Understanding the Academic and Socio-Cultural Experiences of Academically Underprepared Males and the Risk and Protective Factors Influencing Degree Attainment in a Community College System

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UNDERSTANDING THE ACADEMIC AND SOCIO-CULTURAL EXPERIENCES OF ACADEMICALLY UNDERPREPARED MALES AND THE RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS INFLUENCING DEGREE ATTAINMENT IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

by

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DISSERTATION
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation work to Erica, my beloved querida, and to my son Santiago, daughter Adela, and my New Mexico and Tennessee familia. Their unwavering support, understanding, and encouragement have been invaluable throughout my journey. Erica, you have been the greatest champion in all my endeavors, and the level of happiness you bring to my life is immeasurable. Your partnership, steadfastness, and love sustain me. To Santiago and Adela, I urge you to fearlessly embrace failures and mistakes, recognizing them as opportunities for personal growth and using them as steppingstones towards your goals in life. Love openly and honestly, stay true to yourselves, and live each day to the fullest, and live for today as there is no promise of tomorrow. While it is important to have plans for the future, let us not lose sight of the present.

I dedicate this dissertation to my nephew Alejandro, who holds a special place in my heart and whose life was cut short at the tender age of 18. I will forever cherish your infectious smile, laughter, intelligence, kind heart, and your willingness to lend a helping hand. Life has taught me many lessons, but the most significant one I wish to carry with me is to live for today, and love unconditionally. Ale, though your life was just beginning, I will make certain that your memory lives as long as I shall be granted life on this earth.

Lastly, I extend my dedication to the research participants of my study. Despite facing risk factors, they demonstrated incredible resilience and achieved noteworthy success. Their participation has been vital, and I am grateful for their enduring commitment and resilience.
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I remember vividly the times we would be outside, tending to the garden on sweltering summer days. With sweat dripping down our faces, he would call my brother and me over and say, "toma mis hijos, de mis sudadores, para que salgan buenos trabajadores," while blessing us on the forehead. Translated, this means "take from my sweat, my sons, so that you may become hard workers." The symbolic act of receiving my grandfather's blessing has forever motivated me to strive for excellence. I am grateful for the deep cultural roots instilled in me by my abuelitos Manuel y Idela, which have shaped my character and drive. My family's support and the values passed down through generations have been instrumental in my pursuit of personal and academic growth.

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Understanding the Academic and Socio-Cultural Experiences of Academically Underprepared Males and the Risk and Protective Factors Influencing Degree Attainment in a Community College System

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify the risk and protective factors that influence persistence, retention, and degree attainment among academically underprepared male students at a community college in Northern New Mexico. Understanding the context of developmental education was deemed crucial for this research, as open-access institutions, particularly community colleges, serve as the starting point for many students' educational journeys. Evaluating the experiences and educational pathways of these students is of great importance to address the existing achievement gaps. The research focused on understanding the experiences of these students and the factors that hindered or supported their persistence and degree completion.

By comprehensively examining the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared male students, this study aimed to shed light on the multifaceted factors that contribute to the current disparities in achievement. Various variables and challenges influence these participants, making it crucial to understand their experiences as they navigated the higher education system. The issues of matriculation,
preparation, and placement are identified as significant factors affecting academic success at the postsecondary level. Through this research, valuable insights were gained into the factors that contribute to the achievement gaps, thereby informing strategies to enhance student success within the community college setting. By examining the factors such as prior academic preparation, support systems, personal motivation, and the level of institutional commitment, motivation, and sense of belonging, this study provides insight into the interplay between individuals and institutions and how risk and protective factors can impact persistence, retention, and degree completion.

Notably, the completion of remedial coursework built the confidence and skills necessary for engagement in college-level math and English classes. Moreover, the identified protective factors had a positive influence on students' progress, enabling them to meet degree requirements and earn associate degrees despite their initial academic under preparedness upon entering the institution. The presence of cultural capital, encompassing knowledge, skills, and resources, empowered students to navigate the challenges they faced, while the support and encouragement from families and communities played a crucial role. Additionally, academic support services, including developmental coursework, study skills workshops, and supplemental instruction, proved to be valuable resources that assisted students in overcoming academic challenges and supported their persistence, retention, and degree completion.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

Across the nation, educational reforms are impacting a wide range of programs and institutions responsible for delivering public education to students from primary to secondary levels, as well as preparing them for postsecondary opportunities and careers. These reforms encompass various initiatives, including pre-kindergarten programs, early childhood intervention programs, and educational institutions spanning from elementary and secondary schools to postsecondary education.

The ongoing public and political debate regarding the advantages and consequences of placement and involvement in developmental education is driven by several factors. These factors include reductions in state funding for public institutions, the implementation of performance-based funding models in higher education, and the heightened emphasis on accountability measures within educational institutions. These external pressures contribute to the ongoing scrutiny and discussion surrounding the role of effectiveness of developmental education. As state funding across the nation decreases for public educational institutions and institutions of higher education, the debate continues as to whether remediation, or developmental education, is supporting the success of its participants.

Currently, accountability serves as the driving force behind educational reform efforts. At present, accountability may best be identified in the form of performance measures at both secondary and postsecondary educational institutions inclusive of standardized tests, completion rates, matriculation, persistence, retention rates, and degree attainment. These measures are currently utilized to gauge the success of and hold
accountable educational institutions and programs. The various accountability measures range from high school dropout rates to degree attainment at postsecondary institutions inclusive of community colleges, undergraduate, and graduate programs. Elementary and secondary educational institutions are currently being evaluated based upon some of these particular measures, as evidenced in the current implementation of teacher evaluation, school report cards, and continued standardized testing. Public institutions of higher education are experiencing a shift towards models of formula funding that link financial support to specific outcomes, such as persistence completion and degree attainment. This accountability framework holds institutions responsible for achieving these measures and emphasizes the importance of student success and in determining funding allocations.

The statistics reported, by means of the various accountability measures, are utilized to further the current agenda of educational reform (Thomas, 2013). As accountability measures are implemented, the challenges associated with matriculation, persistence, retention, and degree attainment become increasingly evident. As accountability measures are implemented, the complexities and barriers that students face through their educational journeys become prevalent.

With the current climate of educational reform, the identification of the achievement gap is evident and many issues and challenges are brought to the forefront. With the identification of these issues and challenges, there is a need to better understand the academic and socio-cultural experiences of students to inform the narrative.

Critics of the current educational system cite that school systems, particularly K-12 public schools, are not meeting the needs of the current participants. In addition, others argue that secondary schools are not preparing students with adequate academic skills to
engage in college-level coursework. Consequently, students in need of additional academic support find themselves in a position where they require developmental education or remedial education to bridge the knowledge gaps as they transition into college. Further, critics argue that taxpayers should not have to “foot the bill” a second time, due to inadequate preparation prior to the postsecondary opportunities. The foundational argument is that postsecondary education is not the venue for remediating the academic skills or bridging the knowledge gaps as the knowledge and skills should have been developed within the K-12 schooling system; hence the accountability should be placed upon the K-12 school systems.

In contrast, proponents of providing remediation at the postsecondary level argue that such coursework provides support for social change and mobility by rectifying the access issues centered on low placement scores and high admissions standards. Bahr (2008) noted:

On the one hand, it fills an important niche in U.S. higher education by providing opportunities to rectify race, class, and gender disparities generated in primary and secondary schooling, to develop the minimum skills deemed necessary for functional participation in the economy and the democracy and to acquire the prerequisite competencies that are crucial for negotiating college-level coursework. (p. 420)

Regardless of one’s position within the current context of the conversation, further deconstruction of remediation, or developmental education, at the community college level, is warranted. Given the multifaceted nature of developmental education, it is crucial
to deconstruct the associated issues by starting with a clear definition and understanding of what developmental education entails and how it functions.

**Statement of the Problem**

When comparing the graduation rates between male and female students, the evaluation indicates that there is a discrepancy in graduation rates for males compared to those of females (Buchman & DiPrete, 2006; Ewert, 2010; Murnane, 2013). The attainment gaps by gender exist in secondary graduation rates, in addition to graduation rates of students from postsecondary institutions of higher education; especially among Black and Hispanic youth, significant gender gaps exist (Murnane, 2013). In the context of increased scrutiny of higher education institutions, it is important to highlight the disparity in college graduation rates between young women and men. It can be noted that “at present, about one third of young women (ages 25-29) are college graduates compared to one quarter of men of the same ages” (Ewert, 2010, p. 745). The work of Buchman and DiPrete (2006) revealed that it was not until the 1980s that a reversal in the gender gap was evident. Buchman and DiPrete (2006) explained, “women continued to lag behind men in college graduation rates during the 1960s and 1970s, until 1982, when they reached parity with men” (p. 515). As referenced in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, studies that are more recent indicate men’s college-going rates and graduation rates are declining across all races and socioeconomic groups:

It wasn’t just enrollment where gaps between men and women widened. Once they enter college, women are also more likely to stay and graduate. For students enrolling in a four-year-college in 2012, 65 percent of women and 59 percent of men had earned a bachelor’s degree within six years. (Mangan, 2022, p. 1)
These statistics highlight the significant gender gap in college attainment and emphasize the need to address factors contributing to this disparity. Comprehending the causes and consequences of the growing disparity between the gender gaps is critical to maintaining an educated and informed citizenry by understanding the economic, social, and academic implications.

Through a qualitative case study, I examined the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared males to investigate the factors impacting degree attainment at a rural college in Northern New Mexico. The primary objective of this research was to investigate the factors that influence degree attainment by focusing on this context and population. The study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and dynamics that impacted the educational journey of academically underprepared male students in a rural community college setting. While gender may be one of the multiple variables that influence these outcomes, the purpose of this research was to engage with participants and gain a deeper understanding of their academic and socio-cultural educational experiences to better understand the risk and protective factors impacting their degree attainment.

**Matriculation**

One notable factor that emerges when examining the matriculation from high school to college is the issue of high school completion. Murnane (2013) evaluated the U.S. high school graduation rates from 1970 to 2010 and indicated:

One important reason the high school graduation rate did not increase during the final three decades of the twentieth century despite a high internal rate of return to a high school diploma is that a substantial proportion of students reach high
school without the skills needed to complete graduation requirements. (Murnane, 2013, p. 395)

Fault for inadequate preparation of students entering high school is typically assigned to the lower grades by secondary schools. If and when students successfully emerge from the secondary educational pipeline to postsecondary institutions, many are still academically underprepared for the rigors of college-level coursework. As students matriculate to postsecondary institutions, the responsibility for being academically underprepared is attributed to secondary schools by postsecondary institutions. Regardless of where blame is assigned, the research identifies a significant proportion of students are academically underprepared at all levels (Murnane, 2013).

**Preparation and Placement**

Another critical factor contributing to lower graduation rates is the prevalence of academically underprepared students who enter postsecondary education. Many students aspiring to pursue higher education lack the necessary academic skills and knowledge to succeed in college level courses. This narrative is evidenced by their placement assessment and assignment into developmental courses, rather than college-level courses. Daiek, Dixon, and Talbert (2012) maintain that many students are inadequately prepared to engage in college-level coursework. Across the US, “73% of community college entrants under age 24 scored into the lowest two quartiles of the SAT or ACT (Goldrick-Rab, 2007), and only 22% of high school graduates nationally scored at a college-ready level in all three basic skill areas” (Daiek, Dixon, & Talbert, 2012, p. 37). Understanding these complex issues, and which students are most affected by these challenges, was of the utmost importance to this study.
The state of New Mexico shares in this common chronicle of issues and challenges related to education and student outcomes. The New Mexico Higher Education Department (NMHED, 2013) affirmed:

Remediation education, also known as developmental education or basic skills training, for academically underprepared students entering college is a complex issue. The difficulties in developing a universally accepted response to equitably preparing incoming students for the rigors of college-level coursework has increased over time and today remains one of the most persistent and contentious of quandaries in high education circles. (p. 43)

Understanding the various factors and influences that affect a student’s persistence, retention, and degree attainment is crucial and does not need to remain a continued contentious quandary. Equally important is the comprehension of the underlying issues and challenges that shape this narrative, as it is crucial for identifying the effective strategies to support and address the needs of all students.

**College Remediation**

It is critical to understand the experiences of males in both high school and postsecondary institutions. There is a pressing need to address key issues regarding degree attainment at both levels. One key issue may include continued poverty and lack of employment opportunity as a result of failing to attain a degree. Doyle (2010) maintains that “when students do not complete their educational goals, there are substantial losses to the student, the state, and the nation—in terms of lost opportunity and lower standards of living” (p. 4). All students who do not reach degree attainment are adversely affected. There is consensus that the high school dropout rate is a significant
issue in this country, with extensive research highlighting the negative consequences for individuals and society. The consensus is that the current dropout rate is too high, and the graduation rate is unsatisfactory. According to Koenig and Hauser (2010):

There is widespread agreement that failure to earn a high school diploma is a serious problem in this country. A considerable body of research has documented the individual and societal costs associated with dropping out and demonstrate the many hardships that dropouts face. Most people agree that the nation’s dropout rate is too high and the graduation rate is unacceptably low. (p. 11)

Failure to complete the high school diploma limits future access to employment, in addition to access to postsecondary opportunities, which in turn equates with lower wages:

Even if they find a job, dropouts earn substantially less than high school graduates. In 2007, the median annual earnings of high school dropouts were 29 percent less for men and 33 percent less for women, compared with the earnings of high school graduates. (Koenig & Hauser, 2010, p. 14)

For the reasons mentioned, in addition to many others, researching and understanding the risk and protective factors influencing graduation is of utmost importance, particularly for male students.

**Community Colleges**

Across the nation, students not academically prepared to engage in college-level coursework are enrolled in remedial, or what is now termed developmental education coursework. It is important to note that for the purpose of this study, developmental education is a comprehensive framework that supports underprepared students meet the
prerequisite courses to build academic skills in mathematics, reading, or English in order to fully participate and gain entrance to college level coursework. Placement practices into development coursework vary across different types of higher education institutions. Institutions rely on a sole test score to determine if a student is college ready or academically underprepared. Of public two-year colleges surveyed in 2011, 100% used a math placement test and 94% of public two-year colleges used a reading placement test (Fields & Parsad, 2012). Of the public four-year colleges surveyed, 85% utilized mathematics placement tests and 51% of public four-year college used a reading placement assessment (Fields & Parsad, 2012). More recently, colleges are beginning to utilize multiple measures to demonstrate college readiness through high school GPA, and other data points to place students (Ganga & Mazzariello, 2019).

Community colleges generally offer a higher level of developmental support compared to four-year institutions (Ignash, 1997). Although students matriculate to postsecondary institutions having completed a high school diploma or high school equivalency, a high percentage of these students do not enter academically prepared. According to a joint report by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) (2010), in two-year colleges, “about one-quarter of incoming students to these institutions are fully prepared for college-level studies. The remaining 75 percent need remedial work in English, mathematics, or both” (p. 2). As can be noted, the requirement for developmental education and support for these students is prominent. A significant number of students, especially those attending open-access colleges such as community colleges, often need extensive remedial support.

As noted by Ignash (1997), “community colleges provide the bulk of postsecondary
remediation, followed by public four-year institutions and then by private two- and four-year colleges and universities” (p. 8).

A high percentage of academically underprepared students are served by open-access community colleges where the “largest gains in graduation rates over the past decade have been accomplished at open-access colleges and universities” (Doyle, 2010, p. 2). However, the rate at which students reach degree attainment is low. As stated by Schneider (2008), “while American high schools graduate about three-fourths of their students in four years, American colleges graduate only about half of their students in six” (p. 2). Understanding the risk and protective factors associated with developmental education may shed some light as to the current challenges with degree attainment.

As postsecondary remediation, or developmental education, has a widespread array of support and opposition, depending on the sources and voices, it is critical to evaluate the research, as there are noted disparities with academically underprepared students reaching degree attainment within postsecondary institutions of higher education.

In New Mexico, as well as across the nation, it is critical that developmental students have access to support and are successful with college degree attainment. For the academic years 2012-2014, remediation rates were extremely high, especially when examining the research as it relates to race and ethnicity. According to the NMHED Annual Report (2013), “remediation rates for Native American, Black, and Hispanic students remained high: 65 percent, 57 percent, and 50 percent respectively. For White and Asian students, the rates are considerably lower: 30 percent and 29 percent respectively” (p. 43). Consequently, “for the academic year 2012-2013, 51.4 percent of
New Mexico public high school graduates entering a state postsecondary institution required remediation” (NMHED, 2013, p. 43). As indicated by the aforementioned percentages, there is a 35-percentage point difference in the need for remediation between Native American and White students. There is also an equally disheartening difference between Black (27 percentage points), Hispanic (20 percentage points), and White students. These differences highlight that more students of color have higher rates of placement in developmental courses compared to White students.

According to a recent NMHED Annual Report (2018), “86.4% of New Mexico’s students entering 2-year colleges and 41.1% of students entering 4-year comprehensive universities require remediation in math, English, or both (p. 8). The overrepresentation of minority students in remediation presents a significant problem, especially within the consideration of the low graduation rates of minority males, many of whom begin in such coursework. Hoyt (1999) examined the impact of the remediation on community college students, noting, “high remediation rates had a negative relationship with student retention” (p. 61). Hoyt (1999) concluded that as students place into multiple levels of developmental coursework, the chance of degree attainment is less likely.

**Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative study aimed to gain insight into the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared, male students at a rural community college in Northern New Mexico. The study aimed to examine the factors that contribute to their persistence and degree attainment, shedding light on the experiences that either facilitate or hinder their educational journey at college.
Across the nation, students are graduating from high school without the academic skills to successfully engage in college-level coursework, ultimately decreasing their chances of attaining a college degree. In addition to the over representation of minority students in developmental education, male students also exhibit lower graduation rates compared to their female counterparts. As educational attainment is critical in order to maintain an informed citizenry, increasing learning and graduation rates should be a significant part of the equation when educational reform is being contemplated and implemented.

**Positionality Statement**

As a researcher who is a first-generation college graduate and a minority male, my goal was to explore the challenges faced by academically unprepared male students in postsecondary education. Investigating the causes, consequences, and experiences related to gender differences in degree attainment holds particular significance for me due to my personal background and experiences. Coming from a rural community with limited access to post-secondary opportunities, I understand firsthand the obstacles that can hinder degree completion. While my parents valued education, various factors prevented them from obtaining their degrees. Although they did not complete college degrees, my upbringing instilled in me a deep appreciation for the transformative power of education. As a minority male, I am aware of the implications that degree attainment has for personal and professional growth and its potential to positively impact communities. It is through this lens that I approach this research. As a researcher who is both a first-generation college graduate and a minority male, investigating the causes, consequences, and experiences related to gender differences in degree attainment holds particular
significance for me. Not only are they important, but also very relevant to my experiences.

In addition, the purpose of this study was to add to the existing body of research through a qualitative approach to further comprehend the risk and protective factors of those most affected, particularly academically underprepared male students in a rural community college system in Northern New Mexico. Growing up in a rural, northern New Mexico community with limited resources, my critical lens is on those voices not typically represented at the table. The study focuses on a small, rural Northern New Mexico community college where my awareness and direct knowledge of the cultural context and the connection to community afforded additional insight into the issues and challenges at hand. The gender gap reversal since the 1980s is a fairly recent occurrence (Buchman & DiPrete, 2006). By comprehending the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared males in a small rural community college system, we may gain valuable insights into the challenges that persist nationwide, as males continue to perform below their female counterparts.

**Research Questions**

The research questions in the study were formulated with the aim of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the issues and challenges encountered by academically underprepared male students in a community college system. The purpose of this study was to answer the overarching question: *What are the risk and protective factors, experienced by academically underprepared male college students, at a community college, in Northern New Mexico?*
Understanding the academic and socio-cultural experiences of males in community colleges may provide further insight into some of the issues affecting degree attainment at the postsecondary level. Additionally, as remediation is prevalent across the nation, comparing the experiences was equally important. Thus, the second purpose of the research was to identify and understand the experiences for those who must engage in remediation and how these experiences influence outcomes by answering this question: *What influence do these risk and protective factors have on persistence, retention, and degree attainment at this rural, Northern New Mexico community college?*

**Conceptual Underpinnings**

The challenges, struggles, and successes of the diverse students attending this institution of higher education differ as they sought to reach success vis-à-vis completion of a vocational or technical certificate or completion of an associate degree. I understand these challenges, struggles, and successes as I grew up in and around Northern New Mexico and its small rural communities. These experiences create a lens through which I view and “seek understanding of the world” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24) in which I live and work and are aligned with a social constructivist interpretive framework. This research study draws upon the participants’ views of the experiences and challenges experienced in a small, rural Northern New Mexico community college.

This research is shaped through the researcher’s experiences and utilized qualitative methods of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013). There is a critical need to fully identify and understand the academic and socio-cultural experiences, issues, challenges, and successes faced by academically underprepared male students. This study sought to examine various influences on academic attainment, including risk and
protective factors, such as a high rate of placement into developmental education (Attewell et al., 2006; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Boylan & Bonham, 2011; Lewin, 2011; Winograd, Florez, & Garcia, 2010; Winograd, Krause & Babbitt, 2013); gender differences (Hussar & Bailey, 2011; King, 2000; Murnane, 2013; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2008; Weaver-Hightower, 2010); structural and organizational determinants (Anderson, 1988; Daiek et al., 2012, Tinto, 1975); the role of family (Bandura et al., 1996; Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006); and socio-cultural factors (Bremer et al., 2013; Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Howell, 2011; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2008).

