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Between Worlds: A Grounded Theory Study Of The Experiences Of Provisional Students At A Four-Year Public University

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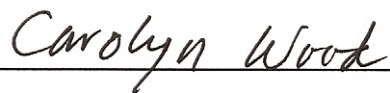**Educational Leadership and Organizational Learning**

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BETWEEN WORLDS: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF THE

EXPERIENCES OF PROVISIONAL STUDENTS

AT A FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

BY

TERRY L. COOK

B.S., Social Sciences, California Polytechnic State University, 1977
M.A., Education, California Polytechnic State University, 1980

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education
Educational Leadership

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

December, 2009

DEDICATION

To Charline and Fred Cook and

to Peter J. Giovannnini, Esq. for their never ending love and support

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A heartfelt thanks to everyone who shared the path and supported me all along the way:
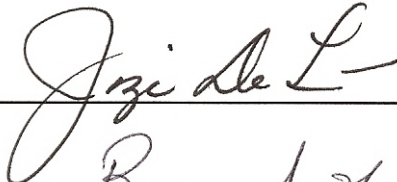
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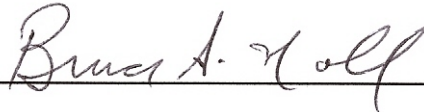
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ABSTRACT

Applicants for college entrance may be deemed able to succeed based on a variety of screening factors: standardized test scores such as ACT or SAT, high school grade point average or completion of college preparatory coursework. Rio Grande University (pseudonym) offered provisional admission to applicants who met all entrance requirements with the exception of completion of high school courses. Providing an opportunity to complete missed courses and to receive support through The Student Success Program, there was an expectation of transition to regular admission. The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze the experiences of a cohort of provisionally admitted students related to their persistence and completion of the baccalaureate degree or to their stopout or departure from enrollment. Using a naturalistic inquiry design, document review, in-depth interviewing and survey methods were used to collect data from three groups of provisional participants with differing perspectives on the problem of the study. Theoretical sampling (Glaser, 1999) methods were used for data analysis resulting in findings with implications for secondary and higher education

leaders. Provisional students, a large percentage of who were first-generation in students in higher education experienced nontraditional secondary schooling that accounted for their missing coursework. Students with traditional high school also faced significant personal and family challenges that affected timely completion of required high school courses. Set in the context of underpreparation, students who were at-risk for college completion also had an external locus of control, believing outcomes were due to events beyond their control and experienced difficulty in successfully transitioning to the academic and social challenges of the higher education environment. This study underscores the importance of the students' development of persistence behaviors prior to college entrance.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Although their paths to high school completion were different, Bonnie, Angela, and Edward all shared a common experience: they were each denied admission to Rio Grande University, the land-grant university in Border State because they had not completed the credits from high school that were required for regular admission. These three students are typical of a growing number of applicants who want to pursue higher education in the United States, but whose high school coursework does not meet the criteria for regular admission.

Student View One: Bonnie

Bonnie thought she was escaping to a better life when she dropped out of Border State High School at the age of fifteen and decided to leave home to live with her boyfriend.

> I've dealt with a lot in my life. My Dad, he died when I was ten, while he was playing Russian Roulette, and you know my Mom just forgot about me and my brother and this guy just used to beat me up all the time for whatever, cheat on me, not come home for days. So here I am, and my mom always told me that whatever doesn't kill me will only make me stronger, and I believe that.

Six years and two children later, Bonnie realized she would not be able to support her children as a single parent. She applied for admission to Rio Grande University but because she was missing credits from high school, entered college on a provisional status at a Branch Campus through the Student Success Program. As a single mother of two, she found going to school challenging. When she felt like quitting, she stayed motivated by saying to herself, "I love myself way too much not to succeed in life".

(Bonnie, Participant, Student Success Program)

Student View Two: Angela

After graduating from high school, Angela started working at a local chili packing plant so that she could support herself and her son. She was one of the few workers who had a high school diploma, and every day her coworkers would encourage her to continue her education. They told her, "If we had a high school diploma, we would be trying to get into college."

> Well, after high school I graduated, and I decided to get a job because I knew I would never make it financially after high school. So I thought, now it's time to learn responsibilities and choices and whatever, with money and work and my son.
> Those three years I kept telling myself, I am going to go to school, I am going to go to school. You know I'm the first one that came to college. That's hard. That's hard. And my family is proud of me, that I'm making a life for myself, and I want my son to see that too, because I'm the first one of all of em. The highest I went to was geometry and I think I flunked my geometry. In English I think I went as far as I could go in English. And I did take all my English credits, but I guess with the ACT test, and it had been three years. And I didn't even study or know if there was anything I could do to study. Like I said, the Branch was very helpful, and I don't really mind being in this transition program because I've been out of school for three years and I do need the help. They told me, "You can get the credits that you're lacking, that you need, and then you can move over to Rio Grande University." (Angela, Participant Student Success Program)

Student View Three: Edward

Edward always knew he would go to college after high school. His parents did not have college degrees and made every effort to support and encourage him.

> Reading is hard for me. I grew up in Juarez, and I moved to El Paso when I was like thirteen something, fourteen, and I did my high school years in a private religious school in El Paso, so I learned how to speak English in four years. I repeated one class in high school, Math 1B, and I was supposed to take geometry 1B and I just took 1A. I didn't know. They lost my application at Admissions, and I had to wait for two hours for them to find it. They also charged me out-of-country tuition because my application said I was born in Mexico. I told them I'm a resident! They told me that I was admitted, but not fully admitted, and that I was gonna take a class at the Branch because I was missing half a credit. And I was

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like, "Why?" And they showed me the transcript, and it said that I had two of the same classes. I guess they made a mistake at the high school. (Edward, Participant, Student Success Program)

The narratives of these three students portray the increased complexity of the pre-college academic preparation of applicants to higher education. When deciding on the required criteria for entrance to colleges and universities, admissions offices can hold open the door to higher education by allowing applicants who meet a majority of their admissions standards to enter with provisional status (Stern & Briggs, 2001). By designating required developmental courses to compensate for high school course deficits, low standardized test scores, or high school grade point averages that do not meet regular admission standards, applicants with nontraditional preparation are provided an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to succeed.

The population of college entrants in the United States with the greatest variation in their preparation for postsecondary education are the home schooled. With an estimated 690,000 children identified as home schooled students in 1995, the number of home educated high school graduates is anticipated to increase exponentially through 2007 (Jones, 2002; Lines, 2000). This will require admissions offices to develop appropriate criteria to accommodate the applications of this new group of students to higher education. Home schooled students may be required to produce ACT or SAT scores, proof of a General Education Diploma (GED), as well as a certified transcript from the national home education program they completed (Winters, 2000). General Education Diploma (GED) graduates represent a second population entering higher education with varying levels of high school course completion rates and may be required to produce standardized test scores as evidence of their ability to succeed in higher

education. Assessing the preparation of GED students for college admission is critical

because their numbers, like home-educated students, will increase dramatically over the

next decade. In 2001, over one million adults took the GED examination, and two-thirds

of the test takers indicated they intended to pursue higher education (American Council

on Education, 2003). While the homeschooled and GED graduates recognize that their

admission to college will require either additional coursework or testing, traditional high

school graduates could be surprised to find themselves similarly situated. Although

meeting all other admissions requirements--a high school diploma, required grade point

average and standardized ACT or SAT test scores--they may not be fully qualified for

college admission because they lacked an adequate number of course credits at a level

required for successful college admission.

Curriculum requirements for graduation from high school in the United States and

the manner in which they correspond to college admission requirements are the focus of

several national reports addressing the severity of this problem.[1] These reports document

startling evidence of the misalignment of high school preparation and college entrance

requirements. In "Betraying the Dream: Stanford Bridge Project," a six-year national

study that began in 1996, the authors conclude that the curriculum disconnect, as well as

incomplete and confusing advice from high school counselors about how to prepare for

college, contribute to high college attrition rates across racial and ethnic lines (Rooney,

2003). The 2003 Manhattan Institute for Policy Research paper "College Readiness"

provided a useful state-by-state comparison of factors that affect college admission

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[1] Note: Reports from the American College Testing Program, 2004 and Association of American
Universities & Pew Charitable Trusts, 2003 discuss the need for alignment of secondary completion and
college admission standards.

(Greene & Forster, 2003). The report found that by 2001, only 70% of the students in public high schools graduated, and only 32% had completed the requirements for admission to four-year colleges in the United States. "There is a gap between what high schools require for graduation and what four-year colleges require before they can consider students' application, causing many students to graduate from high school unable to apply for college" (p.6). Citing a 1998 National Center for Education Statistics report and using data from "The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) High School Transcript Study," a college readiness index was created by assessing (a) graduation rates, (b) number and type of high school credits earned, and (c) minimum passage rates of the NAEP standardized reading examination. Ranked according to the variables of the index Border State students posted a 67% high school graduation rate against a national 70% average, and of those only 28% graduated with college-ready transcripts. Only one state had a lower ranking score, at 26%. The recent emphasis on reporting and ranking high school graduates' readiness for college has critical implications for secondary and postsecondary educational leaders in the United States, particularly in Border State and at the state's land-grant institution, Rio Grande University, the focus of this study.

Rio Grande University

An understanding of the Land-Grant mission of Rio Grande University provides a context for this exploration of provisional admission. The legislation known as the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 funded colleges to focus on teaching science, engineering, and agriculture and although the original intent of the Morrill Act was to provide a utilitarian education for the citizens of the United States, the mission of land-grant

universities has grown much broader. Credited with the enormous expansion of public education at the post-secondary level, land-grant institutions provide accessible education for the citizens of the state. The establishment of land-grant universities is the symbolic turning point when higher education went public, no longer the sole right of the elite upper class (Grimes & David, 1999). The research, service and teaching activities of Rio Grande University serve to fulfill that original mission: "All persons, however humble their pursuits, become more valuable by education, more useful to themselves and to the community, and especially so where each one has a visible and responsible share in the government under which he lives" (Hannah, 1968).

Over one hundred years later, in 1999, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges chartered the Kellogg Commission to explore and revitalize the original mission envisioned by Justin Morrill and Abraham Lincoln. In the opening statement of "Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution," (National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, 1999) W.K. Kellogg Foundation President, William C. Richardson, said, "The land-grant ethic, which embodies equal access to education and service to communities, remains one of the noble, worthy ideas in American society." The 1999 report outlines a dynamic role and future for land-grant institutions and emphasizes the need to "do a better job" of serving the educational constituents--the students.

Both the historic founding of the state's land-grant institution and the impetus for a renewed mission of serving the citizenry of Border State create a strong foundation for educational leaders to act boldly in ensuring that students are well served by the institution. Rio Grande University classified by the federal government as a "Hispanic-

Serving Institution" also has Carnegie Foundation Research University standing. In its published mission statement, Rio Grande University affirms its commitment to the promise of a land-grant institution:

> The first responsibility of the university is to provide quality education. As the state's land-grant institution, Rio Grande University is committed to serving the educational needs of a student body of various ages, interests, and cultural backgrounds. The university seeks to educate each student not only in how to earn a living but also in how to live a meaningful life (Rio Grande University Mission Statement, 2003).

The importance of this assertion in the mission statement multiplies with a close examination of the demographics of the state, county, and the students who apply for admission to the institution. With 18.5% of the population living below the poverty level, Border State ranks third in the United States in this category (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Out of a total of 33 counties in the state, Solano County, home to Rio Grande University, ranks fifth with a poverty rate of 25.4% (U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2005). The majority of the Rio Grande University students, 77%, are residents of Border State, and of those, 43% are residents of Solano County (Rio Grande University 2002 Fact Book. p. 16) and college degree attainment levels for the county are also low: 26.2% of adults (ages 25-34) hold a two- or four-year degree (Lumina Foundation, 2009). The socioeconomic status of Rio Grande University students is likely a factor that affects their admission, experiences, and ultimate completion or departure from higher education indicating that there is a need for more in-depth research of the effects of socioeconomic status on the persistence rates of Border State citizens enrolled at Rio Grande University.

To serve the mission of educating the citizens of Border State, the Rio Grande University system includes one Main Campus and four two-year branch campus

locations. Three of those campuses are at remote sites and one is located in the same city as Rio Grande University. The local Branch Campus supplies the developmental course work that some students require.[2]

A Change to Admissions Policy

In 1998 an accreditation site review team recommended a change to the policy governing provisional student admission based on their finding of a practice they termed "back-door admissions." Applicants who were denied admission to the Rio Grande's Main Campus applied to the local Rio Grande University Branch Campus and were permitted enrollment in courses concurrently at both the Branch and Main Campus. The team concluded that this practice contradicted Rio Grande University's published admissions policy, and required university administrators to implement a program or policy to address the problem. After conducting thorough research, an Ad Hoc Committee of the Rio Grande University Faculty Senate comprised of faculty and university administrators proposed that an alternative admissions program could accommodate students who agreed to provisional admission to Rio Grande University Main Campus. Because higher education institutions that confer doctoral degrees are precluded from receiving funding for credit courses that are considered at the "basic skills" or "developmental" level (Administrative Code, Postsecondary Funding, 5.3.12.9 NMAC), the provisional students would have to be enrolled through a two-year college. By agreeing to complete the requirements of the alternate admissions program, students could make up deficiencies from high school at the local Rio Grande Branch campus and

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[2] For the purpose of this study, Rio Grande University refers to the Main Campus and the local two-year campus as the Branch Campus.

upon completion, move to the Main Campus as a regularly admitted student (Rio Grande

Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Admissions Standards Committee, Final Report, 1999).

Student Success Program

In the fall semester of 2000, the first cohort of provisional students enrolled at the

Branch Campus through the alternate program call the Student Success Program (SSP).

This cohort of students met the following requirements:

1. High school grade point average of 2.0 with an a) Enhanced ACT of 20 or b) a

   GPA of 2.5 with an Enhanced ACT of 21, or c) passage of the GED

2. High school transcript indicates required high school credits are missing.

   Required credits for admission: four units English (required two of

   composition); four credits Science (required two beyond general science

   courses); one credit of Foreign Language; and one credit Fine Arts (Rio

   Grande University Catalog, 2000-2001, p. 1)

The students who lacked high school credits required for admission received a

letter from the Rio Grande University Admissions Office informing them that they were

eligible for the Student Success Program (Appendix A). The program provided an

opportunity for students to make up credits from high school and then transfer to the Rio

Grande Main Campus as regularly admitted students. They would first be admitted to the

Branch Campus and enroll in courses equivalent to missing high school courses. To

encourage their interest and progress, the Faculty Senate also approved their enrollment

in a series of general education courses. The program also required students to enroll in

The Freshman Orientation, a course for first semester freshman on the Main Campus.

Because the students' initial intentions were to gain admission to the Main Campus, the

course would serve as an introduction to the academic culture of the University and to support services. The course provides a supportive classroom environment where students engage in activities designed to develop learning strategies and social adjustment skills to increase their personal and academic self-efficacy. A 1994 national survey reported that 26.8% of the community colleges that offer these courses require it for all students. Approximately 37% of four-year colleges require an orientation course for specific populations such as low-income, first-generation participants in federally funded access programs such as TRIO Upward Bound and TRIO Student Support Services, student-athletes, first-generation students, or for students without a declared major (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). Studies of the outcomes of participation in an orientation course positively correlate with improved academic performance and persistence (Barefoot & Gardner, 1993; Stovall, M., 2000). The decision to require enrollment in a freshman orientation course was based on these positive national outcomes and on the findings of two Rio Grande University Institutional Research Studies, "Analysis of Freshman Year Experience on Student Retention, Fall 1991-Fall 2000" and "Analysis of Freshman Orientation Course on Student Retention, Fall 2000-2002". These analyses identified the course as positively influencing the one-year retention rates of three groups of students: 1) students with lower academic scores than their counterparts who did not enroll; 2) minority students; and 3) students who did not declare a major in their first semester of enrollment.

Although the longitudinal study of The Freshman Orientation course at Rio Grande University contains evidence that the course was a positive factor for retention, it did not include any follow-up evaluation of the Student Success Program participants. It

is interesting to note that 65% of the students admitted through the Student Success Program did not enroll in the orientation course.

As of Spring 2004, the Student Success Program had admitted and served provisional students for six semesters. Table 1 profiles the applicants denied admission to Rio Grande University because of missing required high school credits. The data, supplied by the Office of Admissions at Rio Grande University, indicate that 45% of the total applicants denied admission are lacking high school credits required for admission, and of those applicants, 32% are lacking only one credit for regular admission. The number of students missing one high school credit has remained constant over a two-year period, while the number of students missing two or more credits has increased. The increasing numbers of students who are missing more than one credit identifies a need for further exploration of the causes that permit high school students to graduate without the credits required to enter higher education.

In conclusion, the data concerning the provisional cohort of students confirm national findings about the apparent disconnect between high school completion requirements and higher education admission standards and raises serious questions concerning access to higher education.

Table 1.

Admission Status of Provisional Students

Academic Year	Total Denied admission	High school graduate missing 1 credit	High school graduate missing 1 or more credits	GED graduate	Admitted as provisional student	Enrolled in freshman orientation course
Fall 2000-Spring 2001	555	217	60	31	99	34
Fall 2001-Spring 2002	684	243	80	44	232	86
Fall 2002-Spring 2003	866	217	141	2	237	59
Fall 2003	-	-	-	-	-	26
Totals	2105	677	281	77	568	205

Note. Dashes indicate data not available.
Source: Rio Grande University Admissions Office, Fall 2003.

These data underscore the concern that greater numbers of future college applicants may not qualify for regular admission and the diverse forces affecting high school completion portend a diverse population of students in higher education. Addressing their needs will require more information about the experiences that prepared them, or failed to prepare them, for higher education. Until the challenges of the misalignment between successful completion of high school credits and college entrance

requirements are resolved, there will be a need for alternative admissions programs. This study provides an opportunity to explore two areas of major concern in higher education today: 1) secondary preparation for access to higher education; and 2) how the experiences of the provisional student population affect retention and graduation rates.

Experience with Student Success Program Students

Bonnie, Angela and Edward, the students who shared the stories of their experiences as provisional students at Rio Grande University were admitted through the Student Success Program (SSP) in the spring semester of 2002 and enrolled in a section of The Freshman Orientation course I taught. Through class discussions and individual meetings with these provisional students, a majority of them revealed that they were confused about their placement in the transition program. They reported feeling uncomfortable and unsure about their future at Rio Grande University because they did not want to be identified as Branch Campus students, yet they also believed that they did not "fit-in" on the Main Campus. They were not eligible to apply for scholarships at the Main or Branch Campus because of their provisional status and were confused about which services they could access at either location. All of them reported high levels of stress and seemed overwhelmed by their academic course requirements as well as having difficulty in balancing university study with personal commitments such as working and providing financial support for their families. I explored the students' experiences in more depth as part of an assignment in my doctoral program qualitative research course by interviewing both students from the Student Success Program and academic advisers at the Branch Campus. These interviews were, for most students, their first opportunity to provide feedback concerning their experiences as participants in the program. In

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reviewing the findings of the study, "An Investigation of the Persistence Characteristics of Provisional Students", I found that the demographic profiles of the seven students differed significantly from those of traditional or recent high school graduates in the following characteristics:

1. Mean age of the participants was 20 years old.

2. Five of the students delayed their entrance to college by more than one year following completion of high school.

3. Six of the seven students were first-generation students in higher education.

4. Three were single mothers.

5. Two completed high school equivalency requirements through Graduate Education Diploma (GED) testing and one through a home education program.

In analyzing the data from the interviews, four themes emerged:

1. All seven students spoke about extraordinarily difficult and challenging life experiences (e.g., physical abuse by a family member or significant other, suicide by a family member, learning disabilities, single parenthood).

2. All seven students expressed hope and optimism concerning their ability to complete a four-year university degree program and expressed their belief that a college degree would lead them to achieve a higher standard of living for themselves and their families.

3. All students credited either family members or significant others as a positive influence in their decision to pursue a college education.

4. All students expressed either confusion or frustration regarding their placement in the Student Success Program and with the challenges of navigating the university bureaucracy.

In the spring of 2003, I reviewed the students' enrollment and academic records, finding only two of the seven participants I interviewed for my qualitative course assignment enrolled at either the Branch Campus or the Main Campus of Rio Grande University. The surprisingly low retention rate of these students led me to further investigate the academic records of all of the Student Success Program students enrolled in The Freshman Orientation. Of the 213 participants in the program, 156 students had graduated from Border State high schools, 23 had graduated from out-of-state high schools, one had graduated from a foreign high school, 31 were GED graduates, and two had graduated from home school programs. The mean high school grade point average and ACT Composite scores for the entire cohort of provisional students were low: 2.64 GPA on a 4.0 scale and a mean ACT score of 18.03 (compared to a composite mean of 19.9 reported for all Border State high school students and lower than the national average of 20.6) (KRQE, 2003).

The most disturbing finding, however, was the decline in persistence percentages for Student Success Program participants (Table 2). Of the 213 students admitted to the program between Fall 2000 and Spring 2004, over half were no longer enrolled at either the Branch or Main Campus. In the Fall 2004 semester only 13 (36%), of the 30 students that enrolled in Fall 2000 were still pursuing a degree. Of the 13 students retained, two had completed all academic requirements and obtained baccalaureate degrees.

Table 2.

Student Success Program Retention Percentages; Fall 2000 - Fall 2004

Semester	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Fall 2001	Spring 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Fall 2003	Spring 2004	Fall 2004
Fall 2000	Semester	23	20	18	14	13	11	11	13
N=30	entered	(76%)	(66%)	(60%)	(46%)	(43%)	(36%)	(36%)	(43%)
Spring 2001	-	Semester	4	3	2	3	3	3	3
N=4		entered	(100%)	(75%)	(50%)	(75%)	(75%)	(75%)	(75%)
Fall 2001	-	-	Semester	72	42	37	29	28	22
N=78			entered	(92%)	(53%)	(47%)	(37%)	(35%)	(28%)
Spring 2002	-	-	-	Semester	8	3	2	2	3
N=8				entered	(100%)	(37%)	(25%)	(25%)	(37%)

Note: Dashes indicate no student cohort enrolled.

Source: Rio Grande University Student Record Database, September, 2004.

Table 2. (continued)

Semester	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Fall 2001	Spring 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Fall 2003	Spring 2004	Fall 2004
Fall 2002 N=59	-	-	-	-	Semester entered	40 (67%)	36 (61%)	31 (52%)	29 (49%)
Fall 2003 N=26	-	-	-	-	-	-	Semester Entered	23 (88%)	18 (69%)
Spring 2004 N=8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Semester entered	6 (75%)
Total returned by semester	-	23	24	93	66	96	81	98	94

Note: Dashes indicate no student cohort enrolled.

Source: Rio Grande University Student Record Database, September, 2004.

It is important to suggest that a connection between low retention and qualification for the State Lottery Scholarship may account for a percentage of student departure. Students establish their eligibility to receive the scholarship in their first semester of study by completing twelve credits and achieving a 2.5 or higher grade point average. Seventy-three students, (34%) failed to maintain a minimum grade point average of 2.5 in their first semester of study that would qualify them to receive funding from the scholarship in the second semester. After assessing the retention percentages of the Student Success Program participants, I documented their demographics, a methodology typical in higher education retention studies used to ascertain significant patterns that might explain the behaviors of student cohorts (Astin, 1975; Astin & Osegura, 2002; Horn, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Reporting of the enrollment, retention and graduation rates of students by ethnicity, gender, and age is a common feature of higher education retention research (Astin & Osegura, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The following sections provide an overview of each characteristic relative to the provisionally admitted students.

Ethnicity

An awareness of the ethnicity of the students in this study is critical, as the low enrollment and high departure rates of underrepresented minorities in higher education (Attinasi, 1989; Suárez-Balcázar et.al., 2003) are a focus of both the mission and ongoing retention efforts at Rio Grande University. As seen in Table 3, the ethnic diversity of the students enrolled through the Student Success Program reflects the diversity of the total student population. The majority of entering students, 53%, claim Hispanic ethnicity, and 9% report an ethnicity other than "White". Table 4 indicates only a slight variation

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between the ethnicity of entering and retained percentages for "Hispanic", "White", and

"Other" provisional students.

Table 3.

Ethnicity of Entering and Retained Student Success Program Students Fall 2000 - Fall

2004

Ethnicity of entering participants	Number	Percentage	Ethnicity of retained participants enrolled as of Fall 2004	Number	Percentage
American Indian	9	(4%)	American Indian	3	(3%)
Black	9	(4%)	Black	7	(7%)
Hispanic	113	(53%)	Hispanic	47	(50%)
Other	18	(9%)	Other	8	(9%)
White	64	(30%)	White	29	(31%)

Note: (Entering N=213; Retained N=94*)*

Source: Rio Grande University Student Record Database, September 2004.

Gender

The disparity of educational attainment between men and women presented in the

2003 Mortenson Report "What's Wrong with the Guys?" is shocking: "Over the last 30

years, nearly all of the progress in educational attainment has been achieved by females;

almost none has been earned by males" (p. 1). This study found that between 1967 and

2001 the proportion of women enrolled in higher education in the United States doubled,

from 19.2% to 38.4% while the enrollment of men decreased from 33.1% to 32.6%. In

addition to enrollment statistics the bachelor's degree completion statistics indicate a

widening gender gap: "Between 1975 and 2001, degrees earned by men increased by 5%, degrees earned by women increased 70%."

Of the 213 students who enrolled through the Student Success Program, 54% were male and 46% were female. Their retention rates calculated over a four-year period indicate the females persisted at a higher level, 49% versus 41% respectively.

Table 4.

Gender of Entering and Retained Student Success Program Students

Number enrolled	Males	Females	Males retained to FA2004	Females retained to FA2004
Fall 2000 - Spring 2001 N=34	20	14	9 (26%)	7 (50%)
Fall 2001 - Spring 2002 N=86	49	37	10 (20%)	15 (40%)
Fall 2002 N=59	30	29	17 (56%)	12 (41%)
Fall 2003 - Spring 2004 N=34	17	17	11 (65%)	13 (76%)
Totals/Percentages	116 (54%)	97 (46%)	47 (41%)	47 (49%)

Note: (N=213)

Source: Rio Grande University Student Record Database, 2004.

Age

The age of students entering higher education is a demographic that guides the understanding of student service providers and faculty alike who strive to meet the learning and social needs of all students enrolled on their campuses. The benchmark of 25 years of age or older is commonly used as one factor to classify them as either "traditional" or "nontraditional" students in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). In concert with a students' age other characteristics define these student populations, assisting institutions to assess the strengths and challenges of entering students. A traditional student enters college in the same year as their graduation from high school, is a financial dependent and does not work or works part-time. The nontraditional student does not enroll immediately after high school, is financially independent, and has the responsibility for dependents other than a spouse. Full-time employment, part-time attendance, being a single parent, and high school equivalency by means other than a diploma are other characteristics ascribed to the nontraditional student. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

The motivation for nontraditional students to enroll in college is ascribed to their desire to gain marketable career skills, earn a degree or for their personal enrichment, however, their baccalaureate degree completion rates indicate they are not as likely to complete a degree as their traditional counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). As noted in Table 5 the range of the ages of students enrolled in the Student Success is 18-25, which characterizes them as traditional students in higher education.

