asked Stacey to reflect on her first year experiences, she said "I was stressed out a lot because I was just keeping up with the work." Stacey explained that in her second year she was employing tactics to "stay on top" of her work by doing such things as reading ahead of the class assignments and starting papers earlier. She described strategies she was employing for a history class, where there was a lot of memorization of facts and dates. She said, "it is so much easier to study as you go than just the week before the test. I mean I had the



midterm and it was not even a big deal just because I had been studying.” She noted that an effect of these new actions was feeling less stress and anxiety in general over her coursework, allowing her to enjoy the process of learning more.

PEAK PERFORMER Courtney also reflected during our interview of her sophomore year that her first year, in retrospect, would have been less stressful if she had employed better time management skills. She shared that if she had done so, she “could have been less stressed and been able to really live instead of living school.” Interestingly both women discussed that they “had been told many times” by professors, teachers, mentors and parents that they had to learn how to manage their time, but both explained that these lessons had to be learned by “going through it” and adapting general suggestions and tips to their specific skills and situations.

PEAK PERFORMERS described themselves as “procrastinators,” saving homework and assignments to the last minute and finishing projects in a flurry of activity. Many reflected that this system had not worked for them, primarily because of the stress it caused. Interestingly, these students seemed most skilled at changing their behaviors, but unlike students who were struggling more academically, their motivations were more to avoid the stress than because their grades reflected their procrastination habits.

LEAD CLIMBERS Daniel and Max adjusted fairly easily to the time demands of college. Both noted that time management was one of the larger hurdles for them but they quickly honed their skills for the new environment. Max credited his high school chemistry course for teaching him “sometimes I’m going to have entirely too much to do in one night. You have to figure out what you can do and what you can’t...do that and take a zero on the

thing that is five percent of your grade.” At times in his busy semesters at VU, Max faced similar decisions and applied this same method of time and task management to his coursework. He found success.

LEAD CLIMBER Jackie had the opposite problem. She depicted her first semesters at VU as challenging and rewarding, but also found time management a struggle. She described her experiences with a core chemistry course she took her first year. She had been told by fellow students the course was difficult but assumed her high school class had prepared her adequately. She shared:

Once I got in there I didn’t realize that...I had some easy classes and then there was chemistry which was a really hard course. I pretty much gave all of my courses the same attention and I feel as if my mistake was not giving chemistry even more due to my struggling with the subject.

Jackie’s decision to devote equal time to all courses was a strategy that, in the end, did not work for her. Jackie discussed how she adjusted her time management patterns, employing decision making skills like Max described as she adapted to college academics. She shared that she now went to the library and took pride “knowing that I did something,” having “tangible proof” for her efforts that she got “something real done.” Like the PEAK PERFORMERS discussed above, Jackie also reflected that she felt, in retrospect, that she needed to struggle with her time management so that she could learn from her own experiences on how to be a successful student; only through practice, failure and eventual success did she feel she could achieve her academic goals.

Whereas PEAK PERFORMERS and LEAD CLIMBERS seemed to have overcome many of their time management struggles by the time we interviewed in their second year, PANIC CLIMBERS and CLIFF HANGERS were still negotiating this process in an effort to

find a formula that would work for them. During our interviews, PANIC CLIMBER Dana described her study habits to me. She said “I would read in the beginning [of a class]...I always read on schedule.” Dana explained that did not feel like it worked, “when it actually came down to the test I would have to reread everything because I would forget everything so I just end up like you know cramming it all in.” Despite this, Dana was not finding immediate success in any new strategies she was employing.

When Dana and I met for our second interview, she talked at length about her difficulties in her pre-med classes. She had just taken two exams, in which she had not done as well as she had hoped, and was questioning her chosen academic path. She admitted that high school had come very easy to her and she got good grades for “not even trying.” At VU, she shared:

No matter how much time and effort I put into something, I feel like it's not enough half the time... I feel like that your grades are no longer a reflection of how smart or how hard you try... I don't know, the more I think about it the more I think it's all about luck.

Dana felt that students were at the mercy of the TAs and professors they had for their large lecture classes, and as she contemplated her own challenges, she believed she had been a victim of unfair grading and teaching practices. As was discussed earlier, students with a lower sense of self-efficacy credit powers outside of their control for their successes or failures. Her low sense of self-efficacy, coupled with her time management strategies, contributed to her difficulty in achieving her goals.

CLIFF HANGER Sean's discussions about his struggles with time management are similar to those of other students in my study. He felt tempted by friends who would often

invite him to hang out and play video games. He admitted that his first year was a difficult adjustment. He said:

[In my first year] I just think that I put stuff off, got behind, and it's just like a snowball effect. It just gets bigger and bigger. And I definitely think that...I didn't have the right mind set about studying at certain time every day to make sure that I could stay ahead. And just being lazy at certain times. I definitely didn't do as well, but I think I learned from that situation.

Sean discussed strategies he was employing, like scheduling study time throughout the day, avoiding studying with friends and instead heading to a nearby library for his daily and evening work.

In her first semesters, Sophia also struggled with time management, often avoiding homework and instead napping or watching TV. Sophia was the only student in my study to have a work study job; she worked approximately six hours per week in the dining hall. Sophia did not seem to view her job as a distraction or impediment to her studies, instead seeing it as a commitment that added structure to her day. When Sophia reported to me in our first interview about her steps to change her time management habits, she listed a number of study aids that she was creating, such as flash cards and study guides, that she hoped would help improve her retention of the material and therefore, her grades. These strategies, while potentially useful, carried the risk of serving as distractions. Research (Thiede & Dunlosky, 1999; Winne & Jamieson-Noel, 2003) finds that students who struggle more with time management and other aspects of academic control are more likely to devote less time to difficult tasks and focus on ones that are perceived to be easier; these reactions are exacerbated when students feel they are under time constraints. The researchers hypothesize that students avoid cognitively complex tasks as reflections of their sense of self-efficacy;

they “sell themselves short” in terms of what they believe they can learn in a short amount of time (Greene & Azevedo, 2007, p. 346).

One can intuit from the data that the students who possessed higher levels of self efficacy and stronger time management skills had an easier time adjusting to the academic demands of Valley University. For students in the LEAD CLIMBER and PANIC CLIMBER archetype groups, their struggles seemed to encompass either one of these domains, with students trying to regain their academic footing through alterations to their academic practices and self-reflection. Those students in the CLIFF HANGERS group were employing similar strategies to other students in the study but they seemed more vulnerable to the effects of their own behaviors and less skilled at adapting to their new academic environment. In many ways, these students were more receptive to making necessary changes than their peers in the other archetypes but their sense of academic control was weakened. Not surprisingly, these patterns are reflected in the students’ willingness to seek out help – especially from their professors – as they negotiated their first semesters of college.

### **Faculty-Student Interactions**

Although an exploration of students’ sense of self-efficacy and time management abilities is crucial to better understanding the psychosocial dimensions of students, it is also important to analyze the students’ engagement with faculty. Faculty play a strong role in student persistence, with frequent contact with faculty outside of the classroom serving as an important factor in student success (Light, 2001; Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students with higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to employ

help-seeking behaviors, such as meeting with a professor or seeking additional support, in the face of academic challenges (Pintrich, 2000; Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roesner, & Davis-Kean, 2006). As a result, those students most at risk of departure rarely discuss their considerations with faculty or other university personnel; if they do, it's often after the decision has been made (Hermanowicz, 2004). Therefore, connections to faculty and other personnel can play an important role in student success.

Once again, there seem to be some qualitative differences among the students which fall along archetype lines. All students were asked about their relationships with faculty and/or administrators at VU, and more PEAK PERFORMERS reported having formed a fairly close relationship with at least one faculty member than students in other groups. As we move through the archetypes, the main differences seem to be around comfort and timing; many students in the PANIC CLIMBER and CLIFF HANGER groups discussed their hesitancy over connecting with faculty and had only begun to make attempts in the late fall of their second year.

PEAK PERFORMERS like Marcus, Mary, Elena and Courtney shared stories of having made a connection in their first year with at least one faculty member, often from a smaller class. Marcus named an Arabic professor as very important in his life, and he shared, "It's good to know that I can come to him if I have a problem or just want to talk a few minutes." Courtney noted that her math professors were "the most important people because I do use them for advice." Both students recounted connecting with the faculty within their first semesters at VU and returning to visit them once they were in other classes.

In addition, these students' positive experiences with faculty members served as a foundation for seeking out other faculty for help and guidance.

When asked, the students in my study admitted that connecting with faculty was important but only some of them reported having success in doing so. A few students shared that they recognized distinct differences in the quality of their educational experiences once they took steps to talk and meet with faculty outside of class. LEAD CLIMBER Jackie admitted that she did not try to meet with faculty until her second semester, and she reflected, "After taking that opportunity and actually getting to know my professors, it made a difference. I just felt more connected and felt like I was getting more out of my course experience by knowing the professor and having the professor know me." LEAD CLIMBER Kelly's lack of comfort and confidence initially held her back from seeking out her professors, but once she started to struggle in class she "got over it" and started using office hours. She shared, "Even though I'm probably annoying the professor and the professor was probably thinking all these crazy thoughts about me, at the end of the day, my test scores have improved and that's all that matters to me."

LEAD CLIMBER Lila explained that her fear of talking with faculty overwhelmed her in her first year, despite her knowledge that doing so might help her in the end. She said, "I had kind of a fear of talking to administrators and faculty members... I didn't think it was appropriate to go to someone with just general ideas, just general questions." After pushing herself past her comfort zone she realized, "it's ok not to know exactly what you want to do and it's ok not to have this specific idea, just talking with an administrator or faculty member helps ideas flow and helps you get on track in a certain direction." Lila's success in

connecting with faculty came after she decided to abandon the pre-med track, which forced her to seek out psychology faculty as she focused on her major.

Other students admitted that they knew they “should go” to professor’s office hours, but had not taken steps to do so by the time we talked in their second year. PANIC

CLIMBER Dana questioned out loud why she wasn’t “motivated enough” to go but admitted that she was fearful it would be uncomfortable. She shared that other students warned her that at office hours, “that some teachers say bad things at them. They said that they were up to office hours and the teacher made them feel really stupid and stuff.” Considering Dana’s academic struggles, it’s not surprising that she would try to avoid feeling humiliated.

CLIFF HANGER students like Sophia and Nicholas were required by the terms of their academic probation to meet regularly with an advisor and seek out each professor they had in order to discuss ways of improving their grades. For Sophia, this forced her to interact with her professors regarding her performance, something she had avoided her first semester. Interestingly, the close contact and regular encounters provided her feedback that she was a talented writer. She reported one incident with a history professor: “After talking to the teacher and ...she said all of my papers were actually insightful. I got As on all my papers which just really surprised me...I’m still surprised. I guess when I actually motivate myself to do things, I can actually do well.”

Interestingly, only a handful of students, regardless of archetype, named their academic advisors when discussing faculty with whom they had connected. Since, at VU, advisors are assigned to students until they declare their major, many students may have



viewed these relationships as functional, wherein advisors served solely as gatekeepers to course signup and other administrative requirements.

From the students' data one sees the ways in which students view of faculty – and perceptions of themselves as active agents – intersected to influence how and if they developed connections with faculty. For those students like Marcus and Courtney, who were receiving good grades and taking courses with smaller enrollments, finding connections with faculty outside of the classroom seemed a natural step in their academic paths. For LEAD CLIMBERS like Jackie and Lila, they discussed having to overcome their own fears and insecurities before seeking out faculty and as we move through the remaining archetypes we see how a cycle or feedback loop evolved. Stronger students were more likely to seek out faculty and, in turn, their engagement with faculty bolstered their success. The opposite is also true, and the data shows that those students who avoided faculty did not see the same academic returns.

I now turn to an exploration of the students' academic success and their commitment to persist. Not surprisingly, those at greatest risk of departure had lower grades and struggled more academically. Interestingly, academics also were related to persistence decisions for a great number of the more successful students, with the majority of students in my study considering departure at some point in their first semesters at VU.

### **Academics and Persistence**

For students to successfully persist to graduation, they must meet the academic demands and requirements of the institution. In addition, successful academic progress is an indication of students' commitment to persist (Horn, 1998; Tinto, 1993) and their academic

integration. Students' credit accumulation is important to their persistence and academic success (Adelman, 2006; Choy, 2005; Nora, 2002). Low-income and first-generation students are more likely to lag behind in credit accumulation their first year (Adelman, 2006; Chen, 2005) putting them at risk of falling farther behind their peers in persistence to graduation (Thayer, 2000; Warburton, Bugarin, Nunez, & Carroll, 2001). Choice of major is also an important step in the path to graduation, reflecting a commitment to both an area of study and a set of goals tied to career and post-graduate plans (Chen, 2005).

What follows are two sections; the first discusses rather pragmatically the academic progress of students and the second is an exploration of their considerations of departure from VU. Both are organized by archetype.

### **Academic Progress**

In relation to academic progress, I explore two aspects of the students' records. First I discuss their accumulated GPA, with an examination of patterns in students' course-taking. Secondly, I discuss students' majors, and complement that with data from the students' interviews regarding their considerations and patterns in decision making.

**Grades and course-taking.** As is demonstrated in Table 10, students varied in their cumulative GPAs. Table 11 illuminates these data by revealing students' semester by semester GPAs, from summer 2007<sup>18</sup> to spring 2009.

There are some compelling trends that support the existing literature on the link between academic progress and persistence. I begin with a discussion of both cumulative GPA and the GPA patterns over time for the students. As one can see, the students who I

---

<sup>18</sup> Summer 2007 grades were used so as to include all semesters of the SAP participants.

consider less at risk of departure from VU consistently improved or held fairly constant their GPAs over time.

Table 10

*Students' Cumulative GPA, Declared Major and Post Graduate Plans by Archetype*

Name	CUM GPA	MAJOR	POST GRAD PLANS
<b>Peak Performers</b>			
Courtney	3.7	MATH/ED	Teacher
Elena <sup>P</sup>	3.0	NURSING	Nurse
Jenny <sup>P</sup>	3.5	BIOLOGY	Dental School
Julian	3.4	HISTORY	Government
Marcus <sup>P</sup>	3.4	AFR AM STUD	Graduate School
Mark	3.3	STATS	Unknown
Mary <sup>P</sup>	3.4	COMMERCE	Business
Stacey	3.6	ENGLISH	Publishing
<b>Lead Climbers</b>			
Daniel	3.9	COMMERCE	Business
Jackie <sup>P</sup>	2.8	SOC	Medical School
Kelly	2.8	AFR AM STUD	Teacher/Grad School
Lila <sup>P</sup>	3.1	PSYCH	Graduate School
Max	3.5	PSYCH	Medical School
<b>Panic Climbers</b>			
Dana <sup>P</sup>	2.8	E ASIAN STUD	Dental School
Julia <sup>P</sup>	3.0	PSYCH	Unknown
Michael	2.6	CHEM ENG	Engineering/Medical School
Rebecca	2.8	AM STUDIES	Business
<b>Cliff Hangers</b>			
Nicholas <sup>P1</sup>	2.0	UNDECL	Unknown
Sean	2.4	N/A	Graduate School
Sophia <sup>P</sup>	2.0	PSYCH	Graduate School

Note: Cumulative GPA data spans from summer 2007 through spring 2009. Students' major data collected fall 2009.

P connotes Stars Academic Program participant.

<sup>1</sup>Due to Nicholas's withdrawal, his cumulative credits earned were such that he was considered a sophomore; therefore he was not required to declare a major until fall 2010.

Table 11

*Students' Semester-by-Semester GPAs (Summer 2007 – Spring 2009) by Archetype*

NAME	SUM 07	F 07	SP 08	F 08	SP 09	ARCH.
Courtney	0.0	3.7	3.4	3.9	3.9	Peak Performers
Elena	3.5	2.6	2.7	3.0	3.2	Peak Performers
Jenny <sup>P</sup>	3.8	3.1	3.5	3.4	3.9	Peak Performers
Julian	0.0	3.4	3.1	3.5	3.6	Peak Performers
Marcus <sup>P</sup>	3.3	2.9	3.2	3.7	3.7	Peak Performers
Mark	0.0	3.3	2.5	3.6	3.7	Peak Performers
Mary <sup>P</sup>	3.7	3.2	3.3	3.6	3.6	Peak Performers
Stacey	0.0	3.6	3.5	3.7	3.7	Peak Performers
Daniel	0.0	3.5	3.9	3.9	4.0	Lead Climbers
Jackie <sup>P</sup>	2.7	3.0	3.0	2.6	2.9	Lead Climbers
Kelly	0.0	2.4	2.6	2.9	3.2	Lead Climbers
Lila <sup>P</sup>	4.0	2.8	2.9	3.3	3.3	Lead Climbers
Max	0.0	3.5	3.6	3.6	3.5	Lead Climbers
Dana <sup>P</sup>	3.7	3.1	3.2	2.2	2.5	Panic Climbers
Julia <sup>P</sup>	3.3	3.1	3.0	2.9	2.7	Panic Climbers
Michael	0.0	2.6	2.8	2.4	2.6	Panic Climbers
Rebecca	0.0	3.0	2.7	2.5	3.0	Panic Climbers
Nicholas <sup>P</sup>	3.1	2.0	1.5	0.0	0.0	Cliff Hangers
Sean	0.0	2.8	2.1	0.0	0.0	Cliff Hangers
Sophia <sup>P</sup>	3.7	1.8	2.4	1.8	1.6	Cliff Hangers

<sup>P</sup> connotes Stars Academic Program participant

For example, students in the PEAK PERFORMERS archetype like Marcus, Courtney, Julian, Stacey and Mary, maintained and/or improved their GPAs each semester. Due to their pre-enrollment credits, the majority of them were able to take care of the university's area requirements within the first few semesters, leaving them freedom to explore and pursue academic interests. In addition, the majority of them appear to have landed on an academic area of interest early in their first year and course-taking patterns demonstrate that focus. For several students, like Mary (Undergraduate Business School) and

Courtney (Education), they entered VU with a specific area of study in mind and were able to target their courses towards that goal.

LEAD CLIMBERS cumulative GPAs are more variant, with students like Daniel and Max consistently making the Dean's List and others like Kelly and Lila finding greater success once they found their academic footing. For Lila and Kelly that came with honing in on an area of study in which they were interested and engaged in the material. Interestingly, the greatest concentration of students focused on medical school is in the LEAD CLIMBER and PANIC CLIMBER groups; these include Jackie, Max, Michael, Dana and Lila. I speculate that the coursework demands of the students' science and math track contributes to the lower cumulative and semester-to-semester GPAs of these students than their peers focusing on the humanities and social sciences.

PANIC CLIMBERS and CLIFF HANGERS faced greater struggles maintaining and improving their GPAs. One sees that Rebecca's GPA improved from 2.5 in fall 2008 to 3.0 in her spring 2009 semester. This may be due, in part, to her decision to not pursue the undergraduate business school program, which required a rigorous set of courses before enrolling. PANIC CLIMBER Dana's decision to major in East Asian Studies may stem from her strong grades in the handful of courses in East Asian History she enrolled in throughout her first semesters at VU, compared to the C average she was maintaining in her science or math courses.

The cumulative and semester GPAs for Sean, Sophia and Nicholas reflect the struggles that have already been discussed. Two of the CLIFF HANGERS, Nicholas and Sean, withdrew from Valley University the week before final exams for the fall 2008

(sophomore) semester. Despite their voluntary withdrawals, they were ineligible to return to VU for the spring 2009 semester, as required by VU regulations. For Nicholas, his withdrawal patterns influenced his overall progress, greatly increasing his chances of leaving VU altogether (Nora, Barlow & Crisp, 2005).

Another important consideration is average credits earned by the students, and the gap between the PEAK PERFORMERS and the CLIFF HANGERS is most striking. For PEAK PERFORMERS, the average was 31 credits for their first academic year. The CLIFF HANGERS average was 22; this average was affected considerably by the probation of two students and the departure of Sean. As is evident in Table 11, the semester-by-semester GPA pattern for CLIFF HANGERS reveals low grades, and their choice to withdraw from courses after the drop-add date affected their grades and progress. In contrast, none of the PEAK PERFORMERS withdrew from courses, despite low grades in some courses (i.e., Mark's D+ in Math, Marcus's D in Statistics). The course-taking patterns of all the students was tied to their overall academic performance and their progress toward deciding a major, which I briefly turn to next.

**Selecting a Major.** Every student must choose a major area of study and many colleges require that students cement this decision by the end of their second year. Therefore, students use the core curriculum courses required by the institution, in part, to explore and experiment (Montmarquette, Cannings & Mahseredjian 2002). Choosing a major can be a difficult step for students for it requires students to select a concentration area that will likely be related to their career paths and goals (Montmarquette, Cannings & Mahseredjian, 2002). This challenge can feel especially difficult for first-generation students because their parents

may be less willing and able to provide guidance (Chen, 2005). In addition, Chen (2005) found that first-generation students were less likely to major in science, math or the humanities than their peers with college educated parents, speculating that first-generation students may feel underprepared for “high skill” fields and may not be interested in fields they perceive as low wage earning. While I’m unable to compare the students of my study with the larger student population at VU, the trends for their major selection reveal that approximately 1/3 of the students focused on majors in science, math or engineering (see Table 10). In addition, many students chose majors in the humanities, although for the majority, their post-graduate plans were geared toward jobs associated with upward social mobility such as medicine, business and academia.

What follows is a brief exploration of their paths towards those areas of study. Again, the archetypes are useful for seeing commonalities and differences among students.

For the majority of PEAK PERFORMERS and LEAD CLIMBERS students, selecting academic majors involved weighing several options and deciding among subject areas in which they had either a strong record of performance or a strong interest (or both). Many of them recounted the joys and challenges of exploring myriad interests and linking these with post-graduate goals. Students like Courtney, Mary and Julian had developed clear career plans so their choice of major fit well within these longer term goals. Other students like Marcus, Kelly and Mark considered several majors, focusing on courses that they enjoyed and felt competent regarding the subject matter. Mark’s explanation of his thought process reveals the mental volley that some students in my study recounted as they considered options. He said:

I've begun to hone in on what majors I want to do. First it was all of this and now, semester after semester, class after class, I've...added some in here and thrown a bunch out. So right now, the pool is narrowing and now I wonder, do I want to pick up more than one? Do I want to pick up a minor? Do I want to pick a completely different major? There is time to sample - not a lot of time but there is still time so...in that sense, I guess I don't want to make a decision until I am sure about something.

Valley University's strong liberal arts focus influenced many of the students' considerations regarding how their major would tie to their career goals. Lila, after some difficulty in the pre-med coursework, decided to focus on the course area in which she was strongest. Her logic was, "if I'm happy [in my major], then I will be successful." Once she focused on psychology, she found a faculty mentor, sought out opportunities to perform research and began linking her major with her post-graduate goals of becoming a psychiatrist.

A common theme among the PANIC CLIMBERS was their approach to selecting a major and their reliance on external forces in shaping their decisions. For example, Julia spent her first two years chipping away at the prerequisite courses for the undergraduate business school despite her wavering interest in the subject matter. When we interviewed, she was undecided as to what her major would be and I pressed her to talk about how she would decide. She said, "I'll just apply and, if I get in, then I'll just do it...and if I don't, it's fate telling me I'm not meant to get in." Michael took a similar approach to his pre-med/Chemical Engineering track he had created for himself. When I noted that the coursework for both paths might overwhelm him, he replied that he would work at both, and if he started to falter, he would take that as a "signal" he should stop. These students seemed to feel they had less control over their own academic paths. Unlike the PEAK PERFORMERS and LEAD CLIMBERS, they expressed greater fear and trepidation over this exploration phase of their college careers.



CLIFF HANGERS Sean and Sophia fairly quickly targeted psychology as their intended major. Both had taken the large, Psychology 101 course in their first semesters and found the work interesting and satisfying. As one studies Sean and Sophia's transcripts, one sees that they did not have the luxury of selecting among a number of subject areas in which their performance was strong. Instead, their decision to major in psychology seemed more tied to the pressure they felt early on to "pick something" so they could focus their time and effort.

Like other students, CLIFF HANGER Nicholas embraced exploration in his first semesters but his efforts seemed like shots in the dark. Within the scope of our two interviews, Nicholas mentioned at least three majors he was seriously considering pursuing. He discussed at length his aim to enroll in the media studies program, despite its requisite 3.5 GPA for admission. He hoped for a 4.0 GPA his fall semester, thereby increasing his overall GPA to meet the program's standards. He also talked with me about his wish to either major in math or Slavic Studies, as these were also interests of his. He had taken one course in each subject although his grades in both were low. Like Sean and Sophia, Nicholas seemed to be facing few choices and yet feeling pressure to make a choice, thereby focusing his work and, perhaps, finding academic success.

What Nicholas's path illuminates is the double-edged sword of exploration and experimentation that is encouraged in college curricula. While the benefit of exploration might allow Nicholas to find an area that he was "good at," it also left him untethered, which, combined with his time management skills and other challenges, seemed to exacerbate his problems with persistence and academic success. In addition, his story falls in stark contrast

to many of the other students of this study, who either entered VU with a strong academic focus or quickly found a major area of study that they were both interested in and performed well in.

What I turn to next is an exploration of the students' considerations of departure.

Their stories illuminate the quantitative data presented in this section and reveal that, while academic success aids students' commitment to persist, there are other factors that work to either reinforce or erode that commitment.

### **Considerations of Departure**

Although pre-college factors such as family, relationships with peers and high school academic and social experiences play a role in influencing college student persistence, research demonstrates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993) that what occurs for students while in college is highly influential in their commitment to persist or decisions to depart. Therefore, it is imperative to learn from students how they perceive the idea of persistence itself; what motivates them to stay, what factors influence their considerations of departure.

In my interviews with students, I asked each of them if they had ever considered leaving VU. Eleven of the participants indicated that they had thought of leaving VU at some point. When I pressed them to explain what made them persist despite this consideration, I received numerous responses. Common threads were woven throughout their disparate answers. Not surprisingly, academic performance loomed large for several of these students, although personal reasons also arose in the discussions. The archetype boundaries are fairly distinct regarding considerations of departure, with the members of the PEAK

PERFORMER archetype almost unanimous in their commitment to stay at VU. As one moves through the remaining archetypes, one finds that there were more students considering departure – either voluntary or involuntary – when we met in their sophomore year.

When discussing their feelings about staying or leaving VU, the majority of PEAK PERFORMERS discussed their positive perspectives regarding learning and the reward they found in feeling challenged by their academic setting. PEAK PERFORMER Mark was among that group; when I asked him if he ever considered departure, he replied, “Quitting or transferring....um...no. I mean I wouldn’t really seriously consider leaving VU - if anything I will scratch and claw my way to the finish.” When I pressed him for what aided in his persistence, he added, “I guess outside of the academics, Valley’s environment is very...it’s just something fun, it’s just inviting, it’s good overall and even academically - even if it is difficult, I feel like I’m learning.” Mark felt that once he found his major he would thrive. His academic record demonstrated his pattern of sampling a variety of classes with the goal of narrowing his choices. Mark’s post-graduate plans were less cemented than some students, which may have forced him to embrace the joy of learning and to let go of some sense of control over his academic path.