**Definition of Terms**

**Academic Achievement** is the extent to which a student has reached or achieved their academic goals.

**Achievement Gap** arises when one group of students outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant (Kena et al., 2016, p. 294).

**Attrition** is the rate at which students leave or stop-out of institutions of higher education due to various factors.

**Developmental education** and **remedial education** are generally utilized interchangeably; thus, it is important to operationalize the definitions.

**Developmental Courses** “are usually considered to be college-level but with a focus on academic development such as study strategies, critical thinking, or the freshman experience rather than a particular content area” (Boylan et al., 1999, p. 88). Although Boylan, et al. (1999) distinguish between the differences, the terms are still utilized interchangeably.
**Developmental Education** was defined as “the broad range of courses and services organized and delivered in an effort to help retain students to ensure the successful completion of their postsecondary education goals” (Boylan & Bonham, 2007, p. 2). Boylan and Bonham (2007) further defined that “these courses and services are generally delivered according to the principles and theories of adult development and learning, hence the term ‘developmental’ education” (p. 2). For the purpose of this study, developmental education was considered as the prerequisite courses to build academic skills in mathematics, reading, or English. These courses needed to be completed prior to gaining entrance to college level coursework. Developmental courses do not apply toward certificate or associate degree programs of study.

**First-generation college students** were defined as “students who enrolled in postsecondary education and whose parents do not have any postsecondary education experience” (NCES, p. 3, 2017) or students who had a parent enroll and have some college experience, but never graduated.

**Hispanic/Latino** was defined as a person of “Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race” (Institute of Education Sciences, 2002, para. 7).

**Low-income students** were defined in terms of both income and family size. Income below 125 percent of the federally established poverty level.

**Matriculation** is the process by which students transition into (enroll) and through institutions of higher education.

**Persistence** was defined as a student measure referring to the act of working toward an educational goal such as the completion of a certificate or associate degree.
**Pell eligibility** was used as a proxy for economic status but “its primary limitation is that it undercounts the proportion of low-income students, especially at institutions where many do not apply for federal financial aid, due to either lack of information, low costs, or citizenship status” (Janice & Voight, 2016, p. 53).

**Protective factors**, for the purpose of this study, were circumstances, characteristics, or factors which were associated with a positive impact or serve a support for a student along their academic journey.

**Remedial Education** was noted as focused on providing academically underprepared students with the requisite skills for succeeding in college-level coursework and curricula. The term remedial refers exclusively to courses generally considered to be pre-college level (Boylan et al., 1999). For this study, I referred throughout the text to remedial education as developmental education as they are regularly utilized interchangeably. According to the New Mexico Higher Education Department,

Remediation consists of stand-alone courses that cover high school level material, while gateway courses are the first college-level courses of a sequence (usually Freshman English and College Algebra). Traditional remediation courses are taken sequentially and can take the least prepared student up to 5 semesters to complete. (2016, p. 7)

**Remedial Courses** differ by institution but are generally noncredit courses. The courses “are usually noncredit courses teaching what is generally considered precollege content. They are typically given course numbers below 100 (i.e., English 099 or
Mathematics 090) (Boylan et al., 2007, p. 2). For this study, I referred to remedial coursework as developmental coursework.

**Retention Rate** is an institutional measure utilized to determine the percentage of a given cohort that is enrolled at a particular time and of the cohort enrolled, what percentage return the following semester. Depending on the institution of record, retention rates are usually measured from fall to spring or from fall to fall of the subsequent year.

**Risk factors**, for this study, were circumstances, characteristics, or factors that may be associated with a negative impact a student along their academic journey.

**Socioeconomic Status (SES)** was defined as “a composite of often equally weighted, standardized components, such as father’s education, mother’s education, family income, father’s occupation, and household items” (Kena et al., 2016, p. 305).

**Stop-out** referred to a period of time a student takes pause, leaves or withdraws from enrollment at an institution of higher education for a period of time before completion of a certificate or degree.

**Limitations**

Reflecting on my personal and professional interest in this study led me to recognize bias on my part as a limitation. However, I took extensive measures to ensure validity and reliability of the information gathered and presented. Understanding and documenting ontological and axiological values furthered the validity of the research.

**Delimitations**

Given the dynamic nature of educational institutions and ongoing educational reforms, it is crucial to acknowledge that this study captured a specific moment in time.
Further research is warranted to explore the evolving landscape and its impact on the academic achievement and degree attainment of male students.

**Significance of the Study**

**Global Context of Developmental Education**

Understanding the global context of developmental education may support the identification of the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared males within the context of a community college. Generally, there is a disproportionately higher number of students of color represented in developmental courses and programs (Attewell et al., 2006).

In a local examination of the remediation rate, the NMHED *Annual Report* (2013) indicated that for more than a decade, the remediation rate has hovered at approximately 50 percent. Dropping out of college is a frequent risk faced by many students in higher education participating in remedial education. According to the NMHED *New Mexico Math Remediation Report* (2016), “Nationally, only 11% of students enrolled in remedial courses graduate from a 2-year institution in 3 years, and only 18% transfer to a 4-year institution (with or without a degree) in 4 years” (p. 8).

According to findings by the Center for Education Policy Research (CEPR, 2011), of the students who graduated in New Mexico and who entered college in New Mexico during the fall of 2003 (n = 2,976), 67% obtained degrees within 6 years. Twenty percent of students requiring one remedial course reached degree attainment within the same time frame. Only 9% of students requiring two levels of remediation reached degree attainment, while 4% of those requiring three remedial courses reached degree attainment within the same six-year timeframe. Consequently, of the 2,976, approximately 1,994
students requiring no remediation obtained a degree. On the other hand, 1% (n = 29) placed in four remedial courses obtained a degree within six years (Winograd & Sallee, 2001). Thus, it is evident that students requiring remediation had a lower completion rate. Further inquiry into the non-academic variables influencing degree attainment are warranted, as the findings of this inquiry indicate that the developmental courses provide concrete foundational skills, high expectations, and a conducive learning environment that should support degree attainment.

Research indicates there are significant challenges faced by students who begin in developmental education (Bahr 2008, 2010); however additional research is warranted as to whether placement in remediation is the sole variable that may affect degree attainment. Although starting out in developmental education coursework may present challenges to success, due in part to needing to remediate foundational skills, evidence suggests there are other predictor variables that may influence degree attainment. A full contextual description of every factor influencing degree attainment was not presented within this research study, as this study centered the attention primarily on the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared males at a particular regional Northern New Mexico community college.

The purpose of this study was to explore the following research questions: 1) What are the risk and protective factors experienced by academically underprepared male college students, at a community college, in Northern New Mexico? 2) What influence do these risk and protective factors have on persistence, retention, and degree attainment at this rural, Northern New Mexico community college? The perspective that a student’s need for remediation is the sole reason for decreased degree attainment and simply
placing blame on developmental education may limit the possibility of identifying the mitigating factors that may affect the persistence and successful degree attainment of all students.

Reducing attrition, and, more importantly, increasing learning and subsequent graduation rates, should be a significant part of the equation as educational reform is implemented. Additional research and accountability by K-12 and postsecondary institutions is required to remedy the challenge of a timely completion of certificates, associate, and bachelor’s degrees. However, it is essential to prioritize the comprehensive understanding of the complex factors including persistence and degree attainment in further research, in order to drive meaningful change in the current educational landscape.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared male community college participants. It is absolutely critical to understand which factors lead to successful degree attainment and which factors deter the completion of the college degree.

**Need for the Study**

The primary objective of this study was to contribute to the existing body of literature by conducting qualitative research and analysis on the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared male students at a community college in Northern New Mexico. More specifically, the study aimed to identify the risk and protective factors influencing persistence, retention, and degree attainment for these developmental education participants. Understanding the context of developmental education is an essential part of this research study. As many students begin their educational journey at open-access institutions of higher education, particularly
community colleges, evaluating the experiences of these students and their educational pathways is very important. As these various participants are influenced by many variables and challenges, understanding the academic and socio-cultural experiences as students navigate this system of higher education may provide insight into the various factors that contribute to the current achievement gaps.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Educational Pathways Preface

Educational attainment and the pathways through which one achieves educational success may vary for different participants. Beginning in high school, students may drop out and not reach degree completion. The students that are successful in earning a high school diploma, may or may not directly matriculate to postsecondary institutions of education. Some may enter the workforce directly after high school completion. For those that do go on to postsecondary education, many are underprepared upon graduating from high school. Placement in remediation coursework is necessary for a high percentage of those students that matriculate to postsecondary education. While there are many educational pathways, the achievement gap is experienced across the spectrum from race and ethnicity to gender.

The experiences of these educational pathways differ by the various participants and are influenced by many variables and challenges. A comprehensive review of the literature on factors influencing degree attainment, particularly in relation to gender equity and educational outcomes, is necessary and justified; in particular, the challenges with degree attainment faced by males must be further disaggregated and researched.

Review of the Research

The challenge with the existing research is there are few studies with large data sets that include various institutions or states (Bahr, 2008). Large population samples are limited to collections of data by state and difficult to compare to other regions, as there are many variables to consider. Varied definitions of developmental education are utilized
by institutions to define the programs, even within the respective states. Depending on the state, developmental education has varied connotations and applications. According to Bahr (2008), there are “few methodologically sound, comprehensive, large-scale multi-institutional evaluations of post-secondary remedial programs” (p. 421). In addition, Bahr (2008) cites weaknesses in the small-scale studies over the last several decades and mixed or inconclusive findings.

To further compound the identified challenges with the current research, assessments utilized for course placement present challenges. College placement policies differ from state to state, along with the considerable differences in what constitutes a developmental or college-level math or English course. As developmental education varies by program and institution, it is difficult to pinpoint whether a sequence of developmental education courses can be beneficial for remediating math or English skill deficiency. According to Bettinger and Long (2009), “by increasing the number of requirements and extending the time to degree, remediation may negatively impact students outcomes such as persistence major choice and eventual labor market returns” (p. 737). Additionally, students may self-select to enroll in the remedial coursework or opt to begin at the lowest level math or English course as each institution has varied placement policies.

Achievement Gap by Gender

An examination of the literature yields many research articles that reveal that male students are behind their female counterparts in terms of degree attainment. As evidenced by King (2000), “in particular, African American, Hispanic, and low-income males lag behind their female peers in terms of educational attainment and are far outpaced by
white, Asian-American, and middle-class men and women” (p. 2). Influences such as demographic variables, socio-cultural factors, levels of preparedness, and academic experiences contribute, to some extent, to the disparities between men of color and their White peer counterparts.

**High School Degree Attainment**

Research shows that there is a discrepancy in the graduation rate for males compared to females. Murnane (2013) explained, “the high school graduation rate is higher for females than for males in each of the major racial/ethnic groups, but particularly for black youth (12.2 percentage points among 20–24-year-olds in 2010, as measured from adjusted ACS data)” (p. 386). In 2010, the discrepancy between male and female student completion rates was 6.2 percent with female student of all races having the higher completion rate. It is interesting to note that in 1970, the completion rates were almost the same with all races, at nearly 81 percent (80.8% male and 80.7% female). It is only after 1980 that a clear distinction between male and female completion rates emerged (Murnane, 2013). Furthermore, Murnane (2013) specified that during most of the twentieth century, more females than males graduated. Murnane (2013) recounted:

> During the first decade of the twenty-first century, gender gaps in graduation rates fell, especially among Hispanics, even though graduation rates for females in all of the major racial/ethnic groups increased. The reason is that the graduation rates of males, especially Hispanics, experienced greater increases. Yet even with these increases, significant gender gaps prevail, especially among black and Hispanic youth. (p. 386)
Not only is the gender gap evident, but the variation in graduation rates is also further influenced by the racial and ethnic composition of the high school students (Murnane, 2013):

The low graduation rate for black youth in Mississippi in 2008–09 (58.6 percent) had a marked impact on the overall state graduation rate because nearly one-half of all public school students are black. In contrast, the quite low graduation rate for black youth in Wisconsin (65.3 percent) had relatively little impact on the state’s overall graduation rate because fewer than 10 percent of the state’s students are black. (p. 387)

Based upon the evidence, one could theorize that racial and ethnic identity accounts for some influence on graduation. One could also conclude that there is a clear distinction and discrepancy with degree attainment between males and females. However, King (2000) would contend that the gender gap for African American students, at the high school level, is not a significant issue. Rather, King (2000) found “the big story for African Americans is not a gender gap, but rather the progress both sexes have made in catching up to the whites” (p. 3). Challenges still exist, however, regarding Hispanic student achievement. “Among Hispanics, women aged 25 to 29 now are more likely than men to hold a high school diploma, but the most significant gap is between Hispanics of both genders and the rest of the population” (King, 2000, p. 3). Hispanic students of either gender are not faring well in terms of high school completion. “While close to 90 percent of white and African-American men aged 25 to 29 have a high school diploma, only 60 percent of Hispanic men have reached this minimal level of educational attainment” (King, 2000, pp. 3-4). Hussar and Bailey (2011) projected that the total
number of high school graduates (both public and private) “increased 32 percent between 1995-1996 and 2007-2008, a period of 12 years; and is projected to decrease 3 percent between 2007-2008 and 2020-2021, a period of 13 years” (p. 8). The initial increase is important to note, while understanding the context of the growth over time illustrates that the graduation rates were decreasing. What is of concern was the projected decrease of 3 percent by 2020-2021. While it is crucial to understand the areas where progress is being made, it is equally important to identify the shortcomings within the educational system that hinder student success. Hussar and Bailey (2011) provide actual and projected numbers for public high school graduates by race and ethnicity:

Between 2007-2008 and 2020-2021, the number of public high school graduates is projected to decrease 11 percent for students who are White; decrease 2 percent for students who are Black; increase 27 percent for students who are Hispanic; increase 46 percent for students who are Asian/Pacific Islander; and increase 1 percent for students who are American Indian/Alaska Native. (p. 9)

The projected growth is encouraging for Hispanics; however, the fact of the matter is that Hispanic students in 2023 currently lag behind their White counterparts. More specifically, male students trail both Hispanic females and most other students from various races and ethnicities.

Many students, especially in community colleges, enroll in post-secondary education institutions without adequate academic preparation. The research clearly articulates that there is an incongruity with the high school graduation rate of males to females (Murnane, 2013). The achievement and persistence gap, between male and female students, continues to be prevalent. Understanding the factors that influence and
the consequences of the growing disparity between the genders is essential. Not only does this gender gap exist in secondary graduation rates, the graduation rates in post-secondary institutions of higher education also tell a comparable story. “The high school graduation rate is higher for females than for males in each of the major racial/ethnic groups, but particularly for black youth” (Murnane, 2013, p. 386). Significant gender gaps exist, especially among black and Hispanic youth (Murnane, 2013).

**College Matriculation**

Successful matriculation and completion of post-secondary education are crucial for students as it opens additional career opportunities and prospects for their future. “Higher education provides the credentials by which individuals differentiate themselves in the workforce” (Weaver-Hightower, 2010, p. 32). For those students that matriculate to post-secondary education, the narrative is somewhat similar to that of secondary degree participation and completion. “The number of women participating annually in higher education at all levels now equals almost 8 million, while 6.3 million men enroll” (King, 2000, p. 7). As denoted by King (2000), “the number of male college students has hovered around 6 million since 1975, while the number of females has grown substantially, from 5 million in 1975 to 8 million in 1997, the last date for which these data are available” (p. 7). Enrollment has significantly increased for women over time, specifically for Hispanic women. These gains have been steady for women from the 1970s until the mid-1980s “and little change since then” (King, 2000, p. 12). Consequently, the gender gap has been minimized as there has been little progress among Hispanic men. According to the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2017), “across racial/ethnic groups, larger shares of
undergraduate degrees and certificates were awarded to female students than to male students in academic year 2013–14” (p. 115). For example, the shares of associate degrees earned by female students were 66% for Black students, 64% for American Indian/Alaska Native students, 62% for Hispanic students and 60% for students of two or more races, 60% for White students, and 57% for Asian/Pacific Islander students (NCES, 2017).

It is important to note that the disparities between men and women continue to increase with time. The disparities may be attributed to the rate at which females are enrolling in postsecondary institutions, which is higher than their male counterparts.

Additional figures from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) by Hussar and Bailey (2011) indicated “first-time freshmen enrollment in degree granting institutions increased 48 percent from 1995 to 2009” (p. 24). Of the 2,169,000 first-time freshmen fall enrollment in 1995, approximately 46% (n = 1,001,000) were male students while the remaining 54% (n = 1,168,000) were female (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). In 2009, for first-time freshmen fall enrollees (n = 3,210,000), approximately 46% (1,480,000) were male enrollees while 54 percent (n = 1,730,000) were female. For the span of 14 years, the ratio of male to female students has remained somewhat steady. According to Hussar and Bailey (2011), “between 2009 and 2020, first-time freshmen enrollment is projected to increase 11% overall, 6% for men and 15% for women” (p. 24). As we appraise the actual projected ratio of male to female students, it should be noted that there is a projected shift to 44% males (n = 1,566,000) and 56% females (n = 1,996,000) in 2020 (Hussar & Bailey, 2011, p. 70). Clearly, there is a higher percentage of females than males enrolling in postsecondary institutions of higher education.
Weaver-Hightower (2010) indicated that proportion disparities may be of concern, but “more men attend college today than ever before, and the numbers keep rising” (p. 30). Furthermore, “it’s just that women’s enrollments have risen faster—there was a 29% jump in female enrollments between 1997 and 2007 versus a 22% jump for males” (p. 30). Weaver-Hightower (2010) noted, “African-American and Hispanic males are much less likely to have a postsecondary degree than both their white and Asian-American peers and females of color” (p. 30). King (2000) maintained, “there is not a generalized educational crisis among men, but there are pockets of real problems. In particular, African-American, Hispanic, and low-income males lag behind their female peers in terms of educational attainment and are far outpaced by white, Asian-American, and middle-class men and women” (p. 2). Exploration of the issues affecting degree attainment, inclusive of the degree to which students are prepared to engage in college-level coursework, structural and educational determinants, family and other external influences may provide further insight.

**Developmental Education (Remediation) in Context**

Critics of developmental education cite that developmental education in its current form is ineffective, as the increased time in developmental education decreases degree attainment (Bettinger & Long, 2009; Long et al., 2013). Depending on the programming, some institutions require multiple levels and courses to scaffold and build the necessary skills for successful participation in postsecondary education. The NMHED (2013) pointed out that college students assigned to developmental education “…are far less likely to continue their education and graduate. This last point is indicative of a serious problem: Traditional remediation efforts are not achieving their goal of preparing students
to be successful in the college classroom” (p. 43). Dropping out of college is an enormous challenge faced by students attending institutions of higher education.

Proponents assert developmental education provides opportunities to rectify the disparities such as socioeconomic status, underrepresented populations in higher education, language barriers, to name a few. Murnane and Hoffman (2013) noted that not all racial and ethnic groups saw an equal rise in educational attainment despite the fact that the United States “high school graduation rate increased by 6 percentage points” (p. 61).

Due to the overrepresentation of these marginalized populations in developmental education coursework, further exploration of the existing research is warranted as to whether placement in remedial coursework is the sole variable influencing degree attainment.

**Placement in Developmental Education**

Generally, students of color and students from less affluent families are disproportionately more highly represented in developmental courses and programs (Attewell et al., 2006). In the state of New Mexico, developmental education placement rates have hovered at approximately 50% for more than two decades. During 2013, 51.4% of New Mexico public high school graduates entering public post-secondary education institutions required placement in developmental education (NMHED, 2013). The statewide total remediation rate for the Fall of 2019 showed a decline compared to previous years with approximately 39.4% of students requiring remediation (NMHED, 2019). Dropping out of college is an enormous challenge faced by students in higher education. Exploration and investigation as to why students do not reach degree
attainment is extremely valid, considering the high rates of students placing in developmental education and the low completion rates for these students. Limited degree completion by students in community colleges and four-year institutions is notable:

The numbers are stark: In Texas, for example, of every 100 students who enrolled in a public college, 79 started at a community college, and only 2 of them earned a two-year degree on time; even after four years, only 7 of them graduated. Of the 21 of those 100 who enrolled at a four-year college, 5 graduated on time; after eight years, only 13 had earned a degree. Similarly, in Utah, for 100 students who enrolled in a public college, 71 chose a community college, 45 enrolling full-time and 26 part-time; after four years, only 14 of the full-time students and one of the part-time students graduated. Of the 29 who started at a four-year college, only 13 got their degree within eight years. (Lewin, 2011, p. 15)

While research indicates the significant challenges faced by students who begin in developmental education, additional research is warranted as to whether placement in remediation is the sole variable that may affect degree attainment. Although developmental education may present challenges to success, other factors and predictor variables may influence degree attainment.

**Developmental Education National Landscape**

Students entering community colleges and other institutions of higher education often face academic under preparedness. This necessitates their participation in developmental coursework to learn and hone basic skills.

Across the nation, students are testing and placing into one or more levels of developmental education coursework at high rates. According to Complete College
America (CCA) (2012), “more than 50 percent of students entering two-year colleges and nearly 20 percent of those entering four-year universities are placed in remedial classes” (p. 2). Strong American Schools (2008, p. 5) provided additional data by state, maintaining,

More than 80 percent of students in Oklahoma’s community college system are enrolled in a remedial course. In California, a high percentage of the 40,000 freshmen admitted each year into California State University—the largest university system in the country—more than 60 percent need help in English, math, or both. In Indiana, 70% of students in the state’s community colleges needed remediation in 2005.