Table 5.

Age of Students Admitted through the Student Success Program; Fall 2000-Spring 2004

Number enrolled	Age range	Mean age
Fall 2000 N=30	17-20	18.36
Spring 2001 N=4	18-22	19.5
Fall 2001 N=78	17-23	18.70
Spring 2002 N=8	18-21	19.37
Fall 2002 N=59	15-21	18
Fall 2003 N=26	17-22	18.34
Spring 2004 N=8	18-25	19.87
(Total N=213*)*	Age Range=15-25	Mean Age=18.87

Source: Rio Grande University Student Record Database, March 2004.

Academic Standing: Voluntary versus Nonvoluntary Leaving

The description of students in The Student Success Program and their retention outcomes according to ethnicity, gender, and age provided relevant information about them as a group but left me with many questions, particularly concerning the students who withdrew. In my attempt to understand the reasons the students left Rio Grande University I looked at one final variable concerning the students' persistence: voluntary versus nonvoluntary leaving. In *Leaving College*, Vincent Tinto identified these two forms of student departure (p. 81). His study of student leaving used data from the National Longitudinal Survey and the High School and Beyond Study that tracked all 1972 high school graduates in the United States. Students who were academically eligible

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to remain in school and *chose* to leave were *voluntary leavers* and *nonvoluntary leavers* were students who either did not make satisfactory academic progress, were on academic probation status or suspended from attendance. Tinto's study found that only 25% of all institutional departures were due to a lack of academic progress. Assessing the reasons for of voluntary leaving is complicated because institutions do not uniformly collect data from students who withdraw.

Using Tinto's definitions related to leaving, Table 6 indicates that of the 119 students who withdrew 52% were academically eligible to continue to enroll and yet made the decision to leave voluntarily. Of the students labeled "voluntary leavers," 17% had experienced a lack of academic progress that may have also led to their decision to leave. Research suggests that students are likely to withdraw when they perceive too great a decrease in their academic performance (Getzlaf, Sedlacek, Kearney, & Blackwell, 1984). For the group of students on academic probation, failure to make academic progress may also have affected their qualification for financial aid, scholarships and other funding requirements.

Table 6.

Academic Standing of Student Success Program Students at Time of Leaving

Status at time of departure	Number of students	Percentage of total leavers
Good academic progress (GPA 2.0 or higher)	42	(35%)
Probation removed	3	(03%)
Warning (GPA below 2.0 in the first semester)	17	(14%)
Total voluntary departure	62	(52%)
Probation (Semester & cumulative GPA below 2.0)	39	(33%)
Suspension (Semester & cumulative GPA below 2.0)	18	(15%)
Total involuntary departure	57	(48%)
Total Departure	119	100%

Note(s): Fall 2000-Fall 2004 GPA=Grade point average.

Source: Rio Grande University Student Record Database, September 2004.

Finally, one important aspect of student leaving is often missing from demographic and statistical analyses: the issue of "stopout." Students who leave higher education may re-enter one semester, one year, or several years later to continue pursuit of their educational objectives. The attendance and completion patterns of stopouts was documented in The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Report "Stopouts or

Stayouts: Undergraduates Who Leave College in their First Year" (Horn, 1999). The study found that of the students who left four-year institutions before the beginning of their second year, 64%, returned within five years; therefore, only 36% did not return. The report underscored the importance of identifying students' intentions at the time they withdraw, a feature of student departure that does not appear in the statistical reporting of retention and attrition rates of institutions. Study of the re-entry patterns of provisionally admitted students who left Rio Grande University could have important ramifications for institutions as well as the lives of participants.

The only factor separating regularly admitted students and provisional students was a deficiency of high school, however, the average one-year retention rates were significantly different. The 60% retention rate for the cohorts of provisional students in the Student Success Program students was considerably lower than the 71% Rio Grande University cited for first-time regularly admitted freshman (Rio Grande University Common Data Set, 2002-2003). The program designed to provide an admissions route for provisional students and promote a smooth transition to university study did not appear to be achieving its intended objectives.

Statement of the Problem

Hoping to encourage access to higher education, colleges and universities may offer students who do not meet all admissions requirements an opportunity for provisional enrollment. Provisional admission may require achievement of a minimum grade point average or completion of academic courses or activities to gain regular admission status. Characterized as "underprepared" due to missing content from the high school curriculum or alternative forms of secondary schooling (McCabe, 2000),

provisional students are faced with completion of admissions requirements at the same time they are experiencing a transition into the university community. For even the most prepared students, the transition, persistence, and completion of educational objectives or a college degree appear challenging. A historical perspective of the problem articulated in *Leaving College* found that for the past 100 years approximately one-half of all students enrolled withdrew from attendance within their first year of study, (Tinto, 1993). Sixteen years after publication of the Tinto Report, scholars continue to search for answers to the questions surrounding student departure from higher education. Most prevalent in the literature are studies on a variety of college populations attempting to identify the demographic factors that influence the students' decision to persist, stop out, or permanently withdraw from higher education (Astin, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978, 1991, 2005). Instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (Kuh, 2003) and the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (Edgerton & Shulman, 2002) provide important data on characteristics found to influence student retention such as:

1. Age

2. Gender

3. Ethnic identification

4. Rigor of high school preparation

5. Parental educational level

6. Socioeconomic status

7. Campus residency

8. Size of institution

9.   Enrollment in developmental courses; and

10. Students' ability to qualify for funding

This data is extremely important to the development of policies and programs for both new and continuing students. However, further internal assessment is essential to help institutional stakeholders gain a greater understanding of the complexity of student withdrawal specific to their institution. One of the most prolific higher education researchers, Alexander Astin described the problem in his 1975 study, *Preventing Students from Dropping Out*:

> Dropping out of college is a little like the weather: something everyone talks about but no one does anything about. This predilection for talk over action is reflected in much of the research on dropouts, which has focused more on counting, describing, and classifying them than on seeking solutions to the problem (p. 1).

This statement appropriately describes the limited study of student departure from the students' perspective and the lack of study on the provisionally admitted student population found in the literature (Bess, 1972; McConkey, 1975). Because literature on provisional students was limited, adding their perceptions and lived experiences would be an important contribution to the body of knowledge concerning student success in higher education.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to understand the life experiences of students denied admission to Rio Grande University because of missing high school credits and admitted on provisional status through the Student Success Program. To explore their experiences and the problem of the study from differing perspectives, I interviewed three groups of provisional students who had direct experience with the problem of the study:

Group 1:   Students denied regular admission to Rio Grande University; Admitted to the Branch Campus as provisional students; in their first semester of enrollment

Group 2:   Students denied regular admission to Rio Grande University; Admitted to the Branch Campus as provisional students; enrolled for more than one semester

Group 3:   Students denied regular admission to Rio Grande University; Admitted to the Branch Campus as provisional students; withdrew from enrollment

Research Questions

This study of the experiences of provisional students began with two research questions. They were as follows:

1. What pre-college educational experiences of the participants caused a deficiency in credits resulting in provisional status at the time of admission to Rio Grande University?

2. What were the experiences of the participants that influenced their decision to persist and be retained or to stop out or withdraw from Rio Grande University or higher education altogether?

These secondary research questions guided the interview process:

1. What factors did participants consider when deciding to accept or reject provisional admission?

2. What strategies did provisional participants use to persist when faced with academic and social challenges?

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3. What factors had an effect on the persistence or attrition of the student participants in the Student Success Program?

4. How much consideration did the student give to the feedback of their families and significant others when deciding to continue enrollment or to depart from higher education?

5. How did the familial educational background of student participants influence their persistence or departure?

6. What were the experiences of the participants who used the academic and social university support systems on the Main or Branch Campus of Rio Grande University?

To gain a deeper understanding of the circumstances and events that affected the decisions of provisional students in the Student Success Program, I drew from the naturalistic framework of qualitative research that values the exploration of individual experiences and the meanings ascribed to them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Definition of Terms

The following terms are specific to the problem in this study:

1. **Academic Standing –** Classification used to designate academic performance and progress toward degree completion. "Good" standing refers to a student who has earned above a 2.0 grade point average. "Warning" standing refers to students in their first semester who earn below a 2.0 grade point average. "Academic Probation" occurs when the cumulative grade point average falls below 2.0 in the second semester of attendance. "Suspended" status occurs when a student earns below a 2.0 semester grade point average and the cumulative average is below 2.0.

2. **Academic Credentials** - The composite of high school curriculum, test scores, and class rank that high school students possess as they apply for admission to higher education (Adelman, 2006).

3. **Academic Progress -** Forward progress toward degree completion as measured by number of credits earned and achievement of a 2.0 grade point average.

4. **Axial Coding –** In grounded theory development, the process of building thematic connections between categories that emerged in data analysis.

5. **Branch Campus** – A two-year community college offering courses to prepare students for vocational certificates and degree, or to prepare students for transfer to four-year institutions through offering of developmental and general education courses. The Branch Campus is located in the same city and situated in close proximity to the four-year "Main Campus".

6. **Constant Comparative Method –** In grounded theory development data are analyzed in four stages: 1) comparing incidents applicable to each category; 2) integrating categories and their properties, 3) delimiting the theory, and, 4) writing the theory. (p. 339) Glaser & Strauss quoted in: Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985).

7. **Departure** - A student's voluntary withdrawal from university enrollment or involuntary withdrawal based on lack of academic progress. Also called "attrition" to quantitatively describe students as "dropouts," a label for student departure behavior that is no longer used in research studies due to the limitations the label places on the diversity of departure scenarios that occur. For example, students may be transferring to another institution or stopping out with an intention to re-enter. Use of "dropout" also conveys a negative connotation of the student or their experience in higher education.

8. **Developmental courses -** Courses in reading, writing, or math for students lacking those skills necessary to perform college level work at the level required by your institution". (National Center for Education Statistics, 1991.

9. **Document** – A written artifact (e.g. reports, memos, personal correspondence, notes) containing information related to the inception, administration, or outcomes of The Student Success Program at Rio Grande University.

10. **First-Generation Student -** Designates a student who will be the first in his or her family to attend an institution of higher education.

11. **General Education Degree (GED) Graduate -** A person successfully completing a battery of four tests: Writing, Reading, Science, and Social Sciences; certifying an equivalent measure of basic skills learned at the secondary level.

12. **High School Graduate -** A person who obtained a diploma after successfully completing specific units of instruction determined by the school board and passing the required exit examinations

13. **Land-Grant Institution -** Institutions of higher learning in the United States designated by the Morrill Act of 1862 to provide a liberal and practical education for all students. Rio Grande University was designated the state's Land-Grant institution in 1890. "The first responsibility of the university is to provide quality education. As the state's land-grant institution, Rio Grande University is committed to serving the educational needs of a student body of various ages, interests, and cultural backgrounds. The university seeks to educate each student not only in how to earn a living but also in how to live a meaningful life." (Rio Grande University, Mission Statement, 2003).

14. Main Campus - Designates the academic unit of the institution in the Rio Grande University system that offers four-year degree programs.

15. Nonvoluntary leaving – The state of academic ineligibility--when a student is not permitted to continue enrollment in higher education, caused by suspension or a period of time in which the student is not allowed to enroll in university courses.

16. Open Coding - The first stage in grounded theory data analysis--without any inference as to their meaning the researcher connects ideas, concepts, and themes to segments of the data.

17. Persistence – When the student continuously enrolls from academic year to academic year or re-enrolls following a stop out from attendance, and makes academic progress evidenced by a minimum 2.0 semester and cumulative grade point average or higher).

18. Provisional - A status assigned at the time of admission to students who have not completed required high school credits. Following completion of Student Success Program requirements, students transfer to the Main Campus. Requirements for completion include enrolling at the Branch Campus for developmental math or English, taking The Freshman Orientation course, and satisfactorily completing coursework to fulfill credit deficiency.

19. Retention - The status of students currently enrolled and making progress toward educational objectives that they value. This term also includes practices or strategies that focus on providing support that enables students to be successful by lowering high-risk factors that can disrupt the students' education and result in failure to achieve those aims.

20. **Semi-structured Interviews** – Interview with research study participants that allows for exploration of ideas and concepts emerging in the interview through the addition of questions to an established interview protocol (Heck, 2006).

21. **State Lottery Scholarship -** High schools or GED recipients are eligible to receive this scholarship if they are enrolled full-time, earn a grade point average of 2.5 or better during the first regular semester after high school graduation and complete at least 12 graded credit hours. Thereafter, if the student maintains a minimum cumulative grade point average of 2.5 and completes at least 12 graded credit hours per semester, the scholarship pays tuition for eight consecutive semesters of enrollment beginning with the second semester of full-time enrollment (Rio Grande University Financial Aid Website).

22. **Stopout** - Describes the condition of a student who withdraws from university enrollment but intends to return at a future point in time to complete the requirements to earn at degree.

23. **Student Success Program (SSP)** - An alternative college admissions program required for provisionally admitted students. Upon completion of designated courses required for regular admission and The Freshman Orientation course, the student transitions to regular admission status.

24. **The Freshman Orientation** - A three-credit, graded orientation course strongly recommended for Student Success Program participants. Course content includes: campus resources information, study and learning strategies, library orientation, the challenges of campus life (relationships, sexuality, substance abuse), and an introduction to the goals and values of higher education (e.g., understanding the mission,

policies and procedures of the institution, developing a mentor relationship with faculty/staff, valuing diversity).

25. **Underprepared Students** – 1) Students who did not complete high school coursework required by Rio Grande University to gain admission to the Main Campus; 2) students admitted to college on a provisional status that requires completion of coursework to progress to regular admission status.

26. **Voluntary Leaving** – A students' withdrawal from enrollment at an institution of higher learning while they are academically eligible to continue pursuit of a degree or another educational objective.

Significance of the Study

Colleges and universities offer admission to students based upon their preparation for college entrance by assessing their earned high school grade point average, standardized test scores such as the ACT or SAT, and rigor of the courses they completed at the secondary level. To encourage students who do not meet regular admission standards, institutions may invite students to enroll on a provisional basis, allowing them to remedy their deficits. In 2001, Rio Grande University offered this type of admission to students who were lacking high school credits for regular admission and developed a supportive program to permit access and assist with the students' transition to regular admission. Because the students only lacked high school credits for regular admission it was surprising when an internal evaluation of The Student Success Program (2004) found the majority of the students who accepted provisional admission were no longer enrolled. An analysis of the course credits the provisional students needed to take for regular admission revealed the majority of the students were lacking credits in math, a finding

that the literature confirmed as a key indicator for college completion *(*Adelman, 1999).

Ten years after the release of the Adelman report the need to identify and correct any

misalignment between the high school curriculum and college entrance requirements is

still a focus for both secondary and higher education leaders. In a 2009 report *Closing the*

Expectations Gap a study found half of the states have adopted secondary school

standards in English and mathematics that align with college entrance expectations

(American Diploma Project, 2009). This study began tracking alignment standards in all

fifty states and in the District of Columbia in 2005. Completion of a proscribed rigorous

secondary curriculum also has implications for the increasing numbers of college

applicants who do not receive a "traditional" public or private school education at the

secondary level. Applicants who are Graduate Education Diploma (GED) or

homeschooled graduates or other students with alternative high school preparation may

be at a disadvantage as they enter college.

The findings of national reports concerning the alignment of postsecondary

curriculum and college entrance, as well as the outcomes of the provisional admission

program represented a research problem that could have philosophical and practical

implications for secondary and post-secondary leaders. First, no information was

available concerning the reasons the students had not taken essential coursework for

admission to the state's land-grant institution. Second, the analysis that found over half of

the students did not continue to enroll, described program policies and procedures that

were not supportive of the students' success. Finally, the program analysis did not include

feedback from the students concerning their experience as program participants. The

students' perspective was the missing link to a greater understanding their experience.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The belief that educated citizens are more likely to actively participate in a democratic society and the quality of their life experiences will be enhanced are two core values of higher education (Baum, & Payea, 2004; Council of Industry and Higher Education, 2004). These values have been the foundation of the vast library of scholarly study and research related to the retention of students participating in post-secondary education dating back to the 1950's (Pantages & Creedon, 1978). Of great interest to administrators and researchers alike are the numbers of students who enroll in higher education and leave without a credential or accomplishing their personal and academic objectives. In *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, one of higher education's most prominent researchers, Vincent Tinto, found the four-year degree completion rate has held at a constant rate of 45% for over 100 years. His study also identified a perplexing concern: approximately three-fourths of all students who do not persist leave *voluntarily* during the first year of enrollment. Frequently referred to as "the student departure puzzle" (Braxton, 2000), the complexity of this problem emerges through the diverse research perspectives found in the literature.

To address the current state of student retention I first present updated trends in higher education from the National Center on Education Statistics. Following this overview, studies related to the provisional students' experience in higher education are highlighted from two different perspectives: 1) the relationship of the students' demographic characteristics to college persistence; and 2) the application of sociological

and psychological theories to the college experiences. A visual model at the close of this chapter provides an overview of characteristics the literature identifies as having an influence on students persistence in higher education.

Overview of Trends in Higher Education Persistence

Ten years after the publication of *Leaving College* (Tinto, 1993), the National Center for Education Statistics reported some improvement in the persistence rates for students enrolled in four-year colleges in their report "College Persistence on the Rise? Changes in 5-Year Degree Completion and Postsecondary Persistence Rates Between 1994 and 2000" (Horn & Berger, 2004). The study documented retention rates of 6,000 students who started in higher education in 1989-90, and 9,000 students who began in 1995-96, and found the numbers of students who persisted climbed from 73% to 78%. Although the five-year degree completion rate did not improve, the increase in persistence is promising. The same study also found persistence of students at two-year colleges has also improved, increasing from 5% to 10%. Between the two cohorts more students in the second cohort who entered college in 1995-96 were enrolled in courses and making academic progress towards a degree than in any other study of two-year college students' persistence. The report hypothesized that students' willingness to incur debt and borrow more through financial aid programs and a less than robust economy could account for the increase in both four-and two-year persistence (p. xi). Insufficient academic preparation and diverse educational aspirations of students entering two-year colleges have been cited as the causes for high attrition rates for this population (Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003). Two-year colleges serve a diversity of student populations with diverse enrollment goals. Students may enter intending to transfer to a

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four-year institution or to gain job and career skills. Some are simply "trying out" the college experience to assess their interest or likelihood of completing a four-year degree. The complexity of the students' goals and the numbers of students enrolled at two-year colleges with "risk factors" for college completion are the cause of higher departure rates (Bers & Smith, 1991). These risk factors include: nontraditional secondary schooling such as home education, completion of the General Education Diploma (GED), entering college at a later age, and less financial independence and stability (Horn & Carroll, 1996; Mutter, 1992).

Student Demographics and Persistence

The Studies of student persistence define demographic variables such as: age, generational status, high school course completion, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and academic progress that are used to generate predictive models of student success. Author of one of the first books on this subject, *Preventing Students from Dropping Out*, (1975), Alexander Astin, coordinates the efforts of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California at Los Angeles. Conducting survey research on the demographic characteristics of first-year students, the Institute provides national normative data that institutions use to predict the probability of departure and degree attainment. He and other prominent researchers conduct longitudinal studies of student attributes in an effort to assess levels of risk for higher education academic success and completion.[3] These researchers have identified these six characteristics as indicators of students who are "at-risk":

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[3] Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980; Braxton, 2000; Choy, 2002; Elkins, Braxton & James, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993

- Low socioeconomic status (SES)

- Level of cultural, social and emotional capital

- Minority identification and first-generation enrollment in higher education

- Gender (Males at higher risk than females)

- Nontraditional status

- Academically underprepared due to inadequate high school preparation, graduation from a home schooling program or completion of General Education Degree (Ishitani, 2003: Williams, 1997).

Provisional students in the cohort share one or more of these characteristics, and every student is academically underprepared because of missing required credits for regular admission.

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

A student's socioeconomic status appeared in the literature as most highly correlated with "at-risk" status (Cabrera, 2003; Horn & Chen, 1998). Family income, parental education, parental occupations, and items in the home that represent wealth or educational resources such as books, magazines, and computers represent components in the definition of socioeconomic status. The following conclusions from the Executive Summary of *Swimming Against The Tide: The Poor in American Higher Education*, (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001) summarized the strong relationship between SES and college completion:

- Nearly one-half of the lowest SES quartile high school graduates do not enroll the following fall in any postsecondary institution (a non-enrollment rate of five times higher than high-SES students).

- Compared to high SES counterparts, low SES students were more likely to be members of a historically underrepresented racial or ethnic group, have parents with a high school diploma or less, come from a single-mother home, make the decision to attend college and start at a two-year community college without consulting a parent.

- Low SES students were less academically prepared based on standardized test scores and high school coursework.

- High SES students persist in higher education at five times the rate for low SES students (32% versus 6%).

Socioeconomic status and the level of state financial support for public higher education are two primary factors affecting students' ability to fund their college education. Research in this area has produced a Financial Nexus Model, which asserts persistence rates have decreased because of the reduction in state financial support for public colleges and universities (Paulsen & John, 2002). Institutions have responded to financial challenges by raising tuition, and this has forced some students to increase borrowing through student loan programs. While the option to borrow money may be an immediate and plausible solution for students to continue their education, some are reluctant to incur the level of debt required. Studies document a significant correlation between the necessity of borrowing funds for education and student departure (DeJardins, Ahlburg & McCall, 2002; Fossey & Bateman, 1998).

Although SES and financial support for college enrollment are critical factors, no studies in the literature specifically address the effect of SES on the provisional student

population. A focus on economic factors affecting persistence and departure, of the provisional student represents unexplored territory for further inquiry.

Level of Cultural, Social and Emotional Capital

A relatively new direction for higher education retention research, the effects of cultural and social capital, is surfacing in the literature (Berger, 2000; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Using Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Social Class Reproduction (Bourdieu, 1973), research studies are exploring use of his construct of *cultural capital* enhance our understanding of the diverse population of students who are seeking a college degree. Cultural capital refers to an individual's interpersonal skills, habits, manners, language abilities, educational credentials, and lifestyle preferences. According to Bourdieu (1973), a key factor in the formation of social and cultural capital is individual "habitus," or the way of perceiving the world and interacting with others in social situations. Bourdieu contends that individual levels of social and cultural capital connect to the membership level acquired by an individual in a social class system. Hence, individuals with lower membership in the social system accrue lower levels of social and cultural capital. When lower levels of cultural capital connect with economic resources available to differing class levels, the reproduction of social patterns of inequality occurs. The studies that incorporate the construct of cultural capital assert the possibility that students who enter higher education with higher levels of cultural capital are better able to understand the culture of higher education and negotiate the system, thereby achieving their objectives, persisting, and ultimately graduating (Berger, 2000; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). The cultural capital students bring with them to higher education also affects their level of *social capital* (Garrison, 2003; Putnam, 2000;

Thomas, 2000), the ability to communicate and connect with staff, faculty, and peers. The accumulation of social and cultural capital leads to the creation of *emotional capital* for the student: a sense of trust, safety, and well-being that promotes greater involvement and commitment in an individual's participation in her/his community (Shaw, Valadez, & Rhoads, 1999). Relative to higher education, the skill and ability of students to integrate into their new social environment is highly dependent upon their levels of cultural, social, and emotional capital. The challenge to increase a student's social and cultural capital represents the next frontier for higher education research and exploration (Ogbu, 1994; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002).

Minority and First-Generation Identification

Historically, low retention and graduation percentages of underrepresented minorities in higher education are well documented in the literature (Astin & Oseguera, 2002; National College Access Network, 2004; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). Although affirmative action programs for college admissions and increased funding targeted at increasing minority graduation rates (American Council on Education, 2002; Jalomo, 2000; Stovall, 2000) have helped to increase their bachelor's degree completion rates in the past decade, the graduation rate for all minorities still remains significantly lower than that for White college students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Although some progress is evident in the numbers of minority student completion rates, many unanswered questions remain concerning the minority students' academic and social experiences on college and university campuses and their effect on retention (Attinasi, 1989; Hernandez, 2000; Nevarez, 2001; Suárez-Balcázar, et. al, 2003; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002).

First-generation status confers an added risk factor for minorities and low SES White students and influences college completion rates (Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). The parents' lack of experience with college admissions inadvertently could prevent students from pursing a rigorous academic preparation for college at the high school level, and there is an advantage for students whose parents have had experience navigating the bureaucratic processes associated with college attendance. Finally, a parents' misperception of the value of the college degree may result in less support or guidance to their student (Choy, 2001; Saenz, Hurtado, Wolf, Yeung, 2007; Thayer, 2000; Tym, McMillan, Barone, Webster, 2004).

Regardless of race or ethnicity, if the students' parents did not complete a college degree research indicates they:

1. Are likely to have taken less rigorous college preparation courses in high school

2. Scored lower on standardized college entrance tests

3. Report less support for entering college from their family

4. Feel less confident about their ability to succeed academically

5. Earned lower grades in college than peers

(Komada, 2002; Terenzini, et.al, 1996)

The literature clearly identifies first-generation students as a high-risk population for retention and graduation.

Gender

"Over the last 30 years, nearly all progress in educational attainment has been achieved by females; almost none has been earned by males" (Mortenson, p.1, 2003).

National enrollment statistics indicate an increase of 7.5% of women entering higher education between 1967 and 2000 against a decreasing percentage of males enrolled, 33.1 to 32.6, during the same timeframe. In 2001, women earned the majority of baccalaureate degrees awarded in every state.

Although national statistics indicate that women and men are equally likely to graduate from college, women are more likely to complete a bachelor's degree within five years. The comparative persistence and graduation rates of men and women reported in the literature offer little explanation for the statistical differences. None of the studies found through the literature review included information on the possible influence of gender on the retention of provisional students.

Nontraditional/Traditional Status

Of the diverse conditions that define nontraditional student status, the most common is whether the students proceed to college immediately following their high school graduation: students who do not enroll in college immediately are considered nontraditional. Other conditions include age (over 25 years), part-time attendance, employed full time while attending school, married, and financially independent for purposes of financial aid application (Leonard, 2002). Students who possess one or more of these characteristics are at a higher risk for completion (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Students who delay enrollment into higher education are also less likely to persist and to attain a degree than are students who enroll at a more traditional age (Adelman, 1999).

High School Preparation

The most compelling study of the pre-college characteristics of new students to higher education, *Answers in the Toolbox* (Adelman, 1999) found that students who completed a "rigorous" high school curriculum completed bachelor degrees with more frequency than those who did not. Completion of specific high school units based on a Carnegie Unit Classification System defined the rigor of a high school course. The Carnegie Unit is a standard of measurement used in secondary education indicating that the course met one period per day for one school year. The study reviewed the high school and college transcript records of a national cohort of 14,825 students from the time they were in the 10th grade in 1980 through 1993 to identify the sum value of the *academic resources* students bring to higher education. The resources identified were: rigorous curriculum, test scores, class rank, and academic grade point average. The curriculum measure ranked at the top of the list, producing a higher percentage of students earning bachelor's degrees. He also found that the highest level of mathematics students complete at the high school level had the greatest influence on bachelor's degree completion; completing a course beyond Algebra II more than doubled the odds of degree completion. Perhaps the most interesting finding from this study is that the data support the proposition that socioeconomic status has no effect on bachelor degree completion if the student enters college with a high academic resources rating (Adelman, 1999, p. 3).