PEAK PERFORMER Stacey admitted that the challenging environment of VU’s classes were enjoyable to her. When I asked her what kept her going every day, she replied, “that’s really tricky. I really do like learning things and like all the knowledge that I’ll have and stuff. I know it sounds weird...” As we know from the data in Table10, Stacey’s academic record was stellar; her academic success likely fueled her desire engage fully in her education. Like Mark she admitted to liking the process of learning and challenging herself.

PEAK PERFORMER Courtney admitted that she sometimes questioned why she took a certain class, but she said, “I’ve never, ever had the desire to quit or even think about quitting school.” She reminded herself of the bigger picture when she found herself struggling with assignments and academic demands. She admitted a friend’s perspective had resonated with her; she said, [my friend] said she has to go through this because of the people she’s going to affect in the future. Those people need her to get through this so that she can be a positive effect on them.” Courtney embraced this attitude and thought of the students’ lives she would affect in the future.

Other PEAK PERFORMER students like Jenny, Julian, and Elena seemed surprised by my questions related to persistence and considerations of departure or transfer. All discussed challenges they faced regarding changing academic expectations but none saw that as grounds to leave and attend another school.

Marcus was the only student in the PEAK PERFORMER archetype who discussed leaving Valley University, but his consideration hinged on his personal life. He had just come out to his close friends and was concerned about the overall climate of acceptance he would find at VU. He explained his thought process to me:

I never seriously consider [leaving VU] but I did think it when I was deciding to come out. And I’m still in the process - thinking about that - because I know it’s definitely...the university is open but I still think it leans to the conservative in some things but I feel like that’s one aspect and everything else is still top notch. I don’t have to worry about finances - that’s not a worry here. The academic - what I’m able to study and what I want to study - been introduced to, that’s good. The activities and I do like it down here so have never - I just thought about it for that one aspect. Would I be treated differently?

For Marcus, he was still in the process of deciding and was considering all aspects of his college life – financial aid, academics, friends, social activities, and his emerging identity as a gay man – in his decision to stay at Valley or leave for another institution.

Unlike the PEAK PERFORMERS, the majority of the LEAD CLIMBERS did consider departure. LEAD CLIMBER Daniel entered VU with the intention of transferring to Cornell University after his first year. He had been given a guaranteed transfer option from Cornell after being placed on the waiting list when he first applied. To be admitted through the transfer program at Cornell, Daniel had to maintain a strong GPA at Valley. He shared with me that one of the reasons he chose Valley University over Wesleyan was his belief that he could “perform better” at Valley, thereby making it easier to get into Cornell. Daniel spent a good portion of his first year at VU positioning himself for transfer. He said:

The first semester I really wanted to do good - I was going to transfer to Cornell so I thought I would have to maintain a certain GPA and the other part of my brain I was thinking, I have to do really good at least to prove to myself that I can at least survive in Cornell so at least I'm not at the edge of the passing grade.

Daniel's first year persistence was fueled by his desire to transfer to an institution that he perceived as more difficult and competitive than VU; this led him to want to test his capacities and limits within the safer VU environment.

In spring 2009 Daniel decided to stay at Valley but he did not adjust his academic performance expectations for himself. He admitted to me during his first fall 2009 interview, “since I did really well last semester, I just want to continue to do good [sic] and I heard a lot of people saying the first two years is [sic] really easy if you want to get a good GPA you should make some cushion in your first two years.” As we know from Table 10, Daniel has maintained the highest overall GPA of any student in the study, and his academic record

enabled him to successfully enroll in the university's competitive, highly ranked undergraduate business school.

Daniel's decision to stay at Valley hinged on his level of comfort, both academically and socially. He told me that he had found a group of friends who were important to him and in general thought he "fit good" during his first year. When he cast his experiences at VU against what his impressions of Cornell were (e.g., cold weather, unfriendly students), he did not want to leave.

LEAD CLIMBERS Max and Kelly both considered departure for academic reasons. Kelly admitted that she was used to being "at the top of my class...to come here and struggle...it's not a good feeling." She considered leaving for a place she could "shine a bit more" and stand out amongst her peers. In the end she admitted, "I'm able to make it here, I definitely am...I just have to be willing to put in the time and effort even though it might be hard at times." Max had similar thoughts. He briefly considered departure to a less selective school where he could earn higher grades in the sciences in an effort to better position himself for medical school. He admitted to me that his hope was that medical schools would take into account the selectivity and higher standards of Valley University. He said, "I figure a B+ here would be like an A somewhere else, and medical schools consider that."

Of the LEAD CLIMBERS, Jackie was the only student who had not considered departure. Despite her academic challenges in the pre-med track, Jackie did not consider leaving VU as a desirable option. She admitted that when she felt low she remembered that "VU is really prestigious and they have the rankings for a reason and if I'm struggling, those

are things that I'm being pushed to better than...I'm being pushed to be better." Jackie's sense of validation for being selected by VU buoyed her in times of difficulty.

The majority of PANIC CLIMBERS considered departure, too. Like Kelly and Max, PANIC CLIMBER Dana considered departure because of academic issues. Her post graduate plans of dental school hinged on her having a strong academic background, and she was concerned that her grades her first semesters would hinder her goals. In addition, she admitted to having been a strong student in high school and the feelings of 'failure' she was experiencing were discomfiting. Unlike Max and Kelly, she was unable to obtain a perspective that motivated her, instead discussing her perceptions of the grading at VU, noting that, unlike high school, "it's no longer a reflection how smart you are or how hard you try... it's based on luck." As is revealed in Table 11, Dana struggled to maintain a consistent GPA. As discussed earlier, Dana's sense of self-efficacy was not high and she felt that departure to another school where her effort would be rewarded with higher grades was an attractive option. She felt torn because of her love of her friends and her life at VU, but academics loomed large for her.

For PANIC CLIMBERS Rebecca and Julia, their considerations of departure seemed to stem from their academic struggles. Both were aiming to enroll in the undergraduate business school and both were struggling under the prerequisite course-load. Like Dana, they both felt connected socially to the university but wondered aloud as to whether they could find an academic area that fit their interest and skill level. As was discussed in the previous section, both students were on the brink of deciding not to apply to the business school, and instead focus on the subject areas in which they could thrive.

The CLIFF HANGERS were at the highest risk of departure. Nicholas and Sophia's academic difficulties and subsequent interventions from the university forced them to seriously consider departure. Sean met all academic standards, and it is unclear from his records as to why he withdrew from Valley<sup>19</sup>.

Issues of persistence seemed ever-present for Sophia. Sophia's academic probation left her fearful of having to leave Valley University. Unlike other students, she did not discuss her consideration of attending another college or university and instead she assumed she would move back to her small rural town and get a job. She told me that she was reminded daily of her risk of departure as she struggled to attend class, manage her time, study effectively and meet the demands of her coursework. When I asked her what helped her persist despite her difficulties, she replied:

I guess the main thing is looking at where I would be if I weren't here. Looking at my mom, friends from high school who didn't go to college, my cousin - some days I can't imagine my life outside of VU. If I weren't here I would probably be sitting home trying hard to find a job and I know that is not an option for me because I don't like to do the same job for eight hours where I feel I'm not getting anywhere. That's not a career - that's a job. So my main motivation when I'm feeling ultra low, ultra lazy, is to realize where I could be if I weren't here right now and that's - I mean, my performance in school so far hasn't been a reflection of this, but I'm really afraid of just going home and just being nothing for a while. Not saying that because you have a part time job in my hometown, you are no one if you have plans on going somewhere. But I would see myself at home with no goals and no direction as far as where I'm going to go in life. I would be focused on week to week or each check. Focused on what I have to pay for next and then I feel like that cycle of getting money to take care of this and getting money right now kind of puts the option of school to the backburner for a lot of people because I have to worry about this right now, I can't think about going to school because I have to pay for this and I have to work, I have to work, I have to work. So thinking about where I would be if I weren't here keeps me here. It's a really scary thought.

---

<sup>19</sup> According to academic records, Sean withdrew 12/8/08. In doing so, he took an incomplete in all five of his classes and, due to the late date of withdrawal, was ineligible to return to VU in spring 2009. Although he would have been eligible to return to VU in Summer or Fall 2009, he did not..



Sophia's response to my question demonstrates the complex nature of her persistence efforts. Her role as the first in her family to attend college provided a reference point for all that she did not want for her life. She knew too well from her connections at home that second chances for a full ride to an elite institution like VU might be hard to come by, forcing her to either work or go in to debt if she enrolled at another school. Whereas other students in this study speculated departure in more abstract "what if..." terms, Sophia's reality was that, if she did not change her academic path, she would be forced out of the institution.

Unlike Sophia, Sean's risk of departure was not evident and he gave few clear clues during our interviews. Like many students, he was reflective on the struggle between meeting the high standards VU placed on its students and wishes to go elsewhere. When I asked Sean if he had considered departure, he replied:

Yeah I have thought about it... I didn't really think about it a lot last year. I thought about it this year ... is it really worth it to work eight hours a day and compared to going to another college like fairly close like State Public U<sup>20</sup>, or something and working half of that. And doing better...I mean I've thought about that. It makes sense but I've just realized from going to this college, you're going to be better off no matter how well you do. You're going to come out better, you're going to be well off when you graduate with this degree. And I feel like and that if I work this hard I feel like I've accomplished something by going to this college. I have thought about it, but I mean I've never.. I probably never would do it just because the pride I take I going to this college and this work that I've put into getting my degree here would offset me going anywhere else.

When I pressed Sean as to what sustained him day to day, he shared:

I don't know. Good question. Usually I go to class day to day and I don't think about that. I don't really have to worry about that. I know I'm doing what I have to do so I don't think about it too much. It probably would only come up if I'm just stressed out or something and working hard, so it's not something that's always on my mind. Just that if I talk to friends or something ....*well what are you doing? ...We're just sitting*

---

<sup>20</sup> State Public U. is a mid-sized university with a Carnegie classification Masters Colleges and Universities I.

*around watching TV drinking. And they're at another college, and I'm like oh, I'm off to the library... I just think about it then.*

Sean's words reveal his vacillating thought process in figuring out if he should stay at Valley or go to another school. Like other students in this study, Sean wondered whether the work necessary to be a successful student at VU was worth it or whether he would be better off going to a school where he could do less (or comparable) work and receive better grades. Although Sean's post graduate plans were less concrete than students like Max or Dana, his intentions were to attend graduate school; therefore, his long-term goals hinged, in part, on his undergraduate grades and accomplishments.

Sean's consideration of what his degree from VU would get him (e.g., better opportunities for graduate school and employment) was not unlike many other students who had contemplated leaving. During both interviews, Sean noted that VU's reputation was both a point of personal pride and a source of motivation for him. He felt confident that his degree would help him access a greater number of opportunities; as he stated, the academic experiences at VU:

Will help you excel in whatever you do. I've heard of many people who get a degree in one thing and go to a completely different field after college and still do well for themselves. So just that edict that whatever you do at VU, you'll be well off as long as you exert the work you did in college to your future life and your job. So I feel like it teaches you just to work hard and excel in school and it will just carry over to work.

Despite his perceptions of what the more elite environment of VU could provide him, Sean still struggled with what would be the best decision for him.

Lastly, Sean also felt the pull of comparing himself to his friends at other colleges. Their opportunities to have fun and relax with each other were cast in stark contrast to his

time spent toiling over homework and papers. Many of his high school friends attended a large land-grant school, State Tech, which was much closer to Sean's hometown.

Although Sean was the only student to leave VU, a number of students considered it. For many, their reasons focused on academics and their perceptions of opportunities elsewhere, believing that attending a less rigorous and competitive school would provide them better grades for the same (or less) effort. As these students considered their post-graduate education and career plans, they weighed the unknown of their futures with that which they felt they could control – grades, courses, and majors. The belief by many that a change of environment would lead to better outcomes in terms of grades reveals the link the students made between their college education and their career goals. Therefore, it's not surprising that the students least likely to consider departure were the ones who were finding greater satisfaction in the act of learning. In turn, these same students' efforts were being rewarded with good grades, which likely reinforced their sense of commitment to stay and validated their sense of belonging.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the students of my study were among the academic elite in their high schools. Their perceptions of themselves as successful students were tested in their first semesters at VU, and it's not surprising that a reaction, for some, was to think of leaving. Their feelings of academic fit – or disconnect – at Valley University influenced their considerations of what the university meant for them. By exercising their right to contemplate enrolling at another institution, students were able to reflect on why they *did* want to stay and what they could differently to make that happen. In addition, the students of my study found the social connections that they had established at VU a powerful

force keeping them persisting during times of difficulty. In the next section, I explore the students' social integration at Valley University, revealing the ways in which students' ability to locate and connect with the social world at Valley influenced their lives.

### **Social Integration**

According to my theoretical frame, positive social integration hinges on several factors that are related to overall student persistence. Three are key to my study and emerged from the data. These are: students' feelings regarding communal potential, psychosocial engagement, and their perceptions of institutional commitment (Braxton, et al., 2004). The three propositions that explicate these factors are as follows.

- Communal potential proposition: *the more a student perceives the potential of a community on campus the greater the student's level of social integration.*
- Psychosocial engagement proposition: *the greater the level of psychological energy a student invests in various social interactions at his or her college or university, the greater the students' degree of social integration.*
- Institutional commitment proposition: *the more a student perceives that the institution is committed to the welfare of its students, the greater the level of social integration.*

As discussed in Chapter 2, students' commitment to persist is tied to their ability to integrate socially with the university community. The following analysis discusses the three key propositions as they relate to the students' perceptions of integration, which in turn, affects persistence. I begin with communal potential, which "connotes the anticipation of membership in a particular community of a college or university. Community memberships emerge from residence halls, classrooms and student peer groups." (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 23).

## **Communal Potential**

The students of this study saw their relationships with their peers as the most important in their college lives and for many, these relationships started in their first days on campus when they found themselves overwhelmed by their adjustment to college. Because of this, the archetype boundaries I use soften and blur; therefore, my discussion reveals the commonalities among students and the general importance friendship groups played in their lives. Two areas of focus arose in looking at communal potential. The first was regarding the “transitional agents” students relied on in their first days and weeks at VU. In addition, I explore how the students describe and perceive the relationships they have with their closest friendship groups.

The transitional agents I refer to were the students that the participants of my study connected with during the first days on campus; the relationships were transitional because these connections faded over the course of the first semester and first year. For many, the transitional agents were friends from high school or older relatives (cousins, siblings) who were attending VU at the same time. For those without friends from high school (e.g., out of state students like Julian, Daniel), they relied on a roommate or suitemate as compatriot in the first days as they learned their way around campus. An exchange between Mark and me during our first interview reflects the feelings and experiences of many of my participants. When I asked him if he had friends from high school at VU, he indicated that he did. I queried as to whether he socialized with them and, he replied,

Mark: Surprisingly not as much as I thought I would have. I mean, I still see them. We talk sometimes, but I think that because we weren't, we didn't really do so much together at VU...

I: So you have friends from high school that are here but you guys just...they are not a part of your social group

Mark: We're friends, but we're not...

I: Did you rely on them more when you first got here do you think?

Mark: Mm-hmm, yeah, when I first got here I was like uh where's this building, uh what are you doing and because I didn't really know the people I was living with yet, so I was doing stuff with them but slowly I became more independent.

Mark's discussion of how his relationships with high school friends faded over time was similar to other students' conversations about their first days and weeks of college. For the participants, these transitional agents, such as high school friends and older relatives, were an important indicator for students of the overall communal potential of the university and served a vital role in the students' sense of social integration. Students sought out transitional agents to ease them through the difficult "firsts" of college (e.g., first classes, first weekend, first dining hall trip) and provide them companionship and guidance as they learned their way. Woven into their stories about their relationships with these agents were clear indicators that the participants relied heavily on them to help them negotiate the complexities of their new lives at college and a sense of gratitude that they had at least one fellow companion in which to make their way. The students I interviewed did not view the relationships with these transitional agents in solely a functional way; instead, they often expressed surprise and a bit of disappointment that the nature of some of these relationships seemed so transient. Likely for many, the more solid friendships formed as they met people with whom they shared common interests and values.

All the students in the study identified their friendship groups as one of the most important aspects of their college-going life. Eighteen of the 20 students in this study shared that their closest group of friends were made through the links formed in first year housing.

For the majority, their closest social group consisted of roommates, suitemates or friends they met on the same dormitory floor. This finding is supported consistently in the literature and reflects the important role that on-campus housing can make for incoming first year students (Astin, 1990; see Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 2000). The two students whose core friendship group did not come from connections made through housing were Marcus and Nicholas, who found stronger friendships through student organizations they joined within the first weeks on campus.

The relationship between friendship groups and social integration has several facets. For all of the participants social relationships made college fun and enjoyable. Students in their first year sought out new experiences and doing them with friends made the experiences richer. In addition, students shared that their friendships groups were defined by the support and encouragement that was given; they weren't just looking for some fun, friendly people to hang out with but wanted to find people who connected through values, goals and perspectives. Time and again, I heard mention that the students' friends were people with whom they could "be themselves," finding acceptance and connection while they negotiated the complex world of college. Friendship groups kept the students grounded and provided support and companionship. For PEAK PERFORMER Julian, his "fabulous group of friends" kept him motivated by helping him maintain a sense of belonging and lifting him up with the joy of their friendship and pursuit of fun. He said that without his friends, he would feel no sense of place, declaring that because of his friends, Valley University was his "home."

Friends were consistently the individuals that students in my study turned to in times of difficulty and stress. Stacey shared that her friends were “the ones who have are helping me get through the stressful times and classes and stuff like that...they are really the most important people and they are there for me.” Nicholas seemed astounded that he had found a group of friends who “care so much for each other” despite their differences in background. Additionally, Elena was comforted in finding a group of friends like her; as a conservative Christian she had difficulty relating to her freshman suitemates who were much more interested in participating in the traditional party scene than she was. She stated that the friends found in her Christian student group were her “community” of people “who also struggle with classes and also need help...they’re really important because they help me stay grounded in my beliefs.”

Sophia desired to connect socially to her peers but self-admitted shyness and her habits of keeping to herself and seeking solace in her dormitory space kept her from forming many close relationships. Sophia and her cousin roomed together their first year, but her cousin withdrew from VU in her second semester. Sophia considered her cousin her closest friend, so her departure left Sophia feeling lonely and disconnected. As she negotiated her second year, Sophia shared with me that she was trying to “branch out” and meet new people. The data suggest that Sophia – and all the students of my study – recognized the potential for friendship and community amongst peers, but Sophia’s struggle was with bridging the gap between her wish to connect with people and her ability and comfort in doing so.



Analysis of the students' drawings reinforces the centrality of friends in their lives. The majority<sup>21</sup> of students specifically referenced friends when asked to visually represent where and how they fit within the university community. I gave them few parameters, requiring only that they put themselves in the picture and label the various aspects of the picture. The inclusion of friends in the students' pictures was by far the most common response among the students; no other area of the students' lives had such overlap among all interviewed. I believe the presence of friends in these pictures demonstrates the powerful nature of the relationships in the students' day to day lives and the resonance they carry in the students' perceptions of themselves. To further explore this, I turn next to the students' psychosocial engagement with the community of VU.

### **Psychosocial Engagement**

Beyond the concept of communal potential, the results of my work also support Braxton et al.'s (2004) construct of "psychosocial engagement." Psychosocial engagement refers to the level of mental energy and commitment the student demonstrates in order to make friends and become more involved in the university community. Its primary source is Astin's theory of involvement which posits that "student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the academic experience." (Astin, 1984, p. 297). Involvement can be informal (e.g., dating, attending social activities) or formal (membership in a student organization). It also involves students' actions towards academics, wherein students who exhibit low levels of academic involvement (e.g., not

---

<sup>21</sup> 15 of the 20 students interviewed completed the drawing exercise and 10 of those students specifically included friends in their pictures. Those that did not specifically mention friends did include reference to their larger community (e.g., professors, parents, siblings).

attending class, failing to complete assignments) experience decreased sense of social integration (Berger & Milem, 1999; Milem & Berger, 1997).

I primarily focus on students' formal engagement with the organizations and activities because it is what the students referenced most frequently in terms of their own sense of belonging and connection to VU. This is not surprising in light how central student involvement is to Valley University's institutional culture. With over 700 student organizations and an active governance system that relies heavily on student participation and oversight, freshman receive messages from their first days at Valley that they are expected to become involved community members. The students of my study fell along a continuum regarding their level of engagement in formal activities, with some being heavily involved in many activities and others connecting with one or two central organizations but in a role of responsibility demanding a constant time commitment. In addition, some were still searching for their place, finding commitment difficult because of academic demands.

Because involvement is central to the university's culture, I found few students not involved in some activities at VU. Therefore, as one considers the students among archetypes there are not dramatic differences; despite this, there are some sharper distinctions between the PEAK PERFORMERS and the CLIFF HANGERS. It seems that differences among and between students focus more on their attitude toward involvement; for many of the students struggling academically, they felt unable or overwhelmed by considerations of becoming more engaged in the university community. I discuss both students' involvement and their attitudes toward engagement below and return to organizing by archetype.

PEAK PERFORMER Marcus was involved in a number of organizations and issues on campus. He was active in the student judiciary system, which he joined within the first week of college. His goal for second year was to train to become a student judge, which would require a greater commitment of his time. In addition, Marcus served as a peer advisor for five first year students, was active in a campus religious organization, and volunteered for the presidential campaign. When we talked during his second interview, he indicated he had just begun attending the debating society meetings with plans to get more involved in that activity. He also acknowledged that he might have to reprioritize his activities as he moved into his latter two years of college due to the expected increase in work load for classes.

As we know from Tables 10 and 11, Marcus maintained a strong GPA (3.4 cumulative) throughout his first semesters at VU so his heavy involvement in VU activities demonstrates his ability to effectively manage his time. Marcus indicated that the culture of engagement at VU was something that attracted him to the university initially. When I asked him what he liked most about being a student at VU, he replied, “I definitely like the wide choices that you have...I like the very different organizations like they each, kind of fill a niche, like how you can find the small community within the larger community and that makes the university feel much smaller than it is, like IMPACT and the peer advisors have provided that for me.” His remark demonstrates the way in which Marcus viewed involvement as a way to tap into the various communities of the university. In addition, Marcus used his various activities to explore different aspects of his role as a “VU student”; he mentored because he wanted to “give back,” and his engagement with university governance and the presidential election allowed him to deepen his interest in politics.

Despite his level of extracurricular engagement, Marcus was matter-of-fact in describing his involvement during our interviews, which may demonstrate the centrality of involvement in his college life. It is possible that he felt no need to expound on his feelings about involvement because his level of engagement not only seemed “normal” to him but was likely the normalized level of those with whom he socialized. In addition, Marcus’s success at integrating socially was fueling his desire to become more involved.

Most students were not as heavily involved in formal university organizations as Marcus. Within this majority were many students who seemed very satisfied with their engagement with one or two activities. Julian, another PEAK PERFORMER, purposefully chose not to get over-involved, in part, due to his high school experiences in ROTC. He felt that ROTC had consumed a lot of his time in high school and was enjoying the freedom of spending time with friends that college afforded him. Despite his new found freedom, Julian felt he needed to work hard not to focus solely on academics. He said, “Having been through the ROTC and the discipline, I know that if I have to sit down and read, rather than party, I try to break that a little bit just to make sure that I have the yin and the yang” Later he shared, “But you got to be disciplined, you know, in academics and your social life. You have to make sure that you don’t drink and get wasted every weekend.” Julian’s primary activities were intramural sports and serving in a leadership position for his international dormitory. When we discussed his involvement, he stressed to me that his own personal “revolution” that he went through in his first year at VU focused on trying to take life less seriously and connect with peers and the university community with spontaneity. He admitted that his earlier drive and determination left him wanting and searching for “balance.”

LEAD CLIMBER Daniel chose not to get too involved at VU during his first year because of his intention to leave. He did find a community with a student organization that supports Asian and Asian Pacific American students at VU. Through this group, he had found a close network of friends. When we met for our interviews, Daniel had attended a few meetings for various issues and organizations on campus, but was primarily focusing on academics. Despite this, he discussed his friends as his primary social outlet and shared that his principal activities were aimed at complementing his business education (e.g., volunteering to help people prepare their tax returns).

Academics overwhelmed LEAD CLIMBER Lila so that she avoided getting involved at VU her first year. She had started going to meetings for the university's film society but, she shared, "I realized I couldn't do what I wanted to do or put forth as much effort as I wanted to do because it was unrealistic with my schedule." When we met in first semester of her sophomore year she had attended several film society meetings and hoped to get an organization for African American students on campus. Although Lila's academic schedule had not lightened considerably she decided she needed to find balance. She said, "this year I'm going to force myself [to get involved] because I know in the end I'll appreciate it."

Lila was also quite candid that involvement was also necessary for admission into medical school. She shared "I have to be involved for this many hours to even be considered into medical school so there is a lot of pressure for pre-med students." This was echoed by fellow pre-med student and LEAD CLIMBER Max who reasoned that, with limited free time available to him, he wanted to be very strategic about what he committed to. Both students volunteered through the student center and choose things that would "look good" with less

focus on their enjoyment of the experience.

LEAD CLIMBER Kelly, on the other hand, approached involvement with great pleasure and quickly found several activities she enjoyed. Through a university organization, she became a mentor for a middle school girl; this asked for a one-year commitment and a required education course. She also connected with other African American students and was engaged in the Office of African American Affairs. She had selected VU over other colleges because of its size and culture of student engagement and, therefore, involvement was what she desired.

What the PEAK PERFORMERS and LEAD CLIMBERS had in common was a commitment to, and a (for many) skill at, finding balance in their academic and social lives. The majority of these students, when asked about these areas of their lives, provided replies that revealed their processes of finding this balance. Some students discussed their wishes to become more involved – either more deeply in one organization (e.g., leadership) or amongst a greater number of activities – and admitted that their ability and willingness to do that hinged on their academic lives. Often, they expressed their plan to re-explore their activity options “next semester” or “next year” in their constant effort to stay on top of academics and ensure that received the greatest priority.

PANIC CLIMBERS were diverse in perspective, with some students finding great success in engaging in the university community and others expressing a wish to “do more” but a fear that doing so would threaten their tenuous academic success. This was the case with Dana, who had a large social network through her connections to two student organizations dedicated to Asian students. Through these groups, she participated in one-time

activities like sporting events or dinners but hadn't "found time" to become more involved.

The other activity she discussed with me was her volunteer work for a dental clinic in town; she hoped to gain some experience that would help with entrance to medical school.

Understandably, Dana's academic struggles in her pre-med classes served as her primary focus and she admitted to dedicating a great deal of time to studying and not as much as she wanted to for becoming involved.