The high percentages demonstrate that students are entering institutions of higher education academically underprepared. In addition, there is a pervasive issue of low student success rates in American higher education. According to Causey et al. (2022), “low student success rates are widespread in American higher education. More than a quarter of freshmen do not return for their second year; at community colleges, it is 41 percent” (p. 2).

**Developmental Education in New Mexico**

Locally, in the State of New Mexico (NMHED, 2013), 51.4 percent of New Mexico public high school graduates entered a postsecondary institution for the academic year 2012-2013 and required developmental education. This trend has held steady during the last decade, although we have recently begun to see a slight decrease during the last few years. The significance and prevalence of academically underprepared students was noted by the NMHED (2013):
The difficulties in developing a universally accepted response to equitably preparing incoming students for the rigors of college-level coursework seems only to have increased over time and today remains one of the most persistent and contentious of quandaries in high education circles. (p. 43)

Findings by the Center for Education Policy Research (CEPR) for the Legislative Finance Committee (2011) described similar outcomes as “graduates from New Mexico Public High School who took remedial classes in math and/or reading in New Mexico Colleges between 2000 and 2009 ranged between 46.2 percent in 2000 (n = 6,696) and 50.8 percent in 2004 (n = 7616)” (Winograd & Sallee, 2011, p. 25).

According to more current data, the New Mexico Higher Education Department (NMHED) (2023) data reports on college remediation for the Fall of 2017 indicated that the statewide total remediation rate was 44.15% for recent NM high school graduates. These data are based on the cohort of students who graduated from high school in the previous year and enrolled as first-time, first-year students in public postsecondary institutions in New Mexico. These data highlight that a considerable number of students required remediation upon entering college, emphasizing the need for targeted supports and interventions to address academic preparedness and improve college readiness outcomes amongst high school graduates. These data reflect the rate for first time, freshmen at New Mexico public post-secondary institutions of higher education. As noted by the NMHED (2023), the rates hover at a comparable rate for the Fall 2018 cohort at a rate of 44.2% and for Fall 2019 a rate of 39.4%. Although, the statewide total of students requiring remedial coursework at New Mexico public post-secondary institutions of higher education has decreased over the last decade, the rate is still significant.
To compound the issue, not only do a high percentage of students require developmental coursework, but they are not readily reaching degree attainment. At a 4-year institution in New Mexico, when measured during the fifth semester, 13.5% of students in developmental courses matriculated to a college degree versus 31.3% of the general population (Winograd et al., 2013, p. 45). In comparing the 6-year graduation rate, 29.4% of developmental educations students graduated while 44.4% of the general population graduates (Winograd et al., 2013, p. 45). These statistics highlight the challenges with degree attainment by academically underprepared students in New Mexico.

Additionally, a report on the New Mexico graduates who take remedial classes in the state’s colleges and universities, which included the 40 to 48% of local high school graduates, illustrated the challenges with degree attainment. Of the 2,976 freshmen who entered college as freshmen in Fall 2003, 67% of the students requiring no remediation obtained a degree or certificate within six years. Of the students requiring one remedial course, 20% reached certificate or degree attainment within the measure of a six-year timeframe. Of the students requiring two remedial courses, 9% completed a degree or certificate. For the students that required three remedial courses, 4% reached certificate or degree attainment in six years (Winograd et al, 2010). Based on the research findings, as students require additional layers of developmental support, the difficulty of completing a degree becomes more pronounced, leading to a decreased likelihood of a degree attainment. Each additional developmental course requirement yields lower degree attainment rates. The aforementioned statistics denote the high percentage of
academically underprepared students placing in developmental education and the low degree attainment by these students.

**Stigmatization Affect**

There is a lack of consensus among research studies and articles regarding the defined success or attrition of participation in developmental or remedial programs. Different studies present varying perspectives on the outcomes and effectiveness of such programs. According to Boylan and Bonham (2011), “a classic argument of those opposed to developmental education is that it ‘stigmatizes’ students by placing them in low level, non-credit courses. As a result, such students lose their motivation and drop out of college” (p. 31). Boylan and Bonham (2011) further contend that, “no research evidence is available to indicate that such ‘stigmatization effect’ actually takes place. Students may, indeed, complain about being assigned to a non-credit or lower-level course. No research-based justification supports the assumption that this causes them to drop out” (p. 31).

Bettinger and Long (2009) found, “underprepared students without the courses are more likely to drop out of college and less likely to compete their degrees” (p. 763). The researchers further implied that both English and Math remediation is estimated to “reduce the likelihood of dropping out after five years and increase the likelihood of completing a degree within four to six years” (p. 760). As there are many levels of influence on the successful outcomes of academically underprepared students, further research is warranted.
Structural and Educational Determinants

Anderson (1988) evaluated determinants like the social and academic background of students and their goal commitment. Essentially, the study was a synthesis of Tinto (1975) and the status–attainment model. Tinto (1975) is one of the leading authorities on persistence in college. Tinto (1975) declares that the environment and integration into the college may influence persistence. More specifically “a student’s persistence in college integration into the social and academic systems of the college and their consequent commitment to the institution and the goal of graduation” (Anderson, 1988, p. 160).

The Student Integration Model (SIM) (Tinto, 1975) sought to shed some light on a theoretical model which “explains the process of interaction between the individual and the institution that lead differing individuals to drop out from higher education” (p. 90). Tinto’s SIM works toward a predictive theory of dropout and is founded upon the application of Durkheim’s theory of suicide (Tinto, 1975). As stated by Tinto (1975), “the application of Durkheim’s Theory of suicide to the phenomenon of dropout does not, in itself, yield a theory that helps explain how varying individuals come to adopt various forms of dropout behavior” (p. 92). Tinto’s conceptual framework, influenced by Durkheim's work on suicide, draws a parallel between the egoistic type of suicide (absence of social integration) and student departure, suggesting that students' decisions to leave can be seen as voluntary disengagement from the academic community. However, the SIM does provide some conceptions as to the individual qualities and dispositions relevant to educational persistence (Tinto, 1975). The SIM establishes predictive concepts as to why students drop out of postsecondary institutions.
These concepts include individual characteristics, educational expectations, and an individual’s institutional commitment. Tinto (1975) asserted:

The process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person’s experiences in those systems (as measured by his normative and structural integration) continually modify his goal and institutional commitment in ways which lead to persistence and/or varying forms of dropout.

(p. 94)

Integration, both academically and socially, at the institution of higher education supports the persistence of students where:

Students have to become engaged and come to see themselves as a member of a community of other students, academics, and professional staff who value their membership—in other words, that they matter and belong. The result is the development of a sense of belonging. (Tinto, 2017, p. 3)

One significant criticism of Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model (SIM) is that it primarily focused on traditional-age students, neglecting to consider the experiences of non-traditional or older students (Metz, 2004). This limitation raises concerns about the model's applicability to a broader range of student populations. According to Tierney (1992), in his anthropological analysis of student participation in college he noted Tinto’s Model to be “a model of integration that never questions who is to be integrated and how it is to be done assumes an individualist stance of human nature and rejects differences based on categories such as class, race, and gender” (p. 611). In addition, the Student Integration Model (SIM) (Tinto, 1975) is presumed to not be applicable to community
colleges, as two-year institutions of higher educations are generally commuter populations where students have little to no time or opportunities for social integration. However, Karp et al. (2010) examined two urban community colleges and the ways in which first-year community college students engage with their respective intuitions. Utilizing in-depth interviews with first-year college students, Karp et al. (2010) found that students do develop attachments and networks through academic settings to the institutions. In addition, the attachment is related to the persistence in the second year of college. The findings “support Tinto’s theory that integration is related to persistence” (Karp et al., 2010, p. 75). These networks are established through academic sources like the classrooms.

To address the critical need for degree completion, further investigation of the association between various individual attributes, family background, student preparation, student level of commitment and/or institutional engagement and persistence as it relates to degree attainment is warranted. One intriguing finding is that “higher ability does not assure stronger college performance; one explanation of this discrepancy is the student’s lack of integration into college life” (Anderson, 1988, p. 174).

**The Role of the Family**

Buchmann and DiPrete (2006) considered the role of family resources and gender differences in academic performance and degree completion of college students. Buchmann and DiPrete (2006) also delineated the gender gap that existed prior to the 1980s when parity was reached with men. From that point forward, women have increased in degree attainment. As indicated by data from the U.S Department of Education, Buchmann and DiPrete (2006) articulated, “from 1982 onward, the percentage
of bachelor’s degrees awarded to women continued to climb such that by 2004 women received 58 percent of all bachelor’s degrees” (pp. 515-516). The analyses performed by Buchmann and DiPrete (2006) “imply that the male disadvantage in college completion originates in part from gender-distinctive effects of family background” (p. 534). Having an educated father in the home with some college education may provide a differential advantage for males and they lose the advantage when the father has attained only a high school education or is absent (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006). This is one perspective of many in regard to the role of family and degree attainment. Howell (2011) made the connection to the Coleman Report (1966), which “concludes that the family background characteristics, rather than school attributes, are the primary determinants of student achievement” (p. 295).

Health and Wellness Determinants

Health disparities and health and wellness conditions certainly impact many aspects of life, more specifically, social determinants of health (SDOH). Social determinants of health are the circumstances or environments related to how people live, learn, grow, and work that impact health outcomes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018; McCalmont et al., 2018). Factors like race and socioeconomic status may combine to affect health status (Williams, 1999) while health conditions may present barriers to the successful integration and completion of post-secondary opportunities (Rosenbaum, 2018).

Williams (1999) considered “the complex ways in which race and socioeconomic status (SES) combine to affect health” (p. 173). Racism indirectly affects health as “racism has restricted socioeconomic attainment for members of minority groups”
(Williams, 1999, p. 177) and “can also affect SES attainment through the impact of negative racial stereotypes on educational outcomes” (p. 180). SES and segregation are noted to lessen the access to services and disproportionately expose members of the minority groups to environmental toxins, and poor-quality housing. In addition, the discrimination can impact access to medical care and treatment within the healthcare systems.

Rosenbaum (2018) conducted research based on a nationally representative longitudinal study focused on health conditions that reduce social integration and the impact on educational attainment. Rosenbaum noted “students with greater academic and social integration are more likely to complete college” (2018, p. 147). The study evaluated whether factors predict college non-matriculation and non-graduation. Rosenbaum argued, “a larger number of health conditions predicted lower graduation chances for students attending 4-year college than for students attending community college, which may imply that community colleges are more accessible to students with health conditions than 4-year colleges” (2018, p. 167). As noted by the aforementioned studies, health and wellness determinants may serve as risk factors in relation to matriculation and graduation.

**Background Determinants**

Other background factors are noted as influences on degree attainment (Dunham & Wilson, 2007, p. 208):

To date, sociological research has identified several groups of factors, namely, demographic (SES segregation, peer influences), school related (poor attendance, disciplinary problems, low academic achievement) and family related (family
size, number of siblings) that explain the manner in which background socioeconomic status (SES) structures rates of dropout.

Socioeconomic status (SES) of a family also influences degree attainment. Thomas (2013) contended, “despite decades committed to the science of objective, valid, and reliable standardized testing, outcomes from standardized tests remain most strongly correlated with the socio-economic status of students” (p. 213). Standardized tests are not good predictors of students’ potential (Howell, 2011), yet this is the standard policy for placement in developmental coursework.

Howell (2011) considered the attributes of students’ high schools and teachers as influences on the students’ need for remediation, and postulated family background as an influence on academic ability. Howell explained that “by the time students reach college, their ability to handle college-level coursework is based not only on their academic ability and effort, but on a cumulative set of influences from family, teachers, peers, and school” (2011, p. 292). The study finds that “attributes of secondary school teachers, such as credential status, experience, and educational attainment have statistically significant effects on the remediation rates of college-bound students” (p. 313).

Other factors like self-efficacy have also been noted to exert influence on scholastic achievement. Bandura et al. (1996) suggested that a parent’s sense of academic efficacy may be linked to their children’s scholastic achievements:

Such beliefs influence aspirations and strength of goal commitments, level of motivation, and perseverance in the face of difficulties and setbacks, resilience to adversity, quality of analytic thinking, causal attributions of successes and failures and vulnerability to stress and depression. (p. 1206)
Socio-cultural Factors and Other Variables

The experiences of Latino males early on in public schools may contribute to the gender gap that exists today. The “growing gender gap across all racial and ethnic groups (especially among Latinos and African Americans), perhaps the pendulum has swung too far to one side in terms of the crisis now facing young boys” (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2008, p. 5). A high percentage of students are represented in developmental courses at the college-level. Attewell et al. (2006) contended, “supporters of college remediation draw attention to the fact that students of color, students from less affluent families, and students for whom English is a second language are greatly overrepresented in remedial courses” (p. 887).

Crisp and Delgado (2014) researched and evaluated predictor variables on the persistence and transfer of Hispanic community college students, such as being a racial minority or first-generation college student. First-generation college students face unique challenges. “Compared to students with highly educated parents, first-generation students are already at a disadvantage in terms of their experiences, values, and resources before they even step foot on a college campus” (Ryan, 2012, p. 246). According to Engle and Tinto (2008), “Due largely to a lack of resources, low-income, first-generation students are more likely to live and work off-campus and to take classes part-time while working full-time, which limits the amount of time they spend on campus” (p. 21). Consequently, the lack of resources impacts the opportunities for engagement on the campus.

While predictors such as enrollment in math, reading, and/or English may increase or decrease the odds of students’ success, Crisp and Delgado (2014) maintain, “results
show that developmental students have characteristics including being a racial minority student or the first in their family to attend college that substantially increases their risk of dropping out of college, independent of their remediation experiences” (p. 111). Although developmental education may present challenges to success, it is noted in this study that other predictor variables may also influence degree attainment. Other risk and protective factors are influencing persistence and degree attainment.

Bremer et al. (2013) utilized predictor variables for evaluating outcome trajectories for degree attainment by developmental education populations in community colleges. Bremer et al. (2013) researched the outcomes of students as they account for enrollment in developmental courses in their first term at college, while controlling for “variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, and financial aid, occupational versus non-occupational major, tutoring, and placement scores” (p. 155). Regression and logistic regression were utilized to measure impact. One of the salient findings is that the math ability at the time of college entrance is a powerful predictor of student success in degree attainment (Bremer et al., 2013).

While it is difficult to pinpoint precisely which variables hinder degree attainment it is also difficult to determine which other variables support student success. In a study on Race and Remedial Math, Bahr (2010) noted enrollment in remedial math courses was disproportionate for Blacks and Hispanics. Bahr (2010) articulated, “it is unclear, however, why students at the bottom of the remedial math hierarchy have such a low probability of completing the remedial sequence” (p. 229). Furthermore, according to Bahr (2010), “despite the importance of (and great need for) remediation in math, prior work suggest that the rewards of remedial math programs are not shared equally by all
racial groups” (p. 212). Likewise, the success in remediation is compounded by other variables such as race, socioeconomic status, self-efficacy, to name a few. More recent research centering on the implications for socioeconomic status of a family and the role of the family support with mitigating these issues has been conducted. Roksa and Kinsley (2018) asserted that “family emotional support plays an important role in fostering positive academic outcomes” (p. 415). Further, Roska and Kinsley explained:

When students reported receiving more emotional support from their families, they were more likely to have a GPA of 3.0 or higher, more likely to accumulate at least 24 credits, and more likely to persist through the second year of college. One point increase on the emotional support scale was associated with 19% higher odds of having a GPA of 3.0 or higher, 19% higher odds of accumulating at least 24 credits, and 24% higher odds of persisting through the second year. (p. 426)

An additional factor noted was pedagogy at the collegiate level. In a qualitative study conducted at a community college, of the eighteen participants, more than half of the students felt the teaching practices of developmental courses were inferior. VanOra (2012) reported, “central complaints included few opportunities to connect course material with their own lived experiences, inadequate delivery of course material and an apparent disinterest in students learning” (p. 27).
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

Preface

The purpose of this study was to identify the risk and protective factors and the impact on degree attainment based on the academic and socio-cultural experiences of identified academically underprepared, students, at a community college, in Northern New Mexico. The research focused on further identifying and understanding the risk and protective factors that may have hindered or supported these participants with persisting and reaching degree attainment. The research methods addressed the following research questions: *What are the risk and protective factors experienced by academically underprepared male college students, at a community college, in Northern New Mexico? What influence do these risk and protective factors have on persistence, retention, and degree attainment at this rural, Northern New Mexico community college?*

This chapter is organized in the following sections: 1) purpose and research questions, 2) research design, 3) rationale, 4) context of the study, 5) participants, 6) data sources, 7) data collection methods, 8) data analysis, and 9) standards of quality.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

Academically, underprepared students face challenges and struggles as they seek to ascertain a career path vis-à-vis completion of a certificate or the completion of an associate degree or four-year degree. Various mitigating factors influence the persistence, retention, and successful degree attainment of students. The research questions were formulated with the aim of comprehensively identifying and understanding the academic and socio-cultural experiences, as well as the issues and challenges encountered by academically underprepared male students. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of
the experiences of academically underprepared male students in a community college setting can offer valuable insights into the challenges and obstacles faced by these male students. Furthermore, considering the widespread prevalence of developmental education and its impact on students is equally important to better understand the experiences of program participants to inform effective supports to support persistence, retention, and degree attainment for students.

Consequently, I used a qualitative research approach guided by the aforementioned questions: What are the risk and protective factors experienced by academically underprepared male college students, at a community college, in Northern New Mexico? What influence do these risk and protective factors have on persistence, retention, and degree attainment at this rural, Northern New Mexico community college?

**Research Design**

I utilized a qualitative approach as the mechanism of inquiry to collect data on the experiences of academically, underprepared male students. The research philosophy for this study was grounded in a social constructivist framework utilized to “seek understanding of the world” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). To gain insights into the experiences of academically underprepared male students, I utilized the collective case study approach. This collective case study was designed to explore the experiences associated with academically underprepared male college students at community college in Northern New Mexico. As defined by Creswell (2013), “in a collective case study (or multiple case study), the one issue or concern is again selected, but the inquirer selects multiple cases to illustrate the issue” (p. 99). A total of seven participants were selected for this collective case study to yield rich insight and an in-depth understanding of the issues and
challenges. As noted by Patton (2015) “studying information-rich cases yields insight and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations” (p. 264). This approach allowed the research participant to fully and freely express their perceived experiences. I explored the participants’ experiences through open-ended interview questions (Appendix A).

Through this qualitative research, examining the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared males at a community college in Northern New Mexico allowed for in-depth inquiry to fully address the experiences of the identified academically underprepared male students. The qualitative inquiry was based on individual interviews with the identified academically underprepared male students. With further understanding of the educational experiences of these participants, the retention and persistence issues that center on academically underprepared students can be mitigated early on, so that students at community colleges may have a higher chance of reaching degree attainment.

I selected a purposeful sample to gather information-rich cases. I conducted interviews with students who had participated in one or more levels of developmental education coursework. The interviews were conducted with the community college students digitally, recorded, and later transcribed and analyzed. The interviews provided a rich level of detail to address the research questions.

**Rationale**

Educational institutions provide opportunities for lifelong learning, personal, and professional advancement, and serve as catalysts for change with the livelihood of many students. As students graduate from high school, they may pursue additional educational
opportunities at postsecondary institutions of higher education. However, not all students are afforded these opportunities, nor do they reach degree attainment. It was the intent of the study to investigate the academic and socio-cultural experiences and to understand the risk and protective factors faced by academically underprepared male students and the impact on persistence and degree attainment at a rural Northern New Mexico Community College.

Context of Study

This study focused on investigating the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared males within a rural community college system in Northern New Mexico, which serves as a transitional pathway for students aiming to pursue higher education at public four-year institutions. The college campus was designed to offer two-year, associate degrees, and industry certificates, while also serving as a stepping stone towards opportunities to matriculate to a four-year program and complete a bachelor’s degree. The community college serves a diverse range of students from northern New Mexico and the larger community. It functions as an open-access institution of higher education, offering a variety of programs including career technical education workforce training, dual credit coursework, and college level courses leading to certificate or associate degree completion. The college aims to provide comprehensive educational opportunities that cater to the needs of students from the surrounding counties. Additionally, the college allows for credit transfer enabling students to transfer completed courses and earn credits directly to other colleges and universities.

To gain a better understanding of the context of this community college, in this section I provide a concise background narrative to include essential details such as
enrollment figures, part-time attendance rates, and eligibility for Pell grants. This overview aims to provide a better understanding of the context and the higher education institution’s degree granting environment as indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Enrollment Statistics by Cohort*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fall 2012</th>
<th>Fall 2017</th>
<th>Fall 2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Headcount Enrollment</td>
<td>1660</td>
<td>1360</td>
<td>1046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headcount Part-Time as Percent of Total Enrollment</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>77.6%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pell Eligible as Percent of Total Enrollment</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the Fall 2020 semester, the college served 1046 students, including both full-time and part-time undergraduate students. As noted in Table 1, approximately 84% of the students attended the college on a part-time basis, as reported by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) (2021). Among the first-time, full-time degree seeking undergraduate students, around 70% were awarded Pell grants.