Following the Adelman Report, two studies of the rigor of coursework at the high school level documented further evidence of the challenges public school systems face in

preparing students for college access.[4] The 2003 College Readiness report found that of all students enrolled in public education, 70% graduate, but of that number only 32% leave high school qualified to attend four-year colleges. Only 17% of Hispanic students complete requirements and graduate from high school and 9% of both Hispanic and Black high school graduates were qualified applicants for admission to higher education.

To address the complexity of the disconnection between public schooling and higher education, each of the studies recommended a massive overhaul and alignment of the curriculum and standards from kindergarten through the senior year of college. In an outreach effort to inform public schools of the situation, every high school in the country received a copy of "Understanding University Success", the results of a three-year study sponsored by the Association of American Universities (AAU), the Pew Charitable Trusts, and twenty research universities. The project represented the first proactive national attempt to link high school requirements and university standards. It appears that the issue of the alignment of secondary curriculum requirements and college admissions standards has made its way to the forefront of the educational reform agenda but requires further study (Greene & Forster, 2003; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003).

General Education Diploma and Home Educated Graduates

Two groups of students whose nontraditional academic preparation for college could affect their college persistence and completion rates are students who complete high school through the General Education Diploma (GED) test and students who complete home school programs. The first group, GED graduates, may represent a

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[4] Raising Our Sights: No High School Senior Left Behind (Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 2001); Manhattan Institute for Policy Research Paper, "College Readiness," (Greene & Forster, 2003)

significant number of future college enrollees. In 2002, more than one million adults took the GED test, and two out of every three candidates indicated that they planned to pursue further education. These numbers represent an increase of 20% over the 47.5% of students who indicated higher education was their goal in 2001 (American Council on Education, 2003). Increasing numbers of GED graduates are applying directly to four-year institutions but studies are documenting high drop out rates (Horn & Carroll, 1996). A ten-year study of 143 GED students enrolled at the University of Tennessee between 1988 and 1998 found they earned lower grade point averages in the first and second semester of enrollment, had lower completion of credit hours and significantly lower degree completion rates than their high school graduate counterparts (Ebert, 2002). A second study compared an institutional sample of GED graduates to a national data set of nontraditional students and found of the 108 students entering the University of Virginia with a General Education Diploma, 57% percent of the cohort left without earning a degree. Older GED graduates (23 years and above) and females persisted and completed bachelor degrees at higher levels. Findings from the study indicate higher persistence and graduation rates were correlated with credit hour completion and academic progress based on the earned grade point averages in their first semesters of enrollment (Osei, 2002). The National Center of Education Statistics has found that GED recipients are less likely than high school graduates to persist in postsecondary education, whether persistence is measured by individual attainment rates, institutional attainment rates, or years of college completed (Horn & Chen, 1998).

College entrants without a traditional high school diploma appear to be at risk for persistence and degree completion (Berkner, Cuccaro-Alamin, & McCormick, 1996).

These findings hold significant consequences for higher education in light of the incoming population of recent graduates from home school programs who must possess a certified transcript from their program of study or obtain a General Education Diploma in order gain entrance to many colleges and universities in the United States (Jones, 2002; Lines, 2000). Homeschooling in the United States, considered one of the most significant social events in the last century (Lines, 2000; Winters, 2000), originated among white, upper socioeconomic groups. The decision to home educate is increasing across racial and ethnic lines as well.

The diverse educational experiences of students who are home educated and of those who complete their high school requirements through the General Education Degree Program may designate them as provisional students in higher education. Although the enrollment numbers of both groups are reaching significant levels, there are few studies of the experiences of either the General Education Diploma (GED) or homeschooled student in higher education.

In reviewing the literature, I found only two studies of the characteristics of the provisional student population. [5] The 1972 Bess study followed a cohort of "minority-poor" Black and Hispanic first year students that did not qualify for traditional admission. This study found the special admission students earned lower grade point averages when compared to a regularly admitted cohort, but their persistence over a two-year period was comparable to this same group (p. 140). McConkey's 1975 dissertation study described an open provisional admissions policy beginning in the 1960's that permitted any Texas

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[5] Academic performance and persistence characteristics of special admission minority-poor freshmen and regular freshmen at six California State Colleges, Bess, 1972; A study of the academic progress of students admitted to the University of Texas at Austin under the Provisional Admission Program 1972-1973, McConkey. 1975.

resident to apply for provisional admission. His assessment of the persistence outcomes of provisional students at The University of Texas at Austin found "there is not a large difference in the tendency of regular and Provisional students to remain enrolled in school" (Abstract, p. 3).

Attrition Models

The second category of retention research focuses on the quality of the students' experiences during their transition and integration to institutions of higher learning. Using sociological and psychological theories as a conceptual framework, researchers offer models to explain student decision-making concerning persistence or departure. One of the most frequently cited models is Tinto's *Stage Model of Student Departure* (1988) which uses the sociological concept, rites of passage, (Van Gennep, 1960) to describe the transition experience. Theorizing that individuals entering higher education experience a personal transformation that may involve the rejection of the values and norms of their current community, students who are unable to transition into the new community are at risk for departure. Once transition occurs a student experiences the challenges associated with social and academic integration. Tinto defined integration as the strength of the student's commitment to earn a degree and a commitment to the educational institution where they enroll. The commitment he describes is a relationship with the institution that results from quality interactions with faculty, staff, and peers on campus. According to Tinto, both student commitment and integration are critical to stem departure from an institution. These constructs, addressed in Pascarella and Terinzini's, comprehensive meta-analysis of college retention studies, *How College Affects Students* (1991, 2005) resulted in a conceptual framework of the effects of student experiences in higher

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education. The framework is a 2 x 2 matrix (1991, p. 5) that assesses changes and outcomes related to the student's cognitive or affective development, with resulting data labeled as a psychological or behavioral outcome. Their findings recommend further study of two premises regarding student retention (1991, p. 420):

1. High levels of student social integration may compensate for low levels of academic integration and vice versa.

2. Both academic and social integration are critical for students who enter with individual characteristics found to predict withdrawal and non-completion, (e.g., first-generation, minority, nontraditional, and less academically prepared).

Increasingly, the psychological characteristics and persistence behaviors of college students is addressed in the literature (Bers, & Smith, 1991; Dwyer, 2000; Grimes & David, 1999; Hulme, 2001; Napoli & Wortman, 1997; Pajares, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The most comprehensive treatment of these factors are found in The Bean and Bogdan Eaton psychological model of student leaving (2000), which uses the premise that all behavior is psychologically motivated and considers four behavioral theories relevant to the cognitive and emotional experiences of students who are considering withdrawal:

- Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Azjen, 1975)
- Coping/Behavioral Theory (Lazarus, 1999)
- Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977)
- Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1986)

The nexus between these theories is the proposition that an individual's belief about their ability to control events and succeed at a particular task or behavior positively increases their actual ability to succeed. Two areas for further study emerged from their model: 1) the need to identify and define strategies that enhance student self-efficacy and 2) application of the psychological theories in the model to cohorts of students with different demographics. The Theory of Learned Helplessness (McKean, 1994; Wood, 1991) uses the concept of locus of control from Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1986) describing a psychological state of an individual who develops the belief that actions or responses do not and will not have an effect in controlling desirable and undesirable outcomes (Wood, 1991). Learned helplessness may be the result of attempts to exercise control over a situation without positive outcomes. The inability to control may generalize to other situations and events to the point where an individual believes that no response is the best course of action (McKean, 1994).

More study of the psychological characteristics of students will help to identify the skills students need to effectively transition to the role of college student. Insight into the dynamics of their adjustment to the social and academic transition, as well as life events outside the institutional environment factors that may intervene and influence a students' decision to persist, stop out or depart (Braxton et al., 1988). Some examples of these events are: personal or family problems, personal financial concerns, inability to secure funding to continue to pursue educational objectives, illness, death in family, pregnancy, birth, childcare, required military service, divorce, relocation or transfer for job or career opportunity, or the need to provide financial support for family members. This listing of life events and their influence on student persistence are found in a

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growing body of research that identifies a critical supportive role for the parents and

family members of their students' successful transition to higher education (Ashburn,

2007; Daniel & Scott, 2001; Karney-Hall, 2008).

The psychological and behavioral responses to college attendance also surface in

the literature on the quality of the campus climate and its impact on student persistence.

Three unique perspectives in the literature define the campus climate: 1) organizational

climate, 2) physical/environmental climate and, 3) social climate.

Organizational Climate

Organizational climate refers to "the atmosphere or ambience of an organization

reflected in its structures, policies, and practices; the demographics of its membership;

the attitudes and values of its members and leaders; and the quality of personal

interactions as perceived by its members" (Committee on Women in the University's

Work Group on Climate, 2002; Cress & Sax, 1998). Much of the study of the influence

of these factors on students in higher education have primarily focused on the

hierarchical nature of institutional bureaucracy, where students may be considered "lower

participants" with no organizational status or power (Godwin & Markham, 1996; Stroup,

1966). Further exploration of the challenges university students face in dealing with the

rules, policies, and procedures of the bureaucratic culture of higher education is

recommended (Berger, 2000; 2001; 2002; Godwin & Markham, 1996; Suárez-Balcázar et

al., 2003; Sweetland, 2001).

One insightful study considered the possibility that students with traditional

public school experience might be more prepared to navigate the systems of higher

education (e.g., registering for classes, obtaining financial aid, understanding policy and

procedures). The study suggested that students with nontraditional preparation may not be as adept at dealing with the organizational bureaucracy of higher education due to their limited experience and limited opportunity to develop problem solving skills for these events and situations that inevitably produce stress and frustration (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Physical/Environmental Climate

"The arrangement of environments is probably the most powerful technique we have for influencing behavior" (Moos 1974, p. 4). This statement by Rudolf Moos, author of over 50 articles on the social-ecological dimensions of human environments, has potentially important implications for students in higher education. Moos' research on the physical setting of university campuses found that the environment affects students' attitudes, moods, and behavior, as well as academic performance (1979). His research focused on the student perceptions of their institution and found that students made decisions about staying at an institution or leaving based upon beliefs concerning the potential harm or benefit of the physical environment (Moos, 1979; Tierney, 1988). One of the most studied aspects of the physical environment of the college campus is how the size of the institution and class size affects student learning and persistence (Dillon & Kokkelenberg, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Although there is no absolute conclusion on the effects of institutional size, Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) concluded that students are more prone to engage socially in smaller environments that they perceive to be more psychologically manageable. Their research found that institutions with more than 5,000 students enrolled experienced lower retention rates. Social

engagement, whether it occurs in or out of the classroom appears to have an impact on improving persistence of students on campuses with large or small student populations.

Social Climate/Culture

The concept of a positive campus climate has evolved to encompass not only the physical environment but also an emotional connection to the institution, a sense of emotional stability conveyed through the organizational culture of the institution. The concept of culture differs from organizational climate in that *culture* is the sum of actual and symbolic activities in the organization that create a sense of shared meaning for its members (Tierney, 1988). If students understand and gain a sense of belonging in the culture of higher education, their interactions within the social and academic systems of the organization are more likely to result in satisfaction, commitment to college, and ultimately the decision to stay.

The study of student integration into the campus culture becomes even more critical when considered in the context of the diverse campus. Tinto (1975) defined integration as a process of assimilation whereby the student must adopt the values and practices of the dominant college population in order to be socially and academically successful. His perspective that the individual entering higher education would have to leave behind or give up some aspect of themselves in order to achieve a fit in the campus culture has become untenable in the diverse culture of higher education (Attinasi, 1989; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992; 1999; Zea, Reisen, & Beil, 1997). Tinto later modified his concept of assimilation to include the idea that persisting students must gain "membership" in the college organizational culture, but not necessarily at the risk of leaving behind personal identity (Tierney, 1992).

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The strategies and methods universities and colleges employ to address the challenge of creating a positive campus climate and enabling "membership" are highly individual to the institution. Internal climate assessment may be used for strategic improvement planning, or institutions may choose to participate in national assessment programs such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (Kuh, 2003) to obtain feedback from their students and benchmark their efforts using national performance indicators. Connecting students to first-year orientation or mentoring programs designed to support their academic and social transition appears to be one of the most frequently implemented strategies to help facilitate a more positive perception of the institution (Policy Center on the First-Year of College, 2002; Stovall, 2000). Although these programs help students in the transition to their new environment, Vincent Tinto stated the experience of a positive campus climate is not universal: "Though some institutions have established freshman year programs, it is still the case that most new students are left to make their own way through the maze of institutional life. They, like the many generations of students before them, have to learn the ropes of college life largely on their own" (1993, p.99).

Limitations of the Literature

Provisional admission to a university provides an opportunity for those students who are lacking requirements for admission to make up any deficits and pursue their educational goals. Provisional admission status denotes a student lacking in their ability to one or a combination of admissions requirements: standardized test scores, class standing, grade point average or completion of high school credits. For the purposes of this study, a provisional student is one who lacked required high school credits for

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admission to Rio Grande University. Due to the volume of research on student persistence in higher education, I developed the following process to explore previous scholarly work of the problem in my study:

1. Review the literature to identify previous study of provisional students in higher education

2. Categorize retention research into two areas: studies analyzing student demographics and studies using sociological or psychological theory to explain student attrition

3. Review the literature to identify studies of the characteristics of underprepared and high-risk students participating in post-secondary education: age, generational status, high school course completion, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and academic progress.

4. Review the literature for explanatory student attrition models using sociological and psychological constructs.

Both the study of student demographics and the explanatory attrition models help to create a contextual background of the larger issue of the retention of all students in higher education. First, I was able to use the characteristics defining "at-risk" students from the literature to establish a higher level of risk for completion for the provisional student population. In particular, the academic preparedness characteristic related specifically to the students in this study who did not complete sufficient high school credits for admission. The Adelman study, *Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment (1999)*, found completion of a rigorous curriculum at the secondary level directly tied to persistence and attainment of the baccalaureate degree. In addition, completing mathematics courses beyond Algebra II

more than doubled the odds of degree completion. The attrition models cited also identified constructs to explore such as the psychological factors influencing the students' transition into the campus culture and their motivation to persist.

To provide an overview of this literature I developed a Visual Summary of the Literature: The Multi-Dimensional Student Persistence and Departure Conceptual Model (Figure 1). Each influence on persistence identified in the literature connects to one of three categories of characteristics: Individual, Psychological, and Institutional/Organizational/Climate. Because only two studies found specifically addressed provisional student persistence and departure (Bess, 1972; McConkey, 1975), the model also includes a dimension labeled "Unidentified Characteristics" as a way of emphasizing the need for further study of the persistence of provisional students in higher education. These four categories also informed the development of interview guides used to collect data from the study participants.

Because of the limited information available and finding no studies that include the voices of provisional students, this study breaks new ground. Exploring the meaning students make of their experiences in higher education may yield the missing pieces of the student departure puzzle (Kuh & Andreas, 1991; Magolda, 1999; Manning, 1992; Stage & Manning, 2003; Terenzini, Rendòn, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994).

Individual Characteristics	Psychological Characteristics	Institutional/Organizational/ Climate Characteristics	Unidentified Characteristics
-Socioeconomic Status (SES) -Age -Race/Ethnicity -Gender -Generational Status -Quality of Pre-College Education -High School Course Completion -Rigor of High School Curriculum -General Education Degree Graduate -Home-Educated Graduate -Level of Social Capital -Level of Cultural Capital -Level of Emotional Capital	-Beliefs about Consequences of Behavior -Attitudes toward Performing Behavior -Intention to Perform Behavior -Encouragement from Family & Significant Others -Level of Motivation -Level of Hope -Level of Resiliency -Level of Coping Strategies -Level of Self-Efficacy -Level of Internal Locus of Control -Level of Intention & Commitment to Earn a Degree	-Institutional Image/Size -Admissions Standards & Policies -Quality of Formal & Informal Interaction with: • Administrative Offices • Academic Support Offices • Faculty/Instructors/Peers (Socialization) -Perceptions of the Physical and Environmental Characteristics of Campus -Perception of Quality of Instruction -Perception of "fit" in the institutional environment	Characteristics or factors that may emerge as grounded theory in this study.

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Figure 1.

A Visual Summary of the Literature: The Multi-Dimensional Student Persistence and Departure Conceptual Model.

A summary of research of the characteristics that influence higher education student persistence, stopout, and departure. (2004).

Conclusion

This chapter began with a review of the research findings of major student retention theorists who helped to identify three primary dimensions for exploration with regard to the persistence of students in higher education:

1. Individual characteristics of students

2. Psychological characteristics of students

3. Institutional/organizational characteristics of the college or university

Review of the literature in each of these areas produced a listing of factors, with research supporting their influence on student departure. These factors were used to develop a visual model depicting a student entering higher education, interacting within the systems of the university, and choosing to stay or leave. The literature review confirmed student departure from higher education as a complex issue affecting a diversity of student populations. However, the study of provisional students persistence are largely unexplored. The increasing diversity of the pre-college preparation of entering first-year students and the lack of study of the provisional students' persistence and success are evidence of the need for further research of this student population.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Despite extensive exploration of various factors that are associated with attrition, there has been relatively little study of students' own accounts of their reasons for leaving college.

> Short-Term Enrollment in Postsecondary Education
> E.M. Bradburn, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002, p. 1

Introduction

Although no one is better qualified to inform the policy makers about the retention practices of colleges and universities than the students, most research studies fail to include their voices in discussions on higher education departure. This study utilized grounded theory methodology (Glaser, 1994) to address that concern by exploring and analyzing the thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors of a cohort of provisional students at a four-year, public land grant university. The impetus for the problem selected for this study was the high departure rate of provisional students admitted to the Student Success Program. This chapter describes both the context for the problem in this study and the qualitative research methods employed to explore the experiences of a cohort of provisional students.

Purpose of the Study

This study was guided by the following research question: Why did provisionally admitted students either depart from the university or persist to obtain a degree, after being admitted to a Student Success Program that was designed to promote their transition to regular status and to gain skills that would assist them to obtain a

baccalaureate degree? I used three major categories of characteristics that the literature

defines as influences on student persistence to formulate the interview questions to

collect data. These areas were:

1. Individual characteristics of students with an emphasis on pre-college
    academic preparation
2. Student experiences with the institutions' organizational climate
3. Psychological factors that affected decision-making

The Research Design

The use of qualitative research methods represents a promising pathway to

understanding the experiences of students as they move into the culture of higher

education and persist, stop out, or depart (Kuh & Andreas, 1991; Magolda, 1999;

Manning, 1992; Stage & Manning, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1994). Due to the limited

research of the experiences of provisional students in higher education found in the

literature, I focused on the analysis of their thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors,

to discover how they constructed meaning from their experiences. Qualitative

methodology was selected for this study because of its philosophical foundation in the

ideology of *symbolic interactionism* (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 1979), the study of the

unique symbolic frameworks, perspectives, or lenses used by human beings to decipher

the meaning of their social interactions with others. The individuals' perspective guides

the language and behavior used to communicate in social situations; a philosophy I

intentionally focused on during each phase of the qualitative process (Glaser & Strauss,

1995). It is all about *meaning*, to "see the situation as it is seen by the actor" (Blumer,

1969, p. 20). Data that emerged from the focused interviews with the research

participants who had direct knowledge of the problem in this study generated "rich, thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) of their experiences through language and nonverbal behavior that conveyed meaning. Both the underlying philosophy and methodology of qualitative methods were well suited to the problem in this study primarily because current theories explaining persistence and departure behaviors rely largely on survey and demographic data and rarely include students' perspectives or voices.

Context of the Study

This study was conducted at a Carnegie classified Research and a minority and Hispanic-Serving institution, Rio Grande University. As the designated land-grant university in Border State, Rio Grande has a fundamental mission to provide accessible education for the citizens of the state. In 1999 a national accreditation site visit team found that Rio Grande denied students admission to their Main Campus because these students did not meet high school credit requirements, yet admitted them to their local Branch Campus and allowed them to enroll in Rio Grande University Main Campus courses. This practice contradicted Rio Grande's published admissions policies. To address this problem of "back door admissions", the administration created a program that permitted students to enroll at the Branch Campus to make up credits required for admission, and to support their transition to the Main Campus. Students enrolled in the "Student Success Program" were also required to enroll in a The Freshman Orientation course on the Main Campus. In the spring of 2002 I interviewed seven participants enrolled in the program. The interviews and subsequent research on the academic progress and retention of these provisional students provided an opportunity to explore

the students' experiences, yielding valuable information concerning their persistence at Rio Grande University and setting the stage for this dissertation study.

An institutional review of program outcomes found 50% of provisionally admitted students in the Student Success Program were not at either the Main or Branch Campus. The report but did not include any data from direct or survey contact with the participants (Rio Grande University Student Success Program Outcomes Report, 2004).

Methods of Data Collection

Using three sources, I collected data from three different groups of participants in this study. This section presents the specific methods I used and provides a detailed overview of the process for each group. First, before I constructed the interview instruments I identified and reviewed forty-four documents with information about the formation of The Student Success Program. Categorized according to type (Appendix K), a Document Review Form (Appendix L) guided the analysis. The goals for the document review process were to:

1. Provide a historical context for the development of the Student Success Program, modifications to the program, and outcomes.

2. Identify the methods and processes used to implement the program.

3. Identify internal and external information sources university administrative personnel used to make decisions concerning student population.

4. Identify processes used to track student selection and completion of program requirements.

5. Identify student demographic characteristics including: age, generational status, missing high school course credits, GED scores, ethnicity, academic progress, and status upon withdrawal.

6. Connect findings from this grounded theory study to outcomes of Student Success Program, if any.

Second, I scheduled an in-person interview for eligible participants. The Interview Guides for each participant group included questions designed to explore the experiences, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, interpretations, and decision-making processes of provisional students. Using the steps outlined in *The Long Interview* (McCracken, 1988) I conducted an exhaustive review of existing literature to help define and refine the research question and to help in the construction of interview questions for the participants in the study. An important aspect of McCracken's process also includes "self-examination", where the researcher identifies and discloses any personal bias and experience with the problem being studied in an effort to minimize the effects of researcher bias during the interview. To guard against any possible bias I used the following protocol:

1. Disclosed my knowledge of six of the Student Success Program participants as their Freshman Orientation course instructor

2. Disclosed my personal experiences in higher education that were similar to those of the participants

3. Developed standardized interview questions that were asked of participants in each group

4. Documented and reviewed perceptions, thoughts and feelings in a theoretical

memorandum following each interview.

During the interview, participants were encouraged to reflect upon their

experiences in a free-flowing manner by responding to general, open-ended questions. As

the taped interviews progressed and information and insights emerged through the

participants' responses, an inductive process guided the construction of additional

interview questions. The Interview Guides for each participant group are included as

Appendices D-F. The Informed Consent form signed by participants is also included as

Appendix G. The Rio Grande University online database of student records served as a

data source for demographic data and information about the students' academic progress.

Study Participants and Steps to Theory Generation

Initially, I organized the participants into four different groups representing

different aspects of the problem in this study. The first group from which I sought to

obtain information were the applicants to Rio Grande University who chose *not* to accept

the provisional admission offered to them. The Rio Grande University Admissions Office

identified five hundred and forty-one applicants who met this criterion and who applied

in the fall of 2005. I mailed the first invitation to participate in the study to sixty

applicants living within a radius of approximately sixty miles of the Rio Grande

University campus; one applicant chose to interview. (Appendix B). A second attempt to

elicit data from this group was by telephone contact. After approximately forty telephone

calls with no affirmative response to the interview invitation, a third attempt was made by

sending a survey to all of the five-hundred and forty-one applicants who were denied

admission to Rio Grande University prior the start of the Fall 2005 semester. (Survey;

Appendix C). Forty-three applicants responded to the survey for an 8% return rate. I

determined there was not sufficient data to analyze. Therefore, the denied applicants who

chose not to accept provisional admission to Rio Grande University were not included as

a participant group in the study. A recommended approach for future efforts to collect

data from applicants who elect not to enroll as provisional students would be an attempt

of contact or follow-up immediately after the applicant receives notification of their

denial. Proximity to the time of the denial may yield a higher participation rate.

Presented in the following section is a detailed outline of the research process for

the three groups of participants interviewed.

Group 1

Participants accepted provisional enrollment through The Student Success

Program in fall of 2005. I made an initial contact with these students through a class

presentation during a session of The Freshman Orientation course. Offering participants

an incentive of entry into a drawing for an iPOD and a ten-dollar gift certificate to Barnes

& Noble, nine provisional students from this group agreed to an interviewed. Participant

interviews took place on the campus of Rio Grande University. I recorded each interview

on a Macintosh PowerBook computer using Annotate Software. The participants received

a mailed copy of the transcript for comment or correction. None of the participants chose

to respond.

Group 2

Participants accepted provisional enrollment through The Student Success

Program and entered Rio Grande University between Spring 2001 and Spring 2004. A

review of their academic records indicated they have persisted and made academic

progress towards a degree. Students received a mailed invitation to participate in the

research study and offered entry into a drawing for an iPOD and a ten-dollar gift

certificate to Barnes & Noble as incentive. Eight provisional students from this group

agreed to an interview. Two students entered Rio Grande University as provisional

students in the fall semester of 2001; two in fall of 2002; three in fall of 2003; and one in

fall of 2004. Six of the eight participants interviewed were students in the Freshman

Orientation course that I taught. When referencing participants or their experiences in this

study, a pseudonym identifies them by name and group. I recorded each interview on a

Macintosh PowerBook computer using Annotate Software. The participants received a

mailed copy of the transcript for comment or correction. None of the participants chose to

respond.

Group 3

Participants were applicants to Rio Grande University who denied admission

because of missing credits from high school that are required for admission. These

participants accepted provisional enrollment through The Student Success Program and

entered between Spring 2001 and Spring 2004. However, their academic records

indicated that as of Fall 2005 they had withdrawn from enrollment at Rio Grande

University. As an incentive, students received a mailed invitation to participate in the

research study and offered entry into a drawing for an iPOD. None of the eligible

students accepted the invitation to participate. The second attempt to invite participants to

interview resulted in five telephone interviews. I entered these participants into a drawing

for an iPOD and sent them a ten-dollar gift certificate to Barnes & Noble as an incentive

to participate. Interviews with participants were tape-recorded using a Radio Shack

telephone-recording device. The participants received a mailed copy of the transcript for comment or correction. None of the participants chose to respond.

In summary, collecting data from the students in Group 3 who withdrew from the university was extremely challenging. I was not able to obtain an in-person interview with any of these students. Collecting data through the telephone interview was not the most optimal method but it did provide an opportunity to include the perspective of students who withdrew in the study. The data for this group was limited as opposed to the in-person interviews because it was more difficult to establish rapport using this medium and the participants did not elaborate as much in their responses as did the participants consenting to an in-person interview. The opportunity to explore the reasons for the students withdrawal from the university either before, or at the time of withdrawal, is critical to understanding the student departure puzzle and refined strategies to understand the dynamics of their leaving are needed.