**PANIC CLIMBERS** Rebecca and Julia struggled in their first year to find their niche. In part, this was tied to their academic "drift," which in turn influenced their ability and willingness to find footing socially. Both had close friend groups, but neither had connected with any particular student organizations, despite a wish to do so. Both students discussed their choosing to use their free time doing more solitary or informal activities such as reading, going to movies and "hanging out." It is possible that they felt a pressure to become involved because of the cultural pressures to do so, and yet their own personal styles of more solitary activities clashed with this culture.

**CLIFF HANGERS** Nicholas and Sophia had differences in their attitudes about involvement. For Nicholas, his involvement with two student organizations took a considerable segment of his non-academic time. He was involved in a theatrical program and held an officer position in a co-education a capella group. He never expressed any doubts to me about his continued involvement in these organizations despite his academic struggles. These activities seemed to provide him affirmation that he was contributing to the university community whereas his academic life was not thriving.

Sophia admitted her desire to become more involved in the university community, but

her habits during her first year contributed to her sense of isolation. She recounted:

I was extremely attached to my dorm room. All my life I've been the girl that...I'm fine with staying home and watching TV or whatnot. So that's what I do...I go to class, go back to my room. Go to class and back to my room. So I didn't get to meet a lot of people mainly because I had my cousin. So it was me and her doing our little thing or what not so I missed out on a lot of activities and meeting a lot of people.

During our interviews, Sophia shared her plans for slowly building extracurricular activities into her student life. She joined an African American Christian choral group, and had plans to become a member of the band's color guard, volunteer for a help line and possibly join a sorority her third year. Sophia acknowledged that her first priority was to raise her GPA but her concrete plans to join organizations demonstrated her optimism and hope that she could improve her academics sufficiently so that she could pursue her interests. In fact, Sophia was so hopeful about her ability to turn around her academics that she wondered aloud to me, "I'm wondering how I'm going to do band *and* rush a sorority" in discussing how she would manage the fall semester of her junior year.

Sophia's situation illuminates the complexity of the concept of "involvement" as a marker for persistence. Sophia's desire to connect with the larger community was strong and it is possible that this hope was what kept her persisting despite her academic challenges. In thinking of psychosocial engagement as the "mental energy and commitment the student demonstrates in order to make friends and become more involved in the university community" Sophia's mental energy (e.g., planning, weighing pros and cons) and commitment (e.g., her desire) were high and yet her ability to act upon her wishes was less effective. When one contrasts Sophia to the other students who were also seeking opportunities for engagement and yet were more satisfied with their place in the community



(e.g., Rebecca, Lila), one realizes that psychosocial engagement, in this study, seems to be tied to satisfaction, goals and perhaps the sense of agency a student feels. Students who feel that they *could* get involved if they wanted to may be more satisfied with their level of engagement than students who feel cobbled by their perceived lack of choices or ability. The evidence of the importance students' sense of agency in their perceptions of involvement and engagement supports Braxton et al.'s (2004) theoretical construct regarding proactive social adjustment. This construct posits that students' ability to integrate socially relies on their own positive orientation toward enacting their goals and adjusting to meet challenges. The researchers also posit that students' integration relies on their perceptions of institutional commitment, which I turn to next.

### **Institutional Commitment**

In an effort to define the concept of institutional commitment to student welfare, Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) point to institutional behaviors such as policy creation and administration, the incorporation of students in voicing their concerns and the demonstration of equal treatment of all students. Due to the scope of my study, I relied on the perspectives of students as to their sense of how the university did and did not demonstrate its commitment to their welfare.

During my interviews with the students I asked several questions regarding their sense of community and caring at Valley. Although the answers varied, several themed groups of students arose from the data. Most prominent were the African American students in my study that relied on the formal mentoring program offered to them during their first year on campus. These students, regardless of the archetype group they fell into, mentioned this

program as central to their feelings of integration and connection at VU. The second, and largest group of students – and again not bounded by my established archetypes – discussed their awareness of support systems put in place to help them if they needed assistance. This group of students had not felt the need to tap into these institutional systems, but the presence of them signaled to the students that their needs were being considered. The final, and smallest group, had been forced by the terms of their academic probation to utilize the formal systems in place; this group consists of Nicholas and Sophia, both members of the CLIFF HANGER archetype. I briefly discuss all three groups, using the archetype labels when discussing individual students.

The first set of students I discuss is the five Black students who specifically referenced the Office of African American Affairs (OAAA) at Valley University as central to their sense of community and caring. Marcus, Elena (PEAK PERFORMERS), Lila, Jackie and Kelly (LEAD CLIMBERS) had tapped into the peer mentoring program through the Office, ranking it high in relation to their academic success and overall college adjustment.

When I queried Elena as to how the university demonstrated that it cared about students, she replied:

Hmm, I think mostly because [the university has] the Office of African American Affairs, and I feel like they have people who do help. Like with the peer advising program they have people who just really care about your well being. I feel like they care about you by having these different resources no matter where you come from or who you are you have a group of people who are there to support you emotionally and academically....

While discussing this subject, Elena also referenced a similar peer support program that her Chinese roommate had participated in. Her comments reveal not only the sense of support

she received but her opportunities to witness that community of support from what her suitemate received from a similar university organization.

Marcus echoed Elena's sentiments about the OAAA. He said that OAAA and the peer advisor program were central to his life at VU. After being mentored, he signed up to serve as one for other students in his second year. He shared, "I get to be a mentor to someone else too now. We definitely care; trying to support entering first year and transfer students." Marcus's remarks extend this idea of community; his use of "we" to discuss the OAAA reveals how embedded he felt in that organization.

The only Black student in my study who did not discuss the Office of African American Affairs was Sophia. The absence of this in her discourse is unfortunate and striking in that the peer mentoring program requires that an older student be matched with every incoming Black student at VU. These mentors are also required to seek out their first year mentees on an ongoing basis in an effort to prevent students from disconnecting from the university or falling through the cracks. The mentoring program seemed paramount to the remaining Black students' lives at VU, both functionally in its support of them and symbolically as a means of helping them feel welcomed and connected to VU.

The second set of students was more diverse in their responses. Some referenced people, such as professors, the staff at the cafeteria, resident assistants, and administrators, as indications of their feeling supported. Mary and Rebecca discussed the aspects of the physical campus, with Mary noting the construction of new academic buildings and Rebecca mentioning the emergency phone system installed throughout the university as signs of care and concern for students' well being. Daniel listed the letter he received from the VU

Promise advisory board, comprised of administrators and faculty from throughout the university, welcoming him to the university as a powerful indicator of his sense of belonging. The small detail of the letter's "real" signatures at the bottom made Daniel feel that there was a community of support despite the university's large size. Similarly, Michael named Opening Convocation, a ceremony and welcome address led by the university's president in the first day of fall orientation for freshman, as significant for him. He said, "The university gave us...the convocation and then the greeting from the president. That was like you are being invited into the university instead of that you apply here and go here and start off your college career for the rest of your life. It's kind of like something that they invited you in." These students referenced institutional actors and actions that resonated with them and their daily lives.

The final group of students consists of Sophia and Nicholas, who referenced the systems of support they had encountered in their academic probation. For both, these resources had left them feeling like the university cared about them and their persistence. Sophia discussed professors and advisors when discussing how she felt supported. She said:

My dean, when I was academic warning and probation, she wasn't all stern like you are in trouble type stuff. She was like, *ok, how are we going to fix this, what do you need to do, what class do you need to take to make this better, what would be best for you.* And that is what I feel like VU is for you...to help you better yourself. ..I feel like there is a big support system here at Valley.

Nicholas's comments were similar; he identified the very presence of an academic warning system as a powerful indicator of the care and thought the university extended to its students. He contrasted the academic warning system to what he imagined he would have found at

another large public university he had considered attending and acknowledged that there, he would have likely been lost, feeling like he was struggling alone.

Both students had first-hand knowledge of the scaffolding at Valley because they had had to rely on it for their persistence through the first year. The structure of academic probation at Valley requires that students meet one-on-one not only with an academic advisor but with the instructor for each class so that they can discuss their struggles and seek additional assistance and guidance. This system forces students to interact with the university's administration in ways many students don't need to do. For Sophia and Nicholas their descriptions of the experiences overall were positive, creating a desire to stay and work harder. In addition, both Nicholas and Sophia compared their experiences to their friends at other institutions, noting the positive, supportive environment at VU. It is possible that these comparisons, coupled with their own encounters with faculty and administrators, reinforced their commitment to VU.

In considering the students' sense of institutional commitment, combined with their psychosocial engagement and their perceptions of communal potential, one sees how the constructs interact and interrelate. My data reveals that students' ability to locate and connect to a group of friends can happen within the first hours and days of school; from there, they may branch out from these transitional agents to seek new friends. Relationships seem to naturally form through housing and activities; the proximity of living space provides a natural "in" for those less able or willing to get involved, but social reward seems to come to those who connect to the university community through involvement. I would argue that positive experiences in getting involved reinforce their commitment to the university and to

their peers. Embedded in all of this is the ability for the university to communicate its commitment to students and their welfare. Institutional agents have a strong impact, and the scaffolding the university establishes (e.g., mentoring programs, academic warning systems) through which these agents operate can speak volumes to students regarding their sense of belonging and commitment. I also argue that students receive messages of validation, both from institutional messages and through agents. I turn to this subject next.

### **Validation**

As discussed in Chapter 2, validation is defined as “an enabling, confirming and supportive process” (p. 44) stimulated by agents who encourage students’ academic and personal development. In Chapter 5, I explored validation as a means of additional social capital. In this chapter, I extend Rendón’s theory by positing that students may receive validation from the act of being selected by the institution of their choice, although selection, for some, stimulates a series of complex feelings. I begin by exploring this phenomenon using students’ voices but abandon the archetype labels. This is because the concepts of this kind of validation extended through all archetypes with few differences between groups.

#### **Validation Via Selection**

Valley University’s selectivity seemed to serve as a form of validation for some students; students felt ‘chosen’ in a process that is highly competitive for positions that are highly coveted. With a 35 % acceptance rate, VU is known nationally and regionally as a “highly selective” university, and these messages are not lost on those students who get chosen. Since many of the students in my study are the first in their families to attend college, this concept of selectivity was perhaps even more potent.

Julian shared the thoughts he had in his first days on campus. He said, “I’d never seen this place before. When I was able to get out and walk around on campus, I grasped what I had done which was, wow, you got here. You are with the best in the country, good job, pat yourself on the back and get to work because there is work to be done.” Julian received validation for his ability to among the “best” and he continued to receive validating messages from professors and peers that he belonged at VU. As we know, Julian’s status as the child of undocumented immigrants was highly salient to his identity. In addition, it is possible that he received additional validation for feeling like he overcame a number of obstacles to be at VU.

Jackie expressed the ways in which she felt connected to Valley University and how she received validation regarding her place at the institution. When I asked her what she liked at being a student at VU, she replied, “I like the school, the pride on the campus, I cheer for football games. I don’t know, just feeling prestigious just because I am at a prestigious university.” When I queried as to whether she was proud to attend VU, she said, “I definitely am. Especially when I go back home. I wear my VU shirt... even when I just tell people I go to VU they’re like, ‘oh wow.’”

Jackie’s comments reveal several interesting aspects of this idea of validation. First, she mentions that her feelings of pride and prestige come from being at a top university. Many of the students in this study referenced Valley University’s rankings as a measure of pride and some connected their own feelings of worth with measures of prestige and quality like the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings. Secondly, Jackie’s emphasis that she is “especially” proud when she returns home and shares with people that she attends Valley

University indicates that the validation and pride she feels also comes from the measure of value and quality those in her home community perceive. Their reaction to her achievement reinforces her sense of pride and validation. This finding falls in line with Rendón's concept of validation; some of the most valuable validating agents in students' lives are the family and friends they have at home who encourage them and reinforce that they belong in college.

While Valley University's selectivity served as a form of validation for some students, it also provided messages for the students of my study that certain expectations came with "membership" into the university community. Elena spoke most clearly about this when she discussed her fear of talking to professors in the classes she was most struggling. Her impression was that professors expected her to "know everything" due to the assumptions made about her background and her qualifications in gaining admission to VU. Elena's experience was that she gained validation by being a member of the university community, but felt hindered by the assumptions made about her abilities.

Kelly reiterated these feelings in recounting her experiences seeking extra help from her professors during her first year. She said:

It's intimidating...you get to VU and you think 'I'm smart, I'm here, VU is a good school' and it's sort of intimidating at first...I'm really struggling, I need to ask for all this help because you figure people will look at you and think, you don't belong here, you shouldn't be here, let me think of how you might have gotten here.

Kelly received validation regarding her acceptance to VU but her experiences with individual professors left her worried that they questioned her abilities. She continued:

I guess the expectation is if you're here, you can do the work and you should do it well. And to be struggling and struggling a lot and to always be going to that professor and always needing that extra help, always asking for extra review...It's like a professor looked at me like I don't think this kid belongs here.



Kelly's recounting of her academic efforts despite feeling invalidated reveals her persistence in moving through those doubts. She ended her discussion by commenting that asking for extra help was "awkward, but you get over it." Therefore, Kelly did not rely solely on messages of validation regarding her place at the university and her ability to be a contributing member of the community.

Kelly's comments regarding her validation shed light on another aspect of Rendón's theory, which involves the role of validating agents. I turn to that subject and use Sophia's experiences at VU as a means of exploring both the concept and the interrelatedness of the actions of agents within the institution in terms of validation.

### **Validating Agents**

As mentioned previously, Rendón's theory of validation hinges on the actions of validating agents, individuals both in and out of the classroom who provide students messages affirming that they belong at the institution and have contributions to make. Students can receive validation from peers, faculty, mentors and family members. It is important to note that validation goes beyond just emotional support; students who feel validated receive messages of affirmation regarding their membership in the university community.

Rendón encourages university administrators and professors to provide validating messages and experiences early and often in a student's time in college; she posits that these early positive messages can form a foundation from which students can rely later. Sophia's discussion of her experiences with validation supports Rendón's recommendation. During Sophia's tenure in the Stars Academic Program the summer before her fall 2007 entrance,

she struggled with a course and questioned her ability to successfully complete the class. She recounted to me:

They - as in professors and faculty - they expect a lot out of you... 'you wouldn't be here if we didn't think that you could do the work.' That's what Dean Reese told me all summer when I was trying to withdraw from the anthropology class and I actually believe that now.... They expect you to go above and beyond what you had done before. They actually challenge you to think for yourself.

Like other students discussed previously, Sophia received affirmation that she belonged at VU because she had been admitted to the university. Students held fast to this notion that they had what it took to be a VU student as they faced the realities and difficulties of adjusting to college. What is important to note is that while this kind of validation is important to students, it alone cannot sustain them. Instead students in my study demonstrated the need to tap into other resources at their disposal – both within themselves and through connection with others in the community – if they were to positively integrate into the university community and persist. As is evidenced by Sophia's path at VU, the validating messages she received from professors and administrators was not necessarily enough to provide her what she needed. Perhaps it is the combination of validating messages and aspects of self-efficacy in students that merge to give students a sense of their own abilities and skills.

### **Issues with Validation**

Although Rendón's concept of validation is a key construct of my original theoretical frame, I found little data to support it as central to the students' experiences. I believe one reason for this is that Valley University culture may influence validation in more subtle ways. First, Valley University, despite its large size, does work to promote ways in which

students and faculty can interact in smaller forums (e.g., small first year advising based classes [called COLAs], the “take your professor to lunch” program, second year seminars), which in turn provide students opportunities to receive validating messages from powerful agents at the university. Second, VU’s pervasive messages regarding student involvement as a standard expectation of all students, while certainly in line with Rendón’s critique of the traditional, passive stance on student engagement and involvement, provides students a message regarding their potential to be contributing members of the community.

Another interesting point is the perceptions of validation from family, friends and teachers. For the students in this study, they received messages regarding their ability to perform well in college throughout their K-12 years. Parents who encouraged their children to apply to the best schools were sending validating messages to them that they could achieve; once in school, these students continued to receive messages from family and teachers that they had the capacity to meet their goals and be successful students at VU. Although Rendón’s theory posits that students who are at risk of departure received few validating messages before enrolling in college, the students she studied were first-generation students who faced barriers to success before entering community college. The students of my study are high-achieving and experienced many successes. Perhaps, in light of these differences, overt forms of validation are not necessary or as relevant to students’ success.

To this point of the chapter, I have explored the students’ perceptions of themselves as students at VU, both academically and socially. In these latter sections of the chapter, I explore the students’ perceptions of themselves within the larger social frame of the VU environment.

### **“I just try to be normal”: Low-income Students’ Perceptions of Their College Lives**

In the following section, I explore aspects of the students’ experiences as low-income students at Valley University. These include discussions of money, relationships with family and peers, and perceptions of class position. In an effort to more thematically explore the experiences of the students I purposely do not use the archetypes to distinguish students.

I begin with a brief discussion of the students’ perceptions of the financial aid policies that enabled them to attend VU virtually cost free; I divide this section in two, discussing both how the students related the financial aid to their ability to persist and how they saw the financial aid VU offered them as a sign of the institution’s commitment to their welfare. I then turn to an exploration of the students’ perceptions of class boundaries, noting the feelings of similarity and difference students had with their middle and upper-class peers.

#### **Perceptions of Financial Aid**

Financial aid is a form of economic capital and serves as a resource that can aid students in accessing other forms of capital, namely social and cultural capital (Nunez, 2009). The financial aid offered to students through the VU Promise initiative enabled the students of my study to enroll and attend at no or low cost. Therefore, these students’ ongoing persistence was intrinsically tied to financial aid. The majority of the students I interviewed mentioned this explicitly in their conversations about their success in continuing into their second year at VU. Their knowledge that the financial aspects of college were covered by grants freed them to focus on their academic studies and extracurricular activities. This finding supports existing research (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Cabrera, Stampen &

Hansen, 1990; St., John, Musoba, & Simmons, 2003) that financial aid can serve as an equalizer for students, facilitating students' persistence and integration.

The majority of the students from my study shared with me their perceptions of what their full grant aid afforded them in terms of time and feelings of stress. Courtney revealed that her financial aid allowed her to focus on other things and not worry about money. She said, "I don't really think about it [financial aid and finances] at all, except for when the time comes where it's like the bill pops up online and mine says I don't owe anything. That's very nice, I must say." Stacey admitted that she felt relieved that she did not have to work to help support herself in college. She said, "[not having a job] is a big thing, and I like it.... I kind of would like to work but also I'm glad I don't have to... I just think that it's added stress that I don't need right now." Dana admitted that her financial aid allowed her to focus on school. She felt lucky in comparison to her middle income friends, who worked and borrowed to get through school. She shared with me that her financial aid, "saves a lot of stress. I know a lot of my friends work and they try to contribute and put the money towards tuition and stuff like that. I guess it makes it more easy [sic] for me to focus on school."

Kelly saw the financial aid as a form of validation and as a reminder of her responsibility to work hard and persist despite challenges and roadblocks. She said, "I'm here and a lot of people, I guess, want me here. Paying for me to be here and I was accepted here. So, I'm not going to leave just because it gets hard. I'll just work harder." Kelly's admission that she was responsible to uphold her responsibilities was echoed in Julian's remarks. He likened the financial aid VU provided him as an "investment" in him. He said:

That's how I see it....you know, me being in an elite school, cool, you know. I'm born with the best in this country, that's how I like to see myself. That's how I hope the university

sees me - not just another Hispanic kid...no, no, no, no...I'm one of the best...you guys thought I was one of the best because of all the stuff I did in high school so that's the end of the story. The fact that you gave me the opportunity, I accept it, thank you very much. Now let me do my work to show you that you've done a hell of an investment on me....

It is possible that for students like Kelly and Julian, the nature of the financial aid (grants not loans) imbued a sense of obligation and commitment that motivated them and assisted them in their persistence. As we know, from earlier analysis, Kelly considered leaving VU, and her comments suggest that, due to her feelings toward her financial aid package, she was more inclined to stay and “work harder” toward graduation.

Many students expressed outright gratitude for the aid they were receiving, often acknowledging that VU provided them with an opportunity not offered by other institutions that they had applied to. Julia shared, “I guess I feel kind of grateful that I’m given this opportunity because if I went to any other school I probably wouldn’t have gotten this much aid. I probably would have graduated with debt.” Other students discussed their wish to thank the president and the financial aid office for giving them the chance to be at VU cost free, acknowledging that their academic paths would have likely involved working and attending community college if it hadn’t been for the financial assistance.

Although many students felt a sense of relief and freedom knowing that financial aid was provided for them, Sophia’s feelings of relief were mixed with guilt. This guilt that she was not taking full advantage of the opportunities afforded to her at Valley sometimes overwhelmed her. She shared that when she was doing well and felt on top of her game, she was able to keep her thoughts in check, but when she struggled she went through a difficult mental dialog. She said:

[Reminders of my financial aid status] come in every day. But not the times that I'm not applying myself but when I have my moments where I realize that I am not doing as well as I should I definitely think about that. *This* is the school that you really, really wanted to come to, you are here without financial worry...it definitely comes into play. Sometimes I still can't believe it - that I'm fully covered. Food, housing, books, everything.... A laptop - I was really shocked about that. With the printer, with the ink - everything - with the case. Everything - there is nothing I can complain about financially, I'm pretty sure the school is going to cover me. That's when I'm like, Sophia, you are not being smart right now because you got the opportunity - there is no reason for you to not succeed. Not only are the finances covered - the school is immaculate. You have all the resources here - professors, deans, everything. I don't know if other schools are exactly like VU - it's just...it's too good to be true and half the time I forget that because I take it for granted sometimes with the way that I do not apply myself. I really take it for granted. So, it definitely comes to my mind.

Sophia's explanation of her internal dialog and strife over her actions reveal her belief that she was under an obligation to the university due to its financial support of her. Like Kelly and Julian, Sophia recognized a reciprocal relationship between the institution's financial support and a responsibility that she felt to work hard and persist at the University. But unlike those students, Sophia's academic performance and faltering sense of academic control left her vulnerable and burdened instead of validated and buoyed. In addition, like many students, Sophia was grateful and thankful, but she was unable to enjoy the gifts received because of her fear that she would have to leave VU.

These findings demonstrate the multiple roles that the generous financial aid package VU offers to its lowest income students in both influencing students feelings of persistence and their feelings of institutional commitment. It is important to note that the students had complex feelings regarding money, financial aid, their perceived class position and their place at the university. Students felt a mix of gratitude, relief, guilt, pride and independence as they thought about themselves and their college peers within the elite university environment.

In the following section I explore the several aspects of the students' lives as low-income students within an elite university culture. As discussed earlier, financial aid seems to act as an equalizer for students, and the data suggest that the presence of full grant aid allowed some students to more easily adapt and blend into the middle-class (and upper-class) environment at VU.

I begin with a discussion of the students' perceptions of themselves and the influence their class background played in their lives at VU. I continue with an exploration of students' stories wherein they were reminded of class differences at VU, including a discussion of housing decisions. I conclude with the students' discussion of the ways in which they perceived themselves as similar to their middle and upper-class peers at VU.

### **Perceptions of Class Boundaries**

In bell hooks (2000) discussion of her experiences "crossing class boundaries" she reflects that her matriculation at an elite institution gave her a "different sense of self" wherein she encountered, for the first time, aspects of classism amongst her middle-class peers. Here, hooks witnessed the privileges of class, noting how the students seemed unaware of its affect on their lives. Similarly, many of the students of my study revealed that their perceptions of themselves as low-income and working-class students were made more vivid through their experiences with peers in the new environment of college.

Courtney admitted that she did not realize her family was considered low-income until she received full aid from VU. She reported asking her mom, "are we poor?" and becoming more aware of the class homogeneity of her home community wherein many of her family members and friends' parents were working-class. Upon coming to VU, she felt



“very aware” that her roommates and friends came from wealthier backgrounds. She said, her friends’ parents “own businesses or are doctors or something of that sort. A lot of the people I live with, their parents own businesses and I know they have a lot of money.” When I probed her to describe how that affected her, she admitted she was hesitant to discuss her family background and instead chose to keep much of it private. She admitted, “People ask what my dad does, but they don’t realize when I say that he works at the [Local Daily Paper] which is our local newspaper, they don’t realize that he’s printing that newspaper and not writing the articles in it.”

In contrast, Julian was open about his family background having written an op-ed piece in the student newspaper in fall 2008 about his life as the child of undocumented workers. He shared with me that in the article:

I state in bold letters - I live in poverty. I am not ashamed of it - has it been very difficult, yes...um, has it brought the worst in me, yes...has it brought out the best in me, yes. People need to know that I live in poverty.

Despite his self-confidence, he admitted that he had been fearful of the prejudice he would face when he first arrived at VU. He was worried he would not find what he called “economic acceptance” within the university’s elite culture. He realized he would be a minority – both racially and economically - and while his racial background would be more evident to his fellow students, he was more fearful of what they would think of his financial background and his “story” of being the son of undocumented workers living in poverty. Julian experienced in the end “an economic challenge of a different kind.” He continued, “I didn’t encounter snobby people, I encountered my own worries” about money and finances. Budgeting his stipend and money earned in a part-time referee job tested Julian’s new found

financial independence. After a stressful first semester, he quickly learned he did not have the resources to mimic his higher income peers in their lifestyle choices, such as dining out, going to the movies or buying clothes. He shared, “I learned you gotta be careful, don’t be spending this. Now I know what to do, where to buy the books, what not to buy as much of. Now that I have that experience...I don’t have the challenge.”

Julian was an anomaly regarding his openness of his family’s background. He seemed to embrace the differences among himself and his friends and shared that these differences allowed him and his friends to talk openly about issues of immigration, poverty, and politics. He seemed to use difference to grow closer to his friends. Most of the other students of my study were less open about their backgrounds and sought out friends “like them.” They talked of having found a group of friends with same morals, values, and viewpoints as them and their wish to seek commonality with peers than to look for difference. When asked, many of these students if they were aware of being a low-income student day to day at VU, the majority of students replied “no.” Despite the lack of daily reminders and, for some, insistence that they were “just like” everyone else at VU, their stories reveal that reminders of difference did occur. I turn to some of these stories next.

**Trigger points.** As discussed, students varied on their experiences with VU students as they immersed themselves in the middle and upper-class student culture. Regardless of their perceptions and feelings regarding class boundaries, students experienced moments of exclusion and difference, which reminded them of differences in background and family resources. For some, it was exchanges with friends and roommates, for others it was encounters with the larger university culture, including faculty, which revealed class

assumptions and biases. Here I explore a few of the students' stories, noting common and unique experiences.