Table 2 displays the persistence statistics for the college, which highlight the crucial role of persistence in student success and academic achievement. Persistence is defined as students' capacity to stay engaged, committed, and motivated in overcoming challenges and accomplishing their educational objectives. In this context, persistence is measured from the fall semester to the following fall semester, providing insights into students' likelihood to continue their educational journey over time.
Table 2

Persistence Statistics by Cohort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fall 2011-2012</th>
<th>Fall 2016-2017</th>
<th>Fall 2019-2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-Time Retention Rate</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-Time Retention Rate</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fall-to-fall retention rate (of 2019 cohort) was 48% and 30%, full- and part-time enrollment, respectively. The graduation rate for full-time, first-time degree seeking and certificate seeking undergraduate students (of 2017 cohort), within 150% of the normal time required for completion, was reported to be 28%.

In comparison, during the Fall 2017 semester the college’s headcount was 1360, including both full-time and part-time enrollees, with part time enrollment representing 77.6% of enrollment (NCES IPEDS, 2018). Of that population, 61% of the first-time, full-time degree and certificate seeking undergraduate students were awarded a Pell Grant (NCES IPEDS, 2019) and the fall-to-fall retention rate (of 2016 cohort) was 44% and 36%, full- and part-time enrollment, respectively. The graduation rate for full-time, first-time degree seeking and certificate seeking undergraduate students (of 2014 cohort), within 150% of the normal time required for completion, was reported to be 28%, like that of the 2014 cohort.

During the Fall 2012 semester, the headcount at the institution was 1660, with approximately 63% of students attending part-time (NCES IPEDS, 2013). Furthermore, 76% of students were eligible for Pell grants. The fall-to-fall retention rate noted in Table 2 was 50% for full-time students and 38% for part-time students (NCES IPEDS, 2014). The graduation rate for the 2009 cohort was 3% as noted in Table 3.
Table 3

Graduation Statistics by Cohort

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From 2012 to 2017, there was a decline in overall student enrollment, with a higher proportion of students opting for part-time attendance. However, during this period, there was a notable increase in the graduation rate, rising from 3% to 28%. Between 2017 and 2020, there was a further decrease in student enrollment, with more students choosing part-time enrollment. The full-time retention rate experienced an improvement, while the graduation rate remained constant.

Participant Demographics

Participants

In this study, I conducted interviews with seven participants via a Zoom teleconference. Purposeful sampling was utilized to ensure participants met specific criteria and was utilized to identify up to ten voluntary participants with “clearly identifiable cases with boundaries…to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases or a comparison of several cases” (Creswell, 2013, p.100). More specifically, maximum variation sampling was employed as this “approach consists of determining in advance some criteria that differentiate the sites or participants, and then selecting sites or participants that are quite different on the criteria” (Creswell, 2013, pp. 156-157).

Upon approval of the study by the UNM IRB (Appendix B), I selected a total of seven participants from the educational institution. The first criterion for participation
was that all participants needed to have been enrolled in, and have completed, one or
more required courses in developmental education inclusive of reading, writing, and
mathematics courses (Appendix C). Then, based on the first criterion, half of the
participants I selected needed to have attained their degree. The selection criteria for the
other half of the participants was that the participants would have engaged in the
developmental coursework but would not have returned during or after completion of the
developmental coursework. All participants selected were to be reflective of the ages and
other demographics of the two-year public institution.

A total of 266 potential participants were identified as having enrolled in and
completed one or more required courses in developmental education between the Fall
semester of 2012 and the Fall semester of 2017. I reached out to each of the identified
potential participants via the announcement of research and participant recruitment letter
(Appendix C).

The seven voluntary participant interviews consisted of male, classified
undergraduate, community college students who entered the community college between
the fall semester of 2012 and fall semester of 2017. The individuals who met the research
criteria were enrolled in and completed one or more required developmental education
courses, which covered reading, writing, and mathematics. Subsequently, teleconference
interviews were arranged and conducted with the identified seven participants, allowing
data to be collected as per the research requirements.

Additional demographics collected were related to the students’ first-generation
status, courses enrolled in and completed in developmental/remedial coursework, degree
trajectory and time to completion. During the interviews, the participants were asked
about their educational experiences, educational background, and level of degree attainment.

Data Sources

Interviews

I conducted individual interviews with seven prior program participants. Data collection consisted of individual interviews, which allowed for thick, rich description (Patton, 2015). In-depth interviews were conducted digitally via Zoom, a communications platform. I conducted the first interview on March 16, 2021 and concluded my last interview on June 16, 2021. I developed a semi-structured interview protocol to ensure consistency and validity. The protocol consisted of open-ended questions that targeted the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared male community college participants. The in-depth interviews provided qualitative data with a rich level of detail and allowed for analysis that offered insight into the experiences of academically underprepared male community college participants in developmental education. I audio recorded, transcribed the recordings, and analyzed the transcripts.

College Transcript Review

In addition to the collection of qualitative data, I conducted individual college transcript evaluations to assess the completion of developmental coursework, total earned hours, and cumulative GPA for each student.

I individually reviewed each transcript, which allowed me to verify the enrollment and completion of developmental coursework by each participant. The transcript evaluation was also employed to determine the entry point at which students began their remedial courses. The comprehensive transcript evaluation allowed for a thorough
verification and identification of their educational pathway and highlighted periods where students may have taken breaks or temporarily paused their studies. Also, the transcript evaluation provided information on whether students earned their respective degree and offered insights into the period within which the participants pursued their degree completion.

By reviewing and analyzing the transcripts, it was possible to gain insights into the student’s course enrollment, progress and completion of developmental coursework, degree pursuit, and overall academic achievements. The comprehensive approach allowed for a holistic understanding of the student's educational pathway which provided valuable information for evaluating their academic experiences and successes.

**Data Analyses: Derive Categories and Themes**

After all interviews were completed, I reviewed and transcribed each of the responses to the interview questions. The transcribed interviews were reviewed for accuracy and all publicly identifiable information redacted. I utilized a within-case analysis and a cross-case analysis of the interviews as part of the analysis and interpretation of the multiple cases (Creswell, 2013). The data collected from participants was reviewed through an inductive coding process (Miles et al., 2014) and further analyzed. In the first cycle, I applied inductive coding to the transcribed interviews. For each interview, I compiled the responses in MS Excel to allow for organization and to systematically categorize and capture excerpts of the qualitative data. After analyzing the data from the first cycle, the evaluation method facilitated the review of personal data and enabled the identification of additional themes. The coding process conducted during the first cycle analysis contributed to this identification. As the various cases were different,
it was important to note that the generalizability from one case to the other is not possible as the contexts of cases differ (Creswell, 2013).

I utilized MS Excel to conduct a second cycle of coding to group and sort the data. An Excel spreadsheet was created and utilized to systematically analyze the data for recurring ideas and to determine larger categories and themes to provide insight into the academic and social cultural experiences of these academically underprepared male students within a community college system. Table 4 showcases the coding process of the first cycle coding, the identification of categories, and the evolution of themes.

Table 4

*Inductive Coding and Identification of Categories and Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>First Cycle Coding</th>
<th>Identification of Categories</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Preparedness</td>
<td>Academic Challenge</td>
<td>Challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle School Preparedness</td>
<td>Difficulties</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Remedial Coursework</td>
<td>Prior Education</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>Developmental Education</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Struggle</td>
<td>Difficulties</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Struggle Class</td>
<td>Difficulties</td>
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<td>Struggle College</td>
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<td>Difficulties</td>
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<td>Break in Study</td>
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<td>Challenges and Impact</td>
<td>Personal Challenges</td>
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<td>Mentor</td>
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<td>Support</td>
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<td>Themes</td>
<td>First Cycle Coding</td>
<td>Identification of Categories</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>Expectations, Aspirations, and Motivation</td>
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<td>Goals and Commitments</td>
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<td>Encouragement</td>
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<td>Motivation</td>
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<td>Expectations</td>
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<td>Goals</td>
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<td>Community vs. Large</td>
<td>Support-Institution</td>
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<td>Persist</td>
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<td>Factors Persistence</td>
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<td>Support Faculty</td>
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<tr>
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### Themes

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>First Cycle Coding</th>
<th>Identification of Categories</th>
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<td>Participant Demographics</td>
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<td>Remedial Coursework and Impact</td>
<td>Stigma</td>
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In Chapter 4, I delve into the themes that emerged as a result of both the first and second cycles of the inductive coding process. These themes are identified and discussed in detail in Chapter 4. See Appendix D for an example of a coded transcript.

**Standards of Quality**

**Ensuring Quality: Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

The questions were clear as to the purpose of the research and the study design was aligned to collect data that answered the research questions. The researcher was positioned within the study and the roles were defined. The data were collected from the interviews driven by the research questions with the seven participants providing reliability (Miles et al., 2014).

As interest was generated for this study through a process of self-reflection, personal prejudice is noted as a limitation. However, extensive measures were taken to ensure validity and reliability of the information that was gathered and presented. Understanding and documenting my ontological and axiological values furthered the validity of the research.
As the sample size of the study was limited to seven male participant interviews, the generalizability of the information analyzed should be limited to furthering additional research around the various topics affecting male participants in rural community college settings. As educational institutions are ever changing and undergoing educational reform and influence, it is important to note that this study only marked a particular moment in time, and further research is warranted, as various changes continually impact the educational achievement and degree attainment of male students.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Preface

The purpose of this study was to investigate the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared male community college participants. Through this qualitative case study, the research questions focused on providing thick descriptions and rich details through personal interviews regarding the risk and protective factors experienced by underprepared male community college students at a community college in Northern New Mexico. More specifically, the study aimed to identify the risk and protective factors influencing the persistence, retention, and degree attainment for these developmental education participants. Understanding the risk and protective factors experienced by underprepared male community college students may support the reduction of attrition, and, more importantly, increase subsequent graduation rates. Understanding the complexity of persistence and degree attainment, by these participants, was at the forefront of this research.

Students enter post-secondary pathways through traditional and nontraditional opportunities. The students enter through the traditional high school pathway having graduated from high school and attend a two-year college or a four-year college or university. Some students enter after having engaged in the workforce and enter college or university for various reasons. Pathways and experiences are unique to the individual. Some students elect to begin their educational journey at open-access institutions of higher education, particularly community colleges. According to the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2023), in fall 2020, 10.9 million students enrolled in a four-year institution while 4.9 million students were
enrolled in two-year institutions. As approximately one third of students enrolled in a
two-year institution, evaluating the experiences of students attending two-year institutions
and their educational pathways is very important. This research focused on the following
research questions: 1) What are the risk and protective factors experienced by
academically underprepared male college students, at a community college, in Northern
New Mexico? 2) What influence do these risk and protective factors have on persistence,
retention, and degree attainment at this rural, Northern New Mexico community college?

**Introduction to Participants**

To gain a better understanding of the participants, I present in this section a brief
background narrative that encompasses key details such as their age, educational degree
attainment, first-generation status, and some of the challenges they have faced. This
context will provide valuable insights to their individual educational experiences and
perspectives. Table 5 provides selected information about the participants, including their
pseudonyms.

**Table 5**

*Selected Demographic Information about the Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>First-Generation College Student</th>
<th>Educational Attainment</th>
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<td>No</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beto</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>AS Pre-Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dale</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Elias</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Neal</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>AA Digital Media Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobias</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>AS Pre-Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>AA Liberal Arts and BA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Age and First-Generation Status

The age range of participants spanned from twenty-two to sixty-seven years of age. Two of the participants were of retirement age and attended college after having completed full military and workforce careers. The average age of the remaining five participants was 24.4. However, the aggregate average age of all participants at the time of the interviews was 34.6 years of age.

For the purpose of this study, first-generation college students are defined as “students who enrolled in postsecondary education and whose parents do not have any postsecondary education experience” (NCES, 2017, p. 3) or students who had a parent enroll and have some college experience, but never graduated. Out of the seven participants, five participants self-reported being first-generation college students. The participants shared that they were the pioneers in their families, being the first to either attend or complete a postsecondary credential. Victor, a retired military individual aged 67, mentioned that among his [many] siblings, he was the first one to achieve a college degree and completed it after his military career.

Victor identifies as a first-generation, Hispanic college student having embarked on his college journey after serving our country for over 41 years. Despite these unique circumstances, Victor successfully matriculated to a four-year program and has earned a bachelor’s degree. This achievement demonstrates his determination and dedication to furthering his education even after a long and distinguished career of military service.

Elias, a retired individual age 53, confirmed that he was indeed a first-generation college student when I asked about it. As of the time of this study, Elias had successfully
earned an associate degree. This signifies the successful completion of study at the post-secondary level.

Beto, a 25-year-old participant, mentioned that neither of his parents had attended college, indicating a lack of prior college experience within their immediate family. Beto told me, “Both my mom and dad didn't go to college.” These responses highlight the unique position of these participants as the first individuals in their families to embark on a college education journey as a first-generation college student. Beto experienced challenges during his high school years, leading to his decision to drop out. However, at the time of this study, Beto had made significant progress in his educational journey and had earned an associate degree in pre-science.

Of the five participants reporting as first-generation college students, two indicated they were the first in their families to complete a college degree despite their parent or parents attending a post-secondary institution of higher education, and not completing a college degree. Dale, a 26-year-old participant, explained that his father had some college experience but did not complete a degree. In addition, Dale is uncertain about his mother's educational background but suggests that she may not have pursued formal education beyond high school. As noted by Dale, “My dad has like, I think he did like, a little bit of college, but he didn't finish. Uh, I don't know that my mom has any formal education past high school.” Dale identifies as first-generation and noted high school presented challenges and that he was disengaged with school. Dale shared, “I didn't really see myself like getting educated in the future and I didn't really care.” Dale was expelled from school and later graduated completing online coursework to finish his high school requirements. As he entered college, at one point he was not employed and
lived in his car the first semester he began his college career. During his college career at this same college, he stopped-out of college citing employment needs and financial reasons. Dale has successfully completed an associate degree and has progressed to a four-year program. Currently, he is pursuing a bachelor's degree.

Tobias, a 25-year-old participant, self-identified as a first-generation college student. Tobias made considerable progress in his educational journey by completing an Associate of Science Pre-Science degree and has matriculated in a four-year program. Tobias shared, “My mom got a certificate at [university], so in that capacity I'm second generation, but as far as first to get a associates or bachelors, I will be first.” Tobias is considered a first-generation college student despite his mother completing a certificate program as no one in his immediate family has obtained a traditional college degree. As a first-generation college student, Tobias is breaking new ground within his family by pursuing a postsecondary education beyond the certificate level.

Profiles of Participants Not First-Generation Status

Both Neal and Adán expressed that they do not consider themselves as first-generation college students as their parents have attained a degree. Neal, a 22-year-old participant, mentioned that his mother had achieved either a bachelor's degree or even a master's degree. Neal identifies as a second-generation college student, as his parent earned a bachelor’s degree and graduated with high honors. Neal disclosed he dropped out of high school and earned a high school equivalency credential. He did not feel academically prepared to enter college. During his academic career, Neal has earned an associate degree and has matriculated in a bachelor’s program and as of the Spring 2021 semester had stopped-out of college due to financial challenges.
Adán, a 24-year-old participant, identifies as a second-generation college student as both his parents are college graduates. Adán’s parents have completed their college education with his father achieving a master’s degree and mother attaining a bachelor’s degree. Adán revealed high school was a struggle for him. Adán has accomplished the completion of an associate degree and has progressed to a bachelor's program. However, at the time of this interview, Adán had decided to take a break from college coursework. The break was attributed to the challenges associated with the substantial amount of online coursework. As a result, Adán temporarily halted his academic pursuits to address the difficulties he encountered with the online learning format.

Crisp and Delgado (2014) posited that students participating in developmental coursework have “characteristics including being a racial minority student or the first in their family to attend college that substantially increases their risk of dropping out of college, independent of their remediation experiences” (p. 111). However, despite the heightened increased risk of dropping out of college, as of the Spring 2021 semester, all seven participants completed an associate degree. The specific type of associate degree and the time taken to complete it varied among the participants. As of the Spring 2021 semester, four participants had enrolled in and were working towards the completion of a bachelor's degree, one participant had already obtained a bachelor's degree, and the remaining two participants had decided not to pursue further educational opportunities after obtaining their associate degree.

**Degree Trajectory**

Each participant enrolled in and completed remedial education coursework while working toward the completion of an associate degree. The focus of the major study for
each participant varied as noted by the completion of degree by participants. As illustrated in Table 5, participants worked toward and completed the following degrees: Associate of Applied Science in General Studies (AAS General Studies), Associate of Arts in Digital Media Arts (AA Digital Media Arts), Associate of Pre-Science (AS Pre-Science), and the Associate of Liberal Arts (AA Liberal Arts). The Associate of Liberal Arts, the Associate of Pre-Science, and the Associates of Digital Media Arts are two-year degrees with general education and pre-major work that may transfer directly to four-year programs. The Associate of Applied Science in General Studies is a two-year degree program leading to employment or continued studies. It is crucial to emphasize that each of the seven research participants achieved an associate degree.

**Completed Credit Hours, GPA and Time to Completion**

Commonly, an associate degree, a two-year credential, requires the completion of a minimum of sixty credit hours with the completion of specific coursework and major core classes. The associate degree is awarded after having successfully completed specific classes and sixty hours of postsecondary study. The time to completion lasts two to three years. The participants in this study completed specific coursework associated by program emphasis of the associate degree, as noted in Table 5. The associate degrees noted articulate directly to bachelor’s level programs. All seven participants completed the associate’s level degrees, while five of the seven participants completed the associate’s level undergraduate studies and transferred on to bachelor’s level degree granting programs.

All participants completed well over the required number of credit hours as they worked toward degree completion (see Figure 1). The final grade point average of each
participant appears at the end of the bar. Collectively, the participants averaged a completion of approximately 81.5 credit hours and an average of 3.4 grade point average on a four-point scale.

The time to completion of the associate degree is noted in Figure 2. The time to completion does include the completion of summer coursework. As mentioned earlier, the typical duration for completing an associate degree ranges from two to three years, assuming that the student is enrolled full-time at the institution of higher education. Full-time status usually entails taking around 12 to 15 credit hours per semester. The time to completion of the associate degree ranged from Victor completing the associate degree in the span of 6 semesters while Tobias completed the associate degree within a total of 10 semesters. Extending the time to completion of the associate degree was required for participants to complete multiple levels of remedial mathematics courses before the completion of a college-level mathematics course. Three of the seven participants
required the completion of remedial English coursework before proceeding with the completion of a required college-level English coursework. Two of the seven participants were enrolled part-time for a short period of time. As pointed out earlier, five of the seven participants matriculated to bachelor’s level programs. As of Spring 2021, two of the five participants pursuing their bachelor’s degrees had stopped-out of their degree program.

While it is true that all students in the study successfully completed their associate degrees, it should be noted that their completion periods differed from the standard reporting of completion rates for two- and four-year college programs.

Despite the significant growth in enrollment at two-year colleges, the completion rate for first-time, full-time degree seeking students remains low. Less than a third of these students completed a degree within 150% of the normal time. The graduation completion rate hovered at approximately 25.1, 27.0, and 28.2 percent respectively for cohorts entering 2014, 2015, and 2016 (NCES, 2020). According to the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2020), when comparing males at all 2-year public institutions of higher education, 24.4% (2014), 26.1% (2015), and 27.2% (2016) graduate with a certificate or associate degree within 150 percent of normal time. All participants successfully earned an associate degree, but not within the measured 150% of normal time for a first-time, full-time degree seeking students. Figure 2 illustrates the number of semesters completed by each participant.
Background Determinants

Perspectives on Being Academically Prepared

All participants in this study enrolled in and completed one or more required remedial courses in the developmental education sequence of courses. All participants were placed in remedial or developmental coursework based on entry exam criteria to include assessing English and mathematics skills. Standardized assessments utilized by the college system determined the appropriate student course placement in remedial coursework in the developmental education sequence of courses. If ACT and SAT scores were available, these metrics were also considered with the placement of students in remedial coursework. The standardized assessments were a proxy for determination of academic readiness, or the need for remedial assistance upon enrollment. All participants required some remedial support upon enrollment at this college.
Although participants required various levels of remedial support upon enrollment at the college where they all attended, when queried about how prepared they were to enter college, three of the seven participants expressed confidence with academic preparedness, but did not quite know what to expect, while the remaining participants expressed they were not academically prepared. Victor voiced, “Well, I had the confidence that I could make it, you know, saying, but the thing is, is that, well, I didn't know what to expect after so many years.”

The seven participants expressed a level of comfort with being academically prepared; all required remedial coursework. Dale had a very different perspective regarding his preparedness to enter college. When he first started college, Dale noted:

I was actually living out of my car. Just so, I'm probably not very prepared like I knew, kind of what I was getting myself into, and I took like a pretty light load that first semester. I think I took like 9 credits or something like that, and, uh I don't know, I still succeeded. I did pretty well that semester, but maybe I wasn't super prepared when I was entering into it.

Despite feeling underprepared in some areas, Dale expressed confidence in his overall academic preparedness. He stated, “I've always done really well in school, like when I am really engaged in it I could just like fly through stuff quickly. Unless it's calculus, then I have to work at it.”

Neal demonstrated a strong mental preparedness for his academic journey, but he expressed a lack of confidence in his academic preparedness. He recounted:

Mentally, probably very prepared. I think I was ready to go forward, but academically not prepared at all. I had to take a lot of remedial classes in college.
to catch up. And I still, I still do. I still have a, a couple more that I have to finish before I can get my degree.