Data Analysis

Following a review of the literature review on qualitative methodology, I determined the process of analysis described by Glaser and Strauss (1999), as *discovery* would best serve the purpose exploring the meaning of the experiences of the provisional applicants and students in this study. The concept of "discovery" applied not only to data analysis but also to the research process as I modified the original research design as data collection progressed. The research process termed *theoretical sampling* by Glaser & Strauss is a comprehensive procedure where the researcher compares each data set to all of the sets of data collected and assigns "codes" while focusing on two questions: 1) What are these data a study of? And, 2) which category is a fit for these data?

Through this *constant comparative* method (Glaser & Strauss, 1999*)* categories and concepts about the experiences of the participants emerged. By comparing the pieces of data to each other, the similarities, differences, degrees of consistency and patterns are noted and conceptual categories emerged. The constant comparative method involves using both inductive and deductive analysis. Induction is the process whereby ideas and concepts emerge during the coding process and deduction is the intentional process of returning to the data sets collected from document review, interviews and surveys to confirm the fit. Deduction also occurred as I continuously reviewed studies in the literature to explore previous research regarding concepts that emerged.

The data were first analyzed using *open coding*, a process of marking and making relevant notations in the text of the interview transcript. Open coding continued until the categories were saturated or no new concepts emerged. I documented both the research process and concepts that emerged during analysis in *theoretical memos*. Theoretical memos were written after each interview, throughout data analysis and as insights emerged about the meaning of the data. I used the theoretical memos to free write my thoughts, ideas, and questions about the data. From the comparison of content in the memos, theoretical concepts about the problem emerged. As I analyzed the codes and concepts from the theoretical memos, *selective coding* of the data began by assigning codes to data that matched the concepts of emerging categories. Finally, the categories of concepts connected together in the *axial coding* phase where I identified meaningful relationships between and among the characteristics of categories. These relationships form the "core phenomenon" of the findings. In this study, four findings comprise the theory addressing provisional students persistence or departure.

Standards of Quality for Grounded Theory

Researcher Bias

     As the process of a qualitative research project evolves "the methods take the researcher into and close to the real world so that the results and findings are grounded in the empirical world" (Patton, 2002, p. 125). This grounding determines the truth-value or credibility of the constructs of the theory judged by the effectiveness of the primary research instrument, the researcher. To reach this standard of effectiveness the researcher will achieve the ability to "see the world" as it is seen by the participants in this study. I took the following steps to ensure the credibility of this study. First, I identified the following areas where my personal bias might influence the research process or findings. As the Director of an academic support department on the Main Campus at Rio Grande University, I coordinated the Freshman Orientation Program and taught The Freshman Orientation course for regularly admitted students for ten years. For three years, I taught the sections of the course designated for provisional students enrolled in the Student Success Program. Through the interviews, I found the provisional students experiences were similar to what I experienced as a first-year student in higher education. As a first-generation student, I had similar challenges and obstacles to degree completion as those described by students enrolled in the Student Success Program. Because of my struggle to understand the culture of higher education coupled with the lack of guidance and mentoring received as an undergraduate student, I strongly identified and empathized with the challenges faced by the provisional students. My personal experiences are the basis for my strong commitment to first-generation, low-income, and minority students who are underrepresented groups in higher education. I maintained a heightened

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awareness that these personal values and biases may lead to a tendency to focus on elements of the students' accounts of their experiences that resonated with mine at each phase of the research process. I developed the following protocol to guard against bias and ensure credibility in the research process:

1. Comments addressing personal thoughts, ideas, and feelings that occurred during and following each interview are included on the interview transcript and in subsequent theoretical memos. I returned to review the comments and memos throughout the process of theory development for evidence of bias that could affect the trustworthiness or credibility of findings.

2. Utilizing the process of negative or discrepant case analysis (Dey, 1993; Robinson, 1951; Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, & Dillon, 2003) I continuously reviewed the data and emergent themes to ensure the theoretical findings represented the experiences of all participants.

3. The participants received a copy of a transcript of their interview and a draft of the findings with an invitation to review and comment on the accuracy of both documents. (Member Checking; Merriam, 2001, p. 204).

4. Peer Review (Trochim, 2002). Four doctoral-level peer reviewers with knowledge of higher education persistence and departure critically evaluated the research methods and findings (Peer Review; Trochim, 2002) and made the following recommendations:

A) To provide a rich context of the students' life experiences prior to college admission and facilitate understanding of the students' challenges: Include

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a summary of the individual narrative of each participant as a separate chapter within the study.

B) To facilitate future grounded theory practice for this student population and ensure audit trail requirement are met:

Develop a matrix and timeline of the research process and theory development.

C) To facilitate understanding of theory component connection:

Create a chart or visual representation at the conclusion of the analysis chapter to illustrate application of themes to participant groups.

D) To minimize researcher bias regarding coding of core phenomena:

Develop rubric for assessing the identity statements of students. Invite two other campus professionals with no previous knowledge of the participants or the research study to code statements.

5. The steps of the research process, from selection of participants to the generation of the grounded theory were documented to provide sufficient detail so that readers can confirm the logic used to generate the grounded theory for this study. A matrix of theory development from selection of participants to findings is available for review upon request (Audit Trail; Merriam, 2001)

Dependability of Study Results

Readers of this study might also consider the standard of reliability as a measure of rigor and quality (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). However, reliability usually refers to the construct of obtaining the same or similar results by replicating the conditions of a

research study. Repetition in a qualitative study will never yield the exact same results. Instead, the concept of dependability is appropriate for this study. Dependability for this study rests on the selection of participants who were qualified to address the issues related to the research problem as well as stringent documentation of changes that occurred throughout the research process. Each of the three participant groups in this study had uniquely different experiences as provisional students in higher education. Although the number of participants in a study is sometimes used to gauge the dependability of the findings, the "validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected than with the sample size" (Patton, 2002, p. 245). Audit trail and the use of theoretical memos established the level of documentation required for dependability. Triangulation, the strategy of using multiple research methods enhanced the dependability of this study. I used interviews with participants, document inspection and student academic records to achieve corroboration between the sets of data. In addition to the methods used, triangulation in this study refers to the interviews with three student groups representing differing perspectives on the research question (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

<div align="center">**Limitations of the Study**</div>

The limitations of this study were two-fold: First, results of this study are limited to reflect the experiences of provisional students who are denied admission to Rio Grande University in Border State. The complexity of the students' pre-college characteristics and their unique and diverse experiences as they interacted within the organizational structure of the university may not generalize to other student groups or institutions. Second, an evaluation of the policies related to provisional admission or the effectiveness

of the Student Success Program or Orientation Course were not within the scope of this research nor possible given the methodology of this study.

Conclusions

Higher education persistence and departure represent complex challenges and opportunities for administrators. Entering students bring with them diverse and complex levels of academic preparation and unique life experiences. While many studies have explored the issues associated with the students' experience in higher education, there are still many questions yet to be resolved, particularly the retention of provisional students. A critical issue of growing concern to university administrators is the increasing number of students admitted on a provisional basis who may not meet existing academic requirements, and the institutions' inability to successfully retain them. The students with intimate knowledge gained through their experiences as provisional students were most qualified to guide our understanding. This qualitative study provided an opportunity for the voices of provisional students to emerge. The grounded theory process for data analysis and theory development provided a way of looking at the problem with the potential to increase our understanding of the student departure puzzle.

CHAPTER IV

PARTICIPANT PROFILE ANALYSIS AND OUTCOMES

Introduction

To better acquaint the reader with the students in this study I begin this chapter in Part I with a narrative introduction of selected participants. The introductory vignettes in Part I provide insight into the experiences of the students before and after their admission to Rio Grande University. I elected to present them in this chapter by using the concept of "nested contexts", a metaphor used to describe the exploration of the meaning of the participants' experiences in social and cultural environments (Lubeck, 1988). Introducing the participants in this way allows the reader to see the world as they see it, to understand the forces that shape them. "Persons are shaped by the meaning that they ascribe to their experience, by the situation in social structures, and by the language and cultural practices of self and of relationship" (White, 1992).

Introduction of the participants are set within four contexts that characterized their experiences:

1. First-Generation Status

2. Gender

3. Learning Disabilities/Special Education

4. Outliers: Students potentially misclassified as provisional at the time of admission.

By locating the students within these different contexts, I hope to convey the individuality of each student, as well as the connections between them that I believe influenced their experience in higher education.

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In Part II of this chapter Table 7 provides an overview of demographic characteristics for all of the study participants (N=22) of this chapter and I extend the use of contextual backgrounds to present a visual representation of the participants' academic outcomes within spheres of social class markers (Figure 2). These markers are:

1) Income

2) Race/Ethnicity

3) Parental Education

4) Other Factors: a) Participants with divorced parents b) Participants with children c) Nontraditional participants d) Student or family member incarcerated or detained in rehabilitation facility.

Finally, in Part III, the academic outcomes of the students in this study are compared to outcomes for all provisional students admitted to Rio Grande University between 2001-2003 and changes to the provisional admissions policy since its inception are reviewed. To conclude this chapter Table 8 provides a summary of characteristics for each individual student including an update of their academic progress as of Fall 2008. In place of the participants' real names, I substituted pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Context: First-generation Status[6]

Devona, Javier, Joshua

Fourteen of the participants in this study (64%), were first-generation students in higher education; neither parent had obtained a college degree. I selected three participants to introduce in this section from this group because they exemplify extreme diversity in their personal stories and in their preparation for college. Devona dropped out of high school at fifteen years of age and entered college as a nontraditional student several years later after taking and passing the General Education Diploma Test; Javier attended a four year public institution but felt very unprepared for the college experience; and Joshua completed high school at an Indian Reservation school. All three participants had parents who supported their intent to pursue higher education but did not have experience with navigating the culture and expectations of the college experience.

Participant 2: Devona

"She [mother] is so excited for me that I was actually coming to college. She was sad that I was moving away but she was excited."

Nineteen-year-old Devona dropped out of high school at fifteen. Describing the events that led up to her withdrawal she said, "Well, a lot of things, with my Dad, 'cause he went to jail and since then everything kind of went downhill. I just started becoming rebellious and didn't wanna' go to school anymore or do anything anymore, and I just stopped going." She also disclosed an incident in which she was expelled from high

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[6] First-generation status designates a student who will be the first in his or her family to attend an institution of higher education.

school for bringing brass knuckles, considered a deadly weapon to campus. Although she attempted to get back on track with her courses when she returned it was difficult and made the decision to leave easier for her. She also felt the need to work to help with financial support for the family. Three years later Devona's mother met a GED Instructor and encouraged her to take the examination. At that time she was dating someone who wanted to apply to college and they made plans to attend college together if she was accepted. After receiving a high score on the GED she was encouraged to take the American College Test (ACT) and to begin the college application process. She scored very high on the math portion of the ACT and decided she wanted to become an elementary math teacher.

When she applied for admission to Rio Grande University she knew she would probably have to take courses to make up for what she missed in high school. Neither of her parents completed a college degree and both of her sisters dropped out of high school. "My oldest sister had her first daughter when she was fifteen years old and she dropped out of school and everything. My next oldest sister had hers when she was eighteen but she dropped out of school before that. I learned from their mistakes. I told myself that I don't want to end up like that. It's not a bad lifestyle for them; I just don't want to have a lifestyle like that." When Devona's mother decided to take the GED so that she could qualify for better employment opportunities Devona believed it was also time she focus on her future as well. She was dating someone who wanted to apply to college and they made plans to attend college together if she was accepted. After receiving a high score on the GED she was encouraged to take the American College Test (ACT) and to begin the college application process. She scored very high on the math portion of the ACT and

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decided she wanted to become an elementary math teacher. She is determined to complete a college degree and feels getting involved with activities outside of her coursework would be a distraction, "I told my boyfriend, 'We're not here to play around; we're here for school.'"

Because Devona left high school before graduation she was not qualified to receive the State Lottery Scholarship. She received a 4.0 grade point average in her first semester and transferred as a regular admit to Rio Grande University in the Spring 2006. She declared Education as her major and has enrolled every semester since then. She has made continuous progress toward completion of a baccalaureate degree earning a 3.485 grade point average in the Fall 2008 semester.

Participant 3: Javier

"I went in there cold turkey, into college."

When Javier decided to drop out of Rio Grande University after two years, he discussed his feelings with his parents. They told him they did not want him to stop attending college but said, "You're really not doing that great so you'll only be wasting your time and your money." He agreed. Javier attributed his academic challenges his lack of preparation for the college experience,

> You know what? I think it all starts in high school. I went in there cold turkey, into college. The whole thing, I guess was me, being like the first person going to college from my family. I didn't know how to apply for scholarships, courses I should have taken in high school to prepare myself for college, things like that. No one was helping me at all. I graduated with a great grade point average, and I could have easily gotten a scholarship but I didn't get one because I didn't know. I

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think if they would have helped me out a lot more in high school to get ready for college, I wouldn't have been in such a shock when I got to college.

Javier was one of the participants in the study that was completely baffled at his designation as a provisional student believing there was a mistake concerning missed credits in mathematics. He had completed trigonometry in high school and had a good grade point average, thus he ascribed his status to having scored low the day he went to take the SAT test. Javier joined a fraternity in his first semester and lived in the Greek Housing Complex, a decision he now regrets as he focused more on extracurricular activities than studying. He did not qualify to receive the State Lottery Scholarship because he earned below a 2.5 grade point average in his first semester. In the subsequent semester, he received academic probation and remained on probation in both the fall semester of 2002 and spring of 2003. He decided not to enroll in the fall semester of 2003. After leaving college, he secured a job at a retail outlet and hopes he will move up into management someday. He does not intend to return to college. Since Javier Spring 2003, Javier has not enrolled at either the Branch or Main Campus of Rio Grande University.

Participant 8: Joshua

"I guess since I was small I want to do something big."

Joshua graduated from a high school on an Indian Reservation in Border State and was very nervous about leaving home for college. He planned to attend a local community college when he met a staff member from the Rio Grande American Indian Program who encouraged him to consider applying to the university. He participated in a summer Bridge Program and said, "Yeah, it gave me a lot more confidence in myself and

just opened up my eyes a little bit more." Joshua knew he would be required to take developmental math and English courses at the Branch Campus but thought it was because of low ACT scores and high school grades. He was not upset about entering college through the Branch campus. As the first person in his family to attend any college, he was thrilled just to begin his journey to further education and a better future for himself and his family. "Like my situation, I saw how others grew up in my family and how hard it was for them and I just don't want to live that way. I guess since I was small I want to do something big." Joshua worked hard as a student and gives credit to his involvement with the university Army and Air Force ROTC as a major factor in his ability to stay in school. They provide tuition support as well as teaching him discipline. Joshua recalled occasionally thinking about dropping out of college but used positive thinking to keep himself focused on his goals, "In college you gotta learn a lot of things-- and kind of come out of your shell and be on your own, you know. College has taught me a lot of things and helped me out in life. It actually opened up my eyes, well just not my eyes but meet new people but learned a lot about myself and what I can do; and also like how to trust in people, trust in your own decisions and stuff like that."

Joshua qualified to receive the State Lottery Scholarship based on an earned grade point average of 2.6 in his first semester (Fall 2003) and completion of twelve credits. In the spring semester of 2004, he transitioned to the Main Campus and remained continuously enrolled until he graduated in the fall semester of 2008 with a Bachelor of Science degree and an earned grade point average of 3.33.

Context: Gender[7]

Christopher, Jonathan, Helen, Rose

The literature review confirmed a trend of lower college participation and completion rates for males (Mortenson, 2003) and a 2008 study explored the dimensions of "the gender gap" and its' influence on college persistence and graduation (Sax, 2008). One of the objectives of the Sax Study of 17,000 at 200 universities was to explore the differences between men and women as they entered college and to what extent difference may change over the course of college enrollment. One of the key findings was that although women initially earned higher grades at both the time of college entrance and as they continued enrollment over a four-year period, they expressed feeling of less confidence in their academic ability. Women also reported higher levels of stress as they entered college with frequent feelings of being overwhelmed, more than twice the rate reported by men. I use this context to introduce four participants whose narratives resonated with the Sax Study findings. First, Christopher and Jonathan emerged as two participants who expressed strong self-confidence and optimism about their ability to complete a college degree while two female participants, Helen and Rose, both nontraditional students articulated their concerns about their ability to succeed in higher education.

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[7] I selected the gender context to introduce four participants whose experiences were descriptive of current research concerning differences in the levels of hope and optimism regarding college achievement and completion expressed by males and females.

Participant 2: Christopher

"I have to finish, I can't put my mind in that area of dropping out--I started, got to finish."

Christopher entered Rio Grande University in the fall semester of 2002 at the age of eighteen. His great-uncle, president of a four-year university in another state, and other family members always encouraged him to pursue a college degree. He credited his older brother as a special source of encouragement because he had dropped out of college after one year and is currently serving a prison sentence. Before Christopher graduated from high school, his mother decided to pursue higher education and became the first person in his immediate family to receive a Bachelor's degree. After his graduation from one of the most prestigious and academically rigorous high schools in the state, Christopher was surprised to learn he was not eligible for regular admission to the university. He said, "I thought I was fine with math but when I talked to a representative she said I would probably have to go to the Branch and take one math course. I was surprised. I thought I was fine. I took all of the math credits that I needed. I didn't know that you needed to reach a certain level in math in order to be a full time student at Rio Grande."
Upon further reflection he remembers,

> Ever since like I was in eighth grade they kept putting me in lower math classes
> just because of grades or whatever. I was good in math, I don't know. They kept
> putting me in lower classes so by my senior year I was in geometry and I was
> supposed to be in Algebra II. So when I came here they said I had to go to the
> Branch and take Pre-Algebra.

Christopher completed his requirements to gain regular admission within one year and reports he never thinks about dropping out, "Because I have to finish, I can't put my mind in that area of dropping out--I started, got to finish. My brother went to college but he dropped out. He was smart; he wanted to be a doctor. Now I have to be the role model (for younger sister still in high school)."

Christopher qualified to receive the State Lottery Scholarship based on an earned grade point average of 3.5 in his first semester and completion of twelve credits. He was admitted to Rio Grande University as a regular admit in the spring of 2003 and remained continuously enrolled until he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in the fall semester of 2007.

Participant 6: Jonathan

"Not really upset about being denied because I knew there was a back way to get in."

Eighteen-year-old Jonathan considered a military career when he graduated from high school. Both his father, a graduate of Rio Grande University and his mother, a college graduate, thought he should put off going into the military and consider going to college so that he could stay close to family. As a Border State high school graduate he would also qualify for the state's Lottery Scholarship if he completed twelve credits and received a 2.5 grade point average or higher during his first semester. At first Jonathan was unsure about the reasons he had to participate in The Student Success Program. "They sent a rejection letter saying I was not accepted to Rio Grande, sorry something like that, because I didn't score high enough on my ACT's, but then they put me through the transition program, so if you improve yourself. I was like, OK, I don't mind." He knew he was missing required credits from high school and was not concerned about it

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because in high school he had no solid plans to pursue college. "I didn't really know if I was going to go to college or not." He felt confident he could figure out a plan to be admitted to the Main Campus, "I knew there was a back way to get in and I knew taking the ACT that I wasn't going to get a good score-and even if there was no back door, in high school I learned how to do all the welding skills."

Jonathan qualified to receive the State Lottery Scholarship based on an earned grade point average of 4.0 in his first semester and completion of twelve credits. Admitted to Rio Grande University as a regular student in the subsequent spring semester of 2006, he declared a major in Criminal Justice and has continuously enrolled since then. In the fall of 2007, he earned a grade point average of 2.985 and in Spring 2008, a 2.0 causing the loss of the State Lottery Scholarship. In the fall of 2008, he earned a 2.814 grade point average.

Helen and Rose

Citing the need secure a stable financial future for their families, Helen and Rose entered Rio Grande University with an optimistic outlook for the future. Both believed they understood the strategies they would need to succeed particularly given the reality that they would have additional challenges involved with balancing school demands with raising their families. They each spoke of their husbands and extended family members who were committed to supporting their pursuit of a degree. Because they interviewed as participants for this study more than two years after their acceptance to Rio Grande University, they could reflect on the challenges they experienced. Their challenges surprisingly were not with balancing family and school, but with the administrative processes of college attendance. Their stress and frustration were the result of interactions

with the Office of Financial Aid, receiving academic advising and with challenges of course completion.

Participant 3: Helen

"I will be completely frank with you. I know several people who have dropped out simply because of their financial aid office. Almost every semester something happens where they have lost my FAFSA application, they don't know where it is. I have to do another one."

Helen entered Rio Grande University in the fall semester of 2001 at the age of twenty, five years after she dropped out of high school during her sophomore year. She said,

> I fell in with the wrong crowd and I got arrested twice for drinking under the age and for shoplifting. I was using drugs heavily. I was in honors junior classes and I was just skipping constantly. I was never going to class anyways. My parents were like, you can only drop out if you're home schooled. They home schooled me for a while, well, I home schooled myself for a while and I was like this is taking forever. I'll just get my GED, so I got it when I was eighteen. I actually preferred that to school. Because I am more motivated myself and the other students don't seem to be motivated and you have to wait for them and I was able to go at my own pace, which was pretty fast.

After she was married and had a child, Helen decided she would never reach financial security by working as a baker. Both Helen's parents held graduate degrees and they, and her husband encouraged her to apply for admission to college. She understood her provisional student status and eagerly enrolled in the courses needed for regular

admission. After completion of one semester in the Student Success Program, she transitioned to the Main Campus. Recalling the challenges of pursuing a degree, her courses and managing multiple priorities of family and study were not as difficult as dealing with the institutions' financial aid office. "I hate financial aid. I'm not gonna lie. If I was a violent person I would like to bomb it." Helen recalled that her experiences with the financial aid office were the only times she thought about dropping out "You have to jump through all these hoops and it's like I don't need this I have stress at home. I don't need to constantly prove myself every day. It's just, I understand completely why people drop out because who needs it, honestly who does?"

Helen did not attend college immediately following high school and therefore was not qualified to receive the State Lottery Scholarship. She earned a grade point average of 3.6 in her first semester (Fall 2001) and in the spring semester of 2002 transferred to Rio Grande University Main Campus. She remained continuously enrolled until she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in the fall semester of 2005.

Participant 5: Rose

"This semester was rough, this semester has been go to the two classes and I've dropped the two manage that stress. I've go to get back on track. It makes me realize, I think, it'd be nice to be single and maybe I would do this a little different because I would have time to focus on it but in all reality maybe I wouldn't. The fact that I have kids and I'm married is the reason that I do what I do; I can't say that I would have come back to school if things hadn't happened the way they have in my life."

When Rose began her sophomore year she informed her Mother that she wasn't going to go to high school anymore. "I was caught up with the wrong crowd; I was dating

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a guy that wasn't any good for me. I was thirteen, well, fourteen, freshman year, fourteen, fifteen, thought I knew it all. Just caught up in the wrong group. The first two years in high school I think I was gone more than I was there in class." To help her deal with negative peer pressures her mother helped her to figure out a plan so that she could work during the day and attend high school classes at night. She completed her high school requirements and graduated on time with her night school class. She applied to a college in her hometown and dropped out within the first three weeks of the semester. "I think I just was not pushy enough or not assertive enough to say, I need tutoring. I remember going to a tutoring center once and there wasn't really anybody in there. I walked in, waited around, and no one really said anything and I wasn't assertive enough to say hey I need help. I just kind of walked out and left, and said, well, whatever."

Rose decided to think about college at some future point in her life and decided to seek employment. She could only qualify for minimum wage level jobs however and she continued to live at home with her mother. She met her future husband at work and after being married felt life was finally "on track". When she and her husband decided to have children, they soon realized it would be difficult to raise a family on their current income. Rose decided it was time to return to college, "Just financial struggles because I decided to stay home and that put all the stress of finance on my husband and neither one of us had a college education, so we're not making very good pay." She applied to Rio Grande University in the Fall of 2003 and informed she qualified for provisional admission through the Student Success Program.

I thought it was a combination of not testing high in my math. I don't think my grade point average from high school was very high because my first two years

were really bad and I don't think that I got a high enough grade point average those last two years of high school to bring it back up to what the university accepted. I think it was a combination of these things but I'm not sure. I think I got put into the program because out of high school I attempted to attend another university full time and I didn't care if I went to class or not. I didn't officially withdraw and all my classes went to F's so I had a grade point average against me when I tried to come here and that counted against me and I needed to take the entry math or whatever the very first one is.

Rose completed her Student Success Program requirements and transitioned to the Main Campus in two semesters. Her husband is also pursuing a degree at the Branch Campus, and they have had another child since she started school. She has made academic progress but sometimes thinks about dropping out.

It's very easy for me to say I don't feel like going to class or it would be easy for me to stay home with the kids this week and then go whoa. I've had a couple of rough semesters. I wouldn't like the idea of putting my son in daycare but I had half a mind to move back because I feel like I have a job if I go back that is moderate pay and I would have more family support. I would have my family and his family, to help with the kids and if someone gets sick. I did, I had that thought.

Rose did not attend college immediately following high school and therefore was not qualified to receive State Lottery Scholarship. She earned a grade point average of 3.6 in her first semester (Fall 2003) and transferred to Rio Grande University as a regular admit in Spring 2004. She remained continuously enrolled, making progress toward a

Bachelor of Arts degree until Spring 2008 when she earned a .500 grade point average. She did not enroll in courses in the subsequent semester, Fall 2008.

Context: Learning Disabilities/Special Education[8]

Mike, Jorge, Lynn, Rogelio

Four of the participants shared their identification while in high school as learning disabled or "special ed" students. They described their classes at the secondary level as less challenging than their peers yet all graduated with college ready transcripts with the exception of missing required credits for entrance to Rio Grande University. In their interviews, these participants did not communicate any embarrassment or express concern about their identification as a student with learning challenges. Not one wanted to pursue receiving any disability accommodations because they wanted to see if they "could make it" in college without them.

Participant 1: Mike

I was in special ed all through high school so my classes were way easier than everybody else's.

After graduating from high school in 2002, Mike found he could only qualify for minimum wage jobs in hard labor positions. Two years later, he began to think about his future employment options and decided he would apply to college to learn a trade.

> I worked at a processing plant, worked in an onion shed; little jobs that were
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> going nowhere; minimum wage, things like that; I couldn't stand it. I want to go to
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> school because I don't want to end up like my dad. He broke his hip on a drilling

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[8] Four of the participants in the study entered college without disclosing to anyone that they had previously been diagnosed with a learning disability or had been tracked as a special education student at the secondary level.

rig and now he's disabled, he does yard work and he has a miserable life and he's always pissed off at his work and I don't want to be like that. I don't want to be him so I want to come to school. That way I have a net to fall on. That's why I came to school.

When he was accepted as a provisional student at Rio Grande University he was surprised to learn his family did not support his decision, "My mom was pissed off at me because she said I was coming to school just to party and screw around, which who doesn't, you know? My dad was mad because I was staying with them at the time and I was paying rent, a lot of the money they was getting was coming from me. My dad was extremely pissed off that he wasn't going to get that money no more."

When Mike was not admitted directly to the Rio Grande Main Campus he was confused, "My understanding is the only reason you have to do the Student Success Program is that you didn't take the honors classes." Mike thought he had taken all the right classes in high school and was proud that he had obtained a 4.0 grade point average in high school even though it was a "Special Ed" grade point average, "My grades, I was in Special Ed all through high school so my classes were way easier than everybody else's." Mike knew he could qualify for disability accommodations for his college classes but wanted to see how well he could do without that support.