A number of students felt the greatest differences when they were with their friends and roommates. Within the basic day-to-day occurrences such as dining out, shopping, and discussing holiday plans, the students were reminded of how their lives were different. For example, for Courtney it was "when [my friends] say they have ordered food or whatever, they'll be like I have this much money left out of this and I'm waiting for my mom to send me this much money and I'm like wow, that's a lot of money." Mary shared that in hanging out with friends, "you hear about people's vacation homes or something. Or like mostly like the girls are like '*Oh my god I just spent \$1000 online today*' or something like that. So it's not day-to-day but it's obvious sometimes." Nicholas noted that a number of his friends in his a capella group were from wealthier backgrounds than he. He said, "when I'm out to dinner with them and conversation will come up and it's like they can't relate to me because they haven't lived a lower middle-class lifestyle." He continued, "I believe there is a separation in my relationships with kids who do come from upper-class backgrounds just because we can't relate to each other on that level." I asked him how that difference manifested itself and he admitted "it's just attitudes towards finances. ..obviously I don't have the money to be going to like these high class restaurants three times a week. But there are people who are like, *hey do you want to go...* and I'm like, I can't do that." I questioned Nicholas as to whether his friends were aware of the differences and he speculated that they were not aware because they "are the majority." Nicholas had not discussed outright his family's background but he admitted "I've encouraged people to not make assumptions about

my background.” For students like Nicholas, Courtney and Mary, these interactions reminded them of the gaps that existed between them and their friends, and these encounters perhaps left them feeling vulnerable to bringing these differences to light through telling their own stories. As Nicholas observed, he was in the minority in terms of class position, and his desire was to find commonality between himself and his friends through their love of music and singing.

Two students, Jenny and Max, participated in sorority and fraternity rush, despite the fact that they did not intend on joining. Jenny shared, “I knew I wasn’t going to pledge a sorority. And so I just kind of wanted to see what it was like ‘cause I knew if I didn’t rush, I’d regret it and I just kind of wanted to convince myself that it’s okay not to be in one.” A result of her exploration was a heightened sense of difference between herself and her friends. She shared, “I mean you do realize it, just like the lifestyle the people have. People decide to go eat out more than others or spend more money and things like sororities and fraternities and other activities that cost more money.” Max participated in rush because he was curious about the culture. He shared with me that he told the men he met that he couldn’t afford joining a fraternity because he was a “scholarship guy.” When I pressed him regarding this, he admitted that he told no one he was a VU Promise student, instead referencing his \$6,000 private scholarship he received. In addition, he admitted that “no one on campus” was aware he was a VU Promise student except the financial aid and admissions offices and me. It seems that the private scholarship served as a legitimate and accepted form of aid in Max’s mind, whereas the full grant coverage provided by VU Promise revealed aspects of his life he was not willing to disclose to friends and peers.

For some students, reminders of difference occurred in the classroom. Jackie was made aware of the privileges of her middle and higher income classmates by a classmate in one of her science courses. Jackie recounted to me, “a student told me that a lot of students here they have...they have private tutors if they can afford it and they have parents who can [pay for the extra help].” Jackie expressed surprise and rationalized that “those students” had “their reasons for doing that...and I have mine.” She discussed that her feelings of pride and optimism regarding her success in courses sustained her when she felt limited by resources. Kelly noted the absence of discourse on class difference in courses. She said, “I feel like it’s not talked about. I almost feel as if everyone, my friends, peers, TAs, teachers, everyone sort of feels as if everyone at this school is from a better off family and they don’t really think that there’s low-income students here.” Like other students discussed above, Kelly was made aware that she was a member of an economic minority on campus and the results of that were feeling invisible. I would argue that invisibility’s benefits include the students’ ability to blend in with their middle-class peers, which the students in my study sought to maintain. A less positive result is that their invisibility may have left them feeling misunderstood and stereotyped. As Nicholas noted, he did not want his friends making assumptions about him because of his class background and we can infer that he was concerned about negative stereotypes.

When I met with the students in their second year, they had for the most part settled into life at VU, having found activities and friendship groups in which to connect. Students were also facing housing decisions that, for some, forced them to consider revealing themselves as low-income students to their friends. I turn to this specific trigger point next.

*Housing.* One particularly salient reminder of students' financial background revolved around decisions to move off campus for their junior year. At VU, a large percentage of third and fourth year students move into off campus housing, such as houses and apartment complexes scattered throughout the city. The timing of my second interview with all students fell around the time that they were facing these decisions, as lease agreements and dormitory contracts were coming due. As a result, many students were negotiating these decisions and engaging in conversations with friends about money and financial background for the first time. The students' stories of these experiences reveal the complexity of "outing" themselves in this manner.

Marcus briefly considered living off campus for his third year but was fearful that his financial aid allotment for housing would not cover the costs. In the end he decided to sign up to live in an on-campus language house for his junior year. He shared with me that, if fellow students asked him why he was planning on living on campus, his reply was, "oh I live in a language house so I'm there for a special reason." Similarly, Elena's friends requested that she live off campus with them, but when she learned about the average rent prices for nearby apartments, she balked. In the end, she told friends that she wanted to stay on campus so she could be nearer to the nursing school, thereby living in housing that was completely covered by her financial aid package. Interestingly both students shared that they were hesitant to tell friends of their concerns regarding money and instead relied on the more obvious aspects of their lives (e.g., academic major, language interest) as the reasons for their housing decisions.

Other students reported that discussions with friends about housing provided a forum in which to find commonalities regarding finances instead of feelings of difference. Rebecca shared that housing conversations with close friends revealed that they, too, were on full financial aid through VU Promise. She stated, “I had no idea, we just didn’t talk about family, you know money. But like finding housing for next year, we were all in the same dilemma of getting money for housing and what that entails and they’re actually in the same situation as me....they are on full grants.” Similarly, Jackie found that her closest friend and roommate, although not on full financial aid like her, had the same goal of finding “reasonable” housing for their junior year, allowing them to agree upon a budgeted and affordable rent range. Both students found that the housing conversation allowed them to reveal more personal aspects of their lives with little risk.

Two students shielded themselves from outright discussions about their financial backgrounds by relying on more middle-class, and acceptable, forms of income to cover housing costs. Mary and her future roommates were facing pressure from their parents to find affordable housing, leaving Mary in a position in which she did not have to reveal her own financial constraints. In addition, Mary was planning on finding part-time employment to help finance her housing costs and admitted that many of her middle-class friends had jobs, too. She seemed to view her job as a means of normalizing her situation with her middle-class peers, giving her an additional reason (besides her low-income background) for wanting to find housing with a reasonable rent. Max viewed the \$6,000 private scholarship he had received as his “housing money” and only discussed this money publicly with his friends as they negotiated living options. Max did not reveal that he was on full aid through VU

Promise despite the fact that he received an additional housing stipend through this assistance. Again for Max, the scholarship was a legitimate form of aid that he felt comfortable discussing with his middle-class friends.

Other students like Dana, Nicholas, Julia and Mark found housing for their junior year that fit well within their budgets and VU Promise housing stipends. In turn, none of them reported having talked with their friends about their financial aid status or their monetary restrictions.

**“I am just a normal student.”** I’ve revealed aspects of the students’ lives in which they faced reminders of the economic differences between themselves and their middle and upper-class peers at VU. Despite these differences, many of the students in my study shared stories of how they felt “just like everyone else” at Valley University. All students participated in many of the normal activities students take part in during college; they dined out with friends, purchased new, trendy clothes at nearby shops, and owned iPods, cell phones and other electronic gadgets. Several students studied abroad, either for the semester or over the shortened winter term. They attended sporting events, concerts, and plays and, in general, blended into the larger university community.

For some students, the financial aid seemed to give them a feeling of equal footing with their wealthier peers. For Kelly, she freely spent the small pockets of money her parents gave her. She said, “I feel like it’s mine to do whatever with, because I have a financial support for the necessities from the school....I don’t feel guilty, though. I feel privileged.” When I asked Mark about what his financial aid package provided him, he explained that it provided him an opportunity to be “normal.” He said:



I [don't] want to be thought of as just someone who got here on a full ride because of their income level. I just don't want to really put that out there - I just want to blend in as much as possible so as to experience college as others would normally do.

Students also revealed that, despite differences in family background, they focused on the commonalities they had with other students. Sophia summed it up well. She shared “sometimes I almost forget that the majority of people here are - or their families - are really wealthy and here I am, from [a] small town, my mother makes less than \$20,000 a year but honestly I never think about that day to day.” She continued, “We are all here - we all have our different struggles with school, we are trying to make it regardless of how much money our family has. We all have the same stupid related problems so I honestly sometimes forget that I'm financially different from the other students.”

Interestingly, most students reported incidences of feeling guilt as they heard their middle-class friends discuss loans, student debt, and part time jobs in relation to college costs. Again, Sophia's description provides a strong example of this dynamic. She shared, “I feel kind of bad because [my] roommate that is always complaining about the finances, her mom makes more than what would require her to apply for VU Promise but yet she doesn't make enough to fully pay for school so she is kind of caught in the middle.” As was discussed earlier, students' feelings of gratitude and relief were complex, and for some, feelings of guilt reinforced their desire to keep quiet about their financial aid and try to feel normal.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of students in my study were not forthright about their financial aid support with their closest friends. To “out” oneself in that

way might risk affecting relationships with friends from wealthier backgrounds and force uncomfortable conversations about difference, poverty, and struggle.

Despite the powerful influence the aid had on students' ability to integrate within the larger student body, there were also reminders of difference regarding class and family background that the students encountered in their daily lives at VU. Faced with cultural norms that were dictated by middle-class rules and strictures, the students in my study encountered a social world in which privilege and opportunity could not be 'bought' with generous financial aid. I now turn to an exploration of the students' experiences using a Bourdieuan framework.

### **Students' Experiences and Social Reproduction**

Although the data for my study reveal the powerful effects of human agency on persistence and integration, it would be a disservice to the students of my study to only explore their experiences in college through this lens. Implicit in these frameworks is the notion that the responsibility for action and engagement lies primarily with the student. While it is important to consider the power of the students' own sense of academic control and ability to integrate socially and academically in their commitment to persist at VU, one cannot ignore the influence of social stratification and social reproduction in their lives. As was discussed in the previous chapter on the students' pre-college experiences, their paths to college were influenced by their access to and use of valuable forms of cultural and social capital. For some, their families provided them a strong framework in which to connect to legitimized forms of capital and, for others, the school systems provided entree into a middle-class world. Still others were limited by their lack of access to opportunity through either

avenue. Bourdieu's framework (1977a, 1977b, 1990) is useful for understanding the complex manner in which human agency interacts with socially structured opportunity to reproduce existing social structure (Walpole, 2007). As in the previous chapter, I rely on the concepts of habitus, social capital and cultural capital to explore the data.

To review, habitus is seen as one's "system of lasting, transposable dispositions, which, integrating past experiences function at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions" (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 82 – 83). As a mediating link between individuals and their social worlds, habitus shapes aspirations, actions and attitudes. Habitus is viewed as an "amalgam" of one's past and present, and as such is open to change. Although unconscious and therefore not able to be reshaped through reflection or will, Bourdieu (1984) argues that habitus "is no more fixed than the practices which it helps to structure" (p. 466). This allows us to look at how students' situations may be changed or reproduced within institutions such as schools and universities (Tett, 2004). In turn, we can gain some understanding of students' habitus through their actions and words.

Acquisition and utilization of one's social capital and cultural capital are shaped by an individual's habitus. Social capital serves as a source of "network mediated benefits beyond the immediate family" (Portes, 1998, p. 12). Social capital, as networks, must be created through individual agency and provide a source of benefit. Social capital as presented by Bourdieu (1986) has two key elements; first, the social relationships allow individuals of these networks to access benefits afforded to all members, and second, there are inherent aspects of quality and benefit to membership (Bourdieu, 1986; Dika & Singh, 2002).

Cultural capital is the general knowledge, and dispositions transmitted to individuals through family culture. Schools, as institutions, reward the cultural capital of the dominant classes and can devalue the cultural capital of the working-class and low-income students (Farkas, et al., 1990; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; MacLeod, 1995). Schools provide an environment in which highly valued cultural capital is parlayed into academic excellence and access to highly valued forms of social capital. Academic achievement and strong social ties in college can lead to access to further advantage, such as admission to graduate school or the acquisition of a high-paying job. As sites of social reproduction, colleges and universities reflect the dominant class's values, therefore making it more difficult for those from working-class families to acquire the necessary competencies for inclusion (Farkas, et al., 1990; Lamont and Lareau, 1988). Students' encounters and experiences within this new "field" with which they are unfamiliar can result in disjunctures that have the power to change and transform (Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009).

As was discussed in the previous chapter, I argue that this study's students' *habiti* reflects their straddling between two social class positions. The students in this study were "exceptions to the rule" as low-income students seeking upward mobility through education at an elite institution (Bettie, 2002; Reay et al., 2009). Like Reay et al.'s (2009) "strangers in paradise" the students in my study had been influenced by educational socialization in their K-12 years that prepared them academically and socially for life at an elite university like VU. That said, there is evidence of the effects of social class differences in their lives.

When analyzing the student data what emerged, as in the previous findings chapter, was a set of students whose *habiti* and capital formation aligned more with middle-class

norms than their working-class backgrounds. Despite this similar pattern, what also emerges is a nuance around aspects of students' habitus formation. I do not argue that some of the students in my study *were* middle-class students, but instead, building on their previous experiences in high school, adapted and adjusted in response to perceptions of the norms. As students sitting on the boundaries of two social classes, they were shaped by past and present lives in addition to their aspirations for the future. What results from this position, for some students, is the ability and comfort in enacting the highly valued capital of their middle-class peers. Conversely, one sees that those who had more difficulty in transitioning to and succeeding at VU were enacting habitus and capital formation, which was not rewarded within the elite university culture.

For this chapter I explore the interplay between the students' perceptions and actions and the larger field of Valley University. Data are presented without archetype labels. Like the previous chapter, the students displayed the habitus that was more in alignment with middle-class students. The greatest differences were between the first three archetypes and the last archetype. I begin with a discussion of the ways in which students did and did not display the habitus of their middle-class peers. Specifically I focus on students' data around their perceptions of their position on the boundaries between classes. From this foundation, I briefly explore several areas of students' acquisition and enactment social capital, looking at students' formal and informal network formation with peers, administrators and faculty. In addition, I briefly discuss the effects of a lack of highly valued cultural capital on habitus, looking specifically at Sophia's perceptions of herself at VU.

### **Evidence of Social Mobility Habitus**

The permeability of social group boundaries has been explored in the social psychology literature (Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), revealing that individuals employ social mobility strategies in an effort to achieve positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish, & Hodge, 1996). These strategies include pursuit of higher education as a means of gaining membership into perceived “high status” groups (Crocker, McGraw, Thompson, & Ingerman, 1987). Although individuals seeking membership in “high status” groups may employ overt strategies in an effort to gain mobility, they maintain a position on the boundary, influenced by both their existing membership and their aspirations. This can be evidenced in myriad ways, including their perceptions and their actions. For this study, I explore both areas as means of discussing the influences on students’ shifting habitus. Specifically I look at students’ views of themselves as low-income students in an elite culture.

One way in which students’ class position perspective emerged was in the ways they compared or contrasted themselves with other, wealthier VU students. As a means of acknowledging their border position between their family’s class position and their submersion in an elitist environment, some students noted the ways in which they were different than their wealthier peers, often seeing their working-class perspectives as “better.” This emerged as the students discussed how they grappled with and negotiated their place at a school filled with wealthier students. Dana discussed how she possessed many of the trappings of her fellow students (e.g., trendy clothes, an iPod, laptop computer) but noted the difference in how she obtained these things. She said, “I work ...so for the most part I

generally get what I want. Not like in a spoiled way but if I want to get something, then I work hard for it.” She continued, “In a way, I like that more than students who are a lot wealthier and well off and they get it from their parents and stuff.” Similarly, Daniel noted how he perceived the differences between himself and upper income peers. He shared,

From what I’ve seen, those kids were really a bit spoiled in that their expense are all paid by their parents - they are driving an SUV to school, stuff like that and basically ...they go to school but they are not...really interested in schoolwork at all. So I’m glad that I’m not too wealthy - I mean socioeconomical [sic] situation where I’m not too wealthy but that makes you more independent I guess and that makes you know how to value money better and that makes you value things differently like not taking things for granted.

In Daniel and Dana’s remarks we see an “othering” of themselves cast against the values and actions of those from a different and institutionally valued social class. These students discussed their working-class values as more attractive. Other students saw these differences as a form of exclusion, despite their wishes to “fit in” and find commonality. This was most striking in my interview with Michael. When asked about what he disliked most about attending VU, he replied:

I feel a lot of rich people come to VU just because of the way that they dress and the car they are driving...I feel kind of like being left out because people who wear nice clothes or drive nice cars tends to form their own group and then they don’t want to hang out with you because your financial situation or things like that. I think that is the worst part of being a student here.

In Michael’s words we hear how hurt he felt at being judged by students because of his family background. His discussion evidences the forms of acceptable cultural capital displayed by middle-class students and the feelings of inadequacy and alienation lower income students can feel.

A few students talked frankly about their ability to negotiate their emerging class position. While not a comfortable place to fall, students perceived it as a natural result of their position nestled between their family's social class position and their educational paths. Kelly's comments are perhaps the most clear regarding this positioning. Having attended both a private wealthy prep school and a city public high school, she admitted that her transition to life at VU was aided by her ability to "be" with:

The upper-class rich snobby white kid and the lower class average person. I felt like with having the two backgrounds I could sort of just embed myself with anyone. I don't feel like it's necessarily changing myself to reflect, like being a chameleon with different groups. I just feel like having the knowledge of the two groups and sort of how they function and just knowing, I don't know, natural, I don't know if that makes any sense. To just be with them. I don't feel like I have to really think about anything or really prepare myself to be around a certain type of people or anything like that.

Max's perspectives regarding his social class position provide insight into his view of himself as a member of the middle-class and not the working-class, despite the financial background of his family. He stated:

Most of my friends aren't necessarily low-income. I don't have....I have friends on scholarship but not on full ride, need based scholarships and I guess it's not that I'm trying to segregate myself from other social classes but it's just interesting that socially, I feel like I'm in...I don't know...I feel like I wouldn't be able to identify [with low-income students at VU].

In Kelly and Max we see students whose capital formation and access positioned them either comfortably in dual social classes or firmly entrenched in the middle-class perspectives. As we know from earlier in the chapter, their adjustment to college life at VU went more smoothly than Michael's perhaps in part because of the congruous influences of both middle-class and working-class habitus positions.



Another distinct area of college attendance and aspirations that embraces middle-class norms is the area of post-graduate plans. In research on the college choice and experience patterns of students from various social class backgrounds, Walpole (2003) discussed that aspirations to and pursuit of graduate education were primarily the domain of those from the middle and upper-class. She argued that low-income students who seek to convert their accumulated capital toward graduate school attendance – and the higher career aspirations that accompany that goal – display a habitus aligned with their upper income peers. As we learned earlier in the chapter, the majority of the students in my study aspired to graduate or professional school upon graduation. Students like Max, Marcus and Lila had clear paths determined as to how to reach their post graduate educational and professional goals. For them, it wasn't a question of whether to attend graduate school, but a question of where to go and how to select the appropriate area of professional focus in order to meet long-term goals. Conversely, the students who displayed the habitus of their working-class backgrounds – namely Sophia and Nicholas – discussed graduate school in different terms and with greater trepidation. I would argue that the culture at VU shaped their perceptions of graduate school as something they *should do* versus something that they considered possible. As they considered what “people like themselves” did for careers, these students had difficult merging their aspirations and sense of limitations.

What becomes apparent from this exploration is how the students emerging habitus shaped their perceptions. As Baxter and Britton (2001) note, low-income students who attend elite universities are “on a trajectory of class mobility, which is experienced as a painful dislocation between an old and newly developing habitus” (p. 99). As is evidenced,

accommodating for a new and for some, uncomfortable environment, forces students to face and negotiate difficult discontinuities. I believe these perspectives shape how students view their sense of privilege and power over enacting valuable forms of social capital, namely in the form of networks.

### **Social Networks and Social Capital Formation**

I explored the students' social capital primarily in the form of networks, both informal and formal. In what follows, I look at the students' access to and engagement with both peer and faculty/administrator networks. I use the students' extracurricular involvement as a lens in which to look at their means of accessing and activating social capital because of the value the university culture places on involvement reflects the "field" or the inherent rules and norms of Valley U. environment.

**Enacting social capital through peers.** Almost all students discussed making connections with older students as a means of accessing valuable cultural capital, often in the form of insider, college knowledge. Although the scope of my study did not extend into exploring the perceived strength of these informal networks, one can assume that some students in the study were better able to access networks that were valuable for their social capital capabilities; namely that the networks provided valuable information (quality) and were sizeable in their potential to link members to other, valuable networks (quantity). Although I am unable to determine the strength and size of any of the study participants' peer networks through a network analysis (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), I can make some assumptions about their potential as sources of social capital based on both my knowledge of the

university culture and how the students described their peer networks. This perspective is supported by Foley and Edwards (1999) who stated:

Social networks provide direct access to both resources and information. They also constitute the most proximate spheres of interaction in which individuals come to perceive resources to be both available and valuable. Individual or collective actors can be said to have social capital when resources are present and accessible, in other words when they are actually available for use. Thus, social capital = resources + access....Measures of access can be taken as indirect indicators of social capital in the sense that one cannot have social capital available without access, so more means of access increases one's *likelihood* of having greater social capital available for use. (p. 28)

Students in the study varied in their possible access to social capital through social networks.

On one end of the continuum was Marcus, who was heavily involved in multiple organizations around campus. He held a position in the student judiciary system, served as both a mentor and mentee for the Office of African American Affairs and maintained membership in an active religious organization on campus. Without knowing a great deal about the makeup of the people in these various organizations, one can surmise that Marcus had a great ability to tap into the valuable social capital of the dominant culture when and if needed. All three of his primary organizations were embedded in the culture of VU, especially the student judiciary system, which has been in place since the university's founding in the 1800s.

One could surmise that Sophia fell along the other end of this continuum; because her coursework and six-hour job took a great deal of her time, she limited her extracurricular activities, having joined a choral group the first semester of her second year. In our interviews, she shared with me her hopes to become involved in a social sorority, join the band's color guard and begin to integrate into the university community in other ways. She

was waiting to get involved until her grades were better because she was worried that more activities would distract her from her priorities. By her own admission, her friendship circle was very small (her three roommates) and these friends used their free time for school work and jobs. Therefore, between her lack of involvement and her small social group, she was unable to tap into strong sources of social capital. Again, if social capital = resources + access, Sophia was at a distinct disadvantage in obtaining social capital due to her lack of access to potential resources.

**Social capital through access to formal institutional agents.** Just as access to institutional agents proved helpful in students' paths to college, it seemed important to again locate and be aided by similar agents at VU as a means of enacting the necessary capital to succeed (Coleman, 1988; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001). Patterns for seeking institutional agents mirror much of what we learned earlier about their comfort in and action toward seeking out faculty. But from a social reproduction standpoint, one sees the value of connecting with faculty or other institutional agents as a means of gaining access to valuable information limited to students more familiar with the college culture.

Jackie's experiences with a faculty mentor provide the most vivid portrait of this kind of valuable social capital. Jackie tapped into a source of social capital through her connections in the Office of African American Affairs. Specifically, she found assistance from one of the deans, Dean Susan Smith an African American who earned her Ph.D. in Chemistry (Valley University '07). Jackie first got to know her through attending study session that Dean Smith held for interested students. After two semesters of attending these sessions, Jackie began arranging periodic appointments with Dean Smith seeking out advice

on courses and other activities Jackie was involved in. When I asked Jackie whether Dean Smith provided close one-on-one meetings with all students, Jackie replied, “She has like a select few...a select few of students. And I know people in sciences...there are pretty much like five of us that I would say she’s connected to ...a few others in my year as far as I am concerned.”

Jackie’s relationship with Dean Smith is a form of social capital both because of its selective membership and the kind of information distributed within this tight network; as a successful Black woman with a terminal degree in Chemistry from Valley University, Dean Smith possesses a great deal of powerful capital for the students she is close to. The women and men under her tutelage learn about how to best negotiate the rigorous science curriculum from a person with first-hand knowledge and insider connections. In fact, Jackie shared with me that Dean Smith had made special arrangements for her to shadow a doctor for several weeks in the summer, allowing Jackie a chance few other sophomore students were given.

When I asked Jackie how and why she knew to take advantage of the opportunities with Dean Smith, she credited her older, college-going sisters, and stated, “I don’t know. I think we just learned from each other.” This reply implies a family-based habitus for Jackie and her sisters in which their perceptions and aspirations shaped their actions. Jackie’s perspective of this faculty relationship as a natural and rightful part of her college path displays a level of entitlement often held by middle-class students. That she and her sisters “learned” to take these actions connotes their position on the boundaries between social classes.

Like Jackie, Max actively sought out institutional agents that could help him on his path to medical school. He recounted for me an exchange he had with a person he had met at a recent wedding. He said, “So, I have a connection, I haven’t used yet but it’s a card in my hand of my sister’s husband’s aunt...[she] works at VU’s hospital and she is in charge of an internship program. She offered [me her card] at a wedding I went to...she said, just call me sometime.” Max did not question whether to play his ‘card’ but *when* to do so, indicating a perspective more bounded by middle-class norms than working-class.

Other students in the study had not taken the early actions of Max and Jackie. Some students seemed limited by their *habiti*, especially within the new field at VU. Their fear and insecurity over seeking out institutional agents overrode their knowledge that they knew they “had to” in order to obtain strong letters of recommendation or other connections that could help them in their post-graduate careers. Their unwillingness to exhibit some of the strategic behaviors – such as networking and seeking out additional opportunities – that they displayed in high school indicates that the new environment at VU was influencing their *habiti* in ways that was limiting them.

Interestingly, it seems that the strictures of academic probation at VU provided students with access to strong social capital networks, but unlike the other examples discussed, these relationships were formed out of the formal rules and regulations meant to help failing students stay at VU. Sophia and Nicholas were required to meet with an associate dean of advising, whose job responsibilities encompassed steering faltering students toward necessary and valuable resources at VU. This required contact provided Sophia and Nicholas advantage that other students who were in many ways equally disconnected from institutional

agents (e.g., Dana, Rebecca and Julia) were without. Unfortunately, Sophia and Nicholas were not required to maintain this relationship with the advisor once their probation terms were completed. Ideally, they would have used the connection to build their networks, but at the time of my interviews with them it was too early to tell if this would occur. This begs the question of whether non-voluntary membership within social networks has any lasting effects or power over changing one's habitus.

We can chalk up differences among students, in part to issues of maturity and the concepts discussed earlier, like self-efficacy and feelings of institutional connection, but exploring the students' experiences through the social reproduction lens affords us an opportunity to critique the inherent structures and limits of the institutional environment. I turn next to an exploration of the students' perceptions of themselves and their environment due to an absence of class discourse at Valley University.

### **Cultural Capital - Absence of Class Discourse Left Students Feeling Inferior**

As we learned earlier in the chapter, students felt it necessary to maintain silence regarding their class background due to the prevalence of middle-class norms and perspectives on campus. One can argue that this silence is evidence of an absence of class-based discourse and class critique within the academic and larger university community. In this absence, students adopted a meritocratic view, buying into its basic tenants of individualistic efforts and the resulting rewards (or punishments) for not "working hard enough." In turn, some students blamed themselves for their academic struggles and shortcomings. With no space in which to critique and question, they were unable to put their situation in perspective. When individuals believe in the achievement ideology (if you work

hard you will succeed), the result that is that failures become internalized (Kuriloff & Reichart, 2003).