Elias remarked, “I feel I was a fairly good. Fairly good, and prepared.”

Adán shared he was not as prepared, given his high school experience:

I didn't see myself going to college really, and I didn't really know why at the time I was in high school and like I feel like, I had an interesting take on public education. Umm, where I feel like I didn't take it as seriously because I felt a little bored in certain classes, and that didn't come without its struggles. I, I always struggled with very like analytical type tasks, so whether that was like math, science, things that like certain sciences were a little easier that were it wasn't as applied earlier on the math part of it, but math is very intertwined with science, so like when I was in high school, I kind of suffered in certain academics and did really well in others.

Adán also disclosed:

…so, when it came to college and college preparedness, I really, it's not so much that the like public education failed me. It was more of like there wasn't enough structure for me to kind of have a plan for the next step. So, um, when I got to college I, I ended up, I like applied for different colleges and I got accepted to a few but I really was kind of afraid to just make that leap.

Beto, like many of his peers, recounted feeling he was not prepared, but the structures within the university supported his confidence:

I don't think I was that prepared. Um, I think getting the support and the help through the GED and getting to do like the placement exams and seeing where I
would best fit and getting the support through the advisors and the teachers within the university help build my confidence to stay in and complete a degree.

Tobias believed he was “not at all” prepared:

I didn't really understand how the, the university worked because I didn't really get an idea from, you know anybody else, especially when I was in high school and college level because both my parents or my mom, like I said did go to a university, but she didn't really have the best experiences with it and she couldn't really kind of pass on a lot of those you know, tips on how to and I really understand the concept of, you know, scheduling my own classes, getting you know whatever prerequisites I needed for other classes, set for a curriculum.

As a result, Tobias felt he was not as good with planning the first couple of years and the lack of preparedness and planning affected him as he completed classes that he did not need for the completion of his degree.

The participants at this rural community college shared a common experience of feeling academically underprepared upon entering. Despite a few participants expressing some level of preparedness, all of them had to enroll in developmental coursework alongside their regular degree related classes throughout their academic journeys. These perspectives highlight the importance of providing necessary support and resources to promote academic success and address the challenges faced by the academically underprepared students in community colleges.

**Developmental Education, Coursework, and Impact**

While the participants had diverse career goals and individual college pathways, they shared common experiences and perspectives regarding developmental coursework.
Most participants recognized the importance of building background knowledge and refreshing their skills before transitioning to college level coursework. They expressed the value they found in the developmental course, highlighting its role in preparing them for success in higher level courses. However, some participants also mentioned encountering challenges or negative sentiments associated with the development of coursework. Overall, their experience of participation development coursework demonstrated its significance in their academic journey.

Victor shared his personal experience with the mathematics coursework, specifically the remedial classes he had to take. He acknowledged struggling with the subject initially but highlighted the value of the remedial courses and improving his understanding. He explained:

I took all the algebra that I was required to and I did have to go to all the remedial classes at the end. And I'll be truthful, I was doing not very good in that subject and uh, took all the remedial courses that it could and they were very helpful. You know the other students were very helpful.

He conveyed his challenges with mathematics, but commented the classes were helpful. In addition, he remarked that the support of tutors “were helpful.” He cited that the support helped him and clarified, “You know that that's what got me through” referencing the completion of the mathematics coursework.

Victor also distinguished the differences in the demographics of participants. He observed:

For the most part, the people that were in those classes were the I guess the older students. The new the younger kids, the kids coming fresh out of high school or
still in high school doing the dual credit program had no problem with it. So, I, I think it was the older students were having more of a problem than anything else.

Dale had a very different experience with the development coursework and remarked concerning his involvement and connection to his peers. When asked about his experiences and the pros and cons of participating in developmental education, his response centered on the lack of engagement with his peers and not talking with any students until he reached his college level mathematics course. He stated:

I have no idea who's taking any of those courses with me. I didn't know any of my classmates ever until like last semester that was like the first time I really engaged with any of my classmates was, as the classwork gets harder. It feels like the more you almost have to engage with your classmates just to like just so you can like have like a group thing going where you're all thinking about the same things and studying towards the same things. 'Cause like I, I didn't really like talk to anybody in my, like those math classes.

Dale’s engagement with peers was limited within the developmental coursework. It was not until he reached the college level coursework that he engaged with peers. He explained:

Those are online. I didn't like to hang out with people to talk about, like how to set up an equation or something like that. I do that now with calculus, like I do that with [mathematics professor] and a couple other classmates every week and it's really great, but in those developmental stages I did not do that at all.

In alignment with Victor’s perspective, Neal believed developmental education was for a varied demographic and nontraditional learners. Neal reflected:
I think, uh, maybe if it's for young people like myself, it's going to be people who dropped out of high school or maybe were homeschooled. Or potentially people that uh, didn't necessarily get a proper education. Growing up and now are at an age where they can't attend college and so they try and do that but need the foundation to maybe take some of the more advanced courses in terms of. It's the word, nontraditional learners. It’s more refresher courses. Or maybe it’s a knowledge that they never really got the chance to learn and they are able to go back and take those courses …

Neal found value in the structure created for the support of mathematics coursework and noted the faculty teaching developmental coursework were also teaching the college level coursework and found this to be a positive experience.

Elias explained his perspective, “For me it was like, really like a refresher course. That was the pro and the con was being out of, out so long from school that the way things were done had changed, changed from what I had learned.”

Adán found the coursework to be supportive and was able to work in a “non-judgmental atmosphere” despite his feeling there was a stigma associated with the developmental coursework. He noted the stigma as a negative attribute of the classes:

I think the con more than anything, is just kind of like the stigma of it. Um, being in a class where it's really you're starting over, you're learning how to build those foundational skills and other than that I mean like it was really helpful to be among a group of peers that were in the same boat you were in, so to speak and to have a non-judgmental atmosphere 'cause that was a big thing for me like when I was growing up I, I was kind of shamed for not being as quick at like math and
things like that. I remember in fifth grade one of my teachers called me a
birdbrain in front of the class, which doesn't seem like a big deal at face value,
like I have thicker skin now, but to a kid that's like it's pretty devastating. Um, it
really affects your ability to I guess conceptualize yourself, doing things like that
and, um I, I think being able to go through that without having that sort of like
fear was a big a big thing for me because, uh, I had the support. Like if I needed
help, I could just go talk to my friends about it and I was able to do it and it really
like boosted my confidence, um. So yeah.
Beto denoted his experience was similar to that of his peers and indicates the
value of the development of the foundation skills as referenced by other participants. He
stated:
I would say the pros are that you would be able to, you'd be able to build like your
background knowledge into like the other classes; that way you don't take too
hard of a class and not I guess get scared of completing the course and drop out.
Tobias offered his perspective on engaging in developmental coursework. He
indicated:
I would say pro is, you get to learn a lot about you, know a variety of different
subjects. There's really no, in my opinion, there's no cons to it. I really think that
in learning something there's only positives to be. The only negative I could
possibly see is, you know, time spent in an entry level course could be probably
better spent in something geared towards your major, but overall, the idea in my
opinion to go to college is to get a well-rounded education, not a specialized one.
The non-judgmental environment created an atmosphere for the majority of the participants to engage and participate within the framework of the developmental education coursework despite references to stigma, challenges with technology, and spending time in coursework not directly geared at degree completion. The majority of the participants found the developmental coursework supported the development of foundation skills or served as a refresher or a mechanism to support students with building confidence and overcoming fears. The overall perception of the developmental coursework was positive for these participants.

All participants required one or more developmental mathematics courses during their academic career at this community college. According to research conducted by Winograd, Florez and Garcia (2010), students who entered college and required one remedial course, 20% of these students reached certificate or degree attainment within the six-year timeframe. As of the completion of this study, participants have reached degree attainment, despite their need to complete developmental coursework.

**Stigma of Participation with Developmental Coursework**

The feelings, perceptions, and experiences of participation in developmental or remedial coursework varied by participant. The participants cited varying degrees of discomfort and stigma with taking part in the developmental coursework. As aforementioned, nontraditional learners cited challenges with the technology and limited experience with the delivery of online classes. One participant referenced being perceived as feeling like a student participating in remedial coursework were less knowledgeable. Others perceived there was a stigma based on age. One participant believed that an older
student returning to college and asking for help was embarrassing. Victor proclaimed the following statement regarding his mathematics coursework:

Dealing with, you know, with technology nowadays a lot of the program was on computers. You took your classes online, you know the teacher reserved as a facilitator, which they did a good job, but you know it's, it's, I guess I was used to the teacher being there all the time, you know what I'm saying and they were there all the time. But the thing is, is that sometimes when you're a little bit older, it's kind of hard to ask for help. You know what I'm saying. And that's one of those things yeah, that makes, you know, but that, but that's on me. You know that's on me and the older students, you know what I’m saying? They don't wanna feel like you know they're embarrassed to say, well, I really don't know this. You know what I'm saying?

Dale indicated other students relayed this perception and he remarked, “some people have, like this weird, like stigma with it. If they have to start with it. Like it, like they feel like they're dumb or something like that 'cause they had to like start over, but that's just like things that people have told me.”

Neal noted that developmental coursework had an association with students that did not have an opportunity “to get a proper education.” He contended:

Or potentially people that uh, didn't necessarily get a proper education. Growing up and now are at an age where they can't attend college and so they try and do that but need the foundation to maybe take some of the more advanced courses in terms of. It's the word, nontraditional learners.
In addition, Adán concurred with the notion of the stigma associated with the coursework and references starting over and learning how to build the foundational skills.

These participants shared their experiences and perceptions regarding the notion of taking developmental coursework as a stigma. The stigma of being a nontraditional learner, or not knowing or having experienced the foundation information was shared but did not impact negatively or serve as a risk factor for engagement of coursework. Opponents of developmental education argue that the coursework stigmatizes students by placing them in low level, non-credit courses and as a result of being placed in the coursework, “students lose their motivation and drop out of college” (Boylan & Bonham, 2011, p. 31). The perceived risk factor of placement in developmental coursework did not negatively impact the retention and persistence of these participants. The classes supported the development of the required foundational skills, so that these students could enter the college level coursework and attain their degrees. In alignment with Doyle (2010), this open-access college is supporting academically underprepared students reach degree completion such that the “largest gains in graduation rates over the past decade have been accomplished at open-access colleges and universities” (p. 2). Based on the shared experiences of the participants, despite the noted stigma of participation with developmental coursework, this open-access institution of higher education and the developmental coursework provided is serving as a protective factor when it comes to building foundation skills for nontraditional learners.

**Challenges**

During the duration of the academic careers of the participants at this rural, community college, the participants experienced varying levels of academic and personal
challenges. From the statements of the participants at this rural community college, several challenges were encountered including academic challenges such as struggles with mathematics, English composition, and online coursework. Personal and financial challenges were also highlighted including depression, workload, family challenges, and difficulty in obtaining grants. However, the participants were able to overcome these challenges with the help of supportive networks of mentors, instructors and tutors provided by the college.

Victor reflected on his experience with education, specifically mentioning his struggles with algebra. He also mentioned that he is now retired and financially stable, but still sees maturity and discipline as an important factor in pursuing education. Early in his college career, Victor mentions the challenge of getting grants and counselors not encouraging him to attend college. Despite these obstacles he took college courses at various institutions throughout his career, but never quite finished. As a nontraditional learner, he decided to go back and complete the degree to avoid becoming statistic and fulfill a personal goal. Victor noted his experience with algebra as he stated, “Well, the only difficult times, like I said, was algebra. The rest of the stuff, but the rest of the stuff was great.” He further stated:

No, you know I am retired and financially stable. There's not an obstacle there, uh, going to college was great. You know, I still did a lot of my work I do at home and with the non-profits and I still went to college and I really enjoyed it.

Victor recounted his experiences as an adolescent:

You know how you been back when I was 18, 19, 20, I was too wild back then and you know how it is? You know I'm saying? You think you know everything,
but life teaches you some very important lessons, you know? Thank goodness through, you know, through a lot of mentoring, a lot of people you know trying to push in the right direction you finally, accomplish your goals.

Victor further articulated his perspective regarding access and opportunities as he stated:

And back then it wasn't, well, let's put it this way. It's very difficult to get grants and, and to even attend college or you know, even counselors wouldn't even encourage you to attend college and that was one of the biggest problems we had and throughout my career, I, I did take some college courses at [4-year institution] and in [community college], but never really quite finished.

Dale shared he had difficulty with an online English and composition course and experienced forgetfulness as a challenge with the online class. Dale reported:

I remember I had a really difficult time with the English and Composition II for some reason. Oh wait, I remember it's 'cause it was my first like actual online class. And I kept forgetting that I was even taking it, and so I would like I'd be like, oh crap, and then look at it like the night before and have like a whole essay. Right?

Neal found the workload to be the greatest challenge he faced. He found academic difficulty with mathematics throughout his academic career at the college. Although commuting to and from the college was sometimes a challenge, he had a support network to help him. Overall, Neal had a positive experience at the college even though the worst experience was failing a class, he had a group of people who supported and encouraged him to retake the class and eventually earn a passing grade. Neal stated:
I think, uh, one of the greatest challenges was, uh I think actually the greatest challenge I faced was workload at some point, but, uh I never really had any personal challenges or financial struggles with [college], in terms of uh, uh, academic challenge it always, it was always math. I've never really been good at math and so, just like yeah, math is hard for me. Uh, yeah, certainly getting to and from [college], but I, I always had that support network and then. Yeah, I'm not sure. I think for me, [college] was just mostly a good experience. I'd never really had any bad experiences there. I think the worst experience I had was failing a class, but even after failing a class I had a net of people who were there to catch me and keep pushing me to go and so I retook that class and I passed it with a C, a couple semesters later.

Elias found the work in math and English to be a challenge. Although he noted the academic challenge, Elias also shared that the support from the college through tutors and instructors who were willing to go the extra mile helped to overcome the challenge, as he stated:

Yeah, some of the work in math and in English was a challenge. Um, [college] was real supportive, they had tutors, the instructors were willing to go the extra mile to help whoever was struggling now or whoever period.

Adán faced interpersonal and personal challenges during his academic career at this college. Before transferring to another institution, Adán noted a period of depression. Specific classes and experiences supported the coping with depression. He noted transferring to different institutions and changing academic programs multiple
times. Adán shared his challenge with depression as he transitioned to a four-year institution, explaining:

Um, yes, uh, some like interpersonal stuff, some just like parts of my life that I went through um phases, I suppose, um. A notable one being like towards the end of my, um, like right before I transferred to [4-year institution], 'cause that's basically how it worked. It was, I went to [college] um, I transferred to, to [4-year institution], after two years to pursue [degree]. Then I kind of like came back changed to the [science program] and biology and forestry and then went to a [different 4-year institution]. So yeah, yeah, I would say towards the end, before I moved to [city], I kind of went into a bit of like a depression and that was a big a big thing for me, um, or like a harder thing for me, um. But I felt like those specific semesters like there were certain things that happened or even like classes that I took that helped me in those specific situations or that specific situation because it's just kind of like what I felt I needed at the time.

Adán noted that as the onset of the depression took place, he stated, “…I kind of came to a halting screech [sic].” He further explained:

I guess just with everything that was happening I, that was the semester that I took Trig for the first time and, uh I just kind of, I think, overloaded myself, um, in terms of my expectations of those classes in that semester, and just where I was in general, um. But, uh, I took trig. I was taking chem II, calculus, and this was when I was still going for biology. This was kind of like a turning point for me. And that's why I switched to forestry, 'cause like academically it's a little less, I don't
know stringent would be the word, but uh, it's a little a little easier to get that
degree from I would say from like a mathematical standpoint.

Adán had a difficult semester at college due to a variety of factors to include
feeling under-prepared for math classes while dealing with the personal issue. He stated
the way in which the math classes were presented made it even more challenging.
However, he found solace in a Kundalini yoga class which taught him valuable skills for
coping with these challenges despite the struggles. Regarding the math classes he chose
to audit them instead of taking them for credit, recognizing that it was not the right time
for him to be taking the classes for credit. Adán was able to find growth and learn
important skills through these experiences:

Right. To explain, like I guess that semester it was just I got into these classes. I
attended the first few classes, felt very, it was just it and it wasn't even the fault of
[college]. I think for my feeling that way because I think I was prepared it just the
information wasn't brought forward in the right way it was I was part of the
[science program] at that point and they had at that point, [professor] had had one
of her friends bring in a professor or had one of her professor friends come in, and
she was teaching math for the [science program], and that's when I was taking
calculus and trig, and I was I guess kind of discouraged a little bit like towards the
beginning and just like where I was in life, like feeling like I had uh, I just had
[personal issue], which again sounds silly now to think that like affected me in the
way that it did, but um, and then having like the weight of those classes and
feeling, I guess a little unprepared or like inadequate. But it was interesting how it
unfolded because I was taking a Kundalini yoga class that semester and in truth, I
felt that that class was where I got the most amount of growth from even though that sounds a little silly, like it’s not really an important like last necessary class for my degree, but it was important and necessary for that part in my life. And I learned a lot of, like, skills on how to, you know, just meditate and how to deal when your life gets overwhelming and stressful, um, which I think is a really important skill to have, um. And I ended up auditing those classes and I'm glad I did that because I just it wasn't it wasn't the right time for me to take those classes.

Beto faced a major challenge for two years due to issues at home. He had to focus his attention and be preoccupied with family matters, leading to difficulties in keeping up with his homework and attending class. Beto stated, “So I would say probably a big challenge would be like, uh, I guess home life. The last two years was really rough, I would say.” He explained the impact of the home issue, “So kind of made it like part, like I guess being busy with home life, I forget about homework or forget about like, like attending classes, and stuff so that made it rough.” Beto further explained:

I don't think I managed it very well. Honestly, I could have handled it a lot better.
I could have communicated with the instructors and let them know what was going on, but I kind of pushed through and try to do the homework and not achieve like the academic, worried that I should have, so I did see like I drop in my overall grades.

Tobias faced attendance challenges during two semesters. In the first one, he gave up on the precalculus and geometry class after midterms but later resumed attending regularly and finished the semester with good attendance, though he did not pass the class. During the second semester, a family member got sick and passed away thus
impacting his ability to focus on school. Again, he did get back on track that semester but redoubled his efforts to finish the schooling on a high note. Tobias recounted:

So, there was one point in particular where my attendance really started to slip, actually two. The first one was [mathematics professor] probably pulling his hair out as I stopped going to my pre-calc and geometry class, 'cause at that point midterms had just finished and I kind of gave up on the class. You know, I would never really succeed it and anything if I had to take it, I'll take it again next semester when I can allocate time to it, so I kind of gave up and stopped showing up. Which looking back on it, you know, shame on you for doing so because you know I did lose out on quite a bit of material.

The second instance when his attendance slipped was due to the death of a family member. Tobias described how he was able to get through the challenge:

How did I get past it? I did start going back regularly again. Just more so it appears. Not because I tried to know it. So, I did end up finishing out the semester with really good attendance. Ultimately, didn't pass the class, but that was expected considering I've missed quite a few courses. But back then I learned if I don't get, you know, keeping at it until you do, and if you never understand it, you know, ask somebody else and you know eventually you'll get. Second one is I was in like believe my second to last semester that my [family member] got really sick and she passed away the day of the midterm. So, I really didn't. I wasn't really there mentally for that entire semester. And I didn't get past it for that semester because my mind was other places I couldn't focus on school 'cause I was always worried about what was going on in my family life and I didn't work. My faculties
were spent, you know, always spent on the family and food at that point. So, I didn't really get around that one. I took the last semester and went back in the spring and like doubling my efforts finished as best as I possibly could to make up for the lack of effort with the semester.

Tobias shared how he got back on track the following semester as he narrated:

Ok, so for that semester I didn't really get back on track because like I said, my mind was just in other places and no matter how much I tried, you know it didn't really seem like it would kind of fix itself, so that semester I did, kind of not to say, give up, but I didn't really finish that as best as I could. But the way I got around it was the following semester, which was my last semester at [college] I redoubled my efforts to finish it, finish off my schooling at [college] on the best possible note, and so, I didn't really finish it or I didn't really figure it out that semester, but the following semester was more of a everything kind of fell in place and I really got through it very well.

Overall, the participants experienced varying levels of academic and personal challenges, but they were able to persevere through these challenges with the support of protective factors like support networks, personal motivation, college tutors, and familial support. From the experiences of the participants at this rural, community college it can be seen that there are various challenges that students face during their academic careers. The most prominent challenge included academic difficulties in mathematics and English composition, workload, financial struggles, and personal challenges such as depression. However, the participants were able to persevere through these challenges and continue their academic coursework. The participants had support networks that helped them
through difficult times. In addition, the college was also supportive, offering tutors and had instructors willing to go the extra mile to help struggling students. The participants' perseverance and ability to overcome challenges ultimately led to their academic success.

The participants highlighted discipline, maturity, and support networks as important factors for college success. Largely, these trends show the academic difficulties, workload, and personal challenges are some significant challenges students face during their academic careers and can be significant obstacles to academic progress, but with the right protective factors such as a supportive institution they can be overcome the challenges.

Nontraditional Learners

Returning as a nontraditional learner may provide a different lens or perspective as well as different challenges. Nontraditional learners do not generally follow the typical pattern of graduating from high school and proceeding directly to a college experience. Three of the seven participants shared their experiences attending the rural community college as nontraditional learners. The participants shared their perspectives regarding their experiences as nontraditional learners.