Mike entered The Student Success Program in fall 2004 and completed his missing units from high school within two semesters but found his college math classes to be challenging,

I like to do math, I really like it, but I like the easy stuff. I don't like calculus, trig; all that other stuff means nothing. I really don't want to do it no more. The highest

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math class I took here at the Main Campus was Algebra. That was kind of hard for me even though I tested into that class. When I got to that class I sat there and I was like, what the hell. I don't understand this and I was going to fail that class so I dropped it and I went to the Branch and I took Pre-Algebra which is the exact same class but there's a few other parts of the math that they don't show you. When I went down to the level I passed it with a B and then I came back the next semester and I took Algebra again and I passed it with a C. That's the highest failed class on this campus.

These experiences in his math courses caused Mike to believe that he could not complete a college degree that would require upper level math. He decided to declare a vocational major and work towards completion of a two-year vocational/technical degree at the Branch Campus.

Mike did not attend college immediately following high school and therefore was not qualified to receive the State Lottery Scholarship. In fall semester of 2005 he earned a grade point average of 1.929 but completed the requirements to transition to the Main Campus in the spring semester of 2006. The following semester he decided to return to the Branch Campus and declared a vocational major. He continued enrollment at the Branch Campus until he received an Associate of Arts degree in Automotive Mechanics in the spring semester of 2007.

Participant 4: Jorge

"I've been in Special Ed like my while my whole entire life, like I want to be like the same as everyone, like just try, I don't want anyone to help me, I want to try things on my own, to see where I stand, so I didn't use any help."

As Jorge worked behind the counter at a local fast-food restaurant, he could not stop himself from thinking about going to college. He always wanted to be the first in his family to graduate even though he completed high school through a special education track and learning was challenging for him. He was determined to succeed. Three years after high school graduation he applied to Rio Grande University and was surprised when he did not qualify for regular admission. Admission to the Main Campus was a high priority for him so he decided he would adopt a good attitude toward starting his college career at the Branch Campus. His first semester was difficult. He struggled academically and although he could qualify for disability accommodations, decided he wanted to "make it on his own". Because he entered college more than one semester after his high school graduation, he was not qualified to receive the state Lottery Scholarship. Although he worked two jobs and attended classes he needed to find more resources to help pay for school. Jorge went to see if the Financial Aid office could help him, "I kind of got suckered into a loan that I thought was a grant. When I actually was told, that I asked did I have to pay back and it was no, no you don't. And I was like, OK. So, I ended up buying my car and buying a laptop, paying my rent, and extra bills and then like when the four years were up they said I had to pay everything back and I was like "WHAT!" He knew he would not be able to pay back the loan and afford tuition, so he decided to leave school and work out his financial difficulties. He intends to return to college when the debt is clear, and hopes that will happen next fall.

Jorge did attend college immediately following high school and therefore did not qualify to receive the State Lottery Scholarship. In his first semester of enrollment in Spring of 2002 he earned a grade point average below 2.0. The following semester, Fall

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2002 he earned a second grade point average below 2.0, which placed him on academic probation. He has not enrolled since the fall semester of 2002.

Participant 9: Lynn

Most people's image of college is what you see in the movies, it's all relaxed and laid back, it's like a fantasy in movies and stuff and when actually get in college you realize the reality of it. It's not as easy as that. It's really not as easy to get to classes; it's not as easy when you're actually in the classes. If you don't learn in your senior year to face reality, if you're having issues with facing reality you're not going to make it in college. It's like blunt reality."

When eighteen-year old Lynn graduated from high school and applied for admission to college she looked back on three extraordinary years in high school that held extreme personal challenges and knew that going to college would represent a new beginning for her. Citing family problems at home, she had difficulty expressing her feelings and difficulty relating to her fellow students, especially when she was angry. Expelled from school for bringing a deadly weapon to school, she was required to commit herself to a mental health facility. Once released she was not permitted to return to regular public school but assigned to an alternative high school for closer monitoring. She described her classification at this school as being a "special education" student due to her diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD):

> Everybody told me, my teachers and therapists, they said that I had ADD because even small classes if it gets too loud I can't concentrate and if it gets really bad to where I can't concentrate, if it gets severe I can actually go haywire. I know in my geometry class that I had a couple of instances where there was too much noise,

people talking when we were supposed to be working. I had to reread the problem five times.

Lynn was able to successfully complete her assigned coursework at the alternative high school but believed the course requirements were not as academically rigorous as regular high school and petitioned for re-admission to a different high school. Finally able to complete graduation requirements, she was ready to put the past behind her and looked forward to starting college and a new chapter in her life. As a child from a single parent low-income family, she believed attending college was the key to a better future. No one in her family completed a college degree although her mother attended and dropped out of college twenty-five years earlier. When Lynn received the letter denying admission to Rio Grande University, she did not understand the reasons for her provisional status:

What confused me is that when I applied at Rio Grande and they said that I was accepted, and then when I actually started they told me that I hadn't made it into Rio Grande Main Campus, that I had made it into the Student Success Program. I was like "wait", and I told them "I *was* accepted so what are you telling me now"? And they told me that you're either missing credits and you don't have enough credits or whatever or your grade point average is low or you're missing units as they call it. My grade point average was just fine. I was "BU" which is below units.

Lynn did not qualify to receive the State Lottery Scholarship due to an earned grade point average below the required 2.5 and failure to complete twelve credits. At the conclusion of the spring semester of 2006 Lynn was on academic probation after earning less than a 2.0 grade point average. She did not enroll in

courses again until the fall of 2008 when she completed three out of nine

attempted credits--ending the semester with a 1.829 grade point average.

Participant 8: Rogelio

"I was in Special Ed since 6th grade, 5th grade. But I think that's why they held me back.

They weren't actually challenging me because of my disability. I stutter a lot and there's

words I cannot say but if I take my time slowly I can do it. My writing, I'm not a good

speller, but I know my basics".

Rogelio attended his first day in his Freshman Orientation Course class three

weeks after the semester started due to a mix-up in the classroom for the course. When he

arrived at class on the first day he read a sign on the door indicating the room had moved

to a different building. He went to the class each day for the first three weeks and did not

know he was in the wrong class. Because the title of the course was "Special Education",

he thought he was in the right place. He recalled he became aware he was a "special ed"

student when he was in elementary school. In middle school and high school he knew his

classes were for "slower" students but felt as if he was improving in his ability to

complete his assignments and pass from the grade to grade. A slow reader, he believed

this was the reason for his special education placement. When he attended the class he

thought was the Freshman Orientation course and the class lectures focused on special

education he continued to attend believing it was the right class. He purchased the books

for the course, and attempted to understand the course content. He was naturally

embarrassed when his Orientation course instructor called him at home to find out why

he had not been attending his class. When asked about his understanding the reason for

his admission as a provisional student Rogelio also believed it was due to his learning

disability. He had no idea he was missing units from high school because he had

graduated from high school. When discussing his public school experiences he disclosed

both personal and academic challenges he faced and felt he overcame. He remembered he

decided he wanted to go to college while in the 6th grade as he became aware that his

mother was attending college without the support of her husband, Rogelio's stepfather.

"She had to work hidden, she had to go to school, hidden, and she had to do homework,

hidden." His mothers' persistence to pursue education in spite of her husbands'

disapproval made a significant impact on him. According to Rogelio, "He was not a nice

person to my mother or to me. He was a bad person himself; he was a really bad person

himself." On Fathers Day Rogelio witnessed his stepfathers' murder in the front yard at

the family home. Rogelio attributed these traumatic events with his inability to focus on

school and homework assignments. "I couldn't sleep for a year, take much care about

school."

Although he struggled with his classes because of his reading difficulties he

continued to work to improve and states he always wanted to go to college, "I didn't want

to live the same way she (mother) lived. I didn't want to live low-income; I want to live

more than average income. I'd rather push myself to the limit where I could be proud of

myself and I don't want to be lazy the rest of my life."

At the age of nineteen Rogelio dropped out of high school in his junior year and

attended a residential alternative school that used the principles of military discipline in

the classroom. Rogelio said,

> I think I learned more there in six months than I did in the whole time in public
>
> schools. They kept me focused, that's what it is, because you can't fall asleep. If

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you fall asleep, you do pushups. If they get tired of telling you to do pushups they make the whole class do pushups, running sprints, so the whole class would get on your butt. So more focused, I learned more like that. I think school should be like that, more military style.

When he was unable to graduate from the program by passing the Graduate Education Diploma examination, he returned home, applied for re-admission to high school, and was able to graduate with his class and applied for admission to Rio Grande University. Rogelio received the State Lottery Scholarship based on an earned grade point average of 2.6 in his first semester and completion of twelve credits. In the spring of 2006 however, his grade point average fell below 2.0 and continued to decline in subsequent semesters resulting in his placement on academic probation. This also resulted in the loss of the Lottery Scholarship. He has not enrolled since the spring semester of 2007.

Context: The Outliers[9]

Karmelita and Lamar

Two participants admitted to Rio Grande University on a provisional basis did not believe they were missing credits from high school and their individual narratives of their preparation for college were very different from the other participants in the study. I call them "The Outliers" because their experiences are "situated away from or classed differently from a main or related body", (Gladwell, 2008). Karmelita and Lamar each appeared to have completed courses in high school that would have deemed them regular admits to Rio Grande University.

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[9] The term "outlier" describes two participants who entered the university as provisional students and did not appear to fit the requirements for that classification.

Participant 6: Karmelita

"I have two [high school] graduations."

When Karmelita graduated from a high school in Mexico, her parents encouraged her to move to Border State so she could learn to speak English. She lived with family members to establish residency and found that she could qualify for the state Lottery Scholarship and financial aid if she attended a Border State High School. She enrolled in high school and focused on improving her English speaking and writing skills. Following her high school graduation she applied for admission and was told she needed to complete missing high school credits at the Branch Campus before achieving regular admission status. She really did not even know she was a participant in the Student Success Program. "I did not know. I just, when I came to register for Rio Grande in Fall 2003 they told me that what I need to learn there and for the ACT I had to take classes at Branch and that's why I know that I have to take." Karmelita was shocked to learn that her high school transcript indicated she needed classes because in fact she had taken the highest level math courses including calculus at her high school in Mexico, "I took algebra and the other I took trigonometry and third semester and the fourth semester beginning of calculus and the other one calculus."

Karmelita finds her coursework challenging, as she still needs to improve her English reading and writing skills, "I never practice my English because I have many friends that speak Spanish and I never practice." Karmelita has found the transition to the United States to be very difficult. She does not feel connected to the campus or the community and often feels homesick for her family and friends. She plans to complete her Bachelors degree and return to Mexico to work and pursue graduate school.

Karmelita qualified to receive the State Lottery Scholarship based on an earned grade point average of 4.0 and completion of twelve credits in her first semester, Fall 2003. She transferred to the Main Campus Rio Grande University as a regular admit in Fall 2004 and has remained continuously enrolled since then. As of spring 2008 semester, she is continuing to make progress toward earning a Bachelor of Arts degree.

Participant 3: Lamar

"I took a lot of CLEP (College Level Equivalency) tests when I was in high school so I had about 30 hours from CLEPS."

Twenty-four year old Lamar moved several times during his high school years because of his father's job. Lamar's father has a Masters degree and his mother completed some college level coursework but never earned a degree. Due to the re-location of his family, he received his secondary education at both out-of-country and out-of-state high schools. These transitions created a complicated high school transcript that was difficult to evaluate when he applied to Rio Grande University. While in his senior year of high school he successfully passed thirty hours of College Level Equivalency Placement (CLEP) tests. His college admissions file makes him appear to have completed one year of college when in fact he had never attended one day of class on a college campus. On paper he had earned credits equal to college sophomore standing, yet he still lacked the required courses for college admission. Lamar believed his placement in The Student Success Program in the Student Success Program was a mistake. "When they called and told me that they can only get you into the program I kind of cringed a little bit, oh man, all right, OK, that's alright, I'll take it." Recruited by the Athletics Department to Rio

Grande University with the offer of a scholarship, his primary motivation for attending college was to pursue a career in sports.

Lamar graduated from an out-of-state high school and therefore was not qualified to receive the State Lottery Scholarship. He earned a 3.0 grade point average in the first semester and transferred to Rio Grande University as a regular admit in the Spring 2006. Lamar did not make the Track Team and never competed as a scholarship athlete. He remained continuously enrolled until his graduation in the summer of 2007 when he received a Bachelors of Arts Degree in Accounting.

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Participant Narrative Conclusion

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These vignettes containing personal recollections of selected participants portray the diverse backgrounds of the provisional students in this study and underscore the extraordinary challenges some of them faced as they entered college. Even when set within a context of shared characteristics and experience such as being the first in their family to attend college or having been labeled a special education student, their family dynamics and pre-college educational experiences are unique. To further introduce the students, Part II of this chapter begins with a summary of their demographic characteristics and includes a graphic representation of social class markers that emerged during data analysis (Figure 2). While reviewing the interviews of participants in light of the four contexts described in Part I, an overarching theme of connection to the participants' social class emerged. As I connected their experiences to the income, race and education markers frequently found in the literature to define social class (Lareau & Conley, Eds., 2008; Thompson & Hickey, 2005), I identified the need to further describe the students using this social lens. A category named "Other Factors" was included to

present circumstances shared by the participants that may have social class consequences. Each of these factors influencing social class was merged in the graphic with the participants' academic outcomes of: 1) graduation; 2) continued enrollment: or 3) withdrawal from enrollment at Rio Grande University. Analysis of the social class of the participants is included in Chapter V.

Part II

Participant Demographics and Social Class Markers

In this section the demographics of the participants are summarized in Table 7 and in Figure 2 a graphic representation of their social class markers connects income, race/ethnicity, parental education and other factors to academic outcomes. First, the summary of demographics indicates the majority of participants (64%) were first generation students in higher education and 21 (95%) of the students were provisionally admitted to Rio Grande University due to missing one or more math credits. Of note in Figure 2 is the finding that 16 (72%) of the participants received a Pell Grant, which would indicate that they qualified for need-based financial aid according to federal government guidelines for low-income students.

Table 7.

Summary of Participant Demographics (Groups 1-3; N=22)

Category	Age at entry	Gender	Ethnicity	ACT	High school grade point average	First gen	Number of participants missing required credits
Totals/ Means	19.77	Female (8) Male (14)	Native American (1) Black (2) Hispanic (12) White (7)	17	3.06	14 64%	Math=21 English=11 Fine Arts=7 Social Science=7 Science=2 Fine Arts/Foreign Language=1

Source: Rio Grande University Student Records Database

Social Class Markers

Income Factors	Race/Ethnicity	Parental Education	Other Factors
Received Pell Grant	African American	Father College Graduate	Divorced Parents
	Hispanic	Mother College Graduate	Participants with Children
	Native American	Both Parents Have College Degree	Nontraditional Students
	White	Neither Parent High School Graduate	Student or Family Member Incarcerated or Detained in Rehabilitation Facility

Figure 2.

Participant Characteristics and Academic Outcomes

Legend:
*Red Circle: Graduated***:** C:Christopher; H:Helen; JL:Julio; JS:Joshua; KY:Kathy; L:Lamar; M:Mike; TM:Tim. *Green Circle: Enrolled*: D:Devona; JN:Jonathan; JR: Javier; KR:Karmelita.
Blue Circle: No longer enrolled: A:Amador; B:Benecio; E:Ewan; JA:Javier; JR:Jorge; KD:Kandalario; LY:Lynn; RG:Rogelio; RO:Rose; S:Selina; TF:Tiffany

Note: Income Marker: "Received a Pell Grant" defines participant as having financial need. Other Factors Marker: "Nontraditional student" denotes students who did not enter college immediately following completion of secondary schooling.

Part III

Participant Outcomes

The offering of provisional admissions status by Rio Grande University was intended to provide encouragement and academic support to applicants who lacked one admission requirement: high school coursework required by policy of the institution to be eligible for regular admission (Rio Grande University Undergraduate Catalog, 2000-2001). Given their application to Rio Grande University, the participants' intent was completion of a baccalaureate degree. Based upon meeting all other admissions requirements, the university's offering of an opportunity to participate in a program that allowed them to make up missing credits and enroll in a first-year student success course seemed a rational solution to provide a pathway for regular admission. Through this exploration of the experiences of provisionally admitted students I hoped to gain an understanding of the influences leading to their withdrawal, persistence or completion of their educational objectives.

At the conclusion of the Fall 2008 semester, university student records indicate outcomes for Groups 1-3[10] were:

A) 13 or 59% completed the requirements of the Student Success Program and transitioned to Main Campus as regularly admitted students.

B) 3 or 14% of participants have continuously enrolled each semester and are making progress toward a baccalaureate degree.

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[10] Groups 1-3: N=22

C) 8 or 36% participants have graduated with a certificate or degree[11].

D) 11 or 50% of participants withdrew from enrollment. 8 or 73% withdrew from the Branch Campus and 3 or 27% withdrew from the Main Campus.

E) 1 or .09% of participants withdrew voluntarily while in good academic standing; 9 or 82% withdrew voluntarily while on academic probation; 1 or .09% of participants is classified as involuntary withdrawal/suspension.

F) 3 or 27% of the participants who withdrew, stopped out, left for less than a year and re-enrolled. Two participants re-enrolled at Rio Grande University and the third enrolled at a community college in a different city in the state.

These outcomes are representative of the retention and completion of the entire cohort of provisional students admitted through the Student Success Program as found in a 2004 Rio Grande University report, "Evaluation of Student Success in the Student Success Program Entering Fall Semesters 2001-2003" (Rio Grande University, 2004). For the students who entered the Student Success Program in Fall 2001 and Fall 2002 the report declared a 45.7% attrition rate for the 348 students who were missing required credits for admission. The review of the programs' administrative procedures also identified potential barriers that might have influenced the provisional students' experience and decision to continue enrollment after completion of the first year. First, the students were unable to enroll in some of the courses they needed to satisfy the program requirements, as the courses were not available at the Branch Campus. The students enrolled in those courses on the Main Campus if seating was available. This

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[11] Six participants earned baccalaureate degrees; one participant earned a vocational Associate of Arts degree from the Branch Campus; and one participant earned a Vocational Certificate Program from the Branch Campus. (Rio Grande Student Records Database, 2008)

issue conflicted with the original intent of the program: to ensure students denied admission were not attending courses on the Main Campus. Another issue was a policy concerning the appropriate location for the taking of general education courses. Due to the students' intention to transition to the Main Campus, a requirement of the program blocked their enrollment in general education courses at the Branch Campus. This policy required them to enroll in these courses on either the Main Campus or satellite facilities of the Branch Campus. Of the 793 provisional students enrolled in Fall 2001, 2002 and 2003, 327 (41.2%), earned less than a 2.0 grade point average in the first semester, which placed them on an academic standing of "Warning". The students who were eligible to earn the State Lottery Scholarship also lost the opportunity to receive eight semesters of free tuition. The academic challenges of the provisional students and their attrition rates ultimately affected transition rates to the Main Campus. Only 54 (27.4%) of 197 program participants who entered in Fall 2001 and Fall 2002 completed the requirements for transfer to the Main Campus by the start of their second year. The report concluded the University needed to review the policies and procedures governing provisional admission and revise communication to the applicants so that it would: 1) clearly state the reasons for admission denial; and 2) define the steps to remedy academic preparation deficits.

The university responded to these findings by restructuring both the admissions policy for provisional students and the type of support programming students received. In 2004, the Faculty Senate approved a change to amend the admissions policy for applicants missing one credit. Applicant are admitted as provisional students if they are missing only one required high school unit and have earned a minimum high school grade point average of 2.50, and an ACT composite score of 20 (Rio Grande Catalog,

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2006). A second change was the development of a program on the Main Campus that permitted admission for students missing two or more credits through a program similar to the Student Success Program. This group of provisional applicants can opt for enrollment at the Main or Branch Campus. The students that elect enrollment at the Main Campus are required to enroll in a first-year, orientation program and attend advising sessions until they complete their credit deficits.

Table 8.

Overview of Participant Demographics and Academic Outcomes (N=22)

Participant	Entry Age	Ethnicity	First-gen	Academic outcomes Fall 2008	Academic outcome
Amador	19	Hispanic		Earned 1.143 GPA Fall 2001; 1.556 GPA Spring 2002,	Left on probation
Benecio	18	Hispanic	X	Earned 3.42 GPA Fall 2000; 1.518 GPA Fall 2007	Left on probation
Christopher	18	Black	X	Earned GPA 3.5 Fall 2002; Bachelor of Arts, Fall 2007	Graduated
Devona	19	Hispanic	X	Earned 4.0 Fall 2005; 3.485 GPA Fall 2008	Still enrolled
Ewan	18	White	X	Earned 3.76 GPA Fall 2005; 2.25 GPA Spring 2006;	Left in good standing
Helen	20	White		Earned 3.6 GPA Fall 2001; Bachelor of Arts, Fall 2005	Graduated
Javier	18	Hispanic	X	Earned 1.133 GPA Fall 2001; 1.609 GPA Fall 2002; 1.277 Fall 2003	Left on suspension
Jonathan	18	White		Earned 4.0 GPA Fall 2005; 2.81 GPA Fall 2008	Still enrolled

Note(s): GPA=Cumulative grade point average; First-gen=Students' parents do not hold baccalaureate or graduate degrees.

Table 8. continued

Overview of Participant Demographics and Academic Outcomes (N=22)

Participant	Entry Age	Ethnicity	First-gen	Academic outcomes Fall 2008	Academic outcome
Jorge	20	Hispanic	X	Earned 1.273 GPA Spring 2002; .778 GPA Fall 2002;	Left on probation
Joshua	19	Native American	X	Earned 2.6 Fall 2003; Bachelor of Science, Fall 2008	Graduated
Julio	21	Hispanic		Earned 2.96 Fall 2005; Vocational Certificate, Fall 2006	Graduated
Kandalario	18	Hispanic	X	Earned 2.077 GPA Fall 2002	Left in good standing
Karmelita	19	Hispanic		Earned 4.0 Fall 2003	Enrolled Fall 2008
Kathy	27	White		Earned 3.6 GPA Fall 2002; Bachelor of Science, Spring 2007	Graduated
Lamar	24	Black		Earned 3.0 GPA Fall 2005; Bachelor of Arts, Spring 2007	Graduated
Lynn	18	White	X	Earned 2.308 GPA Fall 2005; 1.829 GPA Fall 2008	Left on probation
Mike	20	White	X	Earned 1.929 Fall 2005; Associate of Applied Science, Spring 2007	Graduated

Table 8. continued

Overview of Participant Demographics and Academic Outcomes (N=22)

Participant	Entry Age	Ethnicity	First-gen	Academic outcomes Fall 2008	Academic outcome
Rogelio	20	Hispanic		Earned 2.6 GPA Fall 2005; 1.526 GPA Spring 2007	Left on probation
Rose	22	White	X	Earned 3.6 GPA Fall 2003; .500 GPA Spring 2008	Left on suspension
Selina	22	Hispanic	X	Earned 3.0 GPA Fall 2005; .666 GPA Spring 2008	Left on probation
Tiffany	19	Hispanic	X	Earned 1.600 GPA Fall 2005; .1.385 GPA Spring 2006	Left on suspension
Tim	18	White	X	Earned 3.0 Fall 2001; Bachelor of Science, Spring 2006	Graduated

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA: FINDINGS

Introduction

In the previous chapter, the introduction of the participants through use of "nested contexts", social class markers and academic outcomes produced an overarching context of social class and its potential influence on the experiences of the students as they entered higher education. The subject of the influence of social class has been largely unexplored in higher education research (Borrego, 2004), and there is considerable research and controversy concerning the social structure of "class" in the United States. Some theorists propose complex models with multiple class layers while others deny the social class systems and layers exist at all (Gilbert, 1998; Kingston, 2000). Most definitions of social class include categories or markers such as income, education, type of occupation, or membership in particular subcultures. Social theorists contend that being born into families at differing socio-economic levels results in either enhanced or diminished life opportunities that may proscribe the quality of their education and access to knowledge and experiences that can build a base of knowledge that helps to acquire social and economic benefits (Bourdieu, 1973; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). For the purposes of this study, social class is defined by the traditional income, race and education markers and includes other experiences of the participants including: having divorced parents, entering higher education as non-traditional students, or having experience with incarceration in a criminal justice or rehabilitation facility. Utilizing social class as a background context serves two critical purposes. First, in *Society in*

Focus, Thompson and Hickey emphasize the necessity of exploring class in order to make meaning of the participants' experiences:

> It is impossible to understand people's behavior...without the concept of social stratification, because class position has a pervasive influence on almost everything...the clothes we wear...the television shows we watch...the colors we paint our homes in and the names we give our pets... Our position in the social hierarchy affects our health, happiness, and even how long we will live (Thompson& Hickey, 2005).

Second, different types of knowledge and learning, skills and abilities are associated with an individuals' social class and acquired over a lifetime transform to various types of skill sets and abilities, providing access to various forms of *capital.* In addition to the economic capital that results from increasing educational levels and qualification for career positions with higher pay, the literature identifies two forms of capital that facilitate individuals' power to influence their circumstances, achieve goals, and enhances their life chances. Cultural capital acquired over individuals' lifetimes, refers to interpersonal skills, habits, manners, language abilities, educational credentials, and lifestyle preferences (Bourdieu, 1973). Closely aligned with the precepts of cultural capital, individuals' social capital is the sum of resources available to achieve social mobility (Coleman, 1990). Social resources begin to accumulate in childhood in the family where memberships and social networks transmit societal norms and values. Applying this concept of social capital to the class status of the participants in this study infers that the students who entered college at lower class levels may not be at a disadvantage if they have strong forms of social and cultural capital such as knowledge,

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skills and values transmitted by their families, as well as community connections and networks. Reflecting on the data analysis for this study, I conclude that the findings tell a story of the influence of social class and of the students' ability or inability to draw upon social and cultural capital as they entered college as provisional students in higher education. The following statements from Lynn's interview set the stage for the introduction of the study findings.

Lynn was presented in Chapter IV as one of the participants who described the challenges of having a learning disability in high school. She was also one of the students who experienced alternative secondary schooling and had the experience of commitment to a rehabilitation facility. In her participant interview, she spoke about her parents' divorce and her need to take care of her younger siblings while she was in high school because her mother worked two jobs to financially support the family.

> Some people actually hear about my life and feel sorry for me. I don't want people
>
> to feel sorry for me. I don't want pity. And because of financial issues, we don't
>
> have a lot of the things that a lot of people do. Most of my friends are all better off
>
> than I am. There's a little bit of tension because they have things that I've been
>
> trying to get for years and I still don't have them, and sometimes they feel sorry
>
> for me and I'm like no don't feel sorry for me. That's why a lot of people seem to
>
> like me is because I don't take things for granted. The only reason I talk about it is
>
> because I feel the compulsion to or because I want people to understand. It's not
>
> like I want to manipulate people into feeling sorry for me. For me to go to college
>
> and be successful and get a degree that would promote me getting a really good

career later on in life so I can help my family and turn things around and make

sure that my past also doesn't become my future (347-361).