Students' discussions on their perceptions and struggles at VU reflected some acknowledgement of this vicious and harmful cycle. Daniel noted, "a lot of low-income students, they feel like they are not as competent as many other students - at least [that's how] I thought of it before I entered VU. I thought I'm not as academically competent as other students." The effects of the "meritocracy myth" at VU were most evident in Sophia's struggles and challenges academically.

Sophia, with little previous exposure to elite college culture, was at a disadvantage in terms of acquiring necessary social and cultural capital. When I asked Sophia to recall what she was most worried about before coming to Valley, she replied,

Not knowing anyone, being lost, and mainly professors' expectations of me because I always envisioned as this "you are on your own, we are not here to help you, you either know it or you don't, get out of my class". Just coming from movies...you are not prepared for class so please leave. So I was really nervous before class...like almost about to cry the day before class. I was just so nervous because in high school I knew all the teachers; I had a good reputation with them. And I just envisioned professors as, I don't know, very harsh, not willing to help you.

What is striking in her answer is both the source of her knowledge about university culture (mass media – movies, TV shows) and her perspective on the possible relationship structure she envisioned having with academic professors. Because of Sophia's background, her perceptions of college academic life were influenced by popular culture, thereby instilling her with a less valuable form of cultural capital. In addition, we see in her remark a knowledge that strong networks with teachers had the potential to provide her important benefits, but she worried of her ability to translate that in the new environment.



In addition, her acquired habitus engendered her attitudes and conduct in such a way as to respond to later educational difficulties in ways that, while they may have felt safe and right to her, did not embody the standards necessary to succeed in college. This is demonstrated by the story she recounts to me regarding her experiences in her first class during the summer before her first year. She enrolled in an anthropology course and she reported:

When I got in there, everything was over my head. I didn't understand anything, the reading was so dense. And I would re-read and re-read for comprehension and still not know what was going on. But I was scared to ask the teacher for help. If everyone else is getting and I'm not getting it, then it must be me. There is nothing I can actually do....there is nothing the professor can do to help me so I didn't really reach out. And I think that if I had done that I would have done better. But because I thought I didn't know anything, I was behind in the readings, I stopped going to classes, because I was just determined to just withdraw from this class.

Without an accumulation of highly valued cultural capital (e.g., college knowledge) to tap into, Sophia was left to interpret her lack of academic success as her own failings. Her response was to stop going to class, likely as a means to avoid the discomfort she felt in adjusting to the institutional norms of academic success. Her habitus, as the mediating link between herself and her social world, lessened her options of strategies she could employ to perform better in her class. Had she possessed and activated highly valued cultural capital, she likely would have viewed her options differently and chosen a different path, seeking out help from her professor or other students because she would have viewed them as allies and resources versus punishers and foes.

### **Conclusions**

Through these data we see how the threads of students' pre-college lives are woven into their experiences once they are within the college setting. Despite the protracted way in

which we look at students in their K-12 years and their post-secondary years, there are firm linkages between students' past and present. Within the social reproduction frame we see that students' lacking in access to transitional agents and highly valued social and cultural capital before they come to college are likely to struggle and potentially not succeed. Yet the findings also show that these students are not a monolithic "low-income" population. Instead we see that there are common characteristics and perceptions among successful low-income students, such as their sense of self efficacy, their commitment to and connection with the institution, and their habits. These factors combine to aid students in their college success.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was twofold. The first aim was to evaluate a summer bridge program targeting high-achieving, low-income students admitted to an elite public university. The second aim was to better understand the experiences of these students in their first years of college. My goal was to bring together these threads of research to both better inform university practitioners regarding the program and illuminate the stories of the students that this program aims to assist. The value of doing so lies in demonstrating the differences among students often studied and discussed as a monolithic (and often disadvantaged) group. Their unique stories reveal the varied paths that led them toward college, and the successes and challenges they found once they were enrolled at Valley University.

The research questions that guided this study were:

- How do summer bridge program participants describe their academic and co-curricular first-year experiences?
- How do students' pre-college experiences (e.g., academic performance, family background) and within college experiences (e.g., academic performance, co-curricular involvement, relationships with peers and faculty, summer bridge program) influence summer bridge program participants' persistence and perceptions of integration and validation during their first year of college?
- How do these students' experiences differ from low-income students who did not participate?

- How do administrators and summer bridge program participants describe the summer bridge program? How do their descriptions compare or contrast with each other?

The first two questions allowed me to explore the phenomenon of being a low-income student at an elite university, specifically focusing on aspects of the students' pre-college and within-college lives that influenced their success and persistence. The second set of questions provided the frame for the evaluation. By using a comparison group, I not only gained additional voices and perspectives but was able to explore what effects the program might have.

### **Primary Findings of the Study**

Four primary findings emerged from the research and I will discuss them below.

*Participants of the Stars Academic Program viewed the intervention as effective, but the students who did not participate received many of the same benefits through different means.*

The majority of the Stars Academic Program (SAP) participants in this study shared that they were glad they had attended the summer program. They sought the program in an effort to gain early exposure to college and earn additional credits. Many believed that the program provided them a foundation that aided them in their transition to college, including providing “practice” at VU courses and exposing them to college resources. Based on analysis of interview data and the students' advanced standing credit accumulation, the non-responders' (and to some extent the waitlisted students') decisions to not attend were tied to their perceptions of their college readiness.

When one compares the experiences and perceptions of the students who did and did not participate, few differences between groups emerge. The transition to college was

challenging for almost all of the study's student participants, regardless of program participation. SAP participants found the fall semester markedly "different" than the firm structure of their summer session, and those who did not participate found the new environment a bit overwhelming. Almost all students struggled with time management, finding the temptations of free time and social activities a test of their academic focus. Once immersed in their first fall semester, students demonstrated similar patterns of locating their friendship groups, getting involved and seeking balance between course demands and college life. One qualitative difference between groups seemed to be around comfort in and action toward connecting with faculty; a greater number of SAP participants reported taking these steps earlier in their college careers than their non-participant peers.

Administrators' perceptions of the low-income students attending VU through the VU Promise program shaped the intended goals of the program, and in turn, their beliefs about the effects of the program. In seeing the students as lacking in family support, strong networks, and college knowledge, the administrators viewed the program as imperative for students' persistence, expressing concern for those who did not attend. What we learn, instead, is that students' within-college experiences were shaped more by their school background and the "toolbox" they brought to college.

*Participation in the Stars Academic Program did not eliminate the challenges students faced in their transition to college.*

For the majority of students in the study, transitioning to college proved challenging. Success seemed to hinge, in part, on the students' ability to manage time effectively and adjust to faculty demands and academic expectations. In turn, students' sense of self-efficacy

shaped this process; students who possessed higher levels of self-efficacy found reinforcement of their behaviors through feedback in the form of grades, praise, learning, and adjusting from mistakes. Those with lower perceptions of self-efficacy and poor time management skills floundered, unable to either assess what they were doing wrong or feeling too overwhelmed to alter their actions and behaviors.

Adding to this process was the university's own culture of selectivity. The students in my study all met or exceeded the high standards for admission to VU. The validation they received from selection served as an impetus to succeed, but for those students who faltered, they questioned their own merits and qualities as they measured themselves against their peers and the larger university environment.

Many of the tools necessary for the students' transition to college were gained in their pre-college lives, from both school and family resources. In using the toolbox metaphor, it seems that the students needed, in their high school years, to not only have access to the proper tools but to learn the correct way to use them. In addition, for a successful transition, students seemed to gain their footing once they learned how to reconfigure their toolbox for the new environment. Some students quickly adapted, learning how to connect with professors, use their study time effectively and meet the demands of a full course-load. Other students realized their skills were either ineffective or inefficient for what was required of students at VU. For them, adaptation took longer, with some still struggling well into their second year of college.

These experiences with their acquired toolset influenced students' perceptions of themselves. When their sense of self-efficacy was tested, students' reactions to the

experiences provided positive or negative reinforcement. The feedback successful students received encouraged them to maintain their practices, perhaps tweaking as needed. For those who were struggling, the response they obtained from professors (through grades and interactions) left them questioning both their own contributions to the problem and placing blame on ineffective teaching, luck, or other aspects out of their control. Students responded differently to failures and challenges also, with the more successful students recognizing mistakes as learning opportunities and those who struggled feeling overwhelmed by their mistakes.

In addition to the students' sense of agency, they were also actors within a larger social world influenced by dominant, middle-class norms. Their ability to acquire highly valued forms of social and cultural capital was influenced by their earlier schooling and family lives. In these home-life experiences, students began to construct the foundation for the patterns they would display in college. Once at VU, some students struggled within the elite college culture, which rewards students who possess dominant forms of social and cultural capital.

Despite the disparities among the students of my study, they showed more similarities than differences in terms of their ability to accumulate and enact highly valued forms of social and cultural capital. Their ability to adapt successfully to the elite college setting was tied, in part, to the time and place in their lives. As students of low-income means striving for lives of the middle and upper-class, they displayed the ability and skill of their more affluent peers. The majority of the students did not feel like "fish out of water"; their habits were such that they perceived their attendance at an elite college as a means of social mobility and

were quick to unconsciously mimic and modify behaviors as needed. As students positioning themselves on the “borders” between social classes, they were enacting the necessary capital in which to alter their social position.

For those who struggled most in their transition to college, neither family nor school opportunities provided them access to the valuable capital of the dominant social class. In turn, these students’ transition and ongoing persistence in college were shaped by the gaps in their accumulated, yet less valued capital and that of the elite college culture. In other words, their lack of college knowledge and experience in forming strong social capital networks left these students at a disadvantage as they entered and tried to succeed at VU. Their habits shaped their perceptions of what were the appropriate and preferred responses to their dilemmas; these did not match the norms of the culture of VU. Positioned in this gap between their perceptions and actions and the valued forms of behavior of the university, these students were at greatest risk of departure. Their issues with persistence, and of those less at risk, are discussed in the next section.

*Student persistence is a complex process tied to students’ psychosocial characteristics and the larger social world.*

How students transitioned to college influenced their ongoing commitment to persistence. For those students who found the transition easiest, they seemed buoyed by the momentum of their early successes. These experiences appeared to reinforce their desire to stay at VU, solidifying as they integrated socially and academically at VU. Their feelings of integration were shaped by locating a friendship group, finding balance between courses and extracurricular activities and sensing VU’s commitment to them as students. In the stories



from the students most at risk of departure we learn the importance of both academic and social integration as necessary, enjoined components toward persistence. Some students faltered academically and yet their feelings of “fit” and connection to friends sustained them; other students struggled to integrate in either domain, feeling overwhelmed by poor academic performance and hindered in their subsequent ability to become more involved.

Eleven of the 20 students admitted to considering departure from VU at some point in their first semesters. A number of these students divulged that they thought of leaving because of academics; they believed that if they transferred to a less selective college, they could earn better grades for the same or less effort. For these students, the flirtation with the idea of leaving allowed them to consider an alternative path for themselves, and in doing so, reinforced their desire to stay at Valley University. A few students were forced to grapple with departure because of their poor academic performance. One of these students did leave, and for the rest, the reality of having to depart was frightening as they considered an unknown future. Unlike the more successful students who considered departure, these students were somewhat paralyzed by their situation, unsure of how to change their lot.

Like the students’ initial transition to college, their ongoing persistence was influenced by both their acquired toolbox and their ability to adapt and change. The presence or absence of a robust toolbox did not solely determine whether students could or could not succeed at VU; instead we hear in the students’ stories that even those with weak skills and a lower sense of self-efficacy were able to change and learn for their new environment. In addition, to their psychosocial characteristics, students’ success and persistence was tied to their accumulated cultural and social capital.

As in their preparation for college, students who located institutional agents once they were enrolled at VU had greater advantage in negotiating the new college culture. Students varied in their willingness and comfort in enacting their social capital network; those with the *habiti* more aligned with the norms and values of the VU culture seemed more successful and comfortable taking the actions necessary to engage with faculty and fellow students. Those whose *habiti* reflected their low-income backgrounds discussed their discomfort and inability to enact their social and cultural capital.

*Financial aid served as a means of equalizing students' academic and social experiences with those from higher income families, but reminders remained of social class differences.*

The students in this study were all admitted to VU under the university's VU Promise program, giving them the opportunity to graduate from the university virtually debt free. This aid shaped the students' decisions to attend VU and provided them with opportunities to participate in the life of the university with little worry of debt or of the need to balance employment with college demands. Students viewed the aid as a means of allowing them to "be normal" and be engaged in the university community.

Despite their wish for feelings of normalcy, the students faced reminders in their daily lives of the social class differences between them and their peers. Some students discussed the encounters with faculty and fellow students, noting that these experiences revealed assumptions that all the students at VU were from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. Other students talked about the subtle cues of fellow students' privilege and wealth, such as friends' spending habits, discussions of expensive vacations, and style and type of clothing worn.

In addition, many students discussed the mixed feelings of guilt and gratitude they felt in receiving the grant aid. These feelings were sharpened as they learned of their middle-class friends' struggles with money and debt. Overhearing roommates' conversations with parents about student loans and seeing their friends balance part-time jobs with school work left the students in my study feeling relieved and privileged. Mixed with these emotions were feelings of unease as the students were, again, reminded of the differences between themselves and their friends.

These complicated emotions rendered many students silent regarding their family and financial backgrounds. The students' wish to blend in with their peers and feel commonality with their friends risked alteration if they exposed themselves. A number of students faced "outing" themselves as they negotiated housing decisions for their junior year of college. Culturally at VU, the third year was seen as a time for students to move off campus to apartments and houses. Housing considerations raised conversations of affordability and finances. Several students in the study avoided these discussions by deciding to continue to live on campus; others revealed their financial needs and barriers and found commonality and connection among friends. Regardless, housing decisions seemed to serve as a trigger point for students wherein they were asked to reflect on their friendships, their family backgrounds and their feelings of difference.

In conclusion, the low-income students' exposure to resources and opportunities in their years prior to college shaped how they experienced their first years of at VU. Their ability to successfully negotiate their first semesters at college was influenced, in part, on their access to validating agents, who served as a means of assisting them in acquiring the

social and cultural capital necessary to enroll and persist. Once in college, students varied in their ability to persist, and their success was related to the toolbox established in middle and high school. Tools such as critical thinking, study skills, and time management were imperative to students as they embarked on their first semesters. Those with fewer tools – or less practice using the tools they had – faced challenges, which caused them to question whether to stay or leave VU.

The summer bridge program was established with the goal of helping students transition to college and attracted students who varied in their academic skills, and social and cultural capital. While difficult to parse out what effect the program had on students, my findings suggest that the program's goals, purpose and intended outcomes be re-evaluated to better align with the needs of the students it aims to target. In doing so, the program can better align with the broader mission of the institution to meet the needs of all its students. Next I turn to an exploration of how my findings can inform existing literature.

### **Relating the Findings to the Literature**

My study relates to several threads of current literature and research. Specifically, my work informs summer bridge and persistence literature and research on the experiences of low-income students. I address each below.

#### **Summer Bridge Program Interventions**

The results of research on summer bridge programs are inconclusive as to the effects, if any, these interventions have on students' academic success and retention (Kezar, 2000; Walpole, et al., 2008). The majority of the studies looking at the effects have been criticized because they lacked a control group (Kezar, 2000). Recent studies utilizing a control group

(Evans, 1999; Walpole, et al., 2008; Wolf-Wendel, et al., 1999) found no significant effects on students' persistence or grades. Despite this, some of the findings are interesting in light of my work.

Wolf-Wendel and colleagues' (1999) study of a summer bridge program at the University of Kansas reveals the value of using qualitative data in evaluative research. Despite the lack of statistical significance of their findings, focus groups with the participants revealed that the students perceived powerful benefits to their success in college, crediting the program with easing their academic, social and logistical transition to college. Similar to my study, the participants' feedback was sought at the end of their summer bridge program, prior to their re-enrollment in the fall. Therefore, these students were assessing the program early on in their college careers. Wolf Wendell and colleagues speculate that the gap in the students' perceptions of the program and its lack of effects on GPA and persistence reveal more questions than answers. They hypothesize the possibility that the program's benefits were short-lived, only lasting a few weeks into the fall. They also discuss selection bias, wherein the students who chose to participate were more anxious regarding college and, therefore at greater risk of departure without the program. They conclude that their study's results demonstrate the "impact of complex programs on complex students" (p. 29) and argue that the program's continued existence allows the university to fulfill its mission toward student success.

Wolf-Wendel et al.'s (1999) work and my research reveal the complexity of exploring the counterfactuals and contemplating alternative explanations. Although measuring a summer bridge program's effects on persistence and grades is imperative - as

these factors are tied to student success - it is also valuable to consider the relationship the program has on harder-to-measure aspects such as self-efficacy, social integration, and perceptions of institutional commitment. In addition, the research raises questions about timing, both of the evaluation itself and sustaining of program benefits. Both Wolf-Wendel et al.'s work and mine demonstrate the risks inherent in surveying student participants during or immediately after the program's term. It can be of greater value to query students once they are deeper into their first semester and first year where they are more able to contextualize what the program did and did not provide them.

My work also complements the research of Walpole et al. (2008) who completed an evaluation with a longitudinal design. Walpole et al. (2008) followed students (summer bridge participants and control group members) from their entry into college through the fall of their junior year, and the researchers assessed students' grades, departure rates and survey results. Their findings show that program participants lagged significantly behind their control group peers in credits earned over time, putting these students on a longer timeline to graduation and risking their early departure. Walpole and her colleagues (2008) speculate that the gaps in progress are due, in part, to the students' previous academic preparation. As my work reveals, the quality of students' pre-college educational experiences can influence their college success. In addition, it may be the students' acquisition of such important factors as self-efficacy, time management, and critical thinking in high school that can make a difference in issues of success and persistence. I believe my work also sheds light on existing research and theory on persistence and I turn to that next.

## **Persistence and Success**

The results of my study inform the diverse and deep field of college persistence literature, especially in the realm of academic preparedness, college transitions and financial aid. I turn first to aspects of academic preparedness.

**Academic preparedness.** As researchers try to get inside the “black box” regarding college student persistence, studies reveal the potent power of the students’ pre-college academic experiences on their later success in college. Swail, Redd and Perna (2003), in their monograph on the college retention of minorities, state:

Wading through the countless research articles [on persistence] brings one to believe that the most significant factors in whether students are prepared for and motivated to enroll in college is the rigor of their precollege curriculum and the support of peers, family, and friends—regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, income, or almost any other background variable. (p. 57)

This statement is supported by my work which revealed the importance of students’ pre-college lives in their ongoing success. Specifically, I found that “rigor” for the students constituted academic opportunities in which they developed their higher-order skills such as thinking critically and managing time and teacher expectations.

The results of my research also illuminate Adelman’s findings (1999; 2006) that rigorous high school courses serve as one of the strongest influences on college completion. The academic momentum students create in high school sustains them through college. Those in my study who were at greatest risk of departure had several characteristics in common with Adelman’s findings (2006); these include the varying levels of quality in students’ high school curriculum and the structured inequality that comes from attending under-resourced schools. My work reveals the complexity of trying to operationalize a variable such as

“academic readiness” because the students in my study met or exceeded the rigorous standards for admission to VU. Despite this, the students still struggled, demonstrating that there were a number of psychosocial and environmental factors at play in relation to their persistence and success.

Equally important when considering students’ pathways to college were the resources – family- and school-based –which the students accessed. The majority of the students in this study were first-generation college students, and yet the active engagement parents had in their students’ lives contributed to the students’ commitment to college. School personnel – such as guidance counselors or teachers – and fellow college-going friends seemed to have the greatest impact on students’ perceptions of themselves and their aspirations. These results support the work of other researchers (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009; Hill, 2008; Nora, 2002 Wolniak & Engberg, 2010) that reveal the importance of school environment and resources in shaping students’ paths to college.

My work addresses a gap in the intersection of existing college preparation/choice and persistence literature in my exploration of the interplay between students’ motivations, behaviors, and perceptions as they navigated from high school into their first semesters of college. My work provides some insight into Massey et al’s (2003) concern that “no study has yet examined the degree to which the social and academic environment experienced in high school influences academic achievement in college” (p. 15). I turn to aspects of college experiences and transition next.

**College transition.** By collecting qualitative data from students after their first year and in the midst of their second year, I captured valuable perspectives and perceptions that



can inform the extant literature on the transition to college (Astin, 1993; Choy, Horn & Nunez, 2000; Terenzini, Rendon & Upcraft, 1994) Specifically, I give voice to the transition for low-income, high-achieving students in a body of literature that has studied these transitions along various lines, including race (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella & Hagedorn, 1999, Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996), and institutional type (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005). Little work exists in exploring these experiences for students from low-income and working-class backgrounds (Walpole, 2003; 2007).

### **Financial Aid's Role in Shaping College Selection and Persistence**

Because Valley University provides a comprehensive financial aid/grant package for its low-income students, it removes a barrier that many poor students face in attending and persisting in college. Specifically, the financial nexus model (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; St. John, Cabrera, Nora, & Asker, 2000; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005) is relevant to my work because this research links students' perceptions about college finances to their enrollment and persistence decisions. I believe my work further informs the financial nexus framework by qualitatively illuminating the ways in which students make educational choices situated within their social context. In other words, both my research and the nexus model recognize the importance of considering the limits to students' choices and decisions based on financial, social, and family factors.

My work also supports Paulsen and St. John's (2002) research on low-income students and college costs. Their findings reveal that low-income students are highly sensitive to college costs, and these costs emerge as a primary consideration in college selection. The students in my study felt similarly constrained, selecting VU in large part

because of the VU Promise grants. In fact, some students selected VU solely because of the large financial package. These experiences put an interesting spin on the concept of “financial constraints” for low-income students. Many would argue that admission to and full tuition from a highly selective public institution would not be seen as constraining, but many of the students of my study were severely limited in their college choices based on their family’s financial background. Despite admission to a number of highly selective colleges, many of these students felt forced to select VU even if their preferences lay elsewhere.

Findings demonstrate that students’ opportunities for college engagement are limited if their educational costs force them to work while attending school (St. John, 2003; Walpole, 2003, 2007). Indeed, the results of my work show that students’ receipt of grant aid freed them financially so that they could participate more fully in the life of the university. Their funding normalized their experiences, aiding them in their efforts to blend in with their wealthier peers. Lastly, my work contributes to a growing body of literature that qualitatively explores students’ experiences within elite colleges and universities.

### **Low-income Students’ Experiences in Elite Colleges and Universities**

Benefits of graduating from America’s most selective institutions have been well-documented (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Clotfelter & Rothschild, 1993; Eide, Brewer, & Ehrenberg, 1998; Pascarella & Teremzini, 2005), and yet there has been critique that these institutions have become “bastions of privilege” instead of engines of opportunity (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Karabel, 2005). A small set of these top schools have adopted financial aid policies aimed at addressing issues of socioeconomic diversity (McPherson & Schapiro, 2006). In conjunction, a growing body of

literature (Aires, 2008; Bergerson, 2007; Bettie, 2002; Hermanowicz, 2004, Mullen, 2009; Walpole, 2007) has begun focusing the experiences of low-income, high-achieving students. This work has focused on such areas as students' college preparation in high school (Bettie, 2002; Bergerson, 2007) and college choice process (McDonough, 1997; Mullen, 2009; Reay, Ball, David & Davies, 2001; Reay, David & Ball 2005) and yet little has been done to qualitatively explore the students' experiences in college (Aries, 2008; Goodwin, 2002; Walpole, 2003, 2007). My work can help address this gap through the exploration and explication of the students' stories and perceptions. As more selective public and private colleges and universities attempt to diversify their student bodies along socioeconomic boundaries, there is a need for a better understanding of these students' experiences \in order to ensure institutions are equipped to aid the students to degree completion.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The results of my work have implications for student and academic affairs practice at colleges and universities and demonstrate the importance of evaluation in the creation of programming. I begin by looking at the areas of institutional evaluation.

#### **Institutional Evaluation of Programming**

Evaluation is often an afterthought as universities implement programs, and yet it should be a central part of administrative efforts (Musoba, 2006). Even in environments where there is tacit approval for assessment, pressures of time and resources mixed with limited expertise and inadequate data can leave administrators unable or ill-equipped to complete quality evaluation of existing and newly formed programs (Musoba, 2006; St. John, 2006b). As my research demonstrates, effective, rigorous evaluation can provide valuable

insight into the goals and effects of institutional programs. In turn, the results can shape decisions about how to redirect valuable administrative and fiscal resources.

Specifically, my findings reveal the importance of balancing the institution's impulses to create programs to serve students' perceived needs and the necessity of framing the efforts with an evaluative perspective. Through necessary critique and evaluation, institutions can move beyond anecdotal reports to a systematic method of assessing program impacts. Learning whether programs are having the intended effects can allow evaluators and administrators to tailor and alter programming. I believe evaluation can be implemented by using existing resources, such as key faculty members, the institutional assessment office, and scholarly results of rigorous research on program implementation and evaluation.

Regardless of how program evaluation gets accomplished, my study reveals that it is important for a culture of evaluation and assessment to exist at a university. This is true for all universities, but I believe particularly important for those universities steeped in a culture of success and selectivity. At these schools, administrators can be blinded by such measures as high graduation rates and in turn believe that evaluation is unnecessary due to such high success. As a result, these kinds of successes give administrators the misleading view that if students are struggling and subsequently leaving or transferring, then the problems and onus lies with the students. Ironically, many of the most elite schools in the country are striving through financial aid and admissions policies to diversify their campuses, but without a culture of evaluation and assessment in place, these universities are ill-equipped to learn from their successes and their mistakes.

While my work reinforces the importance of implementing evaluation of institutional programs, it more specifically speaks to summer bridge program creation and administration. My findings reveal the risks inherent in looking at low-income students (or any subpopulation of students) as a monolithic group and, in response, creating programming that may or may not fit their needs

### **Summer Bridge Programs**

In the following section I will speak specifically about recommendations for the SAP and I will briefly address how my findings can be used more generally. My findings demonstrate that the administrators overseeing and managing the Stars Academic Program need to reconsider which students they target for invitation. The students most in need of the SAP in my study were those who possessed low levels of “college knowledge” through such factors as attending poorly resourced schools, being the first in their families to attend college, and having fewer social and cultural capital resources from which to draw. My findings reveal the risk of leaving these students to their own devices in their first year and beyond.

Therefore, practitioners should implement a few alterations both in selection of the program participants and in the programming of the summer program. Targeting students who are at risk of having less college knowledge could be achieved through the use of several proxies for this broad construct. Admissions officers could identify those students who are first-generation, come from poorly resourced schools (e.g., use of free and reduced lunch data as an indicator), or have a deficit of advanced standing credits (as compared to the

average incoming students). In selecting these students for invitation, administrators target those students who may be at greatest risk of difficulty with their transition to college.

Tailoring programming can follow suit. If we assume that program participants have either fewer tools or are less skilled at using the ones they have, perhaps the SAP workshop sessions can be directed in these areas. Programming that allows students to reflect on themselves as learners and identify their weaknesses and strengths can serve as foundation for building students' sense of self-efficacy and academic control. In addition, by more thoughtfully exposing students to peer and faculty networks, administrators can help develop students' social capital networks.