Victor shared his experience of going back to school after 40 years and being the oldest student in the class, which led some people to mistake him for being the instructor of record. Victor described:

It's well, not such a new experience because I've been on about a lot of people. But the thing is, is going back after 40 years. You know a lot of things have changed. You know being the oldest student in class. It was kind of, it was kind of
funny in a way cause a lot of people would be sitting in the class 'cause I, I always
get there early. People would ask me if I was instructor.

He further explained:

For the most part, the people that were in those classes were the, I guess, the older
students. The new, the younger kids, the kids coming fresh out of high school or
still in high school doing the dual credit program had no problem with it. So, I
think it was the older students were having more of a problem than anything else.

This nontraditional learner observed that older students seemed to struggle more with the
experience than younger ones.

On the other hand, Neal believed that nontraditional learners such as those who
dropped out of high school and did not receive a proper education may benefit from
taking refresher foundational courses and praised the teaching approach at the college,
where instructors were teaching advanced courses were also teach remedial ones,
ensuring consistency for students in subjects like mathematics:

Or maybe it’s a knowledge that they never really got the chance to learn and they
are able to go back and take those courses when it comes to instructors in
[college] there are students, who are becoming, uh, like who are getting their
master’s degrees or becoming teachers themselves or it is a part of their master’s
program to teach a class. They are the people who are teaching remedial courses,
but in a small [college] the people who are teaching advanced courses, your 400
level courses, are the same people who are teaching their remedial courses and I
think that’s brilliant because if you focus on especially in math in [college]. So, if
you focus on math you are going to have the same instructor from day one to day whenever you finish.

Elias decided to pursue higher education opportunities after retiring, despite not having gone to college right out of high school:

Since I didn’t go to college right out of high school and I was retired, I decided to complete something I’ve always wanted to do. So, I knew it was gonna be a little harder for me being that it was such a long time that I was in school. It had been such a long time since I had been in school.

Despite a feeling of connectedness to the campus and receiving support from faculty and staff, Elias felt there was not much interaction with other students due to the age difference. Being surrounded by younger classmates made it feel like it was new again. Likewise, Elias felt somewhat connected to the campus and felt like “everybody was there to help you, help you succeed and never felt left out for any reason.” However, he emphasized that “because of the age difference there wasn't really much interaction” with other students as a nontraditional learner. He noted that, “Everybody was much younger than I, I was in those classes. And just being out of school for so long just. It was all new to me again.”

The experience shared by the three participants who attended the rural community college as nontraditional learners highlights the unique challenges faced by this group. These diverse experiences demonstrate the importance of understanding the needs and challenges faced by nontraditional learners to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.
Expectations, Aspirations, and Motivation

College Expectations

The participants had varied expectations of college. Some expected college to be challenging and to involve a lot of research and different subjects that would interest them. Other participants did not have any expectations or felt that their expectations changed over time as they were more engaged with attending college. Each participant's journey and expectations were very unique. Overall, the participants’ responses suggest that expectations of college can vary widely based upon personal experiences and family backgrounds.

When asked directly about their perceived expectations of college, responses varied by participants. For example, Victor noted:

I expected that the courses would be hard courses. And there would be a lot of research. And that there would be a lot of different subjects that would interest me. You know what I'm saying? That's one of the biggest things is just I, I know, you know from school and, and from you know my career, you know everything is not easy. It's hard, you know. And I was expecting it to be. Harder than what it was. That was one of my first impressions, actually.

Victor anticipated the challenges of the coursework and perceived the college journey to be difficult, given his career experiences. Victor was uniquely positioned having returned to seek a college degree after completing a career prior to entry in this post-secondary institution.

Dale observed no particular expectations except to follow his heart. Dale remarked:
Yeah, just do whatever I wanted. Basically, I don't know that there were any expectations necessarily. It was just go do it. It was more of a just do whatever I want in my heart's content. I don't know, I didn’t feel an expectation anyway.

Neal never had an expectation to be financially successful and his family did not have any expectation other than to live his best life. However, the family indicated they would support him along his journey.

Elias did not recall any immediate expectations as he remarked, “I um, it's been so long I don't remember.”

Adán’s expectations changed after attending a small college and then transferring to a larger one with different resources:

To be honest, just to like this is a really simplistic answer, but to get in because I didn't really know what to expect. And once I got to [college], I feel like my expectations did greatly change and I, I learned about like, kind of how college works at a small campus.

Beto changed his expectations for college multiple times with the intent to try to get into the medical field. He explained:

I had quite a bit. I was trying to, I kept changing what I wanted actually to be, uh, I, I jumped a couple times from general studies to pre-science to trying to get a bachelors and then going back to pre-science so you try to get into the medical field.

Finally, Tobias expected college to be a stereotypical experienced based on his observation of the movies:
Um, I expected it to be, you know, kind of stereotypical. Like what you would see in movies. Like, oh yeah, well, you have to go to class obviously every day for a couple hours. I expected, you know, big lecture rooms and homework to be handed out, you know, on a day-to-day basis and a bunch of you know big book reports and finals and all that you know stereotypical college stuff.

Overall, the participants’ responses suggest each participant's expectations of college varied widely based on personal experiences and family backgrounds.

**Family Expectations**

The participants had varied family expectations when it came to pursuing opportunities for postsecondary education. Participants shared their experiences regarding their expectations with family members. Some participants were pushed and encouraged to pursue higher education, while others were given more freedom to choose their own path. However, in most cases the expectation was to achieve personal and financial success, with the completion of a degree seen as a means to a good job and comfortable life. Ultimately the participants agreed that their family support encouragement played a significant role in the decision to pursue education.

Victor explained that his older brothers were the main reason he decided to go to college. Alongside his brothers, his sisters and others also supported him to come back and finish his educational coursework. However, he did face some scrutiny from some detractors who questioned why he needed to go back to school since he already had completed a career and retired. Victor communicated, “well, my older brothers were some of the ones that really, really pushed me to do it. You know it, it was to them, you
know have one from the family.” In addition, Victor was supported by his other siblings. He noted:

My sisters, everybody kind of a gave me push too. To come back and finish my education course, you have those detractors that say, well, you already did. You had your career and you're retired. Why do you need to go back to school, you know?

Dale noted his family had an expectation to attend as he recounted, “Yeah, just do whatever I wanted. Basically, I don't know that there were any expectations necessarily. It was just go do it.” Similarly, Elias noted his expectation was, “They expected me to go and achieve my goals.”

Neal mentioned that his family’s expectation was for him to live his best life:

… I was encouraged by my family to live my best life as if it were so. When I finally did start going to college, my sister and my mother gave me a lot of help, but never told me ever that I had to get a degree. They just told me that uh, I could and that they would support me through that.

Adán explained that his family encouraged him to pursue higher education and explore different career options but did not pressure him to choose a specific field of study. They wanted him to have a job that would provide financial stability, which was important to the family. While the idea of going to college was daunting for Adán, he appreciated the push from the family as it ultimately led him to his career path. Without the encouragement, he may not have made the decision to pursue higher education until later in life. Adán discussed how he felt it was daunting to think about getting the degree:
So, in a way it was kind of daunting thinking about getting a college degree, and that was part of the reason why I, I feel like if my parents didn't push me to go to college, I probably I wouldn't have made that decision until maybe later in my life.

Beto stated that his parents were supportive of him going to college but did not have any expectations or goals for him. On the other hand, Tobias shared that his parents had specific expectations for him to pursue a degree that they believed will lead to a good job and financial stability. While it was not initially his own choice, Tobias eventually agreed with his parents' reasoning and pursued a bachelor's degree. Beto pointed out, "My parents were just supportive that I went to college and that’s pretty much it.” He further stated, “Uh, at that time, no, they were just not wanting me to actually just drop out and probably not do anything with my life, I guess, so they're just happy that I went to college.” Tobias noted his family’s expectations as he recounted:

Their only expectations were that I go to school and get a degree, and more specifically a degree of something that they thought I could use. You know, like biology, chemistry, math, physics, you know anything that you know probably would lead to a good job down the road.

He further explained:

Initially, it wasn't necessarily my choice per se. My parents really pushed me as well as my siblings to at least get a bachelor’s. And you know, if we wanted to do more, get more education, but their idea is with a good degree comes a good job with a good job, comes good money and with good money comes a comfortable life.
As aforementioned, participants had varying family expectations when it came to pursuing postsecondary education. While some participants were encouraged by their families to pursue higher education, others were provided more freedom to choose their own paths. Nonetheless, the expectation was to achieve personal and financial success by completing a degree, which is seen as a means to a good job and comfortable life. Participants acknowledged that family support played a significant role in their decision to pursue educational outcomes.

**Motivation**

The motivation for college students can vary, driving them to pursue their educational goals and overcome challenges along the way. In this discussion, I explore the motivations of participants during their college journeys. The motivations expressed by these participants in their college journey highlight several commonalities. Firstly, the pursuit of a degree or educational credential emerged as the fundamental motivation for many. Participants expressed a desire to obtain a college degree, recognizing its value and the opportunities it could unlock in terms of career prospects and personal growth. Furthermore, the anticipation of reaching the end of a college journey and experiencing a sense of accomplishment served as a powerful motivator for participants. The recognition that their efforts were leading them closer to their goal provided a boost of motivation.

Victor’s motivation stemmed from a strong desire to obtain a degree. As he explained, “Well, my motivation was that I wanted this. That was my motivation. I wanted this degree and I was going to get it.” This clear goal demonstrates his profound determination and commitment to completing his college education. He firmly made up his mind to see it through, recognizing the value of support he received from helpful
individuals. He acknowledged, “I made-up my mind that I was going to finish because I said, you know, if these people are as helpful as this and they really, really want to help you get through college, you know what I’m saying.” This support further fueled his motivation and reassured him of his ability to overcome obstacles. He affirmed, “For myself personally, that was a big goal that, that's what motivated me is, you know, I wanted to have a degree.” His personal drive and determination, combined with the support he received propelled him towards reaching his goal of obtaining a college degree. Victor was personally driven to reach his big goal of earning a degree and to be an example for his family.

Neal found college to be an incredibly motivating experience, primarily because it allowed him to realize the feasibility of pursuing his passions and achieving success. He emphasized:

I think the most motivating thing is that going to [college] made me realize that my passions, the things that I wanted to do and be successful in, were possible, and that's a huge motivation is that, uh not being told, but being shown that your goals are achievable is a huge boost not only to your motivation but maybe your ego as well and so that, that probably kept me into in it for a little bit.

This realization served as a powerful source of motivation, as it shifted his perspective from being told what is achievable to witnessing his goals' attainability. In contrast to his high school experience, where he felt that the work was driven by expectations of teachers or the educational system, Neal described a shift in his mindset during college. He expressed, “Whereas in high school I felt like I was doing the work for my teachers,
right? Or for some system in college. I felt I was doing the work for myself and broadening my understanding of things in general.”

Tobias noted his motivation for attending college each semester was to adopt a systematic approach by designating an “ace” class, prioritizing it for achieving an A, typically aligned with his major, received dedicated time and resources without hesitation. The remaining classes received equal attention unless his grades started to decline, prompting him to reallocate time from the easiest class to compensate. Tobias noted:

Each semester I always designated one class and that was my “ace” class. The class that I strove to get an A in, and usually it was more of a major class than a minor, but I would label it all. This class I want to know that I'm taking I will pass it, you know, no matter what, if I need to dedicate more time resources to that class, I will do so without thinking twice about it. And then after that everything else got equal attention of whatever was left of uh, you know, prioritizing unless you know grade was slipping, and then I would pull time away from probably my easiest class of the class. I had the best grade in to kind of compensate for the lack of knowledge I had in the other, so it was more so trying to manage my time efficiently, which at the time I have to admit I didn't do very well and I still struggle to do that very efficiently.

Beto found motivation and envisioned the end goal of completing his first industry certification. He recognized the potential opportunities that would arise from achieving these milestones, which served as a driving force in his academic journey. Beto expressed, “Probably seeing the end goal. After finding and actually choosing to stick
with my first degree and my certificate. I was kind of just like the end goal on different things that I can do.” In addition, his wife played a significant role in supporting and motivating him. She provided continuous encouragement and pushed him to persist in his pursuit of education, as he shared, “I would say my wife was a big supporter. She kind of kept pushing me through it. She was the motivation.”

Adán’s motivation stemmed from the search for a personal spark, reason that would ignite his desire to learn. Adán stated, “I guess to a certain extent my motivation was finding that spark that like kind of reason why I wanted to learn.” His unique situation involved his family's well-intentioned pressure to pursue college and explore different paths, which shaped his current trajectory. although his family did not dictate his field of study their main motivation was to secure a job that would provide self-sufficiency. Adán recounted:

I feel like again, my situation is unique because I feel like my family really out of goodwill, they kind of put pressure on me to go to college and like, kind of go down different avenues, and I'm thankful for that because it kind of led me to where I am now. Um, but it's I feel like a big motivator for them to kind of, like try, to get me to, they didn’t try to tell me what to study and it more was like here are some options and go for it. But they wanted me to get a job that I could kind of provide for myself with something that was in a lot of ways, kind of like a safe bet.

Elias’s motivation centered around achieving the goal he set for himself, which was obtaining an associate degree. This goal served as his driving force throughout his academic journey, as he worked hard and overcame challenges. Another motivating
factor for Elias was the job possibilities that would become available with an associate degree. He recognized that obtaining this credential would expand his career opportunities and potentially lead to better employment prospects.

Dale’s motivation was fueled by the anticipation of reaching the end of his college journey and seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. As he progressed through his studies, he found satisfaction in the grind of the realization that they were getting closer to completing his degree. The upcoming sense of accomplishment provided him with a strong motivation to keep pushing forward. Dale declared:

This juncture, oh, I'm so happy to see the light at the end of the tunnel after this semester. Like at the beginning, I was just like, oh man, like I'm really getting into like the grind of it like this feels good. This is what people have told me about. Here we go and now that I'm like getting towards the end. I'm just like okay, like it's right there like I've been grinding for a minute now and so now it's like, I don't know, I'm finally going to get the like a satisfaction of having completed that degree and it's going to feel real good. In like a month, it's coming up.

Dale indicated he drew inspiration from his uncle. He resonated with the mindset of being able to do anything for three months and that served as a constant reminder that he could overcome challenges and persevere through demanding periods of his academic journey. Dale noted:

You know my uncle is really motivated, I guess is the word, to just accomplish something. I think one of his favorite terms is I can do anything for three months. And it makes sense, like I can tell myself that all the time.
This mindset served as a powerful reminder for Dale to remain resilient and determined during challenging periods throughout his college journey.

These participants demonstrated a range of motivations in their college journeys. Despite the diverse motivations, these participants were propelled forward and overcame challenges to stay focused on their educational goals. Overall, these participants’ motivations underscore the significance of personal drive, support systems, goal settings, belief in one's potential, and the anticipation of achievement in sustaining motivation through the college journey.

**Importance of Degree**

One of the central themes that emerged from the participants’ responses to the questions was the importance of earning a degree. According to the participants, some value a college degree as a crucial life goal, others see it as a steppingstone or necessary credential for career advancement. Some participants highlight personal growth and enjoyment of learning while others emphasize the potential for better job opportunities and financial stability. Overall, the discussion highlights the multifaceted nature of the importance of a college degree and how it can be vary based on individual experiences and goals.

Victor values education as an important life goal and believes it should be accomplished. Having served in the military for over 41 years, he decided to pursue a bachelor's degree, which not only made his daughter proud, but also inspired her to pursue her own education. Victor sees education as a means to give back to the community and emphasizes the significance of young individuals obtaining an education, encouraging them not to delay like he did. In economically challenged communities he
advises young people to seek opportunities beyond high school by attending college. Victor acknowledges that in the current era a degree has become increasingly more important for success, contrasting with the past when hard work alone could lead to achievements. He personally pursued a degree to avoid becoming a statistic as he stated, “…have to go back and get my degree 'cause I don't want to be a statistic of one of those guys that they don’t have a degree and I've always wanted to get a degree.” He encourages others to pursue their dreams while acquiring a solid education. Victor shared, “It's, uh, it's really important, but to me it's one of those goals in life that you need to check off.”

Victor illustrated the need to go beyond high school and follow your dreams:

The one thing, that I that I like to tell young kids, especially in small communities like [location] in the surrounding areas where the economic impact is so bad is you know is once you leave high school, you get out of high school, it's time to make that decision to move on to bigger and better things. You know, go to college, move away from that community so that you can see the rest of the world and experience it. After you've done that, you can come back and just like I'm doing now and contribute to the community. But go out and follow your dreams. In order to follow those dreams, you need to get a good education.

Victor noted the value of hard work, but more importantly, the value of education:

If you worked hard, you know you could accomplish anything you wanted, but nowadays you need to have that degree to get it, so I think that's one of the most important things to do is to have a degree.
Dale views a college degree as highly important, as it has become the foundation of his life in recent years. He has dedicated himself to pursuing a degree and has been actively engaged in this pursuit. While his family may not have specific expectations regarding his college education, they are generally excited to see Dale actively involved in something and performing well. The focus for his family seems to be more on Dale’s dedication and success in any endeavor rather than solely on his college education. Dale shared his perspective:

To me, a college degree is pretty important. You know, it's kind of what I based my whole life off of these days and it's what I have been doing for the past few years. To my family, I think they're more excited to just see me do something. They're just I don't know that they're specifically excited for me. I mean, I, I'm sure that they are excited about me going to college like any family would be, but I don't I, I think, uh, if I was doing anything, they'd be excited that I was doing anything and doing it well.

Neal acknowledges that information can be learned online without the expense of attending college. However, he recognizes the importance of having a college degree or higher credentials in order to be successful in his desired career fields. He views a college degree primarily as a credential that serves as a necessary steppingstone for professional advancement. While Neal’s family may not prioritize the college degree as the most important aspect of life, they would likely be proud if Neal were to obtain it. The family's pride is not solely dependent on the degree itself, but more on Neal’s personal achievement and growth as noted in his statement, “My college degree isn't necessarily the most important thing to them. If I get it or not, but maybe, uh, they would be proud of
me if I do.” Neal denoted his perception of earning a college and its importance as a stepping stone:

I find that you can learn the information that you would at college ah, online just as easily and for a lot less of them expense. But the credential of having a bachelor’s degree or a master’s degree is so important in being successful in your desired work fields that it's really hard to have a stepping off point without a college degree.

Adán explains that his expectations about college changed over time. He compares his experience at a four-year institution with his previous experience at another college, noting a difference in resources and the availability of tutoring support. He reflected on the importance of making mistakes and learning from them in order to gain a better understanding of their chosen path. Adán obtained an associate degree which has helped him secure his current job, even though it may not directly relate to his field of study. He now understands the importance of having a clear purpose for pursuing a bachelor's degree and has a better idea of why he wants one. Initially, he viewed a college degree as a daunting and monumental achievement but lacked a clear understanding of the specific job opportunities it could lead to:

I think a college degree like in my mind like coming straight out the gates. I didn't know really what you could do as a forester as a biologist, as a nutritionist, what kind of jobs you could get and how that a degree is kind of just like in my mind, a stepping stone. It's a way to open an opportunity like um, you have a lot more, I don't know, um, like degrees, in my mind were like these monumental feats. Like degrees, in my mind were like these monumental feats. Um, like mountains that
you had to climb in order to get like a job, but what does that mean like? What kind of job? So in in a way it was kind of daunting thinking about getting a college degree, and that was part of the reason why I, I feel like if my parents didn't push me to go to college, I probably I wouldn't have made that decision until maybe later in my life.

Adán’s parents played a significant role in encouraging him to attend college and explore different career paths. He acknowledges his family's motivation to see him succeed and become self-sufficient, while also recognizing the importance of choosing a career that provides stability. As Adán navigated his college career his expectations changed along the way. He observed:

I guess my expectations changed along the way. After going to [college], I kind of expected. I mean not that I expected [4-year college] to be the same, but uh, in in terms of resources, I feel like there was a pretty big difference. And [4-year college] has resources, but it's just a different. There's such a higher volume of students that go there that it's yeah, like [academic support] for example. That's kind of like [college] tutoring program version of, the gosh why am I spacing um, like the [college] tutoring program mathematics kind of, um, it was really hard to get help there. I felt like because you'd have to just kind of like camp out there and wait, which is possible, but I feel like I really appreciated the more one on one time with tutors and the ability to get to know them but I I'm kind of digressing. I guess in short, it just it changed my expectations changed along the line.

Adán believes it is important to make mistakes in order to learn and understand how things should be done. He believed that while the associate degree did not directly
align with the current job it still played a role in helping him secure his work position. He explained:

So for me, I'm somebody that I feel needs to mess up a little bit first in order to understand how to do it, um and that is for anything, um, that's kind of why I am in the point that I am where I do have a degree, but it's an associates in something that I'm not really going to apply, but it has helped me because it allowed me to get the job that I have now and in the process of learning what I've been learning, I'm able to do that job and I'm still learning about it.