Lynn's personal circumstances were unique, as were the narratives of each participant.

The common thread that connected the participants together, however, was their hope for

a better future that was well articulated by Lynn. Pursuit of a college education

represented the fulfillment of that hope. When the academic outcomes for this group of

provisional students indicated they had not succeeded, the research problem was

formulated. Discussed in this chapter are four findings that emerged in the exploration of

the influence of the experiences of provisional students on their persistence or withdrawal

from Rio Grande University:

1. Underprepared is More Than Missing Credits

2. The Perception of the Ability to Control Life Events and Outcomes

3. The Family Influences Students' Persistence

4. The Importance of Achieving Campus Membership

At the conclusion of the chapter, the "Outcomes Model of Rio Grande University

Provisional Students' Experiences" (Figure 3.), demonstrates the connection of these

categories to findings related to the students' persistence or departure from Rio Grande

University.[12]

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[12] The use of pseudonyms protects the identity of participants cited in this chapter. In text participant quotations noted as follows: Pseudonym, Group, Participant Number, Transcript page numbers, (e.g. Benecio, G3:P1 37-51).

Study Findings

Underprepared is More Than Missing Credits

The nexus between the three participant groups in this study was their denial of college admission based on missing credits from high school and their opportunity to achieve regular admission by making up deficits in their high school coursework. Using high school transcripts to align completion of secondary schooling requirements with college admissions requirements is the method used to determine eligibility for college admission. This study found the cohort of provisional students experienced different types of secondary schooling participants including attending alternative public schools, transitions between public and alternative schools, completion of home school programs, and receiving a General Education Diploma (GED) following withdrawal from high school. For the majority of participants this explains the reason they did not complete coursework required by Rio Grande University for admission.

The students who did not complete their requirements through a traditional public school were not surprised to learn they lacked qualifications for regular admission and were grateful for an opportunity to participate in a transition program. Notably, however, fifteen (65%) of the participants in this study attended traditional public high schools and completed high school graduation requirements. Table 9 presents a summary of the types of secondary completion of the participants.

Table 9.

Educational Preparation of Participants Prior to College Admission; Groups 1-3; N=22

Educational preparation prior to college entry	Total
Graduated from in-state public high school	17
Graduated from a home school program; Received GED	1
Attended home school program; public alternative school, public high school; received Graduation Education Diploma	1
Attended public school; received Graduation Education Diploma	1
Graduated from out-of state high school	1
Graduated from a United States Territory high school	1
Graduated from out-of the-country and an in-state high school	1
Attended alternative high school	3
Attended home school program	2

Source: Rio Grande University Student Records Database

The ACT college entrance scores for the cohort is further evidence of the students' lack of academic preparation. The score range for the participants[13] was 11-20 with a mean and median ACT composite score of 17, below Rio Grande's required ACT composite score of 20 for regular admission. The students' ACT scores were also below the national mean scores of students who did not complete a core-curriculum in high school; completion of four years of English and three years of mathematics (algebra and above), social sciences, and natural sciences. A national report summarizing the mean ACT scores of Non-Core Course Completers found the following composite scores for

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[13] ACT Scores (N=22)

students in this group: 19.5 in 2001, 19.2 in 2002, and 19.3 in 2003 (KRQE, 2003). The American College Testing Service contends completing a core-curriculum in high school produces higher ACT scores and predicts the probability of college persistence and graduation. Research confirms the efficacy of using the ACT score for these purposes (Astin, Korn & Green, 1987; Astin & Osegura, 2002).

The American College Testing Service published College Readiness Benchmarks in 2008 outlining a recommended core high school curriculum. This curriculum closely aligns with both Border State high school graduation requirements and Rio Grande University's course admissions requirements (Appendix Q). This alignment structure suggests one possible outcome might be a decrease in the numbers of students who are deficient in credits at the time of college admission. In following the admission trends of provisional students, however, applicants to Rio Grande University continued to fall below the requirements for regular admission on that basis:

Table 10.

Number of provisional applicants denied admission Fall 2004-Fall 2006

Semester	Number of Applicants
Fall 2004	261
Fall 2005	384
Fall 2006	184
Fall 2008	178

Source: Rio Grande University Student Records Database

Note: Data was not available for Fall 2007

Mathematics course deficiency

How the students participating in this study, the majority of which attended public school, completed high school without being required to take the core curriculum for admission to the state's land-grant institution remains an open question. A logical inference would be that they would have completed a proscribed curriculum that would permit college entrance as a choice following graduation. However, every participant in the study was deficient in math credits, and most of them were not aware they needed specific mathematics credits for admission. Lynn explains:

> What confused me is that when I applied at Rio Grande and they said that I was accepted and then when I actually started they told me that I hadn't made it into Rio Grande Main. I thought I was fine with Math but when I talked to a representative she said I would probably have to go to the Branch and take one math course. I was surprised. I thought I was fine. I took all of the math credits that I needed. I didn't know that you needed to reach a certain level in math in order to be a full time student at Rio Grande University (*Lynn, G1:P9: 47-51, 150-156).*

Of the seventeen students who attended public schools, not one recalled receiving information from academic advisors about the coursework needed for college admission. Claiming they were not told that advanced levels of math were required for college, they enrolled in general or vocational math courses such as secretarial, business, or trades math in place of the higher level algebra and geometry courses that would have yielded regular college admission. The participants also provided examples of their lack of achievement in math at the secondary level. Jonathan's statement, "I was just never good

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in math. I hated math, I can't do it", (G2:P6) reflected the sentiment of the majority of the participants. He struggled through his high school courses and still seemed to lack confidence in his mathematics ability. "I took some lower math classes and you have to have three math classes to pass. I took like Pre-Algebra, Algebra I, Part I, Algebra I, Part II, and Geometry Essentials. They got me through, but it wasn't like enough" *(208-211).*

Reflecting on the reasons they never developed sufficient math skills, two participants attributed their difficulty in math to the instruction they received in the public school system:

> I had this instructor, see this is the thing, there's no math or science here once you get past the 8th grade level. The teachers are incapable of teaching you I think. And when I was in my freshman year the guy had been there for thirty-seven years. Both math instructors left when I was a freshman. It was poorly taught (*Amador, G3:P2: 92-95, 107).*

Christopher was unsure about the reason for his placement in math courses below his ability:

> Ever since like, I was in eighth grade they kept putting me in lower math classes just because of grades or whatever. I was good in math. I don't know. They kept putting me in lower classes so by my senior year I was in geometry and I was supposed to be in Algebra II. I just went along with it" (*Christopher, G2:P2: 16-20).*

The finding concerning the math performance of the participants in high school has critical consequences as studies find there is a high correlation between completion of rigorous high school mathematics courses and baccalaureate degree completion. The

Adelman studies (1999, 2001) found that students who complete coursework beyond the level of Algebra II in high school earn college degrees at twice the rate of those who do not. The results of the students' underpreparation in mathematics underscore these findings.

Underpreparation, coupled with the students' negative attitudes towards math had an impact on their academic progress and continued enrollment. A review of the participants' math academic history at both the Branch and Main Campuses (Appendix "P", Math Background and College-Level Math Course Performance) indicated all but two of the participants continued to experience severe challenges to achieving passing course grades. Sixty-two percent of students earned D's, and F's, or withdrew from required mathematics courses before failing. This resulted in their requirement to repeat these courses and for some, prolonged the transition to the Main Campus. Failing math grades also affected the students' achievement of a sufficient grade point average to qualify for the State Lottery Scholarship in the first semester of enrollment.

Perception of admission denial

Although all of students in the Student Success Program received a letter denying their admission because of missing required credits, few could articulate the reason for their denial (Appendix A). Eleven participants (52%) from the three participant groups also reported having "no idea" they were missing required credits from high school. The participants believed graduation from high school was the only requirement needed to meet college admission requirements "They told me I had my math. That's one reason why I graduated because I had all my math" (*Tiffany, G1:P7: 82).*

Two participants, Lamar (G1) and Karmelita (G1), were adamant they were not missing credits and were confused about the requirement that they enter college through the Branch Campus. They had both taken college preparation courses in high school and applied for college admission fully confident they would have no difficulty being accepted. Their applications were evaluated, and they were classified as "below unit" students. Lamar's transcript indicated he had earned thirty college credits, making him a student at the sophomore level when he had never attended one day of college. Lamar attended several public high schools both in and out of the United States and while in high school earned college credit through the College Level Equivalency Program (CLEP). He was certain he had completed the math required for admission, but the Admissions Office evaluating his transcript concluded he was missing all required credits for admission. Lamar wanted to "walk-on" as a scholarship athlete and decided not to challenge the decision to place him in the Student Success Program because it might have affected the decision of the Athletics Department to allow him to try out.

Karmelita, a graduate of a high school in Mexico that focused on preparing students for careers in mathematics and the sciences also lacked credits. Following her graduation from high school she moved to the United States because her parents wanted her to learn to speak English and attend college in the United States. She attempted enrollment at a university in a neighboring state but could not pass the language entrance examination. She decided she could improve her English reading and writing skills by enrolling in high school in the United States. Living with relatives she attended a Border State High School, which also helped her to establish residency that enabled her to qualify for the State Lottery Scholarship. Following her second high school graduation,

she applied to Rio Grande University and was admitted through the Student Success Program, her transcript indicating she was missing required math credits. She did not believe the admissions office evaluated her international high school transcript from Mexico. Expressing confusion about her admission as a provisional student because of missing math credits, she said, "I thought it was English" (*Karmelita, G2:P6: 187-189).*

Three participants who attributed their failure to complete required credits to their "special education" status expressed the most striking misconception for placement in the program. When asked why he was denied admission Rogelio said, "Because I have a learning disability. I know I took all my classes" (*G1:P8: 335).* These students expressed the perception that their courses in high school were easier than "regular" high school classes and could have accounted for their admission denial:

> My grades, I was in special ed all through high school so my classes were way easier than everybody else's. If the English class, I couldn't take an English class in a regular class, I had to take it in a special ed class. My math class, I could take a Math class in a regular class because I could understand it. A science class I could take that in a regular classroom because I could understand it. If I don't like it, I don't understand it (*Mike, G2:P1: 246-260).*

Mike also made a statement in his interview that was very revealing concerning his preparation to learn and achieve at the college level. Placed in special education courses from the time he entered high school, and proudly declared that he graduated with a 4.0 grade point average. A few minutes later he followed his statement with a footnote, "It was a Special Ed 4.0" (*G2:P1: 246-248).*

The perspective of *who* was served through the Student Success Program shifted as interviews with the students revealed that two participants, Lamar and Karmelita, may have been mistakenly classified as provisional and the students did not understand the purpose reason for their admission denial or the requirements needed to gain regular admission. The remainder of the participants in the study believed their low American College Test (ACT) scores or having a low grade point average from high school was the cause. While the students held differing beliefs concerning their admission, actual missing credits at the secondary level resulted in students entering higher education with less than a rigorous preparation to perform at the college level.

The Perception of the Ability to Influence Life Events and Outcomes

Findings in the literature suggested the efficacy of investigating the influence of psychological factors on college student persistence and departure because these actions are behaviors, and all behavior is psychologically motivated (Bean & Bodgan Eaton, 2000). As found in the data, participants' actions and choices (behavior) leading to continued attendance or departure from Rio Grande University, were either attributed to their own effort or to events over which they had no control. The psychological construct of *locus of control*, a tenet of Social Learning Theory (Rotter, 1954) and Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1986), provided a conceptual lens for the coding of attributions made by the students. The locus of control construct describes the human perspective or belief about the reasons for positive or negative outcomes in their lives. An "internal locus of control" reflects individuals' belief that they can exercise intent and control events by utilizing their individual skills and aptitudes. Success or failure at given tasks are attributed to the actions of the individual. Individuals who believe that they have little

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control over the outcomes of their activities have an "external locus of control". These individuals attribute success and failure outcomes to environmental or situational factors such as luck or the level of ease of the task completed. According to the precepts of Social Learning Theory, the development of an internal *or* external locus of control is the result of observing others in the social environment and developing belief systems about behavior based on those observations. The students' social class and access to social capital would be factors to consider as potential influences as well.

Students exhibiting an internal locus of control expressed a belief in their ability to meet the challenges of provisional status and specifically indicated the actions they took to be successful. Rose, (G2: P9), attributed her success to her ability to ask for help when she needed it:

> I think the one thing that helped me get through that first semester that I was in the Freshman Orientation course was, I asked about tutoring and you referred me to the Tutoring Center and that saved my ass. I was really comfortable with her (tutor) and that helped me get through some of those classes. It set that time, I told my husband I am meeting her and it gave me that study time and it helped me separate home and school. I could walk away and say now I need this time. That helped *(397-404)*.

Rose, a nontraditional student who had attended and dropped out of college once before also demonstrated an understanding what students need to do to succeed, "I think that's what college is about, in a lot of ways, becoming assertive, learning to be independent and saying no" *(531-532)*.

Alternatively, the students who withdrew from the university from lack of academic progress, attributed their lack of success to outside forces such as: 1) inadequate academic preparation in high school due to poor instruction, 2) failure to receive college preparation information via academic advising; and 3) failure to receive academic advising concerning requirements of The Student Success Program. When they attributed their lack of success to themselves, they also referred to external events not tied to their academic ability. Reasons for withdrawing from the university included: 1) being homesick; 2) being immature and incapable of living alone; 3) "partying" too much; 4) needing to leave to provide financial assistance for family; and 5) lacking transportation to get to school. Javier's (G3:P3) angry expression about the reason he dropped out is a strong statement exemplifying the attribution of outcomes to external events:

> You know, we did [have high school counselors], but I did not get counseling worth a crap. I went in there cold turkey into college. The whole thing I guess was me, being like the first person going to college from my family. No one was helping me at all. I graduated with a great grade point average, and I could have easily gotten a scholarship but I didn't get one because I didn't know. When I was getting ready to graduate a couple of my friends were like, have you done any, I was like, no, and they were like, you should try; and I was like, I guess so. I think it all starts in the high school. I think if they would have helped me out a lot more in high school to get ready for college, I wouldn't have been in such a shock when I got to college (*297-382).*

When making the decision to ultimately withdraw from the university, the participants did not seek advice or counsel from university personnel and few discussed

the decision with their families. One participant made a final effort to pass a failing class by seeking tutoring assistance. When a tutor could not be located for his course, he believed further efforts would not be fruitful and gave up. He said, "I think about it, some people are good in college and other people aren't. I think I just had a lot of trouble, couldn't keep up and that was it for me." *Kandelario, G3:P2, 204-205*

Kandalario's statement is an expression of self-doubt and of his belief that additional attempts to succeed would not result in a positive outcome. This condition, described in the literature as the psychological state of learned helplessness (McKean, 1994; Wood, 1991, Seligman, 1975), develops as individuals attempt to control events and do not receive positive feedback or a positive outcome. A primary characteristic of learned helplessness is passivity as a response to feeling powerless over circumstances. The participants in this study, like all new students entering the college environment, have to learn to adapt if they are to be successful. There are policies and procedures of the institution to master and a new social environment of professors, university personnel, and peers with whom to interact. These transitions also include learning to learn at the college level, a daunting task even for the most prepared students. Designed to empower students in their new environment, universities offer a variety of first-year interventions to stem the transition into the new social and academic environments. For the provisional students in this study, the intervention was enrollment in a three-credit Freshman Success Course. Hoping to assist students to acquire college-level learning skills and introduce them to campus resources, the course offered support for the students. However, as the data suggest, some of the participants indicated they acquired skills in the course but did not apply them when necessary. Most of the students believed the first year course

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provided helpful information and overall was a valuable experience, but Amador's (G3:P2) statement, echoed by other participants, revealed the students did not apply what was learned: "The lady that taught the class, was awesome. She taught me how to study, all that stuff, so I gleaned it all from that class but, I never quite put it to use" (*56-58).*

The students who persisted to graduation offered a perspective on the efficacy of locus of control by stating the reasons they thought they had been able to succeed and complete their degrees. These students elaborated on their plans following graduation and characterized the college experience as a "means to an end":

> You know you go to college and if you don't have your eyes on the goal, it's a means to an end. You're not there to go to college; you're there to get a better job at the end when you graduate, to get a higher paying job (*Helen, G2:P3, 489-491).*

When challenged with passing a difficult math course, Helen chose to act in a way that provides an example of an appropriate attribution to persistence. Although extremely negative regarding her ability to succeed in an algebra course, she spent five hours a day in the math learning center receiving tutoring so that she could master the concepts needed to pass; thereby fulfilling a requirement for graduation. Participants like Helen who exhibited a defined internal locus of control present themselves as resilient and capable of adapting when faced with challenges. The participants with an internal locus of control persisted and met their goal of graduation. Those participants who perceived an inability to positively influence events and outcomes did not persist.

The influence of locus of control on student persistence and the relationship of their social class and levels of social capital is worthy of further exploration. Students

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may articulate an intent to succeed yet have deeper concerns about their ability to control the outcomes of their academic experiences such as effectively learning the content of their courses, achievement of good grades, and progress toward completion of degree requirements. The participants in this study with an external locus of control were not successful in passing their courses and failed to make academic progress. This resulted in their belief that further attendance and effort would not produce positive outcomes. This finding accurately describes the five participants who withdrew from attendance short of dismissal, while on academic probation.

The Family Influences the Students' Persistence

Family structure & turbulence

Findings in the literature strongly suggest that family structure and family turbulence are strong influences on a students' choice to attend, persist, or withdraw from university enrollment (Nybroten, 2003). Whether students grew up in a two-parent household (intact), versus a single-parent household (non-intact), family structure is a factor in patterns of attendance and completion in higher education. Seventeen participants reported membership in an intact family, and five were members of non-intact families with single-parent mothers as the family's sole provider. The family structure did not emerge as an influence on the percentage of students who succeeded in persisting in The Student Success Program. However, instances of family turbulence during adolescence interrupted high school attendance and completion, which affected timely completion of high school courses:

- Three participants described the incarceration of their parent as having a major effect on their ability to complete high school;

- Two students reported expulsion from public school for bringing a weapon to their high school campus

- One student described an oppressive family situation in which his mother secretly attended college because his stepfather did not approve of her pursuit of education. The same student witnessed the murder of his stepfather at the family home, an event that affected his ability to concentrate in school for several years.

Although most of the participants described life incidents that were less intense than cited above, it is not difficult to imagine how events in Kathy's life during high school affected her decision to drop out:

I didn't have a lot of parenting, I guess. At all really. I kind of just grew up. My Mom is a raging alcoholic, big time. We had this nice middle class family, whatever, but we could just do whatever we wanted. They sent me, it's like a rehab but they sent me there for behavior problems. But I think the root was my Mom, not me. I think she needed the help. I was really, really, bad; but I think it was the direct effect of my environment. The school had something to do with me going to rehab too. High school, 'cause I would never go, ever, never. *Kathy, G1: P4: 114-119*

Parent educational levels

Findings in the literature confirm the influence of the parents' educational level on success of students in higher education (Terenzini, et.al., 1996; Tym, McMillion, Barone & Webster, 2004). Students with parents who have not completed a college degree are labeled "first-generation", a status acknowledged in the literature as an influence on lower

degree completion rates (Komada, 2002; Terenzini et.al, 1996). Alternatively, students

with parents who have completed college degrees may have the advantage of receiving

knowledge about the values of higher education and support in navigating bureaucratic

systems that enable them to succeed. The influence of the education levels of their

parents emerged in all twenty-two interviews with the participants. Nine of the

participants had parents who completed baccalaureate degrees (seven participants with

one parent and two with both parents holding degrees). These students recalled believing

they would "go to college" from as early as elementary and middle school; college

attendance was an expectation, not an option. Their parents were able to assist them with

the college and financial application process, went with them to student orientation, and

encouraged them when they faced academic or administrative difficulties. As an

example, both of Helen's parents had graduate degrees, and she relied on their experience

and knowledge in order to learn more effectively in class:

> They (professors) assume that the students know what they know and obviously,
>
> we don't, that's why we're here. They don't put things in terms that lay people can
>
> understand. They just use words, they try to teach you intro to psych, and they use
>
> these words that you've never heard before because you're in an intro to psych
>
> class. I know a lot of my peers struggled with that. Luckily, I had these people at
>
> home that I could ask, what is this and what is that. So, I guess I had an advantage
>
> over the other students. It's hard (*Helen, G1:P3, 423-429).*

The participants with parents who held college degrees also had had siblings and

extended family who were currently attending college or had completed college degrees

and who served as support and role models for them. An interesting footnote to this

discussion is the finding the parents received their degrees after the participants were enrolled in high school or college.

The remaining fourteen (64%) of the participants who were first-generation students shared a different perspective of their families' educational experiences. Three students had siblings who dropped out of high school before graduation and five participants had parents who attended college but had also dropped out without completing a degree. Four participants had older siblings also enrolled at Rio Grande University but they did not credit them with providing guidance about how to deal with the challenges of the college experience. Overall, the first-generation students perceived support for attending college from their families. The concept of support, however, emerged in three distinctly different ways:

1. The family supported the decision to enter college and motivated the student to persist by providing encouragement.

2. The students were motivated to complete a college degree by focusing on a need to provide financial stability or a higher quality of life for themselves and their family (i.e. parents, spouses, children).

3. The family motivated the student to persist and succeed primarily because the family communicated to the student that they *could not* succeed in higher education.

These differing perspectives on family support portray the complexity of the families' influence on student retention. First, the encouragement to succeed emerged in the majority of the interviews and for one participant the "family" included an entire community. Joshua, a Native American, first-generation student who grew up attending reservation schools noted that only one other member of his tribe had attained a

bachelor's degree. He reflected on his responsibility not only to his parents but also to serve as a role model to children on his reservation. He considered dropping out of college several times but thought about the effect it could have on his community on the reservation. He said, "A lot of people support me, a lot, there's a lot of people support me. That's the reason I'm afraid of dropping out too. I don't want to disappoint them. A lot of people look up to me" (*Joshua, G1:P8: 660-662*).

Second, the students' desire to earn higher wages that would provide financial stability, and thus improve the socioeconomic status of their families was a primary motivator for students to complete their college degree. Lynn, (G1:P9), knew from an early age that college would represent a way out for her family. Her parents were divorced and the child support payments were not sufficient to support a family of four:

> For me to go to college and be successful and get a degree, that would promote me getting a really good career later on in life so I can help my family and turn things around and make sure that my past also doesn't become my future (*359-361*).

The students' desire to provide for their children also motivated their desire to succeed in college. All of the participants with children (N=4), cited being able to give their children, "more than they had" as the sole purpose to pursue education:

> I have a little boy too. That's another reason why I'm so dedicated to school. Just because of him. Yes, I want to provide him with the stuff he wants in the future. I don't want him to go through the same things I went through (*Tiffany, G1:P7, 498-501*).

The third concept related to family influence that emerged was the intense need expressed by several participants to "prove" to family members that they *could* succeed in college. Mike, (G1:P1), was the only first-generation student in the study who did not experience positive family support of his attendance in college:

> One of the things that keeps me going is you know, the ability to tell both of my parents, "I did it, and you said I couldn't." That's one of the things that keeps me going, you know, they have no faith, that's one of the things that keeps me going. I don't want to end up like my Dad, he broke his hip on a drilling rig, and now he's disabled. He has a miserable life, and he's always pissed off at his work; and I don't want to be like that. I don't want to be him; so I want to come to school (488-498).

> Ewan (G1:P3) and Devona (G1:P2) were participants that also didn't want to "end up" like other members of their families. Ewan, for example, was concerned he might repeat his father's experience by failing to earn a baccalaureate degree after completing all but one math course in college and Devona attributed her motivation to obtain a college degree to her need to distance herself from family and friends who had dropped out of high school. All three were teen mothers and only one obtained a GED, "I've learned from their mistakes. I've told myself that I don't want to end up like that" (*414-415*).

Participants attributed their motivation to enter and succeed and college to the influence of their family yet there was little evidence of drawing upon their support following admission or when they considered withdrawing from the university. Only one student from the group of students who dropped out discussed his decision to withdraw

from the university with his family, "I talked to my parents, they didn't want me to stop but they were like, you're really not doing that great so you'll only be wasting your time and your money" (*Javier, G2:P3, 120-121).*

Both students with parents who had completed a college education and first-generation students in the study cited family relationships as a strong motivator for attendance and persistence. However, the outcomes for the latter group were significantly different: 90% (N=10) of first-generation participants withdrew from enrollment at the Branch or Main Campus of Rio Grande University.

The Importance of Achieving Campus Membership

The literature review established the quality of the experiences of new students in the college environment as influential in their decision to persist or to leave their enrollment at an institution or to leave higher education altogether. The institutional culture, described by Vincent Tinto as a "maze", (1993, p.99), requires students to develop the self-reliance to overcome barriers to persistence during the process of learning to adapt to the organizational, physical/environmental, and social climates of their institution. For the majority of participants in this study who were first-generation, low-income working class students a high bar was set in terms of their ultimate incorporation into a new community. First, denied admission to the college of their choice, they experienced the transition from their home community to the Branch Campus. The majority of the students indicated confusion concerning their missing credits and once admitted through The Student Success Program, about taking courses at both the Main and Branch Campus to complete admission deficiencies. Coded as students with missing units and admitted through the Branch Campus, dealing with the

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administrative processes such as financial aid, housing and enrollment on the Main

Campus whose offices were within walking distance of the Branch location was

confusing. Academic advising was the only administrative function in which provisional

students participated at the Branch Campus. The program allowed participants to live in

on-campus housing, yet because of the tuition and fee differences between the Main and

Branch Campuses, were charged additional fees if they wanted to attend a university

sponsored event or utilize the campus Activity Center. Data analysis found the students'

challenges to persistence did not occur at the initial separation stage, but later, during

specific instances where transition and adaptation to the academic culture of the Main

Campus was required.

Despite the confusion about their status and the requirements to move to regular

admission, the students reported feeling positive about their initial enrollment at the

Branch Campus believing they received more individualized attention and the staff were

more personable because the Branch was "smaller" than Rio Grande Main Campus. Four

of the nontraditional participants reported feeling more comfortable with the older

returning student population at the Branch because they had more in common and shared

similar challenges such as working while attending school and having a family to

support. Participants also reported feeling more comfortable in the classrooms at the

Branch Campus where instructors knew them by name and had individual interactions

with them. Lynn's (G1) impressions of the differences between the Branch and Main

Campus represent a finding that a majority of the provisional students felt more

comfortable within the environment of the Branch Campus:

Yeah, it happened earlier on in the semester on the Main Campus. It was in the advising center and the financial aid center. They seemed to be rushed until you get them into their office and are one-on-one with them, then they are relaxed and they can concentrate on just what's going on. Like I call at the Branch and even their responses are different. At the Branch they sound happy and here they're like, hold on. I like that environment a little bit better. That's why I'm thinking about staying there for two years. The teachers actually do want to get involved with their students whereas at Rio Grande Main Campus the classes are so big it's hard for the professors to get involved with their students. The advisers told me this, and I found it to be true. At the Branch they actually, it's almost like a high school setting (*Lynn, G1:P9: 406-422*).