In addition, if programs are going to be created targeting minority students, administrators must take time to consider the larger culture at the university and how to tailor the program within a larger frame of inclusion and acceptance. As was evidenced by my work, administrators carried misinformed perceptions of the student participants that shaped not only the goals of the program but their beliefs of the effects of the program. I believe that these biases reflect an absence of discourse on social class at VU – and other colleges and universities.

### **Creation of Discourse around Aspects of Social Class**

As was revealed by the students' stories, their experiences and perceptions were influenced by their encounters with social class differences within the college setting. Social class differences can create an “invisible inequality” (Lareau, 2002) wherein the norms of the dominant classes affect common daily interactions. First-person narratives (Dews & Law, 1995; Ryan & Sackrey, 1995) of the working-class in academia reveal the estrangement and

internalized conflict felt within a culture that “presumes middle-class homogeneity” (Law, 1995, p. 6).

These biases may be most evident at elite universities that have traditionally served middle- and upper-class students. Making these changes requires university community members to examine the assumptions and stereotypes about the students they serve and assess the ways in which they support and/or alienate students from lower income backgrounds (Tett, 2004).

Developing conversation around social class is a difficult and complex issue to tackle, and the scope of this chapter limits my deep explication of this recommendation. That said, I believe my research demonstrates the importance of working toward this aim. Beyond the standard recommendations of aligning mission, planning and funding around aspects of student diversity, I see some specific steps university faculty, administrators and students can take. These include creating classes that tackle head-on issues of classism in the U.S., inviting speakers to campus who provide varying perspectives on issues of class and encouraging students to devote their energy and commitment to creating this discourse.

Some of this has already begun at VU. For example, in the last three years at VU a grassroots student group dedicated to issues of access and success for low-income students has sprung up solely due to the commitment of a handful of VU Promise students. Since the group began, members have worked with the university president, admissions, financial aid and student government to help in communicating to and encouraging potential and entering VU students. They have brought speakers to campus, run financial literacy programs and established a blog aimed at VU applicants and admitted students. Because the organization’s

mission is to serve all students, members' efforts span beyond the small percent of low-income students at VU.

Interestingly, at least two of the students of my study are now in leadership positions in this student organization; this is striking to me because these two students had both admitted their shame and embarrassment regarding their family background. It is possible that due to the presence of a vocal and committed student organization, these students felt they could “out” themselves in ways they had not originally imagined. This demonstrates that although many of the low-income students in my study sought to blend in and “be normal,” they also sought opportunities to merge their past lives with their present selves. I believe these students felt more comfortable, in part, because the vocal nature of the student organization made it “ok” to be a low-income student at VU. As a result, I believe there is value in taking a multifaceted and purposeful approach to addressing issues of classism and bias.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

My recommendations for further research fall into two broad strands of work. Since my study provides both insight into the role of summer bridge programs and the experiences of low-income students at a specific higher education institution, I will address additional questions and avenues of exploration that arose from both areas.

#### **Summer Bridge Programs**

My research provides evidence of the potential significance of summer bridge programs in assisting students in their transition to and success in the first years of college, but it also reveals the importance of targeting the intervention to students who are at greatest



risk of not succeeding in college. One avenue of further research would be to study the most efficient, effective means of identifying these students during the admissions/pre-enrollment process. Since student factors such as educational background, family educational history and access to resources played a role in setting the foundation for college success, completing research on how to identify these factors from student applications might prove useful. Perhaps conducting focus groups with students, admissions officers and high school officials would shed light on what processes work and what could be improved or added to achieve the goal of identifying these students from the outset. Additionally, a pilot study could be conducted to test the recommendations made before larger changes would be implemented.

In addition to studying how to better identify students in need of a summer bridge intervention, more work needs to be done on understanding what aspects of the summer bridge program have the greatest impact and influence on students. Clearly, summer bridge programs are tailored to the perceived needs of the students and the unique culture of the institution, but one could argue that there are programmatic factors that should be in place to ensure success for students. To achieve this goal, perhaps a multi-institutional study would provide a greater perspective on what works for students.

Lastly, as my research demonstrates, the summer bridge program was limited to only 20 students and one could argue that the participants – and non-participants – needed assistance once in college as they negotiated their first semesters. Therefore, research could be conducted into what other programmatic options could be offered to low-income students in their first year of college. These include pilot testing a living learning community, a first

year seminar opportunity or housing options that allow students to self-select to be included in an academic or housing experience that might further aid their college transition and success.

### **The Lives of Low-Income Students**

My study only began to scratch the surface of the students' lived experiences as low-income students at an elite university. One way in which to expand and extend my work would be focus more closely on the phenomenological aspects of the students' experiences. There would be a great deal to learn from studying a smaller group of students over a longer period of time and focusing on their day-to-day interactions and experiences. This would likely further illuminate the heterogeneity and complexity of their stories and help address the misguided perceptions that these students are a monolithic group.

Conversely, learning more about the lives and experiences of a group of students from different and varied economic backgrounds would add context to and understanding of the more "universal" aspects of being a college student and what are perhaps unique experiences based on family background and income level. Perhaps another single institution study wherein a group of incoming students were randomly selected for participation would yield a rich portrait of the students' lives and allow greater insight into how students make sense of their worlds.

Lastly, there is a need to continue to explore and expand our understanding of Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Habitus is seen as both durable and transposable, and within my study I argued that its transposable nature contributed to students' sense of social mobility. Those in higher education research who have worked extensively in this framework

(see Horvat, 2001; McDonough, 1997; Walpole, 2003, 2007) argue that the tension between the durable and transposable characteristics of habitus is an underdeveloped area of the framework (McDonough, Ventresca, & Oucalt, 2000).

### **Summary**

Despite the presence of rhetoric in the US around the ideas of meritocracy and equal opportunity, access to higher education continues to vary by such factors as family background and race/ethnicity (Gelber, 2007; Haycock, 2006). Even when holding academic achievement in high school constant, those students from wealthier and more highly educated families have greater access to the nation's elite institutions (Bowen & Bok, 1998).

To address these disparities, some of these selective schools have implemented policies to increase access to talented but economically disadvantaged students. At many institutions, including Valley University, these students are seen as the “new minority” and therefore in need of special support and programming (TICAS, 2010; Walpole, 2007).

Despite this institutional response, the findings of my study reveal that the low-income students attending VU should not be viewed as a monolithic group. Instead, these students' paths to college and into their first semesters were diverse and varied, and we have a great deal to learn from their uniqueness. In addition, commonalities existed among students regarding their perceptions of themselves as learners and members of the university community, and these views had a great impact on their navigation of the college terrain. The students' acquired toolbox influenced the ease of their transition to college and their comfort and skill in seeking help when needed. But whereas a number of students had a

robust set of tools with which to work, others brought fewer tools or had difficulty using them in the new, often challenging environment.

My research reveals that there is considerable potential in targeted interventions for those students who have greater need, yet institutions need to hone their skills at winnowing out who needs additional support and who does not. The “one size fits all” mentality when it comes to thinking about low-income students’ needs creates several problems, including wasting resources on those who do not need them and possibly risking alienating students who may already feel “othered” within the university environment. While my work does help inform “what specific factors lead some low SES students to succeed on their path to a college degree despite overwhelming odds” (Cabrera, et al., 2005, p. 157), I believe we still have a great deal to learn about college student success and persistence.

## REFERENCES

- Ackermann, S. P. (1991a). The benefits of summer bridge programs for underrepresented and low income students. *College & University*, 66(4), 201-208.
- Ackermann, S.P. (1991b). The benefits of summer bridge programs for underrepresented and low-income transfer students. *Community/ Junior College*, 15, 211-224.
- Adelman, C. (1999). *Answers in the toolbox: Academic intensity, attendance patterns, and bachelor's degree attainment*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Adelman, C. (2006). *The toolbox revisited: Paths to degree completion from high school through college*. Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Education.
- AEA Guiding Principles (2004).. Retrieved November 3, 2007 from <http://www.eval.org/Publications/GuidingPrinciples.asp>.
- Anastasi, A. (1988). *Psychological Testing* (6<sup>th</sup> Edition). New York, NY: McMillan.
- Argyris, C. (1982). *Reasoning, learning and action: Individual and organizational*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Aries, E. (2008). *Race and class matters at an elite college*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University.
- Arzy, M. R., Davies, T. G., & Harbour, C. P. (2006 ). Low-income students: Their lived university campus experiences pursuing baccalaureate degrees with private foundation scholarship assistance. *College Student Journal*, 40, 750-766.
- Astin, A. W. (1975). *Preventing students from dropping out*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25, 297-308.
- Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college: Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. W., & Oseguera, L. (2005). Pre-college and institutional influences on degree attainment. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College students retention: Formula for student success* (pp. 245 -276). Westport, CT: Praeger.

- Bamberger, M., Rugh, J., & Mabry, L. (2006). *Realworld evaluation: Working under budget, time, data and political constraints*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavior change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 191-215.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A., & Jourden, F. J. (1991). Self regulatory mechanisms governing the impact of social comparison on complex decision making. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 941-951.
- Barritt, L., Bleeker, H., Beekman, T., & Mulderij, K. (2001). A phenomenological approach: In C. F. Conrad, J. G. Haworth, & L. R. Lattuca (Eds.), *Qualitative research in higher education: Expanding perspectives* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (pp. 217 – 227). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Baxter, A., & Britton, C. (2001). Risk, identity and change: Becoming a mature student. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 11, 87–102.
- Beal, P., & Noel, L. (1980). *What works in student retention: The report of a joint project of the American College Testing Program and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems*. Iowa City, IA: American College Testing Program.
- Bean, J. P. (1990). Why students leave: Insights from research. In D. Hossler and J. P. Bean (Eds.), *The strategic management of college enrollments* (pp.147-169). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Belenkey, M., Clinchy, F., Goldberger, N., & Tarule, J. (1986). *Women's way of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Berger, J. B., & Milem, J. F. (1999). The role of student involvement and perceptions of integration in a causal model of student persistence. *Research in Higher Education*, 40(6), 641-664.
- Berger, J. B., Milem, J. F., & Paulsen, M. B. (1998). *The exploration of "habitus" as a multi-dimensional construct*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Miami, FL.
- Bergerson, A. A. (2009). College choice and access to college: Moving policy, research and practice to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 35(4) 1-141.

- Bettie, J. (2002). Exceptions to the rule: Upwardly mobile White and Mexican American high school girls. *Gender and Society*, 16(3), 403- 422.
- Bilson, J. M., & Terry, M. B. (1982). In search of the silken purse: Factors in attrition among first-generation students. *College and University*, 58(1), 57-75.
- Blascovich, J., & Mendes, W. B. (2000). Challenge and threat appraisals: The role of affective cues. In J. Forgas (Ed.), *Feeling and thinking: The role of affect in social cognition* (pp. 59-82). New York, NY: Cambridge Press.
- Blau, J. R., Moller, S., & Jones, L. V. (2004). Why test? Talent loss and enrollment loss. *Social Science Research*, 33, 409–34.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977a). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In J. Karabel and A. H. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education* (pp. 487 – 511). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977b). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241 – 258). New York, NY: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bowen, W. G., & Bok, D. C. (1998). *The shape of the river: Long-term consequences of considering race in college and university admissions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bowen, W. G., Chingos, M. M., & McPherson, M. (2009). *Crossing the finish line: Completing college at America's public universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bowen, W. G., Kurzweil, M. A., & Tobin, E. M. (2005). *Equity and excellence in American higher education*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.

- Braxton, J. M., & Lien, L. A. (2000). The viability of academic integration as a central construct in Tinto's interactionalist theory of college student departure. In J. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 11-28). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Braxton, J. M., & McClendon, S. (2001). The fostering of social integration and retention through institutional practice. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 3(1), 57-71.
- Braxton, J. M. (2000). *Reworking the student departure puzzle*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Braxton, J. M., Hirschy, A. S., & McClendon, S. A. (2004). *Understanding and reducing college student departure*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Braxton, J. M., Sullivan, A.V., & Johnson, R. M. (1997). Appraising Tinto's theory of college student departure. In J.C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: A handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 12, pp. 107 – 164). New York, NY: Agathon Press.
- Bridgeman, B., Jenkins, L. M., & Ervin, N. (2000). Predictions of freshman grade-point average from the revised and re-centered SAT I Reasoning Test. *College Board Report No. 2000-1*. New York, NY: College Entrance Examination Board.
- Brimeyer, T. M., Miller, J., & Perrucci, R. (2006). Social class sentiments formation: Influence of class socialization, college socialization and class aspirations. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 47, 471 – 495.
- Britton, B. K. & Tesser, A. (1991). Effects of time management practices on college grades. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 83(3), 405-410.
- Buchmann C., Vincent J. Roscigno, & Dennis J. Condrón (2006, August). *The myth of meritocracy? SAT preparation, college enrollment, class and race in the United States*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal, Canada.
- Buck, C. B. (1985, February). *Summer Bridge: A residential learning experience for high risk freshman at the University of California, San Diego*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Conference on the Freshmen Year Experience, University of Columbia, SC.
- Cabrera, A., Burkum, K., & LaNasa, S. M. (2005). Pathways to a four-year degree: Determinants of transfer and degree completion. In A. Seidman (Ed.). *College student retention: Formula for success* (pp. 155-214). Westport, CT: Praeger.



- Cabrera, A., Castaneda, M., Nora, A., & Hengstler, D. (1992). The convergence between two theories of college persistence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 63, 143-164.
- Cabrera, A., & LaNasa, S. M. (2000). *Understanding the college choice of disadvantaged students*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cabrera, A., Nora, A., & Castaneda, M. (1993). College persistence: Structural equations modeling test of an integrated model of student retention. *Journal of Higher Education*, 62, 123-139.
- Cabrera, A. F., Nora, A., Terenzini, P. T., Pascarella, E., & Hagedorn, L. S. (1999). Campus racial climate and the adjustment of students to college: A comparison between white students and African-American students. *Journal of Higher Education*, 70(2), 134-160.
- Cabrera, A., Stampen, J., & Hansen, W. (1990). Exploring the effects of ability to pay on persistence in college. *Review of Higher Education*, 13, 306-336.
- Camara, W. J., & Echternacht, G. (2000). The SAT I and high school grades: Utility in predicting success in college *College Board Report RN-10*. New York, NY: College Board.
- Cambiano, R. L., Denny, G. S., & De Vore, J. B. (2000). College student retention at a mid-western university: A six year study. *Journal of College Admissions*, 166, 22- 29.
- Carnevale, A. P., & Rose, S. J. (2004). Socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and selective college admissions. In R. D. Kahlenberg (Ed.), *America's untapped resource: Low-income students in higher education* (pp. 101-156). New York, NY: Century Foundation.
- Chaney, B., Muraskin, L. D., Cahalan, M. W., & Goodwin, D. (1998). Helping the progress of disadvantaged students in higher education: The federal student support services program. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 20(3), 197-215.
- Chemers, M. M., Hu, L. & Garcia, B. F. (2001). Academic self-efficacy and first year college student performance and adjustment. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93(1), 55-64.
- Chen, H. (1990). *Theory-driven evaluations*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Chen, H., & Rossi, P. H. (1987). The theory-driven approach to validity. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 10, 95-103.

- Chen, X. (2005). First generation students in post-secondary education: A look at their college transcripts. NCES. US Department of Education. Washington, DC.
- Chickering, A. W., & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Choy, S. P. (2002). *Access & persistence*. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education: American Council on Education, Center for Policy Analysis.
- Clifton, R. A., Perry, R. P., Stubbs, C. A., & Roberts, L. W. (2004). Faculty environments, psychosocial dispositions, and the academic achievement of college students. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(8), 801 – 828.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95-S120.
- Cookson, P. W., & Persell, C. H. (1991). Race and class at America's elite preparatory boarding schools: African Americans as the "outsiders within." *The Journal of Negro Education*, 60(2), 219-228.
- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2005). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into practice*, 39(3), 124-130.
- Crocker, J., Thompson, L. L., McGraw, K., & Ingerman, C. (1987). Downward comparison, prejudice, and evaluation of others: Effects of self-esteem and threat. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52(5), 907-916.
- Crouse, J., & Trusheim, D. (1988). *The Case Against the SAT*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Damashek, R. (1999). Reflections on the future of developmental education. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 23(1), 18-22.

- Data Digest (n.d.). Retrieved January 22, 2010 from [http://www.web.xxx.edu/IAAS/data\\_catalog/institutional/data\\_digest/datadigest.htm](http://www.web.xxx.edu/IAAS/data_catalog/institutional/data_digest/datadigest.htm).
- Deil-Amen, R., & Turley, R. N. L. (2007). A review of the transition to college literature in sociology. *Teachers College Record*, 109(10), 6-7.
- Denzin, N. K. (1978). *The research act: a theoretical introduction to sociological methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DesJardins, S., Ahlburg, D. A., & McCall, B. P. (2002). A temporal investigation of factors related to timely degree completion. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73(5), 555-581.
- Dews, C. L., & Law, C. L. (1995). *This fine place so far from home: Voices of academics from the working class*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University.
- Dika, S. L., & Singh, K. (2002). Applications of social capital in education literature: A critical synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*, 72(1), 31-60.
- Dowd, A. C., Cheslock, J., & Melguizo, T. (2008). Transfer access from community colleges and the distribution of elite higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(4), 442 – 472.
- Dynarski, S. (1999). *Does aid matter? Measuring the effect of student aid on college attendance and completion*. (NBER Working Paper No. W7422). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Eide, E., Brewer, D. J., & Ehrenberg, R. G., (1998). Does it pay to attend an elite private college? Evidence of the effects of undergraduate college quality on graduate school attendance. *Economics Education Review*, 17(4), 371-376.
- Engberg, M. E. & Wolniak, G C. (2009). Examining the effects of high school contexts on postsecondary enrollment. *Research in Higher Education*, 51, 132 – 153.
- Evans, R. (1999). A comparison of success indicators for program and nonprogram participants in a community college summer bridge program for minority students. *Visions*, 2(2), 6-14.
- Facts at a Glance (n.d.). Retrieved February 20, 2010 from <http://www.xxxxxxx.edu/Facts/>.

- Farkas, G. (2003). Cognitive skills and noncognitive traits and behaviors in stratification processes. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29, 541–62.
- Farkas, G., Grobe, R. P., Sheehan, D., & Shuan, Y. (1990). Cultural resources and school success: Gender, ethnicity, and poverty groups within an urban school district. *American Sociological Review*, 55, 127-142.
- Fischer, K. (2006). Elite colleges lag in serving needy. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 52. Retrieved April 15, 2008 from <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v52/i36/36a00101.htm>.
- Fisher, M. J. (2007). Settling into campus life: Differences by race/ethnicity in college involvement and outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 78(2), 125-161.
- Fitts, J. D. (1989). *A comparison of locus of control and achievement among remedial summer bridge and non-bridge students in community colleges in New Jersey*. Trenton, NJ: Department of Higher Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 315102).
- Foley M., & Edwards, B. (1999). Is it time to disinvest in social capital? *Journal of Public Policy*, 19, 141-173.
- Freedle, R. O. (2003). Correcting the SAT's ethnic and social-class bias: A method for re-estimating SAT scores. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72, 1–43.
- Friedman, V. J. (2001). Designed blindness: An action science perspective on program theory evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 22 (2), 161 – 181.
- Funnel, S. C. (2000). Developing and using program theory matrix for program evaluation and performance monitoring. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 87, 91- 101.
- Garcia, P. (1991). Summer bridge: Improving retention rates for underprepared students. *Journal of the Freshman Year Experience*, 3, 91-105.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Geiser, S., & Studley, R. (2002). *UC and the SAT: Predictive validity and differential impact of the SAT I and the SAT II at the University of California*. Oakland, CA: University of California.
- Gelber, S. (2007). Pathways in the past: Historical perspectives on access to higher education. *Teachers College Record*, 109(10), 2252-2286.

- Gerald, D., & Haycock, K. (2006). *Engines of inequality: Diminishing equity in the nation's premier public universities*. Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust.
- Goldrick-Rab, S., Carter, D. F., & Wagner, R. W. (2007). What higher education has to say about the transition to college. *Teachers College Record*, 109(10), 2444-2481.
- Goodwin, L. (2002). *Resilient spirits: Disadvantaged students making it an elite university*. New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer
- Goodwin, L. (2006). *Graduating class: Disadvantaged students crossing the bridge of higher education*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Green, D. O. (2007). Using qualitative methods to assess academic success and retention programs for underrepresented minority students. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 3, 41-52.
- Greene, J. (2003). Understanding social programs through evaluation. In N. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds). *Collecting and interpreting qualitative data* (pp. 590 – 618). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Greene, J. A., & Azevedo, R. (2007). A theoretical review of Winne and Hadwin's model of self-regulated learning: New perspectives and directions. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(3), 334-372.
- Guba, E.G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1981). *Effective evaluation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Haycock, K. (2006). *Promise abandoned: How policy choices and institutional practices restrict college opportunity*. Washington, DC: The Education Trust.
- Hayward, G. C., Brandes, B. G., Kirst, M. W., & Mazzeo, C. (1997, January). *Higher education outreach programs: A synthesis of evaluations*. Berkeley: University of California, Policy Analysis for California Education. Retrieved January 23, 2010, from <http://www.ucop.edu/sas/publish/pace>.
- Heller, D. (2001). *Debts and decisions: student loans and their relationship to graduate school and career choice*. New Agenda Series. Indianapolis: Lumina Foundation.
- Heller, D. (2003). *Informing public policy: Financial aid and student persistence*. Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

- Hermanowicz, J. C. (2004). The college departure process among the academic elite. *Education and Urban Society*, 37 (1), 74 -93.
- Heuchert, D. (2007, November 1). After gaining Access to VU, Stars Program offers low income students a smooth transition. *VU Today*.
- Heuchert, D. (2010, February 26). Board roundup. *VU Today*.
- Hill, C. B., & Winston, G. C. (2006). How scarce are high-ability, low-income students? In M. McPherson & M. O. Schapiro (Eds.), *College access: Opportunity or privilege* (pp.49-74). New York, NY: The College Board.
- hooks, b (2000). *Where we stand: Class matters*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Horn, L. (1998). *Stopouts or stayouts? Undergraduates who leave college in their first year* (ERIC ed.). Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics : Educational Resources Information Center.
- Horn, L., & Nunez, A. (2000). *Mapping the road to college: First generation students' math track, planning strategies, and context of support*. (NCES 2000-153). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Horvat, E. M. (2001). Understanding equity and access in higher education: The potential contribution of Pierre Bourdieu. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *The higher education handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 16, pp. 195–238). Hingham, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Hossler, D., Schmit, J., & Vesper, N. (1999). *Going to college: How social, economic and educational factors influence the decisions students make*. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino college students' sense of belonging. *Sociology of Education*, 70(4), 324-345.
- Hurtado, S., Carter, D.F., & Spuler, A. (1996). Latino student transition to college: Assessing difficulties and factors in successful college adjustment. *Research in Higher Education*, 37, 135-157.
- Jackson, L., Sullivan, L., Harnish, R., & Hodge, C. (1996). Achieving positive social identity: Social mobility, social creativity and permeability of group boundaries. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, 241–54.

- Kaltenbaugh, L., St. John, E., & Starkey, J. (1999). What difference does tuition make?: An analysis of ethnic differences in persistence. *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, 29, 21-31.
- Karabel, J. (2005). *The chosen: The hidden history of admissions and exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Kezar, A. (2000). *Summer bridge programs: Supporting all students*. ERIC Digest. Washington, DC: Eric Clearinghouse on Higher Education.
- Klopfenstein, K., & Thomas, M. K. (2009). The link between advanced placement experience and early college success. *Southern Economic Journal*, 75(3), 873-891.
- Krueger, A. B. (2003). Inequality, too much of a good thing. In J. Heckman and A. Krueger (Eds.) *Inequality in America: What role for human capital policies* (pp. 1-76). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- 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.
- Kuh, G., & Hu, S. (2001). The effects of student-faculty interactions in the 1990s. *Review of Higher Education*, 24, 309-332.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J., Bridges, B. B., & Hayek, J. (2006). What matters to student success: A review of the literature. *Commissioned report for the National Symposium on Postsecondary Success: Spearheading a Dialog on Student Success*. NPEC.
- Kulik, C. C., Kulik, J., & Shwalb, B. J. (1983). College programs for high risk and disadvantaged students: A meta-analysis of findings. *Review of Educational Research*, 53, 397-414.
- Kuriloff, P., & Reichert, M. (2003). Boys of class, boys of color: Negotiating the academic and social geography of an elite independent school. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59, 751-769.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Laird, R. (2005). What is we think we are trying to fix and how should we fix it? A view from the admissions office. In *Choosing Students: Higher Education Admissions Tools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* W. J. Camara and E. W. Kimmel (Eds.). Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates: Mahwah, NJ.

- Lamont, M., & Lareau, A. (1988). Cultural capital: Allusions, gaps and glissandos in recent theoretical developments. *Sociological Theory*, 6(2), 153-168.
- Lamont, M., & Molnar, V. (2002). The study of boundaries in the social sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, 167-195.
- Lareau, A. (2002). Invisible inequality: Social class and childrearing in black families and white families. *American Sociological Review*, 67, 747-776.
- Lareau, A., & Horvat, E. M. (1999). Moments of social inclusion and exclusion race, class, and cultural capital in family-school relationships. *Sociology of Education*, 72(1), 37-53.
- Law, C. L. (1995). Introduction. In C. L. B. Dews and C. C. Law (Eds.), *This fine place so far from home* (pp. 1 – 10). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Leonhardt, D. (2004, April 2). As wealthy fill top colleges, concerns grow over fairness. *The New York Times*, Retrieved August 6, 2007 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/22/us/as-wealthy-fill-top-colleges-concerns-grow-over-fairness.html?scp=3&sq=as%20wealthy%20fill%20top%20colleges&st=cse>
- Leonhardt, D. (2007, September 30). The new affirmative action. *The New York Times*. Retrieved April 11, 2008 from <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/education/index.html>.
- Leonhardt, D. (2008, April 20). The (yes) low cost of higher ed. *The New York Times*. Retrieved April 20, 2008 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/education/edlife/essay.html?pagewanted=1&ref=edlife>.
- Levin, J. R., & Levin, M.E. (1991). A critical examination of academic retention initiatives for at-risk minority college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 32(4), 323-334.
- Levin, J. R., & Levin, M. E. (1993). Methodological problems in research on academic retention programs for at-risk minority college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 34(2), 118-124.
- Light, R. J. (2001). *Making the most of college: Students speak their minds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.