Beto considers a college education to be significant, particularly because he is the first in his family to attend and successfully complete college. He mentions that his sister dropped out, which further emphasizes the importance of his own commitment to higher education, noting, “Oh, it's it. It's pretty important just because um, being the first one to actually go through college and actually stick with it. My sister, my sister currently just dropped out so.” He further observed, “I find it important being able to have the background knowledge. That way you can better know the field that you're trying to get into.” Beto expressed that the most enjoyable and fulfilling moment in his college experience was when he graduated. He felt a sense of accomplishment after putting in the hard work and completing all of his classes, regardless of the type of degree or certificate obtained. Beto expressed:

Probably when I got to do my graduation. Feel like, can I after all, like the hard work and doing all the classes and stuff. I feel like that's usually the most enjoyable part and I will part being able to feel like you accomplished something whether it be a bachelors, a certificate or an associates.
Beto believes that having a college degree provides valuable background knowledge in his chosen field. He recognizes the importance of acquiring a deeper understanding of the subject matter to excel in his desired profession.

Tobias rates the overall importance of a college degree, indicating that his family considers it to be highly significant. When asked about the importance of a degree he indicated his family, “…would say probably consider that a six on a scale of one to five. They think that a college degree will guarantee you a really good paying job and a comfortable life.” He, too, believes that obtaining a college degree guarantees a well-paying job and a comfortable life. His perspective suggests a strong belief in the value and benefits of higher education. However, when sharing his personal opinion, Tobias rates the importance of a college degree as a three or four on the same scale.

Tobias stated:

To me, I would say it is on a scale of one to five it is probably about a three or four. I don't necessarily think it's needed to get a really good job but it does make the process of finding a good job a lot easier. But personally, since I do like to learn a lot about, you know just a multitude of different things, I really do enjoy and it's very important to me.

He acknowledges that while it may not be necessary to secure a good job, having a degree can make the job search process easier. Additionally, Tobias highlights his personal enjoyment of learning about a variety of subjects, making education important to him on a personal level.

When examining the views of the participants on the importance of a college degree, several comparisons and differences emerge. While Victor, Dale, and Elias all
acknowledge the significance of a college degree, their motivations differ. Victor sees education as a crucial life goal tied to giving back to community whereas Dale emphasized the importance of dedication and success in any endeavor not solely reliant on a degree another contrast arises between Neal and Adán. While both recognize the value of a college degree Neal emphasizes the necessity of a degree as credential for career advancement, while Adán’s perspective evolved over time, realizing the need for a clear purpose and understanding of job opportunities. Beto values a college degree as a personal achievement and appreciates the knowledge gained in his field, while Tobias rates the importance of a college degree highly for its perceived role in securing a well-paying job in a comfortable life overall, these comparisons are differences, reflecting varying motivations and experiences related to significance of a college degree.

**Sense of Belonging**

According to the participants, the community college created a warm and supportive environment where students were provided opportunities to feel welcomed and part of the university. Based on the responses provided by the participants, the students indicated they felt welcomed and connected to the institution of higher education. The participants noted positive interactions with peers, staff, and faculty. According to Healey and Stroman (2020), “When students experience a sense of belonging in a learning environment, we see both immediate and long-term positive consequences for their academic performance and well-being” (p. 5). Participants noted they felt a sense of belonging, alongside supportive environments to include peers, staff, and faculty.
Supportive Environments Welcomed

Participants were asked to share their personal and academic experiences with this rural community college system, and all participants noted the institution was welcoming and they felt connected and a sense of belonging. Students were supported both academically and socially, which promotes the persistence of students as “students have to become engaged and come to see themselves as a member of a community of other students, academics, and professional staff who value their membership— in other words, that they matter and belong. The result is the development of a sense of belonging” (Tinto, 2017, p. 3). These participants noted the positive aspects of the welcoming environment and feeling of being connected. Rosenbaum (2018) noted students with greater academic and social integration are more likely to complete college. Victor noted the institution was welcoming and open and remarked:

I mean, it was so welcoming and it's so open, you know that it made the experience go a lot smoother. You know you always have those, those jitters when you go for to class for the first time. You know, not knowing what you're going to get into but, you know once you get to meet the instructors and the people. You know there, you know the guys, you, the counselors, it was, it was a good experience. I really, really enjoyed it. This made the experience go a lot smoother.

Victor referred to the student orientation week and feeling connected and supported:

I guess the, the days the first couple of weeks over there, you know where you guys welcome us and make us feel at home. That that was really, really enjoyable. I think that that in itself, there is but, but we'll keep a student there knowing that
they have somebody that's willing to back them up, and they're willing to go that extra mile to help them.

Another participant, Dale, had a similar sentiment as he recounted, “I definitely feel connected to the college just 'cause that's most of what I do. It's kind of like what I gravitate around like when I'm picking a place to live seasonally.” Dale remarked, “It’s kind of central to pretty much everything that I do these days.”

Neal recounted the small community and always being connected, “Ah, that's a really good thing because you will have the support necessary to continue learning and that's all that matters too. Uh, people there, that it's not about money.”

Elias had a similar observation and noted he felt connected “because once again everybody there was there to help you, help you succeed and never felt left out for any reason.”

Adán specified he felt connected and developed relationships and bonds:

Yeah, I mean it was kind of like a little community, like I, like I said, I knew where to go for what and I knew everybody, so they kind of like, you develop relationships and bonds and, and I really enjoyed my experience, um, like, even when there were like parts that were like harder, I still felt like very supported.

Beto participated in a work study program and found connections through working, as he noted:

I'm working on doing the, the work study through them and also getting the degree made it more enjoyable I found. Just because you get to work with more people and then it brings like a different aspect to this school, because, uh, working there I got to know more of like the advisors and the, the teachers and the
different programs that they've had 'cause I did the [job] there, so I got to interact with a lot of, like the teachers, that's the other um, learning a little bit about everybody. Um, I think getting to know people made it more fun and enjoyable to be there.

Tobias identified the connections made as a result of participating with a small community college as noted below:

It's actually one of the things I like about smaller community colleges is you really get to get that sense of community from your peers. You're not, you know, sitting in a really big lecture hall with 200 plus students and you know you'll never get to meet any of them, or most of them for that matter.

Each of the participants noted some level of connectedness and belonging to this community college of learners. According to Rosenbaum (2018), students who experience higher levels of academic and social integration are more likely to successfully complete college.

Impact of Supports

Champions

When asked about the support from people in their lives or cheerleaders in their lives, the participants expressed their stories of support with enthusiasm. Almost all of them mentioned a family member as a significant support system and described their perspectives of this support. It is worth noting that emotional support provided by families can have a significant impact on student outcomes (Roska & Kinsley, 2018).

In considering the participants' experiences with support systems, commonalities and variations can be noted. Most participants identified a family member as their
primary source of support, highlighting the crucial role that families play in providing encouragement and assistance throughout their educational journey. This consensus underscores the significance of familial support and fostering academic success.

However, one participant deviated from this pattern and attributed his perseverance in completion of classes to the charter school education system. This deviation highlights the potential impact of alternative support systems beyond the traditional family unit. Moreover, the significance of emotional capital within families is acknowledged as a key factor influencing student outcomes. This recognition underscores the importance of emotional support and the impact it can have on educational achievements. The identification of the support systems sheds light on the diverse sources of support that individuals may rely on emphasizing the need to acknowledge and cultivate various supports within the educational setting.

Victor acknowledged the support of his wife, father, mother, colleagues from different backgrounds, and a former boss who provided valuable guidance. When asked about the champions in his life Victor enthusiastically shared:

My wife, my father, and my mother. And, uh, a lot of my counterparts at work. I, I work with a lot of people from different backgrounds different, uh economic backgrounds and such. You know different communities around the state. You know, I learned a lot, learned a lot from these people. And, uh I have a, I have one guy that really that I worked with. His name is [boss] and he was, he was my boss there. It worked for a while and then he was a good man he was very good man and he was a kind of guy that didn’t hold back. He just told you the way it was,
you know, and you know he tell you this is what you need to do in order his success and which I appreciate. I took his advice and I think I'm the better for it. Dale emphasized the support received from his uncles, appreciating having someone who encourages and believes in his aspirations. Dale commented:

Definitely like my uncles were a major, they were a major contribution to that I, I mean, just to having the support of somebody who's had a college education and then ah, I don't know, it’s having support in general. Having somebody say like yeah, go do it, go do whatever you want. That sounds like fun. Go do it.

Neal credits his oldest sister and college professors for providing the necessary motivation and belief in his abilities. Neal explained:

Ah, my sister. For sure, my oldest sister. And, uh. Uh, a lot of my college professors, actually 'cause I don't think I I've really got the uh, if you put your mind to it, you can do it kind of talk until I went to college 'cause a lot of people would just say, you know, you're just going to be a workhorse. It was kinda rough.

Elias attributes his support to the family, particularly his parents, who prioritized his academic success. He stated, “My family, my parents. They made sure I was focused on, on the schoolwork and they wanted me to succeed.”

Adán recognized the significant role played by his parents and pushing him to set goals and overcome anxiety associated with academic and personal challenges. Adán shared his parents were his biggest support, explaining:

I think my parents probably were the biggest support for me because I've kind of always been timid person, um, when it came to like even sports or academics or anything that, I always had a lot of anxiety with, like if I couldn't be perfect with
something right away. I just didn't want to try and so I feel like my parents really pushed me to have some of those like goals that I didn't know to have at the time, if that makes any sense.

Beto shared a different perspective regarding his experience and highlights the charter school system as a crucial support system that encouraged him to persist and stay on track academically, while also mentioning the support from his parents. He stated:

It probably would have been the charter school, 'cause they're the ones who actually pushed for me to stick with the classes and actually come get me, too, like the grade level that I'm supposed to be at within those, um, those classes.

Tobias primarily acknowledges his parents as a main source of support during his K-12 education, along with his siblings. He noted:

For K through 12 primarily, it was just my parents, especially for you know, 5th grade through finishing high school. That's pretty much the only people I had contact with outside of my siblings, so I would probably have to say either parents or siblings.

The continued support of his siblings and parents continued through his collegiate experience.

The diverse perspectives highlighted in these accounts emphasize the significance of support from various sources, including family members, mentors, colleagues, and educational institutions in shaping the educational journeys of the participants. These participants have diverse perspectives that align with Roksa and Kinsley’s (2018) insights that family emotional support plays a significant role in fostering positive academic outcomes (p. 415). By examining the impact of these support systems on the participants,
the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how various forms of support can contribute to educational success. It is noteworthy that all participants expressed support from individuals who advocated for their achievements. That all participants express advocacy and support further reinforces the critical role family support may be a protective factor in fostering positive educational experiences.

Not only is the role of family support critical in the fostering of a positive educational experience that peers, faculty, and staff play a direct role in providing support structures that positively influence degree attainment and serve as protective factors. The participants' experiences align with the notion that a student's persistence in college is closely tied to their integration into the social and academic systems of the institution, leading to a strong commitment to graduation. Integration, both academically and socially, fosters a sense of belonging and engagement within a community of students, academics, and staff who value and support their successes. This perspective echoes Tinto’s (2017) understanding that students must feel that they matter and belong to be successful. In this context, the role of peers, faculty, and staff members, at colleges and universities plays a crucial role in the connection to the institution and in the development of students.

Peers

Throughout the study, the theme of support networks and systems surfaced as an important component of experiencing success at this college. More specifically, peer support surfaced as an important aspect of a student's experience in college. Peer support, in this context, refers to the help and encouragement students received from their peers
who were facing similar challenges in their academic journey. The students who participated in this research study shared their experiences with peer support.

Several participants had similar experiences of feeling connected to their fellow peers and forming relationships and friendships through classes, group projects and other shared experiences. Victor, Dale, Adán, Beto, and Tobias all mentioned forming connections with their classmates and the experience of interacting with them was enjoyable. Neal also highlighted the importance of students acting as a support network for each other. However, Elias felt somewhat connected to the campus but emphasized that he did not interact much with other students due to the age difference. Victor appreciated the opportunity to engage with and meet new people. He enjoyed the company of his classmates and counselors and noted they still keep in touch:

Well, I, I scheduled my courses in around my day when I could get time off to be there and, uh, you know, just go into the classes and, uh studying and meeting the biggest thing that I really enjoyed was, you know my counterparts that my, like my fellow students, that were there with me. You know I got to meet a lot of new people. A lot of new people, and, uh and I also met some other people that I knew there were and went back to get their degree also. And of course, I met you and I and I met the other counselors that were there. You know, it was a tremendous help.

Further, Victor noted he felt connected:

I felt you know the connection was there because a lot of these young men and women, I mean, just in talking to just by sitting there talking to him. And even today, you know I meet a lot of these young people there working at the doctor’s
office. They’re my classmates and we still talk about it, you know ’cause we sit
down and we talk about you know how things could be better or how, how, how
we could change for the better and the you know what their what, their plans for
the careers. And now that I see him on the streets and I talked to him, I mean they
stayed and they got their degree.

Dale found that an internship experience allowed him to get to know
his classmates better, and they continued to work together in class. He also found it
helpful to engage with peers as it created a supportive group dynamic that directly
supported his studies, as he described:

Oh yeah. Uh, so I think the biggest thing that got me engaged with my fellow
students was an internship that several of us had through, uh, [water conservation
program] with [person]. And then that wasn’t through [program] or anything like
we all just happened to get that like, uh, separately, and we also all just happen to
be attending the same classes, basically. And that was really what got me to get to
know some of my classmates a little bit better. And now that we’re all back in
classes, there’s a few of us that are all taking the same classes like now. We all
work together really well, like we’ve worked like in a job setting outside of
school, and now that we are in classes.

He further stated:

It feels like the more you almost have to engage with your classmates just to, like
just so you can like have like a group thing going where you're all thinking about
the same things and studying towards the same things, ’cause like I, I didn't really
like talk to anybody in my, like those math classes.
When queried about the participants’ connection to the campus, Neal noted the connection to students:

It's also the students, uh, there was a time where I didn't have a way to get to and from [college], and so I used, I got to carpool with a lot of my peers and some of them I didn't even know me they just knew I needed a ride. And so, they would say, hey, where are you headed? Or when can I pick you up from this place so that we can both go to our class? Uh, and that was super helpful, especially when I started taking classes like astronomy. Where we would be out at [college] until like four in the morning and then there was nobody to drive around, and so all of the students would carpool with each other, and so that's an example of how students are acting as a support network.

Likewise, Elias felt somewhat connected to the campus and felt like “everybody was there to help you, help you succeed and never felt left out for any reason.” However, he emphasized that “because of the age difference there wasn't really much interaction” with other students as a nontraditional learner. He did have great connection to the peer tutors and felt supported as measured by his comment, “The tutors are amazing they were patient. That would go over the problems until uh, I got the hang of it.”

Adán noted the enjoyment of working with his classmates and forming friendships. He also found that joining a student support program was helpful in forming connections with others. Adán remarked:

I feel like I enjoyed a lot of the classes and, and that doesn't exclude math. It was difficult, but it was really put in a way that was kind of fun and there was a lot of
teamwork associated with that, like when we would study, we would study his
groups and we would help each other out.

Adán’s experience further highlights the role of peer support in the educational journey.
Adán specifically mentioned the significance of joining a student support program and
connecting with his peers. Adán shared:

No, I was just gonna say I'm trying to remember when I joined the [student
support program] 'cause that kind of contributed to that as well. But it was nice. I
would say it was nice the first semester because it was kind of like I just had a lot
of my classes together with people that I knew and that's how kind of those
friendships were formed and like those networks.

Adán expressed that he formed lasting friendships and felt a strong sense of connection
with his peers during his time at this institution he emphasized the support that he
received from friends, who played a significant role in helping him navigate his college
experience. He expressed:

Yeah, I mean to be honest, I made lifelong friends there like people that really
helped me get through that process and um, you know you meet people and you
kind of like keep in touch with some, like friendships go on but I feel like I felt
very connected to the people that went there, um.

Like Adán, Beto expressed a positive experience in engaging with fellow students
during group projects and gaining insights about them within the classroom setting:

Interactions with these students I'm getting to know them in class so through
seeing like what they were taking and kind of like when we do like the group
projects getting to know people. Um, that was really enjoyable.
Tobias appreciated the sense of community that the smaller community college provided, allowing for more opportunities to engage with peers and professors alike. Tobias stated:

Um, whereas you know at [college], I really did appreciate these small courses where you actually got to chit chat with all of your peers and got to know a whole bunch of different people in addition to getting to learn your or meet your professors and kind of get to know them and understand their teaching styles specifically.

The availability of peer supports played a critical role in the college experience as it provided students with help and encouragement from peers who faced similar academic challenges. Students who participated in this research study highlighted various ways in which peer support aided their studies, including meeting new people developing support networks and engaging in group projects. Students appreciated the sense of community that peer support fostered and found it beneficial to have developed the supportive group dynamics to help them navigate their academic journeys.

**Faculty**

The role of faculty members at a college or university is critical in the development of students. The instances of faculty support played a crucial role in the development of participants, as participants suggested they felt a strong connection to their professors and instructors. The participants expressed feeling comfortable during their interactions and many even shared that they had formed deep connections with the faculty members.
Victor shared his experiences regarding the classes he completed and the professors. Although he found his algebra course to be the most difficult class he had taken, he thoroughly enjoyed other classes with specific professors. He noted that what made these courses enjoyable was the approachability of professors and instructors who gave him the freedom to express himself and his ideas. Victor reflected:

Well, of course, algebra was the most difficult class I had, you know. And I've told you all the reasons why the most enjoyable, the most enjoyable class I had was I had history at the Chicano studies with [professor] and yeah and took some Russian. I took different courses and they were all enjoyable 'cause the teachers were, well, that the professors and instructors were, were great. I mean they let you, uh gave you the freedom to speak out and how you felt and what she knew and stuff like that.

Victor noted his connection to students in the class and felt like there was no sense of inferiority. Victor perceived:

Oh yeah. I felt connected with everybody there, uh, there was no one there that I didn't feel connected with. You know, I you know, I'm kind of an outgoing person and I'll introduce myself and you know, in talking to them, I mean, they're just like anybody else. I mean, there's no reason to be afraid of them or anything. I mean, they're there for a reason and they made you feel at home. They wouldn't be, they didn't make you feel like, any less of a person that themselves. You know what I'm saying? Yeah no 'cause back in my high school days or some bad experiences with the counselors and stuff like this but you really, really didn't
want to approach them, but here you know, it's the, it was a pleasure just talking
to anyone.

Victor further stated, “I think it's, it's a, it's a win-win situation for everybody all the way
around. And again, you know the quality of the instructors and their approachability.”

Dale, like other participants, noted the availability of the foundational coursework,
quality instruction and the enthusiasm shared by the professor as they taught the
coursework. He did note a lack of social interaction that he experienced during his
participation in online coursework. Dale narrated:

I think I had [professor] and I thought she was a great beginning 'cause she was,
you know, really actively engaged in what we're doing, and I think I flew through
I, I don't I think they called it something else while I was doing it, but I got
through the [course] portion of it like in one semester and then took like the third
one, just like took it super slow the next semester, and I think that really made it
easier and now I'm doing a lot better in math classes than I would have been if I
had not taken those courses.

He also recounted his experience with two distinct professors:

[Professor] is very, she's really good at teaching English, and I think she's really
excited about teaching beginning English, and she's really excited about like
giving people a really solid foundation and like inspiring people to like and
actually enjoy technical writing and stuff like that. And I felt really engaged by it,
I felt really good and I got a good grade in class.

He further described a different course and the vast knowledge shared by the professor as
he recounted his mathematics experience:
Those are online, I didn't like to hang out with people to talk about, like how to set up an equation or something like that. I do that now with calculus like I do that with [professor] and a couple other classmates every week and it's really great, but in those developmental stages I did not do that at all. The content is always really interesting. I love [professor’s] teaching method. I love how like she always does this thing when she's lecturing. She'll like close her eyes and she'll just like have like the stream of consciousness thing and she'll just like she'll just like dump information out to you. But also, she's like processing this information as she's saying it and she's like giving you even more based off of what she's saying.

Lastly, his comment provides insight: “Faculty, I’ve pretty much only interacted with the teachers and my advisor. I love a lot of these teachers. I have to say there’s been a lot of support from several of them that is indispensable.”

Neal points out the connection to students and their willingness to be of support and, like other participants, emphasized the faculty at this institution of higher education operate similarly. Neal declared, “…but also the teachers were really down to Earth and got very personal with you and I think that's a benefit of a community college that [college] campus and other larger colleges do not have.”

Neal noted the personalized attention and small classes, which fostered the opportunity to develop relationships with both instructors and peers. He noted the supportive environment, which afforded him the opportunity to comfortably share personal struggles and receive accommodations when needed. The support and connection to faculty is demonstrated with the example of Neal drawing on a shared
background experience in martial arts and connecting the value and overcoming challenges and striving for improvement. Neal shared:

He was my professor for most of my film classes. He told me a lot about his college experience and the benefits of just continuing with college, and he was also very, he was just very good at teaching me in a style that made sense to me. We both came from a martial arts background and so that's sort of the style that he taught me and not like hitting me with a stick or something whenever I did something wrong, but more showing me that there was always a bigger fish or a greater challenge and that it was a good thing to strive to beat those challenges.

Additionally, he shared his experiences and level of comfort:

It was actually really pleasant because I never felt like I was being talked down to or like I was viewed like, oh why? Why don't you know this? You should know this. You're going to college. I felt like what was more important to my peers and my instructors was that I was learning something. And that any level of learning was a good level of learning and you, you didn't have to know a fourth dimensional geometry to impress your teacher. You could, uh, just do very basic math very well and that would impress your instructors and your, uh, I don't know what the word is teacher aides, cadres.