In contrast, the participants who ultimately transitioned to the Main Campus found it difficult to adapt to large lecture classrooms where they did not know their fellow classmates and the professor did not know their names. The challenge of learning technical/specialized vocabulary professors used in lecture, keeping up with the reading and homework assigned, and acquiring new skills for learning such as WebCT, (an online learning tool) were daunting for the participants. Beyond these types of learning challenges, the participants characterized the culture of the Main Campus as "tense" and "unfriendly". Kathy (G2), one of the participants who transitioned to the Main Campus after one semester believed students receive very different treatment on each of the campuses:

I would say that they are more professional at Rio Grande than at the Branch and that isn't always a good thing. It's more bureaucratic here it feels like. And people

don't seem to really care as much, but they have so many students to deal with.

Just even like with the department I go to get an add/drop slip, you know and

these people seem just miserable. Like one college, especially one department,

they're just mean there (*Kathy, G2:P5: 378-385, 391-395).*

A second comparison of the differences between the Main and Branch Campuses

was offered by Mike (G2:P1): "The Main Campus is all like, the Branch is one on one, to

me the Branch is your Special Ed of Main Campus. The Branch is one on one and the

Main Campus is, if you can't do it on your own, you're screwed" (*354-357).* Mike

transitioned to the Main Campus after one semester where he spent one semester and then

transferred back to the Branch Campus where he completed an Associate of Arts degree

in a vocational discipline.

The participants also relayed instances when they felt frustrated and angry about

the administrative policies and procedures on the Main Campus. Helen (G2) conveyed

her feelings about her experiences on particular office on campus with intensity. She

discussed her own experiences but also connects the withdrawal of other students she has

known to difficulties with the Office of Financial Aid:

I hate Rio Grande's financial aid. I'm not gonna lie. If I was a violent person I

would like to bomb it. It is so awful there. One semester they gave one thousand

more than I was supposed to get, and I have two kids so it was gone. They called

me back a couple of weeks later and said we gave you one-thousand more and

you need to pay it back or we're going to have to disenroll you. It's gone and I

had to borrow one thousand dollars from my parents. It was a clerical error. They,

honestly, I will be completely frank with you. I know several people who have

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dropped out of Rio Grande simply because of their financial aid office. Every semester, good grief, I am a senior, that's four years, tons of tons of semesters. Almost every semester something happens where they have lost my FAFSA application, they don't know where it is. I have to do another one (*Helen, G2:P3: 330-347).*

The participants provided other accounts of their experiences that resonated with Helen's experience with the Financial Aid Office. They also had difficulty with registering for courses and with advice received through their academic advisor. A consensus among the participants was a perception of the Main Campus as an adversary, with numerous barriers to overcome: "There is a system. I think it's sink or swim, there's definitely a system, it's sink or swim" (*Rose, G2:P4: 526).*

For the students who were *not* able to "swim" and ultimately withdrew from the university, the administrative challenges did not represent the "tipping point" for student departure. Their departure followed a series of unsuccessful attempts to maintain positive academic progress. University records indicated a steady decline in academic performance of nine of the ten students who left. Tinto describes this type of "leaving" as "involuntary"--the student intends to persist but fails to make positive academic progress resulting in academic probation, suspension, or the threat of dismissal from the university (1987). Only one student was in "good academic standing" at the time of departure.

This group of students never achieved "membership" in the academic community of the university. Their constant focus on "academic survival" left little time for engagement in other activities that might have supported their persistence.

Data analysis of the experiences of students who persisted or completed their educational goal of graduation presents a much different perspective on the transition to membership in the campus community. Asked if they ever "thought about dropping out of college" one participant said "Not an option. Because I have to finish; I can't put my mind in that area of dropping out--I started, got to finish" (*Christopher, G2:P2, 218-219*). The remainder of the participants affirmed thinking about leaving college as a possibility. The theme of "campus connection" emerged as an influence on student persistence, an indicator that the student effectively transitioned. These students talked about "finding a home" in an academic discipline or career, related incidents of support from caring professors, and engagement in activities outside of class such as participation in student clubs and meaningful on-campus employment, all examples of the symbolic capital attained through relationships social networks. These experiences contributed to the students' sense of belonging and identification as a participating member of the Rio Grande campus community. Joshua, a first-generation student, connected with the campus ROTC group in his first semester and not only found financial assistance through a monthly stipend, but also a group of fellow students who shared his interest in physical fitness and the prospect of service to country. He said, "In ROTC there's like core values, like never quit and stuff, and it's rock solid." A second student, Tim, attributed his persistence to interacting with faculty and staff that communicated a concern for his success, "I am in the college that will bend over backwards for you" (*G2:P7: 58).* Through developing relationships with faculty in his department, he became aware of opportunities to connect with other students in his college major. He joined a fraternity, and credited his experience as a member with teaching him discipline, etiquette and with

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how to maintain a positive attitude. He also valued the experiences the fraternity provided to participate in community service and leadership activities. He was very proud that his chapter elected him president of his fraternity. A second sub-theme that emerged was the self-confidence and pride students' relayed about their ability to succeed in the classroom. Academic success reinforced the students' sense of belonging and belief that they could complete the baccalaureate degree,

> I think I like got a taste of accomplishment or something, and I liked it because I hadn't really accomplished anything so I really haven't ever…and it's not even like oh I have to work, I can't go to school; school is my number one priority. I like succeeding I think. I don't know, I just like that feeling. Because if I took classes and got bad grades, like I like the accomplishment of getting good grades, and I'm still surprised that I've done this well (*Kathy, G2:P8: 509-515*.

Participants who persisted experienced similar personal and academic challenges as participants who left the university. However, a finding of this study was a connection they were able to develop with faculty, both in and outside of the classroom, as well as reported satisfaction with participation in campus employment and student activities. Through this type of positive engagement in the classroom and with others in the campus community, students are able to "incorporate" or "integrate" into the new environment. The literature describes integration as achievement a level of campus "membership", (Tinto, 2000). The students achieving membership persist in college at higher levels and become increasingly engaged in learning activities that take place both in and out of the classroom. Experiences that previously might have been barriers become challenges that provide opportunities for growth.

Finally, a connection exists between the students' transition to campus membership and the level of their perceived ability to control outcomes related to the college student experience. The students either perceived the campus climate as welcoming or as representative of challenges they could not overcome. The students with a high level of internal locus of control sought out helpful professors and staff or support resources while the students with lower level of locus of control attempted to work out challenges on their own or gave up altogether. The students' behavioral responses to their challenges were the result of their beliefs concerning their "fit" in the campus community.

Summary of Findings

The provisional students in this study entered college with deficits that characterized them as "at-risk" for baccalaureate degree completion: they were denied admission because they lacked high school credits, and thus, they were required to enroll at a community college and enroll in courses they did not complete at the secondary level. Four major findings addressed the problem statement of the study: Why did provisional students persist or depart from Rio Grande University? The first finding, *Underpreparation; Secondary Schooling,* provided a description of the diverse secondary schooling of the participants and revealed the participants experienced extremely challenging personal issues during their formative that years affected their secondary school experiences. Failure to receive instruction in pre-college mathematics courses and the students' attitudes toward the subject influenced college mathematics course placement and course completion rates. The majority of participants, 95%, reported lack of a rigorous preparation in mathematics or missing required math credits altogether.

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Missing credits is explainable for the two students who withdrew from high school and completed their requirements by passing General Education Diploma examination. The failure of students in secondary school settings to complete mathematics courses required for college access is perplexing particularly given the research connecting math to college persistence and completion in the predictive model of Clifford Adelman (2006).

The second finding, *Influence of Family*, differentiates between the concept of positive family "support", and the "influence" of family on student persistence. Students with parents who had degrees were positively motivated by immediate and extended family while some of the first-generation students experienced positive support and some derived motivation from wanting to prove themselves capable of succeeding in college. Family influence was a factor related to student persistence and departure of the participants, but this study did not find the degree or the extent of this influence on the students' decisions.

The *Perception of Ability to Control Outcomes*, the third finding, emerged as the result of analysis of the statement of the students relative to their beliefs concerning their ability to succeed. Students possessing an internal locus of control overcame academic challenges and succeeded more frequently than did students who attributed their inability to succeed to conditions and events outside of their control. From the analysis of the participants' attributions deemed expressive of an "external locus of control", the question emerged as to whether the students might be in a state of learned helplessness, believing they do not have the ability to influence positive academic outcomes.

The fourth and final finding of the *Achievement of Campus Membership* emerged as a critical factor in the students' persistence or departure. Provisional students in this

study experienced several transitions beginning with the separation from home and family to enter the Branch Campus. If the student completed the requirements to remove their provisional status, a second transition from the Branch Campus to Main Campus was required. Data analysis indicated that the separation from home and family community was not as challenging for the participants as were their experiences associated with the separation from Branch to Main Campus. The students who ultimately withdrew all did so from the Main Campus failing to achieve academic integration or incorporation into the campus community, evidenced by a steady decline in their academic performance. While academic challenges were also present for the persisting group, relationships with professors and engagement with campus employment and student organizations facilitated the transition to campus membership and subsequent achievement of their educational objectives.

A greater understanding of the persistence challenges for the participants emerges when connecting these four findings together and when adding the dimension of their social class markers. In Chapter IV a graphic representation identified the participants outcomes of persistence or withdrawal in terms of their income, race/ethnicity, and parents education. A category named "Other Factors" was included to describe experiences that may have social class consequences: divorced parents; nontraditional student status; participants with children; and the experience of incidents of incarceration in criminal justice or rehabilitation facility. Recognition of the influence of the students' social class experiences brings a focus to the value of the exploration of their family and personal lives prior to their college entrance and may lead to a greater understanding of challenges to their persistence in higher education. A visual representation, "Outcomes

Model of Rio Grande University Provisional Students' Experiences" depicts the findings

of the study in Figure 3.

Persistence/Educational Objectives Met
Stopout/departure

**Institutional/ Organizational
Climate Characteristics**
(Psychological Characteristics)

Positive Transition to
Membership in Campus Culture

**Institutional/ Organizational
Climate Characteristics**
(Psychological Characteristics)

Lack of Transition to Membership in
Campus Culture

Psychological Characteristics

Perception of *ability* to control
outcomes

Psychological Characteristics

Perception of *inability* to control
outcomes

Psychological Characteristics

Influence of Family

Family Turbulence

First-generation vs. non-first generation

Individual Characteristics

Secondary Underpreparation
(missing required credits for
admission; primarily coursework in
mathematics)

Influence of personal and family
experiences on high school completion

Social Class: Income, Race/Ethnicity,
Parental Education

Figure 3.

Outcomes Model of Rio Grande University Provisional Students' Experiences (2008)

Between Worlds

In a final phase of conceptual analysis, an overarching phenomenon of disconnection for each participant group emerged. Use of the metaphor, "between-worlds", identifies gaps in the provisional students' preparation for the college academic and social experience, and in their ability to develop the tools needed to gain campus membership once admitted.

Each participant was "between worlds" at some point in their journey as a provisional student. The students who opted to enroll as provisional students were considered "admitted students", but not "fully admitted", a source of confusion as they were required to identify themselves as Branch Campus students until successful completion of the coursework needed to transfer. The challenges they experienced in high school with learning math prolonged their transfer to the Main Campus and ability to make academic progress. The students eligible to earn the state Lottery Scholarship hoped they would meet the qualifications in their first semester. Of the thirteen eligible students, only seven qualified and in subsequent semesters four of the students lost the scholarship due to academic ineligibility. This lack of financial support and academic achievement widened the gap for many of the provisional students.

Some of them felt more at home in smaller classes and with the personal attention of staff at the community college and others expressed anger and discontent with their affiliation. The transition to college learning and navigating the systems of both campuses proved challenging especially for the students whose parents did not have college degrees. Perhaps the most significant barrier to the students' success was their own perception of their ability to successfully influence their environment to achieve

their goals. Traversing the transitions required of the participants in the study and in the total cohort of provisional students admitted to Rio Grande University was not an easy task, as evidenced by their outcomes.

Chapter VI presents the conclusions and implications of the study. From these conclusions, I identified potential areas of inquiry for future research and developed recommendations for the consideration of both secondary and higher education leaders to enhance the quality of the provisionally admitted students experience in higher education.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS

This study of the experiences of provisional students and their influence on persistence at a public university led me to the conclusion that the retention and graduation of students in higher education is an "ill-structured" problem as Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon used the term (2004). This type of problem has no single solution, and while multiple solutions seem apparent, when applied, they do not tend to bring a resolution to the problem (Kitchener, 1986). When administrators at Rio Grande University developed a supportive program for students who sought college admission but were one qualification short, their expectations of student success must have been high. The provisional admission offered as an opportunity for applicants to remedy deficits from secondary schooling and gain regular admission to the university seemed a reasonable solution to support the students desire to pursue higher education. The outcomes for the cohort of students in this study however indicated a different solution or set of solutions was needed to support them. The complexity of influences on student persistence identified in the literature review coupled with the unique life experiences of each student participant represented a rich territory for this qualitative inquiry.

Through the research design of this study, a key finding emerged, indicating that to understand the outcomes for provisional students at the university, an understanding of their pre-college preparation was essential. The exploration of participants' secondary schooling experiences revealed complex personal and family circumstances that influenced their underpreparation for the college experience. This inquiry also enhanced the researchers' understanding of the historical issues that led university administrators to

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develop The Student Success as a support structure for provisional students. Creation of The Student Success Program resolved the university's need to address a problem of "back-door" admissions, (denying admission and allowing students to enroll in courses on the campus to which they were denied). However, unintended challenges for students emerged as barriers to the students' success. The students' academic outcomes following participation in the program were unexpected: 1) students did not progress as well as anticipated and 2) a significant percentage of the students withdrew from the university. This was perplexing considering the applicants to Rio Grande University appeared sufficiently prepared for college with the exception of missing credits from secondary school. This study adds an important dimension to the analysis of the problem: the perspectives of the students via their own voices. The students' accounts of their experiences provided a lens through which to view the facets of their experiences relative to their persistence or departure. Ultimately, without understanding the complexity of the students' pre-college experiences and their perceptions of themselves as provisional students in higher education, it was difficult, if not impossible, for Rio Grande University to develop a program that would support their successful transition to regular admission and completion of a baccalaureate degree.

Four major findings emerged to address the research question of this study. Each finding raised additional research questions and gave me an opportunity to recommend courses of action that secondary and higher education leaders might consider to support the success of provisionally admitted students. The first finding in this study, student underpreparation, addresses the readiness of high school students to enter college with content and skills levels enabling them to build on the foundation of learning acquired in

secondary school. Rio Grande University's high school course requirements established a standard of quality for admission, but more importantly, they were in place to encourage the academic rigor now recognized as essential for success in college (Adelman, 1999). The participants who completed a traditional path to high school graduation were confused about their admissions denial and its relationship to courses they completed in high school. The participants cited lack of academic advising and insufficient communication about college preparation from high school counselors as potential reasons their transcripts were not college ready. However, no definitive categories emerged in the study to indicate what actually transpired at the high school level. The goal of a seamless transition between high school and college entrance is currently the focus of a larger discussion concerning access to college for all students. Organizations such as The American Association of State Colleges and Universities, The American Diploma Project and the Pathways to College Network seek to educate middle and high school students about the coursework required to effectively compete in the higher learning environment. These efforts are commendable, yet this study found students' continue to lack an understanding of what is required for college admission. Communication and collaboration among secondary and higher education leaders is required to enable a seamless transition between secondary school and the entrance to college and many state initiatives are in place to address this concern.

Although there was less confusion for the participants with nontraditional secondary schooling such as students who dropped out of high school and earned a GED, the assessment of the credit deficits presents a different type of challenge for admissions offices. Evaluating the pre-college preparation of these students has become more

challenging given the increasing numbers of students with nontraditional schooling and graduation credentials seeking admission to college. (American Council on Education, 2008). Students who receive their education through home schooling programs in the United States has also increased; up from 850,000 students in 1999 to 1.5 million students in 2007 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Another group of college entrants are the students whose secondary experiences include some form of alternative public schooling. Serving students considered "at-risk" for success in a traditional public high school, the numbers of alternative schools have increased in the United States but a review of research on their effectiveness reports, "there is still very little consistent, wide-ranging evidence of their effectiveness or even an understanding of their characteristics, (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 2.)

The finding that almost every participant was missing required math credits brings into focus a major piece of the departure puzzle. In "The Toolbox Revisited" (Adelman, 2006) the gap in mathematics achievement and its impact on college degree completion was plainly stated, "One step beyond Algebra 2 doubles the odds that you will earn a bachelor's degree." The participants' disclosure that they do not have a positive attitude about their ability to develop the skills needed to succeed in math revealed a perspective for consideration by educators at all levels. Although a conclusion may be that students who are "college-bound" receive advising to ensure their placement in math courses required for college admission, the participants in the study were missing credits in basic mathematics and pre-algebra courses. These were courses required for admission at the state's land-grant institution. In the final analysis of the alignment of secondary school as preparation for college, the discussion for leaders is more

comprehensive than alignment of courses and credits. The data indicated students in this study were in need of learning skills, content, and habits of mind as they entered the "higher learning" environment.

Related to the lack of preparation was the second finding concerning the critical influence of the educational background of the students parents. The majority of the students in the cohort were first-generation students in higher education; a status confers a higher risk for degree completion. Data analysis also identified the personal problems of students or their families as an influence on their school attendance, participation and achievement. Knowledge of the students' demographics and pertinent information concerning the influence of family provides an opportunity for strategic and appropriate interventions to support the students' success. Although no studies in the literature specifically addressed the influence of parents and families on students' motivation to achieve in high school or college, the participants all described the family relationship as holding some influence over their intention to pursue a degree in higher education. Participants described the influence of their family as "motivating" because they wanted to please them or avoid "turning out like them" but did not elaborate specifically about the depth or significance of their influence. An implication of the influence of family finding is the lack of knowledge concerning the degree of significance students place on the value of family support of their intention to pursue and enter college, and raises the question as to whether increased family engagement and integration into the high school or college environment would serve to positively impact student persistence.

The third and fourth findings of the study *The Perception of the Ability to Control Outcomes* and *Campus Membership* are related to the larger category of "psychological

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characteristics", which the literature review proffered as a "new frontier" in the exploration of student motivation, behavior, and achievement (Bean & Eaton, 2000). The provisional students' ability to adapt and control events in the new environment of the college campus has multiple implications for educational leaders. Developing an enhanced understanding of the psychological concepts that drive the acquisition and practice of the behaviors associated with persistence (e.g. attendance, asking for help, seeking resources, developing learning and study strategies) suggests a culture that values the "whole student".

For students to effectively gain campus membership, a greater understanding of their perception of the quality of their interactions with faculty, staff, and fellow students is required. Research on campus climate and organizational structure has found a wide array of factors that either facilitate transition or create barriers to student persistence (Berger, 2001, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Student perception is the centerpiece of these inquiries. The students with a defined internal locus of control appeared more resilient in dealing with the bureaucratic and academic challenges they encounter. Secondary leaders charged with preparing students for the higher education experience have an opportunity to begin an intentional process of helping students develop an internal locus of control and identify strategies that will promote a successful academic and social transition to the campus community. The challenge for higher education leaders is continuous self-assessment and improvement of the campus climate and administrative processes specifically as it concerns students the integration of "high-risk" or provisional students.

In summary, this study identified implications for both secondary and higher education leaders that have the potential to result in further exploration of the problem, policy changes, or the development of interventions for underprepared, provisional student populations. Specific recommendations for future practice for secondary and higher education providers are included in Table 11.

Table 11.

Recommendations for Future Practice for Pre-College and Higher Education Providers

Finding	Recommendations for pre-college education providers	Recommendations for higher education providers
Underprepared Added risk factors for college completion: a) nontraditional forms of secondary schooling b) first-generation student status	1) Evaluate systems used to track students' preparation for college to identify potential gaps in communication with students and their families concerning alignment of high school course and college admission requirements. 2) Assess students' mathematics self-efficacy and track high school math courses taken to identify need for additional academic support services; enhance awareness of impact of attitude on course performance and achievement. 3) Identify first-generation students and facilitate connection to pre-college programs/academic advising that provide information for students and families on the value of a college degree and the process to prepare.	1) Communicate course requirements for college admissions to: secondary school providers, students, and families. 2) Assess students' math self-efficacy. 3) Develop process to acquire information about the students' experiences at the secondary level. Review assessment of entering students' course preparation for placement in appropriate course levels. 4) Identify entering first-generation students and develop plan for intrusive offer of support services.

Table 11. (continued)

Finding	Recommendations for pre-college education providers	Recommendations for higher education providers
Family Influence	1) Assess current practices relative to parental and family involvement in students' educational and extra-curricular activities. 2) Explore relationship between family influence and student motivation and achievement. 3) Identify strategies to support students' intention to pursue higher education	1) Assess current practices and identify opportunities relative to parental and family involvement in students' educational and extra-curricular activities.
Perception of Ability to Control Outcomes	1) Provide self-assessment opportunities helping students to identify attributions and effects on motivation. 2) Develop strategies and materials to enhance students' knowledge and application of persistence behaviors.	1) Provide assessment opportunities to help students develop an understanding of locus of control and effects on motivation. 2) Inform faculty and campus community on attribution and connection to student persistence. 3) Integrate attribution content into learning strategy courses and The Freshman Orientation Course curriculum.

Table 11. (continued)

Finding	Recommendations for pre-college education providers	Recommendations for higher education providers
Campus Membership	1) Develop strategies, educational materials, and programs that prepare secondary students for transition to culture of higher education.	1) Evaluate content of communication sent when denying admission to applicants. 2) Provide intrusive academic support services until provisional status requirements completed. 3) Develop individualized academic support plan for each student that identifies campus resources and process to receive assistance for academic challenges. 4) Develop feedback mechanisms to identify academic and social challenges to student persistence. 5) Develop strategies to resolve students' administrative challenges or address unsatisfactory interactions with faculty and staff. Develop a culture that values student voice. 6) Develop strategies to identify students' interests that will engage students in the campus community (outside the classroom). 7) Develop procedures requiring students to meet with exit advisor when withdrawing from university enrollment.

Recommendations for Future Research

Ten areas for potential future research emerged through the process of data analysis and theory generation. Each of these areas has implications for the policy and practice of secondary and higher education leaders seeking to enhance the success of provisionally admitted and underprepared students.

1. Influence of Social Class; Influence of Social and Cultural Capital

   Students entering college with differing social class experiences experience the transition to higher education with differing levels of success. Exploring the pre-college family and educational experiences of entering college students could result in development of supportive university strategies yielding higher persistence and graduation rates. Recommended research areas include:

   A) Assessment of the influence of social class on college persistence and graduate.

   B) Identification of levels of social and cultural capital of students with differing social class levels

2. Secondary/College Alignment of Coursework and Skills

   A seamless transition between secondary school and higher education is possible with the alignment of course content and skills based testing before graduation or completion of high school curriculum. Recommended research areas include:

   A) Effectiveness of current curriculum alignment efforts in preparing students for academic success at the college level.

   B) Effectiveness of high school level competency based tests in assuring proper placement into college level courses.

   C) Recommendations by secondary leaders to higher education administration regarding college admissions requirements.

3.   Pre-College Academic Advising

High School counselors/academic advisors guide students' course taking and provide supportive information for college preparation. From the perspective of the participants, the lack of academic advising was a factor relative to their confusion about their college admission denial. Recommended research areas include:

A) Challenges of advising students for college preparation at secondary level.

B) Benefits of parental and familial involvement in the high school academic advising process.

4.   Pre-College Development of Persistence Behaviors

Due to the diverse secondary educational preparation of students, a study of the development of persistence behaviors before a student reaches higher education may provide insight into student needs when facing academic and personal challenges, "One area so desperately overlooked in persistence literature is the impact of psychosocial factors developed during the pre-college years (Nora, p.77, 2002). Recommended research areas include:

A) Analysis of students' attributions regarding their ability to overcome academic and personal challenges in college

B) Students' beliefs regarding experiences, training or education received at the pre-college level that facilitated their ability to succeed in college.

C) Learned helplessness characteristics of students who do not persist in college.

5.   Support of Students with Nontraditional Preparation

Increasing numbers of students with nontraditional preparation are entering higher education (alternative school, homeschooled, and GED graduates). Recommended research areas include:

A) Processes used to identify provisional students and interventions implemented to support their persistence.

B) Persistence challenges of students with nontraditional preparation for college.

6. Academic Models and First-generation Students

   Research confirms an added risk to college completion for first-generation students. However, provisional students who had family members with earned degrees also experienced challenges to persistence. Recommended research areas include:

   A) Academic models of high school and college students.

   B) Effective strategies to assist first-generation students transition to college.

7. Influence of Family and Significant Others

   Students attribute motivation and continued persistence to their families and significant others. Recommended research areas include:

   A) Significance of the influence of the students' attribution to their family as a motivator for their persistence.

   B) Outcomes of increasing involvement of the students' family at various stages of the students' transition to the campus culture.

8. Mathematics Self-Efficacy

   Students' self-efficacy with the subject of math represents a major barrier to persistence and college completion. Recommended research areas include:

   A) Improvement of students' attitude toward math and college level math performance.

   B) Outcomes of high school to college level alignment of math courses and content.

9. Transition to Campus Membership

   This study identified the "transition stage" as most challenging for provisional students Recommended research areas include:

A) Student perception of barriers to a satisfactory campus experience.

B) Analysis of experiences and interventions that support student transition to campus membership.

10.   Stopout versus Stayout

This study characterized three students as stopouts, finding they withdrew for less than a year before re-enrollment. In the reporting of attrition statistics, universities do not differentiate between student withdrawal and stopout. Further exploration of the stopout phenomena has the potential to identify students at-risk for this type of departure and to develop strategies to encourage students' return.

Final Thoughts

Rio Grande University developed an admissions policy and a program to encourage underprepared students to enroll and complete missing academic course requirements in order to facilitate the pursuit of their educational objectives in higher education. This was in keeping with the Land-Grant mission of the university, to hold open the doors allowing access and provide students with the opportunity to succeed. As I learned about the students' experiences through this qualitative inquiry, I gained a greater awareness of the complexity of higher education student retention and an appreciation for the inclusion of the students' perspective in seeking answers to the student departure puzzle.

Analysis of the overarching context of the participants social class proved particularly revealing and underscores the critical importance of what happens to students *before* college and how influential the past may be on what happens *after* they begin the higher education journey. Collectively through their narratives, the participants conveyed a story of personal challenge and hope for a better future. Taken together, their voices can

inform the practice of educational leaders and guide future exploration of the persistence

and departure of provisional students.

APPENDIX A

LETTER OF ADMISSION DENIAL FROM RIO GRANDE UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF ADMISSIONS

Dear Student:

Rio Grande University would like to thank you for applying for the Fall XXXX semester. Your admission file has been evaluated and the courses you completed in the area of: (Insert mathematics, social science, English, fine arts, foreign language) did not meet our main campus admission requirements, which are enclosed. However, you will be admitted to Rio Grande University main campus when you complete a college level (Insert subject) course.

This can be achieved through our Student Success Program offered at our Branch Campus. I am taking the liberty of forwarding your admission file to their admission office. They will in turn admit you to the Student Success Program and mail your letter of admission along with registration information.

The Rio Grande Branch Campus is located near the Rio Grande University main campus, which allows you the opportunity to participate in numerous aspects of university life including living in the residence halls and attending student activities.