- Lipsey, M. W., & Pollard, J. A. (1989). Driving toward theory in program evaluation: More models to choose from. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 12(4), 317-328.
- London, H. B. (1989). Breaking away: A study of first generation college students and their families. *American Journal of Education*, 97, 144-170.
- Long, M. C., Iatarola, P., & Conger, D. (2009). Explaining the gaps in readiness for college-level math: The role of high school courses. *Education, Finance and Policy*, 4, 1 – 33.
- Lopez, G. (2001). The value of hard work: Lessons on parent involvement from an immigrant household. *Harvard Educational Review*, 71, 416-437.
- Lubrano, A. (2003). *Limbo: Blue-collar roots, white-collar dreams*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Maggio, J. C., White, W., Molstad, S., & Kher, N. (2005). Pre-freshman summer programs' impact on student achievement and retention. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 29 (2), 1 – 8.
- Mallette, B., & Cabrera, A. (1991). Determinants of withdrawal behavior: An exploratory study. *Research in Higher Education*, 32, 179-194.
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion and motivation. *Psychology Review*, 98, 224-253.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1999). *Designing qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Martinez, M., & Klopott, S. (2005). The link between high school reform and college access and success for low-income minority youth. American Youth Policy Forum and Pathways to College Network. Washington, DC.
- Massey, D. S., Charles, C. Z., Lundy, G. F., & Fischer, M. J. (2003). The source of the river: The social origins of freshmen at America's selective colleges and universities. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McDonough, P. (1997). *Choosing colleges: How social class and schools structure opportunity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- McDonough, P. (2004). *The school-to-college transition: Challenges and prospects*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education Center for Policy Analysis.

- McDonough, P., Ventresca, M. J., & Oucalt, C. (2000). Field of dreams: Organization field approaches to understanding the transformation of college access, 1965 – 1995. In J. C. Smart and W. Tierney (Eds.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 371-405). New York, NY: Agathon.
- McGrath, M., & Braunstein, A. (1997). The prediction of freshman attrition: An examination of the importance of certain demographic, academic, financial and social factors. *College Student Journal*, 31, 396-408.
- MacLeod, J. (1995). *Ain't no making it: Aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighborhood*. San Francisco, CA: Westview.
- McLoyd, V. (1990). The impact of economic hardship on black families and children: Psychological distress, parenting and socio-emotional development. *Child Development*, 61(2), 311 – 346.
- McPherson, M. S., & Schapiro, M. O. (2006). *College access: Opportunity or privilege*. New York, NY: The College Board.
- Mehan, H., Villanueva, I., Hubbard, L., & Lintz, A. (1996). *Constructing school success: The consequences of untracking low-achieving students*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Milem, J. & Berger, J. B. (1997). A modified model of college student persistence: The relationship between Astin's theory of involvement and Tinto's theory of student departure. *Journal of College Student Development*, 38(4), 387-400.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Montmarquette, C., Cannings, K., & Mahseredjian, S. (2002). How do young people choose college majors?. *Economics of Education Review*, 21(6), 543-556.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mullen, A. L. (2009). Elite destinations: Pathways to attending an Ivy League university. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30(1), 15 – 27.
- Munhall, P. L. (2007). A phenomenological method. In P. L. Munhall (Ed.), *Nursing research: A qualitative perspective* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) pp.145-210). Boston, MA: Jones and Bartlett.
- Myers, C. & Drevlow, S. (1982, March). Summer bridge program: A dropout intervention program for minority and low income students at the University of California, San

- Diego. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association New York, NY.
- Myers, R. D. (2003a). *Annotated bibliography: Perspectives in postsecondary education program and student support interventions*. Washington, DC: Pathways to College Network.
- Myers, R. D. (2003b). *College success programs*. Washington, DC: Pathways to College Network.
- The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). 2006. *State of College Admission*. Retrieved January 23, 2010 from <http://www.nacacnet.org/NR/rdonlyres/4B4C0DF4-BF0A-4B10-89F4-A3D631061305/0/06StateofCollegeAdmissionpdf.pdf>.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). *Dual enrollment of high school students at postsecondary institutions: 2002-03*. NCES2005-008. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Nora, A. (2002). A theoretical and practical view of student adjustment and academic achievement. In W. G. Tierney and L. S. Hagedorn (Eds.) *Increasing access to college: Extending possibilities for all students* (pp. 65 – 77). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Nora, A. Barlow E., & Crisp, G. (2005). Student persistence and degree attainment beyond the first year of college. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College Student Retention: Formula for Success*. 129 – 153. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Nora, A., & Cabrera, A. F. (1996). The role of perceptions of prejudice and discrimination and the adjustment of minority students in college. *Journal of Higher Education*, 67(2), 119-148.
- Nunez, A. (2009). Modeling the effects of diversity experiences and multiple capitals on Latina/o college students' academic self confidence. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 8(2), 179-196.
- Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, C. T, Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 75(3), 249-284.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1980). Predicting freshman persistence and voluntary dropout decisions from a theoretical model. *Journal of Higher Education*, 51, 60 -75.

- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, L. D., Morelon, C., Whitehead, D. M., & Hossler, D. (2006). Campus-based retention initiatives: Does the emperor have clothes? *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 130, 9-24.
- Patton, M. Q. (1987). *How to use qualitative methods in evaluation*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (1997). *Utilization focused evaluation: The new century text* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Paulsen, M. B., & St. John, E. P. (2002). Social class and college costs: Examining the financial nexus between college choice and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73(2), 189-236.
- Peglow-Hoch, M., & Walleri, R. D. (1990). Case studies as a supplement to quantitative research: Evaluation of an intervention program for high risk students. AIR Professional File Tallahassee, FL: Association for Institutional Research.
- Peltier, G. L., Laden, R., & Matranga, M. (2000). Student persistence in college: A review of research. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 1(4), 357-375.
- Perna, L. (2000) Differences in the decision to attend college among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71, 117-141.
- Perry, R. P. (1991). Perceived control in college students: Implications for instruction in higher education. In Smart, J. (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 1-56). New York, NY: Agathon.
- Perry, R. P., Hladkyj, S., Pekrun, R. H., & Pelletier, S. T. (2001). Academic self control and action control in achievement of college students. A longitudinal field study. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93 (4), 776-779.
- Pike, G. R., & Kuh, G. (2001). First- and second-generation college students: A comparison of their engagement and intellectual development. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 76(3), 276 – 300.

- Pintrich, P. R. (2000). The role of goal orientation in self-regulated learning. In M. Boekaerts, P. Pintrich, & M. Zeidner (Eds.), *Handbook of self regulation*, (pp. 452–502). New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Pintrich, P. R., & de Groot, E. V. (1990). Motivational and self-regulated learning components of classroom academic performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82, 33-40.
- Portes, A. (1998). Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 1-24.
- Reay, D., Ball, S.J, David, M. & Davies, J. ( 2001) Choices of degree or degrees of choice? Social class, race and the higher education choice process. *Sociology*, 35(4), 855-874.
- Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2009). Strangers in paradise: Working class students in elite universities. *Sociology*, 43(6), 1103-1121.
- Reay, D., David, M., & Ball, S. ( 2005) *Degrees of choice: Social class, race and gender in higher education*. Stoke-on-Trent, UK: Trentham Books.
- Rendón, L. I. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education*, 19(1), 35-51.
- Rendón, L. I. (2002). Community college Puente: A validation model of education. *Educational Policy*, 16, 642-667.
- Rendón, L. I., Jalomo, R. E., & Nora, A. (2000). Theoretical consideration in the study of minority student retention in higher education. In J. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (127-156). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Richards, L., & Morse, J. M. (2007). *Readme first for a user's guide to qualitative methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Roach, R. (2005). Affirmative action fallout. *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 22(11), 24-27.
- Rossi, P. (1978). Issues in the evaluation of human services delivery. *Evaluation Review*, 2(4), 573-599.
- Rossi, P., Lipsey, M. W., & Freeman, H. (2004). *Evaluation: A systematic approach*. (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Rossmann, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2003). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Rothstein, J. M. (2004). College performance predictions and the SAT. *Journal of Econometrics* 121, 297–317.
- Ryan, J., & Sackrey, C. (1995). *Strangers in paradise: Academics from the working class*. New York, NY: University Press.
- St. John, E. P. (2003). *Diverse pathways: The roles of financial aid and student involvement in expanding educational opportunity*. Prepared for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
- St. John, E. P. (2006a). Contending with financial inequality: Rethinking the contribution of qualitative research on the policy discourse on college access. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49(12), 1604–1619.
- St John, E. P. (2006b). Lessons learned: Institutional research as support for academic improvement. *New Directions for Institutional Research*. 130, 97-105.
- St. John, E. P., Cabrera, A., Nora, A., & Asker, E. (2000). Economic influences on persistence reconsidered: How can finance research inform the reconceptualization of persistence models. In J. Braxton (Ed), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 127-156). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- St. John, E. P., Musoba, G., & Simmons, A. B. (2003). Keeping the promise: The impact of Indiana's twenty-first century scholars program. *The Review of Higher Education*, 27(1), 103-123.
- St. John, E. P., Paulsen, M. B., & Carter, D. F. (2005). Diversity, college costs, and postsecondary opportunity: An examination of the financial nexus between college choice and persistence for African Americans and Whites. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 76(5), 545 – 569.
- St. John, E. P., Paulsen, M. B., & Starkey, J. (1996). The nexus between college choice and persistence. *Research in Higher Education*, 37, 175 – 220.
- Sanford, N. (1962). Developmental status of entering freshman. In N. Sanford (Ed.), *The American college*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Santa Rita, E., & Bacote, J. B. (1997). The benefits of college discovery prefreshman summer program for minority and low-income students. *College Student Journal*, 31, 161-173.
- Schon, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

- Schon, D. A., & Rein, M. (1994). *Frame reflection: Toward a resolution of intractable policy controversies*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Schunk, D. (1994). Self regulation of self-efficacy and attributions in academic settings. In D. Schunk and B. J. Zimmerman (Eds). *Self regulation of learning and performance: Issues and educational applications*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Spradley, J. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York, NY: Hold, Rinehart & Winston.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (1997). A social capital framework for understanding the socialization of racial minority children and youths. *Harvard Educational Review*, 61(1), 1-40.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (2001). *Manufacturing hope and despair: the school kin support networks of US Mexican youth*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Struthers, C. W., Perry, R. P., & Menec, V. H. (2000). An examination of the relationship among academic stress, coping, motivation and performance in college. *Research in Higher Education*, 41, 581- 592.
- Suhr, J. (1980). *Study of the 1978 summer step: The summer "bridge" program at the learning skills center, University of California, Davis*. (Report No. He 018342). University of California, Davis: Office of Student Affairs Research & Evaluation. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 256 275).
- Swail, W. S., Redd, K. E., & Perna, L. A. Retaining minority students in higher education: A framework for success. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report*, 30(2), 1-187..
- Swidler, A. (1986). Culture in action: Symbols and strategies. *American Sociological Review*, 51, 273-276.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin and S. Worchel (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 33-47). Monterey, CA: Brooks-Cole.
- Tebbs, M., & Turner, S. (2006). The challenge of improving representation of low-income students at flagship universities: AccessUVA and the University of Virginia. In M. McPherson & M. O. Schapiro (Eds.), *College access: Opportunity or privilege* (pp.103 -115). New York, NY: The College Board.
- Temple, M., & Polk, K. (1986). A dynamic analysis of educational attainment. *Sociology of Education*, 59(2), 79-84.

- Teranishi, R., & Briscoe, K. (2006). Social capital and racial stratification of college opportunity. *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research*, 21, 591-614.
- Terenzini, P. T., Cabrera, A. F., & Bernal, E. M. (2001). *Swimming against the tide: The poor in American higher education*. College Board Research Report 2001-01. New York, NY: The College Board.
- Terenzini, P., Rendón, L., Upcraft, M., Millar, S., Allison, K., & Gregg, P. (1994). The transition to college: Diverse students, diverse stories. *Research in Higher Education*, 35, 57-73.
- Tett, L. (2004). Mature working class students at an elite university: Discourses of risk, choice and exclusion. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 36(2), 252-264.
- Thayer, P. B. (2000). Retention of students from first generation and low income backgrounds. *Opportunity Outlook: The Journal of the Council for Opportunity in Education*, Washington, DC.
- The Institute for College Access and Success [TICAS]. (2010). Summary of pledges: Eligibility guidelines and basic provisions. Retrieved on January 22, 2010 from [http://projectionstudentdebt.org/Type\\_and\\_Coverage.vp.html](http://projectionstudentdebt.org/Type_and_Coverage.vp.html)
- Thiede, K. W., & Dunlosky, J. (1999). Toward a general model of self-regulated study: An analysis of selection of items for study and self-paced study time. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 25, 1024-1037.
- Tierney, W. G. (1992). *Official encouragement, institutional discouragement: Minorities in academe – the Native American experience*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (1998). Colleges as communities: Taking research on student persistence seriously. *The Review of Higher Education*, 21 (2), 167-177.
- Tinto, V. (2002, October). *Enhancing student persistence: Connecting the dots*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education, Madison, WI.
- Tinto, V., & Pusser, B. (2006). *Moving from theory to action: Building a model of institutional action for student success*. Washington, DC: National Postsecondary



- Education Cooperative. Retrieved March 31, 2007 from [http://nces.ed.gov/npec/pdf/Tinto\\_Pusser\\_Report.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/npec/pdf/Tinto_Pusser_Report.pdf).
- U.S. Department of Education. (September 2006). A test of leadership: Charting the future of higher education – A report of the Commission appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. Jessup, MD  
<http://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/final-report.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education, (2008). *The Condition of Education 2008* (NCES 2008–031), Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Valentine, J. C., Dubois, D. L., & Cooper, H. (2004). The relation between self-beliefs and academic achievement: A meta-analytic review. *Educational Psychologist*, 39, 111-133.
- Valeri-Gold, M. V., Deming, M. P., & Stone, K. (1992). A summer academic enrichment program to retain African American collegians. *Journal of the Freshman Year Experience*, 4(2), 101-117.
- Valley University Institutional Assessment (2006). Retrieved April 16, 2007 from [http://www.web.xxxx.edu/IAAS/data\\_catalog/institutional/data\\_digest/aid.htm](http://www.web.xxxx.edu/IAAS/data_catalog/institutional/data_digest/aid.htm).
- VU Institutional Assessment Report (2010). Provided by Institutional Assessment staff per researcher request.
- VU Promise Annual Report, 2005-2006. (2007, January). VU Promise Steering Committee.
- Walpole, M. (2003). Socioeconomic status and college: How SES affects college experiences and outcomes. *The Review of Higher Education*, 27(1), 45-73.
- Walpole, M. (2007). Economically and educationally challenged students in higher education: Access to outcomes. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 33, 1-113.
- Walpole, M., Simmerman, H. Mack, C., Mills, J.T., Scales, M., & Albano, D. (2008). Bridge to success: Insight into summer bridge program students' transitions to college. *Journal of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition*, 20(1), 11 – 30.
- Warburton, E.C., Bugarin, R, Nuñez, A.M., & Carroll, C.D. (2001), Bridging the gap: Academic preparation and postsecondary success of first-generation college students (NCES 2001–153). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Weiss, C. H. (1997). How can theory-based evaluation make greater headway? *Evaluation Review*, 21, 501-524.

- Weiss, C. H. (1998). *Evaluation methods for studying programs and policies* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Weiss, C. H. (2000). Which links in which theories shall we evaluate? *New Directions for Evaluation*, 87, 35 – 45.
- Wigfield, A., Eccles, J. S., Schiefele, U., Roesner, R., & Davis-Kean P. (2006). Development of achievement motivation. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology* (6th ed., pp. 933–1002). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley.
- Winne, P. H., & Jamieson-Noel, D. (2002). Exploring students' calibration of self reports about study tactics and achievement. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 27(4), 551–572.
- Wolf-Wendel, L., Tuttle, K., & Keller-Wolff, C. M. (1999). Assessment of a freshman summer transition program in an open-admissions institution. *Journal of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition*, 11(2), 7 – 32.
- Wolniak, G. C., & Engberg, M. E. (2010). Academic achievement in the first year of college: Evidence of pervasive effects of high school context. *Research in Higher Education*, retrieved February 8, 2010 from <http://www.springerlink.com/content/hk2675383031xu88/fulltext.pdf>.
- Wyner, J., Bridgeland, J. M., & DiIulio, J. J. (2007). *Achievement trap: How America is failing millions of high-achieving students from low-income families*. Jack Kent Cooke Foundation: Landsdowne, VA.
- Zimmerman, B. J. (1995). Self-efficacy and educational development. In A. Bandura (Ed), *Self-efficacy in changing societies* (pp. 202 - 231). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### VU Promise and the Stars Academic Program Summary

##### **VU Promise<sup>22</sup>**

The VU Promise program is Valley University's financial aid program designed to keep higher education affordable for all admitted students. The university has made an annual commitment of \$20 million in need-based grants to undergraduates. VU Promise offers loan-free packages for low-income students, caps on need-based loans for all other students, and a commitment to meet 100% of need for every student. Although a financial aid program, VU Promise is a collaborative effort among many areas of the university, including admission and university relations.

##### **Main components**

The VU Promise financial aid plan assists students and families through four key components:

1. meets 100% of demonstrated need for all admitted undergraduate students,
2. caps the amount of need-based loans offered to any student at approximately 25% of Valley University's in-state cost of attendance over four years,
3. provides one-on-one financial aid/literacy counseling to admitted students and their families,
4. provides grants to low-income students — those whose family income is equivalent to or below 200% of the federal poverty line.

##### **Highlights of the VU Promise program**

- In February 2004, the university's Board of Trustees approved the program and for the 2004 -2005 academic year, financial aid packages that provided 100% of need to all undergraduates were fully implemented
- In 2005-06, VU Promise replaced loans with grants for low-income students
- In 2007, The Board of Trustees approved extension of program eligibility to transfer students for the 2007-2008 academic year.
- Key goals for VU Promise are to provide participating students with the opportunity to take advantage of the full undergraduate experience and increase options available to students upon graduation, including graduate school, careers in teaching, or service in national or international volunteer organizations such as the Peace Corps or Teach for America.

##### **How the Stars Academic Program fits within VU Promise**

As part of the university's commitment to increase access for low-income students to attend and graduate from VU, a set of administrators established a pilot summer bridge program

---

<sup>22</sup> Information on VU Promise and low-income students retrieved from university's website and VU Promise Annual Report 2005-2006.

(the Stars Academic Program) in 2005. The students targeted for this program are academically talented low-income students who are incoming first years or incoming transfer students. All costs for the Stars Academic Program (e.g., tuition, books, housing) are covered by the university; transportation is not covered.

In its first year (2005), 17 students participated in the five-week program. Upon their arrival in July 2005, they enrolled in six credits of regular summer session courses, attended workshops and training sessions, and participated in events with faculty and administrators. The program was continued; 14 students participated in summer 2006 and 19 participated in summer 2007. The program costs an estimated \$7,000 per student.

## Appendix B

### Email and Letter Correspondence to Student Participants

Dear Name<sup>23</sup>:

I am a doctoral student in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, and I am writing to seek your participation in a study I am completing for my dissertation. I am completing an evaluation of the Stars Academic Program and am interested in interviewing students who were invited to participate in the program but chose not to participate<sup>24</sup>.

I am asking for you to participate in two, one-hour interviews. One will be conducted this summer (over the phone or in person) and one will occur in fall 2008 (in person). I am offering \$100 for your participation.

You were randomly selected from the list of students invited to last year's summer Stars Academic Program. I know that you did not end up participating in the program, and I am interested in learning why you choose not to participate. In addition, I am interested in learning about your first-year experiences at Valley University. Your participation is greatly appreciated; only through talking with students who did and *did not* participate can I begin to learn about the effectiveness of the program.

I hope you will consider assisting me by participating in this research. I am happy to send you a brief biography and a description of the study via email before you decide. I am also very willing to follow up with a phone call so that you may ask me questions and learn more about the study.

I would greatly appreciate your help.

Please respond to this email by July X, 2008. My email is [bas4n@virginia.edu](mailto:bas4n@virginia.edu)

Sincerely,  
Barbara Schmertz  
434-XXX-XXXX

---

<sup>23</sup> Letter and email text were identical.

<sup>24</sup> Text for email and letter was altered to reflect students' affiliation with the SAP. Non participants, waitlisted, and SAP participant students received tailored emails and letters.

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol for Administrators Summer 2007

*At the beginning of the interview the researcher will:*

- *Introduce herself to the administrator and thank him/her for taking the time to participate.*
- *Explain the process of audiotaping the interview*
  - *Only the researcher will be privy to the audiotape*
  - *The audiotape will be transcribed and destroyed at the completion of the study*
  - *Interviewee will have the opportunity to read the transcripts of the tapes and agree to their use*
- *Review the informed consent form and materials release form*
- *Explain that the materials release form will be signed upon his/her receipt of the interview transcript*
- *Obtain signature for two copies consent form*
- *Provide interviewee with copy of consent form for his/her records*

*The following questions will be used as a guide. Some may not be asked if the answer is gleaned from a previous response. Follow-up probes may be used in the context of each interview to illicit greater detail and information.*

Q1: I'd like to begin by having you briefly describe the history of the creation of the Stars Academic Program

Q2: The next four questions are meant to explore the goals of the program.  
Do you feel there is a need for the Stars Academic program?

Q3: What are the expected results of the program and how will you know if the results actually occurred?

Q4: What transformations do you believe occur for the students over the term of the summer program, if any?

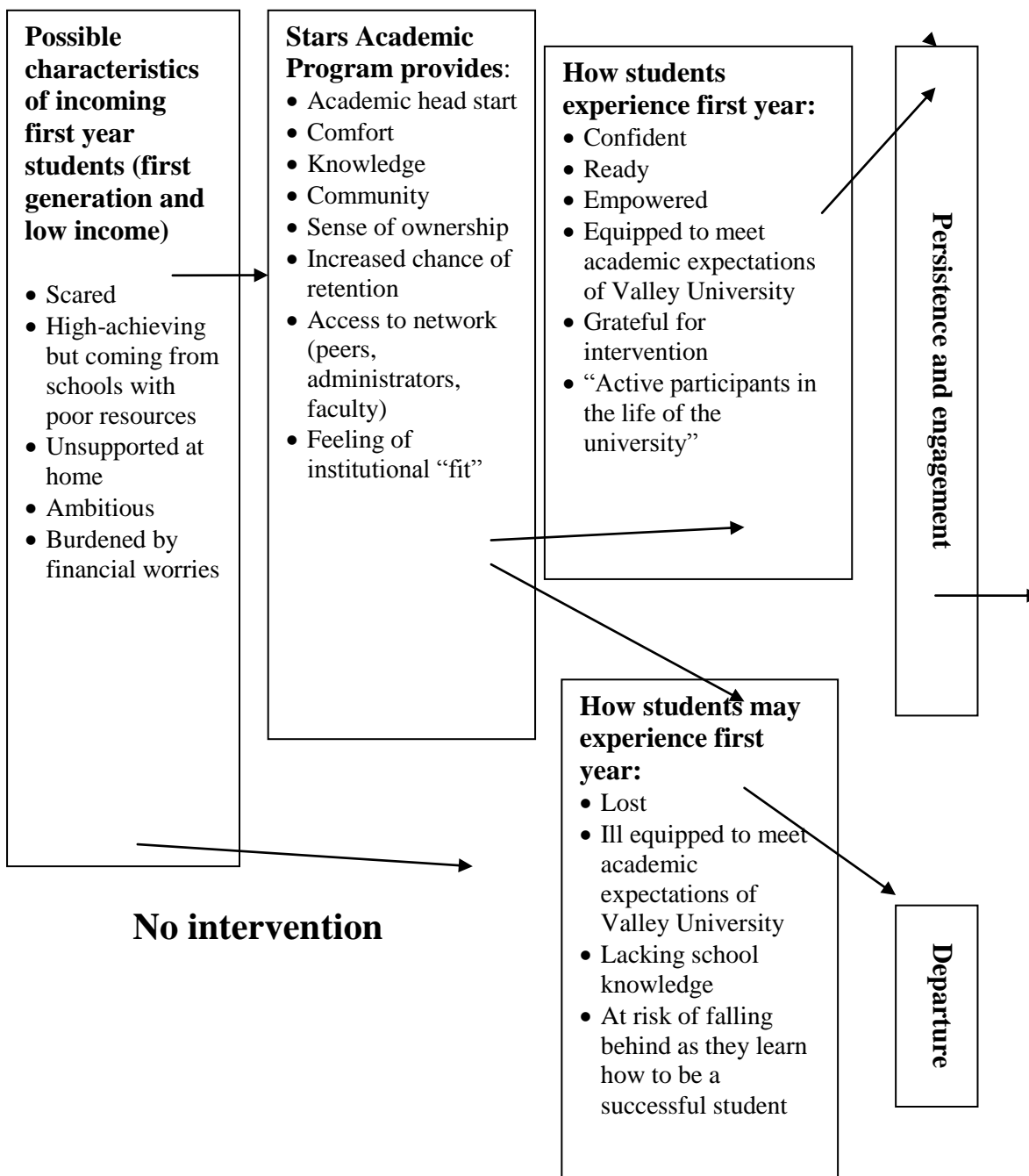
Q5: What long-term effects, if any, do you think might happen for student participants?

Q6: Do you have any other thoughts that haven't been addressed?

Wrap up: Thank you again for your time. You have been very helpful in my data collection. I will transcribe the interview in the coming two weeks and will be in contact to share a transcript with you. May I be in touch with you if I have further questions?

## Appendix D

### Preliminary Theoretical Schema



## Appendix E

### Interview Protocol #1 for Student Participants

#### Protocol for SAP Participants

All interviewees will be contacted in advance via email to request an interview. Once a student agrees to be interviewed and provides a signed consent form, the date and time will be arranged. In advance of the interview, the researcher will also offer to send the interview protocol to the student.

The following protocol provides the guidelines for the first semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with students who did participate in the Stars Academic Program. Interviews may be conducted over the phone or in person.

*At the beginning of the interview the researcher will:*

- *Re-introduce herself to the student and thank him/her for taking the time to participate.*
- *Explain the process of creating an audio file of the interview*
  - *Only the researcher will be privy to the audio file*
  - *The audiotape will be transcribed and deleted at the completion of the study*
  - *Interviewee will have the opportunity to read the transcripts of the audio file*
- *Ask the student if he/she has additional questions or would like to know more about the researcher. The researcher will assure the interviewee that he/she may interrupt at any time to ask questions, get clarification on the meaning of a question or to request the interviewer proceed to the next question*

*The following questions will be used as a guide. Some may not be asked if the answer is gleaned from a previous response. Follow-up probes may be used in the context of the interview to illicit greater detail and information.*

#### Questions to build rapport

Why did you choose to come to Valley University?

What do you do for fun?

Describe your closest group of friends?

Follow up probes:

How did you meet your closest friends?

What do they help you with?

#### Stars Academic Program and VU Promise questions

Next I'd like to talk about the Stars Academic Program. Why did you choose to participate last summer?

What were your expectations of the program?

Follow up probes:



What were you most worried about before coming?

What were you most excited about before coming?

Once you were on campus and participating in the program, how did it meet or not meet your expectations?

Follow up probes:

What words would you use to describe the program?

How did it make you feel?