Upon successful completion of your college course, we look forward to welcoming you to the main campus. At that time, your admission status will be changed to the RGU-main campus and you will meet with your main campus academic adviser to discuss your Bachelor degree program of study.

If I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact our office. Again we than you for your interest in RGU!

Sincerely,

Admissions Director

PS: I am enclosing an "Admission Appeal Procedures" information form for students ineligible for admission to our main campus.

APPENDIX B

LETTER TO APPLICANTS

APPLIED, DENIED, DID NOT ENROLL

September 17, 2005

Dear

I am writing to ask for your help in a research study I am conducting about college admission and what helps students to successfully complete a degree. As the Associate Director for the Learning Assistance Center at Rio Grande University and a doctoral student at UNM, I have worked with students who were offered admission through the Student Success Program at the Branch Campus for the past four years.

In reviewing Rio Grande University admissions files, I found that you applied to Rio Grande University between 2001 and 2005 and did not enroll as a student. I would like to interview you for my study. If you are willing to participate in an interview that will last from one to a maximum of two hours, I can compensate you for your time with a $10.00 gift certificate from Barnes & Noble Bookstore. You will also be entered into a drawing for an Apple iPod valued at approximately $200.00. The drawing will take place at 5:00 PM on Friday, December 16, 2005 and you will not need to be present to win.

We can arrange to meet my office or at a place and time that is convenient for you. I will only be interviewing ten individuals so if you are interested please contact me as soon as possible. I appreciate your consideration of this request. I hope by learning about your experiences I can assist future students entering the university to pursue their academic goals.

Sincerely,
Terry L. Cook, MA

APPENDIX C

SURVEY SENT TO APPLICANTS WHO ELECTED NOT TO ENROLL

Student Success Program Survey

May 2006

1.   What plans did you have or options did you consider after graduation from high
        school, GED or home education program? Check all that apply:

        1a θ   Community College

        1b θ   Four-year college

        1c θ   Vocational School

        1d θ   Work

        1e θ   Military

        1f θ   Other (Please explain)

2.   Describe how you felt when you found out you had been denied admission to Rio
        Grande University:

        2a θ   Understood the reason I was denied admission

        2b θ   Did not understand the reason I was denied

        2c θ   Unsatisfied with RGU's decision and offer to be admitted through the
                Student Success Program

        2d θ   Satisfied with RGU's decision and offer to be admitted through the
                Student Success Program

        2e θ   Other (Please Comment)

3.   How did your family (parents/significant others) feel when they found out you
        were denied admission to RGU? (Check all that apply)

        3a θ   Understood the reason I was denied admission

        3b θ   Did not understand the reason I was denied

        3c θ   Unsatisfied with RGU's decision and offer to be admitted through the
                Student Success Program

        3d θ   Satisfied with RGU's decision and offer to be admitted through the
                Student Success Program

        3e θ   Other (Please Comment)

4. You were denied admission to RGU based on not having completed courses and credits that RGU requires. Did you know you had not taken the required credits for admission?

4a q Yes

4b θ No

4c θ If Yes, did you know which classes you needed to take? (e.g. Math, English, Science, Fine Arts, Social Studies)

4d θ Do you know why you did not complete these courses?

5. Why did you decide not to enroll at RGU?

5a θ I decided to postpone going to college

5b θ I decided to attend a different college or university

5c θ I decided to go to work instead of going to college

5d θ Other (Please Comment)

6. What future plans do you have for education or training?

6a θ I am currently enrolled at a Community College

6b θ I am currently enrolled at RGU or a Branch of RGU

6c θ I am currently enrolled at a four-year college

6d θ I have decided to work and not attend college at the present time

6e θ I have enlisted in the military

6f θ Other (Please explain)

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE - PARTICIPANT GROUP ONE

Applied to Rio Grande University and Were Denied Admission;

Enrolled As Provisional Student through Student Success Program in Fall 2005

1. What plans/options were you considering following your graduation from high school?

2. Describe your reaction when you found out you had been denied admission to Rio Grande University?

3. How did your family react when they found out you had been denied admission to Rio Grande University?

4. Describe the experiences from high school that resulted in missing required credits for college admission.

5. How do you feel about the requirements you have to complete through the Student Success Program before you can transfer to Main Campus?

6. How is college different than you thought it would be?

7. Describe your experiences with the staff and administration at the Branch Campus.

8. Describe your experiences with the staff and administration at the Rio Grande University Main Campus?

9. Do you feel the information you are learning in The Freshman Orientation course has changed your beliefs about or attitude toward college?

10. Describe your feelings about continuing to pursue a college degree.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW GUIDE - PARTICIPANT GROUP TWO

Applied to Rio Grande University and Denied Admission (Spring 2001 -Spring 2005)

Enrolled Through Student Success Program and Persisted

1. Describe your reaction when you found out you had been denied admission?

2. How did your family react to the denial of your admission?

3. How do you feel about the requirements you have to complete through the Student Success Program before you can transfer to Main Campus?

4. Describe your experiences with the staff and administrators at the Branch Community College?

5. Describe your experiences with the administration and staff at the Main Campus?

6. Do you feel your experience in The Freshman Orientation course has affected your attitude about college?

7. How do you feel about your ability to solve problems and make decisions about your university experience?

8. Have you joined a group or become involved in student activities and organizations since you came to college?

9. Where did you live?

10. How did you handle the pressures and stress of college enrollment?

11. Did your status as a provisional student affect you in any way

12. Did you enter college with the intent to complete a degree?

13. What courses did you complete?

14. What did you think college would be like?

15. Did you think about your first semester as time to check out college to see if it was a good choice or decision?

16.   What other choices did you consider for education or employment other than attending Rio Grande University?

17.   What other choices did you consider along with college before your entry?

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW GUIDE - PARTICIPANT GROUP THREE

Applied to Rio Grande University and Denied Admission (Spring 2001-Spring 2005)

Enrolled through Student Success Program and Departed

1. Why did you withdraw from Rio Grande University (Main or Branch)?

2. Do you expect to return to Rio Grande University? Any other institution of higher education?

3. When did you first think about leaving?

4. When did you actually leave?

5. Did you talk with anyone about your thoughts about withdrawal? What was their reaction?

6. How do you feel about your decision?

7. What have you been doing since you left?

8. What did you think college would be like?

9. Did you make any efforts to get involved with campus activities? What social activities or organizations did you participate in? What efforts did you make to participate?

10. Where did you live while attending school?

11. Describe your experiences with the administrative offices of either the Branch or Main Campus (e.g. Admissions, Financial Aid, Registrars, College Deans Offices, College Advisors).

12. College was like…………………….

APPENDIX G

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

"A Grounded Theory Study of the Experiences of Provisional Students at a

Four-Year Public Land-Grant University"

RESEARCHER:
Terry L. Cook, Associate Director, Learning Assistance Center
Rio Grande University   (505) 646-3136

DESCRIPTION
My name is Terry L. Cook and I am a student at the University New Mexico in a doctoral studies program for Educational Leadership. I am conducting research for my dissertation, under the supervision of Dr. Carolyn Wood. You are invited to participate in a study of students who have been either 1) been denied admission and offered provisional admission to Rio Grande University and chose not to enroll or 2) been denied admission and who chose to participate in the Student Success Program (SSP) by enrolling at the Branch Campus. I hope to learn about which attitudes, beliefs and experiences about provisional admission affected applicants decisions to enroll or not and what characteristics of students affected their decision to continue enrollment, stopout or leave Rio Grande University or the Dona Branch Community College. You were selected as a possible participant for this study because you were denied admission to Rio Grande University and to enroll or not to enroll in The Student Success Program. If you decide to participate, I will audiotape our individual meeting or use the notes from our meeting in my research results.

RISKS AND BENEFITS
Some of the questions asked during the interview may be of a personal nature or cause some emotional discomfort. You may choose not to answer or respond to any of the questions posed by the Researcher in the interview. There are no specific benefits to you personally for participation in this study. You may elect to receive a copy of the final research paper and will be informed of any changes that occur with the Student Success Program as a result of your participation in this study.

During the interview an audiotape will be used to assist me in remembering exactly what you say and I will take notes on your comments. These tapes will remain confidential and will be accessible to no one but the researcher. In fact, any information obtained in connection with this study, that can be identified with you, will be coded in such a way that you will not be identifiable in any reports that emanate from this study. The audiotape will be destroyed prior to or, within 7 years, which will allow time for publication, public discussion and rebuttal.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF PARTICIPATION
If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to stop participation at any time with no penalty to you. If you decide to participate, you may discontinue at a later date without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise qualified.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Any information obtained about you from the research including answers to questionnaires, or personal and academic history, will be kept strictly confidential. The information you give will not be shared with anyone with your name attached. Any information obtained in connection with this study, that can be identified with you, will be coded in such a way that you will not be identifiable in any reports that emanate from this study. The audiotapes and notes will be destroyed prior to or within 7 years, which will allow time for publication, public discussion and rebuttal.

NEW INFORMATION
Any new information obtained during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to continue participation in the study will be provided to you.

SIGNATURE
Your signature below means that you have freely agreed to participate in this research study. You should consent only if you have read the previous or it has been read to you and you understand its contents. If you have any questions pertaining to the research or your rights as a research subject you may contact Terry L. Cook at (505) 646-3136 or supervising faculty at the University of New Mexico, at (505) 277-3925. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Office of the Vice Provost for Research at (505) 646-2481.

_____
DATE   SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

_____
DATE   SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

APPENDIX H

LETTER TO GROUP 1 PARTICIPANTS

APPLIED AND CURRENTLY ENROLLED

Dear

I am writing to ask for your help in a research study I am conducting about college admission and what helps students to successfully complete a degree. As the Associate Director for the Learning Assistance Center at Rio Grande University and a doctoral student at UNM, I have worked with students who were offered admission through the Student Success Program (SSP) at the Branch Campus.

In reviewing admissions files I found that you applied to Rio Grande University between 2001 and 2005 and enrolled as a student at the Branch Campus to complete credits that would enable you to transfer to the Main Campus of Rio Grande University. Through my research I have learned that over 50% of the students in the SSP are no longer pursuing a degree at Rio Grande University. I have selected you as a possible participant because you are still enrolled and you completed The Freshman Student Success Course. I would like to know more about what you have done to be a successful student and interview you for my study.

If you are willing to participate in an interview that will last from one to a maximum of two hours, I can compensate you for your time with a $10.00 gift certificate from Barnes & Noble Bookstore. You will also be entered into a drawing for an Apple iPod valued at approximately $200.00. The drawing will take place at 5:00 PM on Friday, December 16, 2005 and you will not need to be present to win. If you have any questions or would like to participate, please contact me. We can arrange to meet my office or at a place and time that is convenient for you. I appreciate your consideration of this request. I hope by learning about your experience I can assist other students as they enter the university to pursue their academic goals.

Sincerely,

Terry L. Cook, MA

APPENDIX I

FLYER GIVEN TO GROUP 1 & 2 PARTICIPANTS

CURRENTLY ENROLLED

FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDENT SUCCESS PROGRAM STUDY:

Enter in a drawing to win this iPod mini. Win the 6GB (super) model in a kicked-up color!!!
Only 40 Participants will enter the drawing!

Features
*   Enjoy long battery life: Up to 18 hours on a single charge(1)
*   <u>Auto-sync</u> your music and <u>podcasts</u> with iTunes 4.9
*   Charge and sync via one simple USB 2.0 connection
*   Wear or carry up to 1,500 songs
*   Use iPod mini with Mac OS X or Windows 2000/XP
*   Find songs fast with the Apple Click Wheel
*   Play MP3, AAC, Audible and Apple Lossless files
*   Walk, jog or work out with up to 25 minutes of skip protection
*   Store files along with your music
*   Remind yourself with Text Notes
*   Play games on the go
*   Stay organized with contacts, calendars and to-do lists
*   <u>iTunes 4.9</u> supports podcasting, listen to radio shows on your iPod

AND

Receive a $10.00 Gift Certificate from
BARNES&NOBLE

APPENDIX J

LETTER TO GROUP 3 PARTICIPANTS

APPLIED, ENROLLED AND WITHDREW

Dear

I am writing to ask for your help in a research study I am conducting about college admission and what helps students to successfully complete a degree. As the Associate Director for the Center for Learning Assistance at Rio Grande University and a doctoral student at UNM, I have worked with students who were offered admission through the Student Success Program at the Branch Campus. In reviewing admissions files I found that you applied to Rio Grande University between 2001 and 2005 and enrolled as a student at the Branch Campus to complete credits that would enable you to transfer to the Main Campus of Rio Grande University. Through my research I have learned that you are no longer pursuing a degree at Rio Grande University.

I have selected you as a possible participant because you completed The Freshman Orientation course. I would like to know more about your experiences as a student in high school and at Rio Grande University and interview you for my study. If you are willing to participate in an interview that will last from one to a maximum of two hours, I can compensate you for your time with a $10.00 gift certificate from Barnes & Noble Bookstore. You will also be entered into a drawing for an Apple iPod valued at approximately $200.00. The drawing will take place at 5:00 PM on Friday, December 16, 2005 and you will not need to be present to win. I am only interviewing a total of 40 participants for this study. If you have any questions or would like to participate please contact me. We can arrange to meet my office or at a place and time that is convenient for you. I appreciate your consideration of this request. I hope by learning about your experience I can assist other students as they enter the university to pursue their academic goals.

Sincerely,

Terry L. Cook, MA

APPENDIX K

DOCUMENT CLASSIFICATION CATEGORIES

Classification	Category	Number in document category analyzed
A	Rio Grande Main Campus Internal Committee Reports and Memorandums regarding Student Success Program	5
B	Reports and memorandums documenting students denied admission due to missing units from high school	13
C	Documents that communicate program requirements to qualified applicants to Rio Grande (e.g. University Catalog, Letters from Admissions; Information Brochures; Newspaper releases; Web pages	7
D	Institutional Research Reports	5
E	Informal Correspondence from staff with knowledge and direct experience with student population	4
F	Newspaper articles--high school preparation for college admission	3
G	State Government Documents (Policies & Regulations; Meeting Minutes)	6
H	External Reports: Analysis of state high school preparation	1
Total		44

APPENDIX L

DOCUMENT REVIEW FORM

Title or Description of Document	Document No.
Education	
Date of Document	
Event or Contact with which document is associated	
Significance or importance of document (Main Issues or Themes)	
Summary of Contents: Salient, interesting, illuminating, important. Perception of what information may be missing from document	
What new questions occurred during or after review?	
Type of Document:	

APPENDIX M

DEMOGRAPHIC TABLES:

PARTICIPANT GROUP ONE: APPLIED; DENIED ADMISSION;

INTERVIEWED IN FIRST SEMESTER OF ATTENDANCE; FALL 2005

Participants Group 1	Gender	Entry age	Ethnicity	First generation	College preparation	ACT composite score	High school GPA	Missing credits
Devona	Female	19	Hispanic	X	Attended public high school; GED graduate 2004	21	2.57	3.5 Math 3.5 English 2.5 Soc Sci .5 FiA/FrLng
Ewan	Male	18	White	X	Home Schooled; In-state graduate; 2005	27	2.65	2 Math
Jonathan	Male	18	White	-	In-state graduate 2005	12	3.39	1 Math 1 FiA/FgLng
Julio	Male	21	Hispanic	-	In-state graduate 2002	16	2.70	2 Math 1 FiA/FrLng
Lamar	Male	24	Black	-	Out-of-State Graduate; 1999	19	2.50	Missing all required credits
Lynn	Female		White	X	Attended public high school; Alternative public high school; In-state graduate 2005	21	2.23	3 Math

Participants Group 1	Gender	Entry age	Ethnicity	First generation	College preparation	ACT composite score	High school GPA	Missing credits
Rogelio	Male	20	Hispanic	-	Alternative High School In-state graduate 2005	11	2.51	2 Math 1 Eng 2 FiA/FgLng
Selina	Female	22	Hispanic	X	Territory of the United States graduate; 2001	14	3.22	1 Math 1 English 1 Soc Sci
Tiffany	Female	19	Hispanic	X	In-state graduate 2005	12	2.22	3 Math 1 Soc Sci 1 FiA/FgLng
Total Group N=9	M=5 F=4	Mean Age 19.88	Black=1 Hispanic=5 White=3	First Generation N=5 55%	High School Graduates=8 GED=1	Mean ACT Composite 17	Mean High School GPA 2.667	Number in study missing credits Math=9 English=4 Soc Sci=5 FiA/FgLng=7

APPENDIX N

DEMOGRAPHIC TABLES:

PARTICIPANT GROUP TWO: ENTERED RIO GRANDE UNIVERSITY

BETWEEN FALL 2001 AND SPRING 2005 THROUGH STUDENT SUCCESS

PROGRAM; PERSISTED

Participants Group 2	Gender	Age Entry date	Ethnicity	First Generation	College preparation	ACT composite Score	High school GPA	Missing units
Mike	Male	20 Fall 2004	White	X	In-state graduate 2002	16	3.72	2 Math 1 Soc Sci 1 FiA
Christopher	Male	18 Fall 2002	Black	X	In-state graduate 2002	18	2.76	1.5 Math .5 Engl
Helen	Female	20 Fall 2001	Hispanic	-	Home School GED 1999	19	None	Missing all credits
Rose	Female	22 Fall 2003	White	X	In-state graduate 2001 Previous college enrollment	None	2.73	1 Math 1 FiA
Kathy	Female	27 Fall 2002	White	-	Home School Alternative School GED 1992	19	2.70	2 Math/1 FiA/FrLg
Karmelita	Female	19 Fall 2003	Hispanic	-	Out of Country and In-state graduate 2003	14	3.95	3 Math/3 English

Participants Group 2	Gender	Age Entry date	Ethnicity	First Generation	College preparation	ACT composite Score	High school GPA	Missing units
Tim	Male	18 Fall 2001	White	X	In-state graduate 2001	17	2.70	.5 Math .5 English 1 FiA
Joshua	Male	19 Fall 2003	Native American	X	In-state graduate 2003	17	3.33	1 Math 1 FiA
Total Group N=8	M=4 F=4	Mean Age 20.37	Black=1 Hispanic=2 NatAmer=1 White=4	FirstGen N=5 62%	High School Graduates=6 GED=2	Mean ACT Composite 17	Mean High School GPA 3.127	Missing credits Math=8 English=4 Soc Sci=2 FiA=6 FiA/FgLng=1

APPENDIX O

DEMOGRAPHIC TABLES:

PARTICIPANT GROUP THREE: ENTERED RIO GRANDE UNIVERSITY IN

FALL 2005 THROUGH STUDENT SUCCESS PROGRAM; DEPARTED

Participants Group 3	Educational preparation	Entry Age	Gender	Ethnicity	ACT	High school GPA	First Gen	Missing credits	Semesters prior to leaving	Academic standing at departure
Benecio	Alternative high school In-state graduate	Fall 2000 19	Male	Hispanic	21	2.503	X	2.5 Engl 1 Science	5	Good
Amador	In-state graduate	Fall 2001 18	Male	Hispanic	17	2.87	-	2 Math	2	Probation
Javier	In-state graduate	Fall 2001 18	Male	Hispanic	13	2.98	X	1 Math	5	Good
Jorge	In-state graduate	Spring 2002 20	Male	Hispanic	14	2.416	X	3 Math 4 Engl 2 Science 1 FiArts	2	Probation
Kandelario	In-state graduate	Fall 2002 18	Male	Hispanic	19	2.946	X	2 Math 5 Engl	2	Good
Total Group N=5	In-State Graduate 5	Mean Age 19	M=5 F=0	Hispanic=5 100%	Mean ACT 16.8	Mean High School GPA 2.743	First Gen=4 80%	Math=4 English=3 Science=2 FiArts=1	Mean 3	Standing Good: 3 Probation: 2

APPENDIX P

MATH BACKGROUND AND COLLEGE-LEVEL

MATH COURSE PERFORMANCE

Group 1	Missing math credits	Math ACT Score	Math course performance		Enrollment status	Attribution regarding math ability
Ewan	1	18	Fall 2005-Algebra Skills Spring 2006-Algebra Skills Repeat Fall 2006-Algebra Skills Repeat	W W W	Withdrew; Last enrollment Fall 2006	Negative
Devona	.5	19	Fall 2005-Elementary Math I Spring 2006-Elementary Math II Fall 2006-Intermediate Algebra	A A F	Enrolled Fall 2008	Positive
Lamar	3	19	Fall 2005-Intermediate Algebra Spring 2006-Calculus for Biological and Management Sciences	C C	Bachelors of Arts Summer 2007	Positive
Selina	3	01	Fall 2005-Pre-Algebra Spring 2006-Algebra Skills Fall 2007-Algebra Skills	B- P W	Withdrew; Last enrollment Fall 2007	Negative
Julio	2	16	Fall 2005-Developmental Algebra I	C	Vocational Training Certificate; Fall 2006	Negative
Jonathan	2	11	Fall 2005-Pre-Algebra Spring 2006-Algebra Skills Spring 2007-Intermediate Algebra Fall 2007-Intermediate Algebra (Repeated)	C C F B	Enrolled Fall 2008	Negative

Group 1	Missing math credits	Math ACT Score	Math course performance		Enrollment status	Attribution regarding math ability
Tiffany	1	14	No math taken		Withdrew; Last enrollment Fall 2006	Negative
Rogelio	2	13	Fall 2005-Pre-Algebra Spring 2006-Algebra Skills	C F	Withdrew; Last enrollment Fall 2007	Negative
Lynn	1	15	Fall 2005-Pre-Algebra Spring 2006-Algebra Skills	B F	Withdrew	Negative

Group 2	Missing math credits	Math ACT Score	Math course performance		Enrollment status	Attribution regarding math ability
Mike	1	18	Fall 2004-Algebra Skills Spring 2005-Intermediate Algebra	B C	Associate of Arts Spring 2007	Negative
Christopher	1.5	16	Fall 2002-Algebra Skills Fall 2003-Intermediate Algebra Spring 2005-Intermediate Algebra Fall 2004-College Algebra Spring 2005-Trigonometry Spring 2006-Calculus-Analytic Geometry	A A- B C B C-	Bachelor of Arts Fall 2007	Negative

Group 2	Missing math credits	Math ACT Score	Math course performance		Enrollment status	Attribution regarding math ability
Helen	.5	17	Fall 2001-Pre-Algebra Summer 2002-Math Appreciation Spring 2003-Intermediate Algebra	B A C	Bachelor of Arts Fall 2005	Negative
Kathy	0	16	Fall 2002-Pre-Algebra Spring 2004-Elementary Math I Fall 2004-Elementary Math II	A+ A A	Bachelor of Science Spring 2007	Positive
Rose	2	No ACT on file	Fall 2003-Pre-Algebra Spring 2004-Intermediate Algebra Fall 2004-Matrices & Linear Programming Fall 2005-Calculus for Biological and Management Sciences Fall 2005-Calculus for Biological and Management Sciences Repeated Summer 2006 Calculus for Biological and Management Sciences Spring 2007-Elementary Math I Fall 2007-Elementary Math II	A+ B A W W C+ B C	Enrolled Fall 2007	Negative

Group 2	Missing math credits	Math ACT Score	Math course performance		Enrollment status	Attribution regarding math ability
Karmelita	3	17	Fall 2003-Algebra Skills Spring 2004-College Algebra	A A	Enrolled Fall 2007	Positive
Tim	.5	16	Fall 2001-Algebra Skills Spring 2002-Intermediate Algebra Fall 2003-Calculus Spring 2004-Calculus Repeated	B C W D	Bachelor of Science; Spring 2006	Negative
Joshua	2	17	Fall 2003-Pre-Algebra Spring 2004-Pre-Algebra Repeated Fall 2004-Algebra Skills Summer 2005-Math Appreciation Spring 2006-Intermediate Algebra	D C C B- W	Enrolled Fall 2007	Negative

Group 3	Missing math credits	Math ACT Score	Math course performance		Enrollment status	Attribution regarding math ability
Benecio	0	20	Fall 2000-Intermediate Algebra	W	Withdrew Spring 2003; Re-Enrolled Fall 2004; Withdrew 2006; Has not re-enrolled	Negative
Amador	2	13	Fall 2001-Developmental Algebra I	F	Withdrew Fall 2002; Has not re-enrolled	Negative
Javier	1	14	Fall 2001-Pre-Algebra Spring 2002-Algebra Skills Fall 2002-Intermediate Algebra	C C W	Withdrew Fall 2003; Has not re-enrolled	Negative
Jorge	3	16	Spring 2002-Developmental Algebra I Summer 2002-Developmental Algebra I Repeated Fall 2002-Developmental Algebra II	D C- RR	Withdrew Spring 2003; Has not re-enrolled	Negative
Kandelario	2	16	Fall 2002-Algebra Skills	B	Withdrew Spring 2003; Has not re-enrolled	Negative

Total Groups 1-3: N=21
  D,F,W=13 (62%)

APPENDIX Q

COMPARISON OF ACT RECOMMENDED

COLLEGE PREPARATION CORE/

STATE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION/

RIO GRANDE UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS REQUIREMENTS 2008/2009

Comparison of ACT Recommended College Preparation Core/State High School Graduation/

Rio Grande University Admissions Requirements 2008/2009

American College Testing College Preparatory Core	State High School Graduation Requirements	Rio Grande University Course Admissions Requirement
4 years English (grammar, composition, literature)	4 credits English; grammar, literature	4 units English 2 units composition
3 or more years Mathematics (Algebra I and higher)	3 credits Mathematics 1 credit Algebra I or higher;	3 units from Algebra I, II, Geometry, Trigonometry, or advanced math
3 or more years Science (earth, biology, chemistry, physics)	2 units Science 1 with laboratory component	2 units beyond general science
3 or more years Social Science (history, geography, civics, economics)	3 units social science, U.S. history, geography, world history, government, economics	None
Additional courses (foreign language, arts)	1 unit: physical education; communication skills, business education; writing, speaking; in language other than English; 9 electives.	1 unit Foreign Languages or Fine Arts

Source: ACT Brief, 2006; State Public Education Department, 2008; 2008-2009 Rio Grande University Catalog.

APPENDIX R

DEBRIEFING LETTER

Title of the Study: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES
OF PROVISIONAL STUDENTS AT A FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC LAND-GRANT
UNIVERSITY

Dear Research Participants:

Thank you so much for your participation in the research study that was designed

to learn more about the experiences of provisional students at Rio Grande University. I

hope that the stories of your path to higher education that you shared with me can serve

to help incoming students to be successful as they pursue their degree and career goals.

From the data that was collected and analyzed I developed a theory about the

experiences that affected students decisions to: 1) Not enter college as a provisional

student; 2) Enter and continue to make progress toward a degree; 3) Stopout; and 4) Enter

and withdraw from the university. I am enclosing a copy of the study on the enclosed CD

for your review. I encourage you to communicate with me regarding any comments,

feedback, or concerns about the study using the enclosed self-addressed and stamped

envelope. Please send to me by September 15, 2008.

Thanks sincerely,

Terry L. Cook

Phone: (575) 646-3137

Email: tcresearch@gmail.com

Mailing Address: PO Box 4432, Las Cruces, NM 88003-4432.

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