How do think the program related to your experiences in the fall and spring? If it did not affect your year, what did?

Follow up probe: Did you find yourself helping other students? If so, how did you do that?

#### Questions related to social and cultural capital

Tell me a story of how you solved an academic problem during your first year.

Follow up probes: Who helped you? Why did you seek them out?

Describe the role your family plays in your higher education goals?

Follow up probe: who else has played a key role in helping you with your goals?

#### Questions regarding perceptions of institutional commitment

Do you think Valley University cares about you? Why?

Follow up probes: If so, how does the university show that it does?

If not, how does that affect you?

#### Questions regarding communal potential

Who are the most important people for you at the Valley University? What makes them special?

Follow up probes:

Who else is important to you? Why?

#### Questions about validation from institutional/personal agents

Name a professor or administrator that you have a relationship with. Why is he/she important to you? What does he/she mean to you?

#### Questions about integration during first year

What do you like most about being a student here?

What has been the most challenging part of being a student here for you?

Conclusion

Do you have any final thoughts to share with me about what we've discussed today?

Do you have any questions I can answer?

Thank you so much for your participation in my research. If you decide later that you would like for me not to include this interview, please contact me via e-mail. I really appreciate your time and energy.

**Protocol for Stars Academic Program Waitlist Students**

Questions to build rapport

Why did you choose to come to Valley University?

What do you do for fun?

Describe your closest group of friends?

Follow up probes:

How did you meet your closest friends?

What do they help you with?

Questions about the Stars Academic Program and VU Promise

As you know, I contacted you regarding an interview because you signed up to participate in the Stars Academic Program but were placed on the waiting list. Why did you want to participate in the summer program?

Follow up probes:

What did you expect the program might provide you?

Now that you have been at Valley University for one year, do you still feel you would have liked to have participated in the summer program?

Questions related to social and cultural capital

How did you learn your way around Valley University in your first weeks and months?

Follow up probe: who helped you?

Tell me a story of how you solved an academic problem during your first year.

Follow up probes: Who helped you? Why did you seek them out?

Describe the role your family plays in your higher education goals?

Follow up probe: who else has played a key role in helping you with your goals?

Questions regarding perceptions of institutional commitment

Do you think Valley University cares about you? Why?

Follow up probes: If so, how does the university show that it does?

If not, how does that affect you?

Questions regarding communal potential

Who are the most important people for you at the Valley University? What makes them special?

Follow up probes:

Who else is important to you? Why?

Questions about validation from institutional/personal agents

Name a professor or administrator that you have a relationship with. Why is he/she important to you? What does he/she mean to you?

Questions about integration during first year

What do you like most about being a student here?

What has been the most challenging part of being a student here for you?

Conclusion

Do you have any final thoughts to share with me about what we've discussed today?

Do you have any questions I can answer?

**Protocol for students invited to participate in Stars Academic Program but did not respond**

Questions to build rapport

Why did you choose to come to Valley University?

What do you do for fun?

Describe your closest group of friends?

Follow up probes:

How did you meet your closest friends?

What do they help you with?

Questions about Stars Academic Program and VU Promise

You may or may not remember receiving an invitation last summer to participate in the Stars Academic Program. This summer program provides funding for incoming freshman to earn

six credits and participate in workshops over five weeks in the summer. Do you remember receiving an invitation? Do you remember why you decided not to attend?

Follow up probes:

What would have had to been offered for you to participate?

What would you have liked the program to offer that it didn't?

#### Questions related to social and cultural capital

How did you learn your way around Valley University in your first weeks and months?

Follow up probe: who helped you?

Tell me a story of how you solved an academic problem during your first year.

Follow up probes: Who helped you? Why did you seek them out?

Describe the role your family plays in your higher education goals?

Follow up probe: who else has played a key role in helping you with your goals?

#### Questions regarding perceptions of institutional commitment

Do you think Valley University cares about you? Why?

Follow up probes: If so, how does the university show that it does?

If not, how does that affect you?

#### Questions regarding communal potential

Who are the most important people for you at the Valley University? What makes them special?

Follow up probes:

Who else is important to you? Why?

#### Questions about validation from institutional/personal agents

Name a professor or administrator that you have a relationship with. Why is he/she important to you? What does he/she mean to you?

#### Questions about integration during first year

What do you like most about being a student here?

What has been the most challenging part of being a student here for you?

#### Conclusion

Do you have any final thoughts to share with me about what we've discussed today?

## Appendix F

### Interview Protocol #2 for Student Participants

#### **Protocol for Stars Academic Program Participants**

The following protocol provides the guidelines for the second semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with students who participated in the Stars Academic Program.

*At the beginning of the interview the researcher will:*

- *Re-introduce herself to the student and thank him/her for taking the time to participate.*
- *Remind the student of the terms of the consent form – most importantly that he/she may interrupt at any time to ask questions, get clarification on the meaning of a question, request the interviewer proceed to the next question or end the interview at any time.*

*The following questions will be used as a guide. Some may not be asked if the answer is gleaned from a previous response. Follow-up probes may be used in the context of the interview to illicit greater detail and information.*

#### Introductory questions

What has your fall semester been like?

What are you looking forward to this year?

#### Questions about the Stars Academic Program and VU Promise

Think back to last summer when you received the invitation to the Stars Program. How did it feel to be selected and get into the program?

What do you think the main purpose of the Stars Academic Program is?

Follow up probe: How do you think the program administrators achieved those goals?

If you recall, you were selected to participate in the Stars Academic Program because you receive funding through VU Promise. What is your experience being a VU Promise student?

Follow up probes:

How do you think your experiences are different or the same as other students at Valley University?

Do you feel your experiences as a high-financial need student affect you? If so, how?

Are you involved with the student group for VU Promise?

Follow up probes: If so, why? If not, have you heard of it?

#### Questions related to social and cultural capital

Draw a diagram that represents where you think you fit within Valley University.

Follow up probe: what other types of people (professors, friends, family) would be in the diagram? Where would they fall?

Do you feel you were adequately prepared for college (academically, socially and emotionally)? Follow up probe: if not, what/who has helped you?

What are you involved in at Valley University? Why is it important to you? How did you get involved?

#### Questions regarding communal potential

What advice would you give a friend who was coming into Valley University this fall?

Describe your best friends?

Follow up probes: How did you meet your friends?

Do you feel there are people like you here?

#### Questions about validation from agents

Describe a tough time you had during your first year.

Follow up probes:

Who helped you? How did that person/those people help?

#### Questions about integration during first year

If a friend from your neighborhood asked you whether or not he/she should apply to VALLEY UNIVERSITY, what would you say?

What makes you stay at Valley University?

Follow up probes: did you ever think of leaving Valley University? If so, why did you stay? If not, what kept you here?

I will be using the data I collect from all of the students' interviews to help inform a schematic of the "theory in action" for the Stars Academic Program. I am looking for feedback from all student interviewees on this schematic. Would you be willing to help me? If so, I will be in touch in a few months about it and we can decide how you best want to give me feedback (email, in person).

#### Conclusion

Do you have any final thoughts to share with me about what we've discussed today?

Do you have any questions I can answer?

### **Protocol for Stars Academic Program Waitlisted Students**

The following protocol provides the guidelines for the second semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with students who were waitlisted for the Stars Academic Program.

#### Introductory questions

What has your fall semester been like?

What are you looking forward to this year?

#### Questions about the Stars Academic Program and VU Promise

Think back to last summer when you received the invitation to the Stars Program. How did it feel to be put on the waiting list?

If you recall, you were selected to participate in the Stars Academic Program because you receive funding through VU Promise. What is your experience being a VU Promise student?

Follow up probes:

How do you think your experiences are different or the same as other students at Valley University?

Do you feel your experiences as a high-financial need student affect you? If so, how?

Are you involved with the student group for VU Promise?

Follow up probes: If so, why? If not, have you heard of it?

#### Questions related to social and cultural capital

Draw a diagram that represents where you think you fit within Valley University.

Follow up probe: what other types of people (professors, friends, family) would be in the diagram? Where would they fall?

Do you feel you were adequately prepared for college (academically, socially and emotionally)? Follow up probe: if not, what/who has helped you?

What are you involved in at Valley University? Why is it important to you? How did you get involved?

#### Questions regarding communal potential

What advice would you give a friend who was coming into Valley University this fall?

Describe your best friends?

Follow up probes: How did you meet your friends?

Do you feel there are people like you here?

#### Questions about validation from agents

Describe a tough time you had during your first year.

Follow up probes:

Who helped you? How did that person/those people help?

#### Questions about integration during first year

If a friend from your neighborhood asked you whether or not he/she should apply to VALLEY UNIVERSITY, what would you say?

What makes you stay at Valley University?

Follow up probes: did you ever think of leaving Valley University? If so, why did you stay? If not, what kept you here?

#### Conclusion

Do you have any final thoughts to share with me about what we've discussed today?

Do you have any questions I can answer?

#### **Protocol for students invited to Stars Academic Program who did not respond**

The following protocol provides the guidelines for the second semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with students who were waitlisted for the Stars Academic Program.

#### Introductory questions

What has your fall semester been like?

What are you looking forward to this year?

#### Questions about the Stars Academic Program and VU Promise

If you recall, you were selected to participate in the Stars Academic Program because you receive funding through VU Promise. What is your experience being a VU Promise student?

Follow up probes:

How do you think your experiences are different or the same as other students at Valley University?

Do you feel your experiences as a high-financial need student affect you? If so, how?

Are you involved with the student group for VU Promise?

Follow up probes: If so, why? If not, have you heard of it?

#### Questions related to social and cultural capital

Draw a diagram that represents where you think you fit within Valley University.



Follow up probe: what other types of people (professors, friends, family) would be in the diagram? Where would they fall?

Do you feel you were adequately prepared for college (academically, socially and emotionally)? Follow up probe: if not, what/who has helped you?

What are you involved in at Valley University? Why is it important to you? How did you get involved?

#### Questions regarding communal potential

What advice would you give a friend who was coming into Valley University this fall?

Describe your best friends?

Follow up probes: How did you meet your friends?

Do you feel there are people like you here?

#### Questions about validation from agents

Describe a tough time you had during your first year.

Follow up probes:

Who helped you? How did that person/those people help?

#### Questions about integration during first year

If a friend from your neighborhood asked you whether or not he/she should apply to VALLEY UNIVERSITY, what would you say?

What makes you stay at Valley University?

Follow up probes: did you ever think of leaving Valley University? If so, why did you stay? If not, what kept you here?

#### Conclusion

Do you have any final thoughts to share with me about what we've discussed today?

Do you have any questions I can answer?

## Appendix G

### Informed Consent for Students

**Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.**

**Purpose of the research study:** The purpose of the study is to conduct an evaluation of the XXX Academic Program, a summer bridge program offered to all XXX students receiving full grant aid. To conduct this evaluation I am seeking to better understand the experiences of students who did participate in the program, and those who were invited to participate but did not do so.

**What you will do in the study:** You will participate in two, one-hour private interviews with the researcher. Both of these interviews will be audiorecorded, and a transcript will be produced from each interview. You will have an opportunity to review each transcription and make changes to both of them. Please know that participation in each interview is strictly voluntary; you can skip any question that makes you uncomfortable, and you can end the interview at any time.

In addition, you will have the opportunity to provide the researcher feedback on her analysis of the data collected from the study. This will occur toward the end of the research study and can take place through various means (e.g., email exchange, meeting face-to-face). Participation in this activity is voluntary.

I will also collect information about your enrollment in college including course enrollment, semester grades, and cumulative GPA in an effort to better understand how the XXX Academic Program helps students with their academic progress while at XXX. These data will be collected from the student database with the cooperation of academic administrators at XXX.

**Time required:** The study will require about two to three hours of your time. As stated above, you will participate in two, one-hour interviews. One will be held in the summer and one will be conducted in fall 2008. If you select to give the researcher feedback on her data analysis, you may be asked to provide additional time.

**Risks:** You may be at risk. Because the research study is an evaluation of a program, administrators tied to the program will be an audience for the final report. Although these administrators do not hold positions of power (e.g., your course instructor), they may have the opportunity to interact with you during your remaining years at XXX. Because I cannot assure anonymity, it is possible that these administrators may be able to discern your identity from the content of the report. I will do my utmost to protect your identity (see Confidentiality section below).

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The study may help us understand what aspects of the XXX Academic Program are and are not effective. Beyond the scope of the evaluation, we may also learn how low-income students experience a highly selective college environment.

**Confidentiality:** The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. I will do my utmost to protect your identity through the use of pseudonyms, locking my data files and code sheets in a lockbox in my home office and protecting my electronic data on my computer with a password. I will also be sensitive in any reporting of direct data during my analysis and write up of my work.

Data collected from the student database will only include your name and pertinent academic information (e.g., GPA, grades, courses taken). Upon receipt of this data I will replace your name with your pseudonym, which will be used for all other resulting analysis.

When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, all materials will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report (only your pseudonym).

**Voluntary participation:** Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

**Right to withdraw from the study:** You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, the interview transcription will be destroyed and the interview audiofile created from the digital recording of the interview will be deleted.

**How to withdraw from the study:** If you want to withdraw from the study, you can tell the researcher to end the interview. There is no penalty for withdrawing. You will still receive a pro-rated payment for the study. If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact Barbara Schmertz at [bas4n@virginia.edu](mailto:bas4n@virginia.edu) or 434-XXX-XXXX.

**Payment:** You will receive \$100 for participating in both interviews.

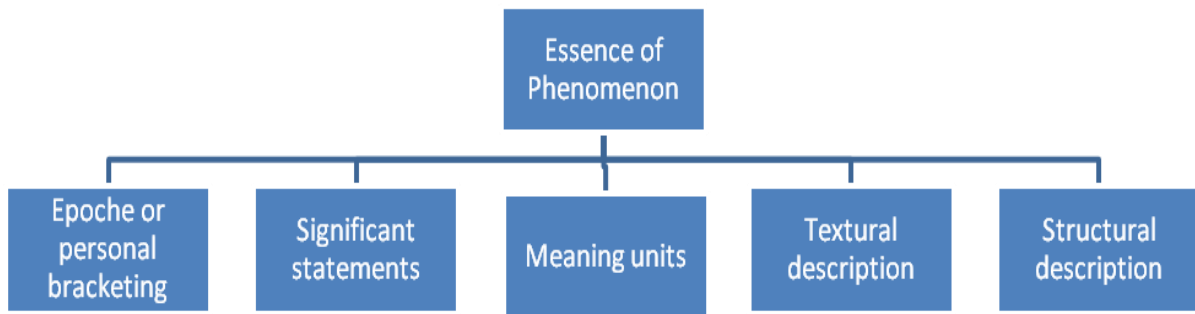
**If you have questions about the study, contact:**

Barbara Schmertz, M. Ed.  
Curry School of Education  
University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903  
Telephone: (434) 960-4158  
[bas4n@virginia.edu](mailto:bas4n@virginia.edu)

Professor Heather Wathington  
Department of Leadership, Foundations and Policy  
Curry School of Education  
University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903

## Appendix H

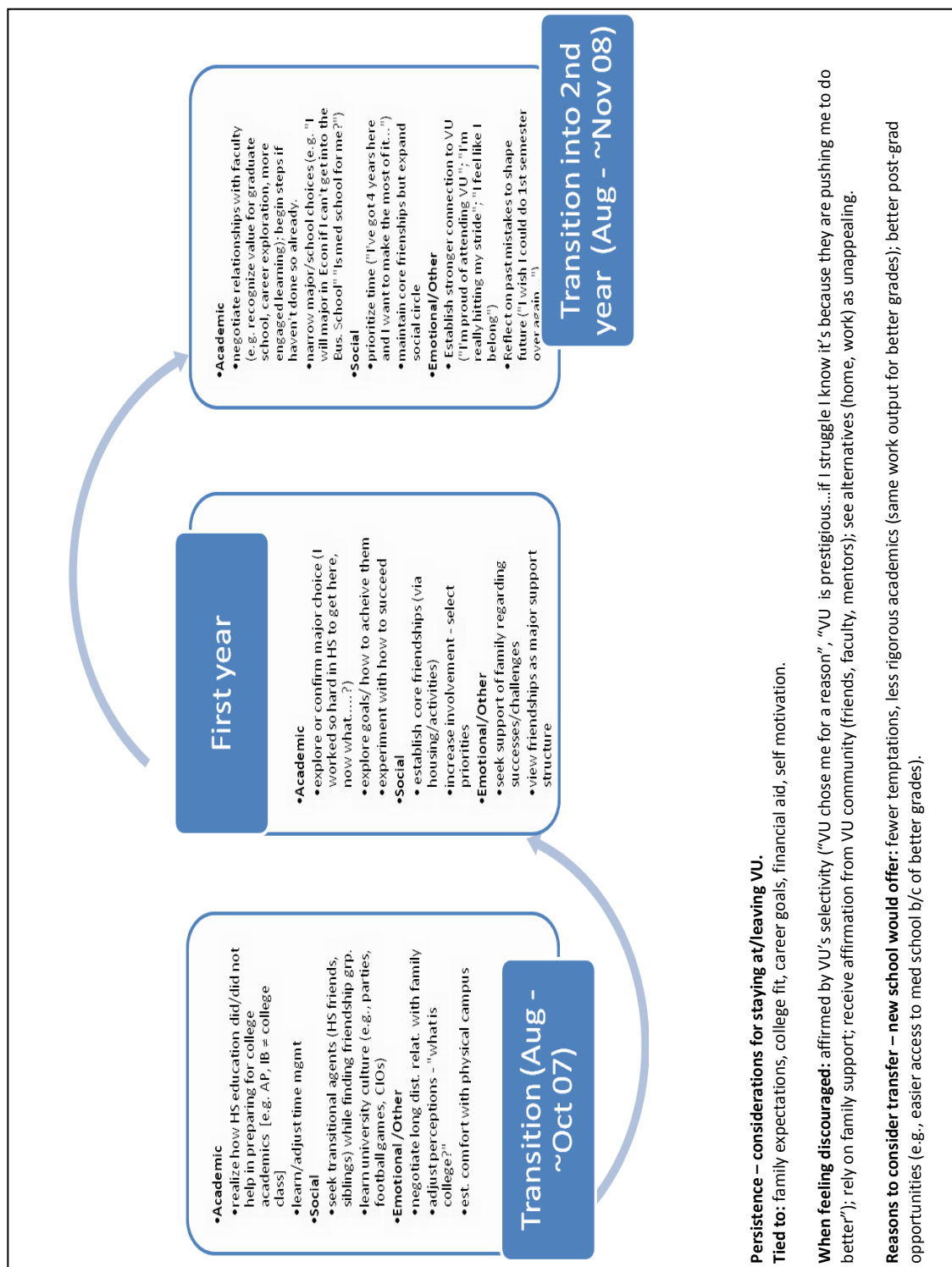
### Phenomenological Coding



Adapted from Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five different approaches* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## Appendix I

### Schema for Students



**Appendix J**  
**Stars Academic Program Survey**  
**Summer 2007**

Please take a few minutes to answer the questions below. We are interested in learning your thoughts on the Stars Academic program and its use in helping prepare you for the fall. We appreciate your honest answers.

The following section will help those who plan the Stars Academic Program to better meet the needs of students.

Please rank the following activities you participated in during the summer session. (1= most helpful  
 7=least helpful)

- ☐ welcome session
- ☐ library and ITC workshop
- ☐ Student Financial Services workshop (1<sup>st</sup> one)
- ☐ Advising workshop
- ☐ Student Financial Services workshop (2<sup>nd</sup> one)
- ☐ Library workshop #2
- ☐ Leadership Development and Getting Involved workshop

Please explain your ranking decisions:

Please mark your favorite organized social activities (select as many as apply)

- ☐ movie night downtown
- ☐ Pizza/Friday night out with older students
- ☐ Weekly dinners with Gretchen
- ☐ Dinner with former SAP students
- ☐ Public Affairs dinner with professors
- ☐ other

Your fellow SAP participants chose to attend for various reasons. What is your reason for coming to VU for the program (rank the top three answers)

- ☐ to earn six credits
- ☐ to learn more about the university before I started in the fall
- ☐ to get used to college-level work before my first year
- ☐ to meet new people
- ☐ I had no choice
- ☐ better than my other summer options
- ☐ other

The Stars Academic Program should:

- ☐ maintain its size at 20 students  
☐ increase its size (if so, by how much \_\_\_\_)  
☐ decrease its size (if so, by how much \_\_\_\_)  
☐ No opinion

Please explain your answer

Please indicate your level of satisfaction with each of the following items:

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Support of staff and administrators					
Amount of financial support					
Quality of academic advising and guidance					
Overall satisfaction with Stars Academic Program					

**In the following section, please indicate how much you agree or disagree that the Rainey Academic Program (circle one):**

increased my confidence regarding entering college				
5	4	3	2	1
Strongly agree		Neutral		Strongly disagree
taught me about the University resources to seek out if I have questions				
5	4	3	2	1
Strongly agree		Neutral		Strongly disagree
helped me develop relationships with faculty on campus				
5	4	3	2	1
Strongly agree		Neutral		Strongly disagree
helped make me feel like a member of the university community				
5	4	3	2	1
Strongly agree		Neutral		Strongly disagree

**To what extent you do you agree or disagree with the following statements (circle one):**

I am glad I chose to attend VU				
5	4	3	2	1
Strongly agree		Neutral		Strongly disagree
I am worried about how I will do academically in the fall				
5	4	3	2	1
Strongly agree		Neutral		Strongly disagree
My family is supportive of my coming here this summer				
5	4	3	2	1
Strongly agree		Neutral		Strongly disagree
I am worried about affording college this fall				
5	4	3	2	1
Strongly agree		Neutral		Strongly disagree
I know I have friends here				
5	4	3	2	1
Strongly agree		Neutral		Strongly disagree
I am excited for the next year of school				
5	4	3	2	1
Strongly agree		Neutral		Strongly disagree

**The following section includes two short answer questions. Please take a moment to answer.**

Who was your biggest support during the summer program?

If you could change one thing about the summer program, what would it be?

Please use this space for any other thoughts or comments on your experience in the program.

Thank you for very much for taking the time to answer these questions. Your input is very important.  
Have a great rest of your summer and see you in the fall!



**Appendix K**  
**Stars Academic Program**  
 Summer 2007 Schedule of Events

Tuesday, July 10

- 3:30 pm: Check out of Orientation Session C at the Student Activities Building and then pick up your summer room key from Gretchen (she'll be in the SAB with a Stars Program sign!)
- 3:30 – 5:00 pm: Move in to your summer room
- 5:30: Meet Gretchen outside of Smith dorm to walk to dinner at the dining hall with Dean Reese
- 6:30 pm: Tour of Campus with Gretchen; find your classrooms and the bus stops
- Later: get settled, get to know one another on your first group night in Smith and Allen

Wednesday, July 11

- 9:00 am: Laptops for Students distribution in the lobby of Smith Dorm. If you have received notice from Student Financial Services that you were approved for the program, come pick up your laptop! If you have questions about your status, please ask Gretchen
- 9:45 am: Meet Gretchen outside of Smith to walk to the VU bookstore for book buying
- 10:45 am: Return to your room with your books
- 11:30 am: Eat lunch in the Dining Hall prior to the Welcome Session at 12:30 pm!
- 12:30 pm: Welcome Session begins, Gall Hall Conference Room
- 5:10 pm: Welcome Session ends, students return to their rooms to drop off things, take a breath
- 6:30 pm: Welcome Dinner, The Garden Room of Hotel E
- Later: Prepare for the first day of classes!

Thursday, July 12

- *All Day: Classes Begin!*
- *If you do **not** like a course and wish to switch out of it, you must come see Gretchen **immediately** today to find another alternative! **Today before 4 pm is the only day in which you can add into a new course without special permission.***
- 3:30 pm: If you need books or required course supplies from the VU bookstore or the Student Book Store on the Corner, meet at Gretchen's office on the second floor of Gall Hall, Room 211b

Friday, July 13

- 3:30 pm: If you need books from the VU bookstore or the Student Book Store on Main Street, meet at Gretchen's office on the second floor of Gall Hall, Room 211b
- Evening: Movie night downtown! Sign up at the Welcome Session July 11 for tickets.

Monday, July 16

- 3:30 pm: If you still need books, meet at Gretchen's office, Gall Hall room 211b

- 5:00 pm: Meet Gretchen for dinner at Hill

#### Tuesday, July 17

- 3:30 pm: if you still need books, meet at Gretchen's office, Gall Hall room 211b

#### Wednesday, July 18

- **SAP Workshop, 3:30 pm – 5:00 pm:** ITC and Library Workshop in the Gall Hall Conference Room
- 6 pm: Dinner in the Solarium of the Colonnade Club with former SAP students

#### Thursday, July 19

- Various Times: First Meetings with Gretchen, sign up in the Welcome Session on 7/11

#### Friday, July 20

- Various Times: First Meetings with Gretchen, sign up in the Welcome Session on 7/11
- 5 pm: Pizza Dinner with the College Guides in the Amphitheater in front of Gall Hall (rain site: inside Gall Hall)
- Later: Trip downtown to Five with the College Guides!

#### Monday, July 23

- 5:00 pm: Meet Gretchen for dinner at Hill outside of the card swipe area

#### Wednesday, July 25

- *Deadline to Drop a Summer Course*
- **SAP Workshop, 3:30 – 5:00 pm:** Workshop with Student Financial Services in the Library Electronic Classroom

#### Thursday, July 26

- **SAP Workshop, 3:30 – 5:00 pm:** Workshop with Dean Reese on Advising in the College of Arts and Sciences in the Gall Hall Conference Room
- Casual dinner in Gall Hall Commons following Workshop

#### Friday, July 27

- Various Times: Second Meetings with Gretchen, sign up in the Workshop on 7/25

#### Monday, July 30

- Various Times: Second Meetings with Gretchen, sign up in the Workshop on 7/25
- 5:00 pm: Meet Gretchen for dinner at Hill

#### Tuesday, July 31

- *Deadline to Withdraw from a Summer Course*

#### Wednesday, August 1

- **SAP Workshop, 3:30 – 5:00 pm**: Student Financial Services Follow-up Workshop in the Library Electronic Classroom

Tuesday, August 2

- **SAP Workshop, 3:30 – 4:30 pm**: Follow up Library Research Session with Matt Ball in the Library Electronic Classroom

Monday, August 6

- *All Day: Last Day of Classes!*
- **SAP Workshop, 3:30 – 5:10 pm**: Workshop on Leadership, Getting Involved and Using University Resources, in the Gall Hall Conference Room
- After the Workshop, dinner with Gretchen at Center Hall

Tuesday, August 7

- *Reading Day*
- 6 pm, Stars Academic Program Dinner

Wednesday, August 8

- *Final Exams*

Thursday, August 9

- *Final Exams*
- End of Summer Session and End of Stars Academic Program
- First day to move out of Dorms and Check out with Conference Services

Friday, August 10

- By 11:00 am: Move out of Dorms and Check out with Conference Services or give your keys to Gretchen to return

*Have a wonderful end to your summer!*