When queried about his thoughts and feelings about feeling connected to the campus, he stated:

Uh, people there that it's not about money. It's not about, uh, uh, social status or anything like that, it's about students being successful and faculty being successful because they are also learning from their students, and I feel like in terms of
interactions I've had it's not just like the faculty and the instructors that are the major support network.

When asked about someone that served as a supporter or cheerleader, he referenced a family member and a professor. He stated:

…Uh, a lot of my college professors, actually 'cause I don't think I've really got the uh, if you put your mind to it, you can do it kind of talk until I went to college 'cause a lot of people would just say, you know, you're just going to be a workhorse. It was kind of rough.

He also noted one additional instructor that provided direct support and encouragement:

He never really pushed me to complete college per say, but he always pushed me to uh, overcome obstacles and, and taught me that obstacles have many different forms of manifesting and, and with him it was martial arts where it was maybe a physical barrier or technique I didn't know or something, but that translated well to academia, where as a test I failed. But then I knew I would have a, uh an opportunity to retake a test or with finals I usually didn't, but with smaller tests I would have an opportunity and so I would train more or study more and take that test again and do much better later.

Neal highlighted the personalized attention is small class sizes at this college, which allowed him to develop strong relationships with instructors and peers.

Elias expressed a very positive experience at this college, noting the strong support and help available from both the instructor and college as a whole. He mentioned the availability of tutors and the willingness of instructors to go the extra mile to help struggling students. He stated, “...[college] was real supportive, they had tutors, the
instructors were willing to go the extra mile to help whoever was struggling now or whoever period.” This support was noted to have a positive impact with helping the student to succeed. Elias also summarized that he noted that the teaching style was hands on, with instructors showing them rather than just telling them, which was very helpful. He acknowledged, “How, how can I say this? Where there was open up a book and show me or show me hands on the on the computer class. Um, just very helpful.

Like other participants, Adán expressed a positive experience and strong support during his time at the college. He formed close relationships not only with peers but also with his instructors. This highlights the importance of a supportive and nurturing environment, fostering positive student experiences, and building meaningful connections within the college community. Adán stated:

To be honest, it was a pretty good experience, I feel, um I felt very supported. I felt like that I like pretty much the whole time that I was at [college]. I felt like I had a pretty close knit like support system and friends and I got to know my professors and I liked it a lot.

Beto observed a similar experience, explaining, “Uh, with the teachers I didn't have real much problems with um, everybody was really enjoyable to interact with. Whether it be in class or out of class when I was working the teachers were real nice and interactive.” He stated, “I guess made it more comfortable going to their classes and enjoyable.

The participants noted that the approachability and quality of the instruction were important factors in forming these connections. Additionally, the participants mentioned engaging experiences with certain professors who displayed passion about their subject
matter and demonstrated effective teaching methods. The participants felt strong connections with their professors and instructors and appreciated their approachability and willingness to listen to their ideas. They felt comfortable during their interactions and formed deep connections with the faculty members. The availability of foundational coursework, quality instruction, and enthusiasm of the professors were also other factors that were highlighted by the participants. It is apparent from the perspectives of the participants that the faculty members’ contributions played a crucial role in supporting their academic endeavors.

The participants highlighted the significant impact of faculty on their educational journeys. They expressed a strong connection with their professors and instructors, emphasizing their approachability and willingness to listen to their ideas. The participants felt comfortable during their interactions with faculty members and described forming deep connections with them these positive experiences with faculty contribute as supportive and nurturing learning environment, enhancing a student sense of belonging and academic success.

Staff

Like faculty, the participants highlighted the significant impact of staff members at this institution of higher education in providing support, encouragement, and guidance to them. Similar to the faculty, the staff members were highly regarded for their exceptional guidance and support throughout the students' academic journeys. The specific staff roles mentioned by the participants included support staff and financial aid and applications, academic advisors, instructors, tutors, and learning support staff for students with disabilities. The participants consistently praised the staff members for their
knowledge, friendliness and unwavering dedication to helping students succeed in their academic pursuits. These positive interactions with staff members play their pivotal role in assisting students in facilitating their academic goals.

As evident from the experiences shared by the participants, the engagement and assistance provided by staff members at this institution of higher education played a vital role in empowering the participants and facilitating the support of their academic achievements. The following paragraphs delve into the specific ways in which staff members supported and guided the participants on their academic journeys. Victor remarked:

Well, the staff. What can I say I mean? You know when I registered for courses. They guided me all the way through. You know they guided me all the way through any questions I had, they answered, uh, if they couldn't give me the answer right away, they got it for me or they point me in the right direction. You know the staff is excellent.

Victor emphasized the importance of having a university in the local area and praised the quality of staff that were always available to provide guidance and support to students. He appreciated that the staff were not simply going through the motions but genuinely cared about helping students succeed. Victor stated:

You know the, the biggest like theme is just having a university here in town. That's a big thing. Plus, the quality of the staff that they have, you know, the quality that I experienced was great. It’s good, you know. They weren't, they weren't there just to put in the hours they were there to actually help out the student. That's what I really enjoy.
Both Beto and Elias shared the positive experiences they had with staff at this college. Beto found everyone he interacted with to be enjoyable, friendly, and helpful, whether it was for financial aid or getting it or general advising. He stated:

Everybody that I interacted with, whether it was I'm getting help with my financial aid or the advisors, were real enjoyable. Everybody was real friendly and made sure I was able to get the help that I needed and fulfill any applications correctly. Or even if I had any questions, they were there to help.

Elias specifically praised his academic advisor who helped him stay on track for graduation and take the appropriate classes. Elias appreciated the quality of the instructors and tutors, stating that their entire staff was great. He communicated, “If had a problem, uh, I would just talk to my advisors or whoever and they would have helped me resolve it.” Elias also noted the support he received as a student with a disability. He noted, “I was a student with disabilities. And, um, I got great help from [program] and [staff] and that also helped me to succeed.”

Adán praised the learning support staff as he observed:

I mean it was, it was cool. I like I got to know my tutors. I got to know like the front desk staff and the advisors, you know. Like I knew if I needed any sort of advice on pretty much anything I could go to [staff].

He further relayed:

Um, getting to know like [tutor] and all of the tutors was really great and even when I would go to, you know, and it was cool that it was an atmosphere where not only was it you know full-time staff, but also student hires and it’s kind of really integrated the community.
Adán spoke highly of the learning support staff, noting that he had the opportunity to develop relationships with his tutors, front desk staff, and advisors. He expressed appreciation for their availability and willingness to provide guidance on various matters. Additionally, he highlighted the positive experience of interacting with both full-time staff and student hires, emphasizing how the integration contributed to a sense of community within the institution.

In summary, participants suggest staff members at this institution of higher education were a vital part of their academic journeys, providing invaluable support guidance and encouragement. Participants praised the staff members for their knowledge, friendliness, guidance, and dedication to helping students achieve their academic goals. The support staff in financial aid applications, academic advisors, tutors, and learning support staff supporting students with disabilities and we're all recognized for their contributions.

**Socio-cultural Factors and Other Variables**

**Financial**

Each participant had a different college experience and was affected by various socio-cultural factors and other variables such as transportation, financial, breaks in study, and employment challenges. Each participant shared their unique perspectives and the implications of persisting at this college and its impact on degree attainment.

As aforementioned, Victor worked through a full military career and had since retired and returned to postsecondary opportunities. Victor’s unique circumstances, his career endeavors, and financial position provided an opportunity to focus on engaging with coursework and was not impacted by finances, as the GI Bill paid the required
tuition. He cited having the financial resources as a big factor of the completion of the degree.

Victor noted that having the financial resources was the largest factor in his successful completion of course work whereas Dale was impacted by the lack of resources. As aforenoted, he lived in his car for a while, and was later able to connect to a resource that provided direct support and somewhat mitigated the risk factor of having a lack of financial resources. Dale did stop attending and later returned due to the lack of financial resources:

Yeah money. That’s kind of the main thing from the beginning. If I had had money, I could have just bought a car, but if I had money, I could have just bought an apartment, bought a house, whatever but ever so it goes. Everyone’s poor when they're in college, right?

Dale was later connected with an Ameri-corps program which provided financial support. Dale remarked:

So, I had no idea that [youth program] even existed, and then I signed up for it and then got like thousands of dollars from Ameri-corps to pay for that. So, that was a good beginning. Then I started going to [program] and started getting money for that and like that was, you know, my education basically already been paid for by Ameri-corps or so that that's just like money in my pocket now.

The financial resources paid for the access to the coursework and supported the progress of degree attainment.

A similar experience was noted by Neal who also had to take a break from coursework until he could afford to return to progress with coursework:
I had to reach out to scholarship programs, the lottery scholarship for one and utilized the Pell Grant but, uh, I've always been sort of uh, lucky in that it was never too much of a bill until recently. Now I just can't afford to go this semester, so I'm putting in. I'm taking the academic break for the next little bit until I can afford to go.

**Transportation**

Participants noted transportation as hindrance for some students. Forty percent of the participants remarked transportation was a barrier or an obstacle to gaining access to coursework, given the rural location of this institution of higher education. This barrier is not an academic challenge, but logistical one. Participants noted the need to travel long distances, their lack of a vehicle, and the need to walk to the campus to gain access to the campus and coursework. There is a scheduled bus transit system to the campus, however these sparse resources require participants to plan accordingly and to remain on campus for longer durations of time. This lack of transportation coincides with the limited financial resources available to these commuter students.

Participants noted the following experiences with their situation with transportation to and from the campus. Dale stressed the challenges:

Oh yeah, definitely, uh. There have been times where like I didn't have a car. And I had no way of transportation, so I was taking like the [company] bus around everywhere. And that is not like designed for a lot of classes like sometimes you have to show up like an hour or two before your class. Just 'cause that's the way the bus schedule works. That was frustrating, like I was just walking everywhere.
Victor emphasized that due to the ruralness of the small communities the local university makes it less difficult to travel for post-secondary education. Victor explained, There’s a lot of little communities that are, that are away out there and by having this university here, it makes it a lot easier to travel. You know, no longer do you have to go eighty to one-hundred thirty miles just to the university.

In this statement, he reports the challenges with travel are that “a lot of people, especially the younger ones or maybe even the older ones don't have the resources to pursue a four-year degree.” Neal agreed and contended one of his challenges was transportation, but he had a support network to get him to and from the campus.

The remaining participants did not declare they had issues with transportation. The lack of financial resources and the impact on persistence and degree attainment are wide-ranging. Distances from schools can also be a risk factor in degree completion. Despite the challenges, all three students did earn their associate degree.

**Break in Studies**

According to data from the National Student Clearing House Research Center, in an annual progress report for the academic year of 2020/2021, it was noted that, “more than a quarter of freshmen do not return for their second year; at community colleges, it is 41 percent” (2022, p. 2). There are many factors that can contribute to these lower student success rates including financial challenges, minimal or lack of support and guidance, personal challenges, and academic challenges, to name a few. These factors can make it difficult for students to persist and complete their programs, particularly those attending community colleges.
According to interviews conducted with the participants and review of the academic transcripts, three of the seven participants stated they took a break from their studies due to financial challenges, employment, and the impact of the national pandemic of the coronavirus. Taking a break from their course of study may be necessary for students to address these challenges and prioritize their well-being. However, it is equally important for colleges and universities to provide support and resources to help students overcome obstacles and stay on track to graduation.

Three of the participants temporarily paused their education for personal reasons. Neal and Dale had to take a break due to financial difficulties, which made continuing to attend school unaffordable. On the other hand, Adán chose to take a break from his education voluntarily, seeking respite from the demands of online classes during the pandemic. It is important to note that while Dale and Neal faced financial barriers that compelled them to take a break, Adán’s decision to pause his education was not driven by financial constraints.

Neal observed:

I had to reach out to scholarship [program] for one and utilized the Pell grant but, uh, I've always been sort of uh, lucky in that it was never too much of a bill until recently. Now I just can't afford to go this semester, so I'm putting in. I'm taking the academic break for the next little bit until I can afford to go.

Like Neal, Dale’s college pursuits were also influenced by financial challenges. To address these financial constraints, Dale opted to attend coursework only during the spring semester, allowing him to allocate more time to work to generate income. This decision was a strategic approach to balance his educational goals with his financial
responsibilities. Dale adjusted his academic schedule to accommodate his need for employment, which impacted his ability to take coursework during the summer and fall semesters. Dale stated:

Yeah, so I was for a while there I was only attending the spring semester.

Because I was working this [job] that was taking me away for summer and fall.

That would start in like April, May, typically. And then it would last until like October. So, I would, I wouldn't start attending classes again until January.

Dale clarified that his decision to prioritize work was not a shift in priorities away from school but rather a means to support his education. He initially started attending school before securing the job, and the job opportunity arose through his involvement in a [program]. The internship program served as a source of income to help finance his education. Despite taking on the job, participants emphasized that their commitment to school remained unchanged. Dale clarified:

I mean, I had started school first and then later got that job, so like that was still my priority there and uh, I got that job like I met up with the people that I was working with through [program], something I was doing so that I could pay for school. So, it’s like my priorities had not shifted from school. I just wanted to do that as well. And that was the only way I could figure out how to do it.

Adán experienced the need to take time off from his studies due to the utilization of online coursework resulting from the impact of the pandemic. The shift to online learning presented challenges for Adán, and he required a break to alleviate the strain associated with attending classes online. He remarked:
When coronavirus started I kind of was needing a break from school and so I thought I would take a semester off because online classes aren't like my favorite thing, I mean, I will do them, but um, I just felt like I needed a break in general, so I'll be resuming now in the fall.

The experiences of the participants highlight the diverse range of reasons and necessity to take a break from their studies, including financial struggles, personal reasons, the competing priority of needing to work to support their education, and the need to accommodate online learning. These insights show the complexity of factors that contribute to the decisions to temporarily pause one's education. They emphasize the importance of providing support and resources to help students persist and achieve their educational goals. Financial challenges faced by these participants are significant risk factors that can potentially prolong or impede the successful completion of their degrees. Understanding and addressing these challenges can play a vital role in promoting student success and degree attainment.

**Health and Wellness Determinants**

The health and wellness determinants refer to the various factors that impact an individual’s health and well-being. These determinants may include economic factors such as access to education, employment, and health care, to name a few. These determinants influence and shape an individual's social well-being, physical, and mental health. The health and wellness determinants may affect an individual's ability to lead a healthy and fulfilling life.

More than half of the participants were impacted by various health and wellness determinants. Some participants navigated their academic careers challenged by a
documented disability. One participant, who was diagnosed with diabetes during adolescence, stated that diabetes still impacts his daily life and decision making due to the prohibitive cost of insulin and the need for insurance. Mental health challenges and access to jobs and housing were noted as factors that impacted his daily well-being. More specifically, one participant mentioned difficulties in finding jobs, housing, and financial stability in the city where he lived. Another participant suffered from depression, especially during the end of his time at college before transferring to a four-year institution. He shared more specifically how he managed his depression with the support of certain classes.

As we know, students with disabilities navigating higher education are protected by state and federal laws and may be supported with resources to include, but not limited to, disability accommodations. Students face challenges as they navigate earning a higher education credential. During the interviews, more than half of the students disclosed they had a disability that impacted their learning.

Adán was impacted by his diabetes. He was diagnosed in adolescence and indicated it is a big factor in impacting his daily life, “like my decision making just because insulin is really expensive and I want to be able to like have insurance and, uh, you know for obvious reasons.”

Dale remarked about the additional challenges:

Money, housing 'cause we live in [city] and housing is difficult. Jobs 'cause again we live in [city] and finding a reliable job is difficult sometimes. No, I've always felt like I've had like a lot of support mechanisms like socially like I’ve always
had people around me, that have been good for me. But housing, money and jobs, it's not always an easy thing in [city], unless you already have all of those things.

One participant noted he suffered from depression. Adán mentioned going through different phases, particularly during the end of his time at a college before transferring to a four-year institution to pursue a bachelor’s degree. He described facing depression during this time and how certain classes and events helped him cope and overcome the depression. He explained that taking trigonometry for the first time during the semester was overwhelming and contributed to his struggle. As a result, he changed his course of study to forestry because it required less mathematics. Adán shared:

So, yeah, yeah, I would say towards the end, before I moved to [city], I kind of went into a bit of like a depression and that was a big a big thing for me, um, or like a harder thing for me, um.

The aforementioned health and wellness determinants including economic factors such as education, employment, and healthcare impact an individual's well-being, potentially affecting their ability to lead a healthy and fulfilling life. More than half of the participants disclosed various health and wellness determinants that impacted their well-being. Disabilities, financial instability, and mental health challenges were noted, in addition to a participant citing difficulty finding jobs in housing in their respective community. However, this research noted that students had social support to overcome the barriers and utilized certain classes and events to cope and overcome their challenges.
Risk and Protective Factors

Analysis of Factors

The key findings from this study revealed many risk and protective factors impacted the persistence and graduation of academically, underprepared male students in a rural community college system in Northern New Mexico. As aforementioned, these students faced barriers and various obstacles to their academic success. As presented in Table 6, these students were faced with socio-cultural factors and other variables to include being first-generation college students, financial challenges that led some students to have a break in their studies, transportation issues, and personal challenges to include health and wellness.

Table 6

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Risk Factors</th>
<th>Protective Factors</th>
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<td>Lack of academic preparedness</td>
<td>Access to academic support services</td>
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<td>Limited financial resources</td>
<td>Mentoring relationships</td>
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<td>Inadequate social support</td>
<td>Sense of belonging within the community college</td>
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<td>External responsibilities and obligations</td>
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<td>First-generation college students</td>
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However, these risk factors did not stop the participants from reaching degree attainment as the students reported support structures and delineated their ability to persist. Despite facing academic under preparedness and various risk factors, all seven participants successfully obtained an associate degree. The key findings of this study
revealed that each student received varied levels of support and experienced unique circumstances. However, the most significant findings highlighted the role of protective factors in fostering persistence and retention among the participants. These protective factors were identified as cultural capital and support from both family and the broader community. The presence of cultural capital, including knowledge skills and resources helped to empower the students and navigate the challenges they faced. Also, the support and encouragement received from their families and communities played a crucial role in fostering their participation persistence and retention in completing a higher education credential.

Lastly, the noted academic support services received by participants, including the completion of the required developmental coursework, engagement with tutoring programs, study skills workshops, and supplemental instruction were recognized as valuable resources that helped students overcome academic challenges. These services served as protective factors and contributed to enhancing persistence, retention, and degree completion rates. As students completed the remedial coursework, they built the confidence and skills necessary to engage in the required college level math and English coursework. Individually, students benefited from the tutoring services provided and noted the experiences as being positive and helped them to progress with their coursework, thus meeting the degree requirements and earning their associate degree despite entering the institution academically underprepared.

These findings underscore the importance of recognizing and leveraging these protective factors to promote persistence, retention, and degree attainment.
Ability to Persist and Protective Factors

According to the participants, the ability to persist in college was driven by many variables. Participants noted some of these variables such as the need to complete the degree and the expectations set for themselves or the expectations set by family, having the financial wherewithal and maturity to navigate the completion of the postsecondary credential, willpower, a strong work ethic, and the love of learning.

Victor successfully attended the two-year institution and has directly matriculated to a four-year institution of higher education. He traveled to the four-year institution from his home three times per week and aligned as many classes as possible to maximize the number of credit hours he could earn as he worked toward the completion of his degree. Victor indicated, “I did some in-person courses and you know, I took those courses that I knew would help me out with what I'm doing in the community.” His motivation was centered on completing the degree, so that this endeavor would affect his community. Victor recounted:

The thing is that you never stop learning and the importance of having a degree.

You know what I’m saying. For myself personally, that was a, a big goal that, that, that's what motivated me is, you know, I wanted to have a degree.

Victor also noted that being more mature and more disciplined contributed the completion of the bachelor’s degree. He also had the financial means to support this endeavor. Victor explained:

You know, not to toot my own horn or anything, but the thing is, is that now, being more mature, being more disciplined and you know having the resources to do it. That helps a lot. And then again, the other thing is that you know, like we
had the, the GI Bill that I used, so I didn't have to worry about tuition or anything like that. And that's one of the what that's a big factor when you look at it.

Victor was going to complete the degree, no matter the circumstances:

I've never like to quit; I've never quit anything in my life. And you know, and that's one of the big things is that I was going to do it come hell or high water. You know, the thing is, is that even if I had to go back I would do it. You know, you know, I'm not the smartest tool in the shed. I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed, but you know, but I would persist in going back. Doesn't matter if I have to repeat classes or go back. You know it’s something that I wanted all my life and I wanted, it’s something that they can’t take away, if you want it that bad, you'll do it.

As aforementioned, Dale did not see himself pursuing educational opportunities in the future and he did not really see the point, nor did he care, as noted, as a result of his experiences with his formative education in middle and high school as he found himself disengaged. However, after being expelled his senior year and completing his high school career early via an online course, Dale became interested in plants, permaculture, and realized he wanted a more specialized education outside of his interests and research. He explained, “And so really like I got out of high school and then just started doing my own research on things that were interesting and then was like maybe I should just get a college education, it seems easier.” Dale further explained:

I started just, I started just like looking into things myself, I started getting really interested into plants and permaculture and soils and rocks and trees and all of these things and I wanted like a more specialized education outside of like what I
was just like reading in my free time, basically. Like I wanted to be more engaged in like a natural resource conservation setting I guess is how I'd put it these days.

It was this individual research that fostered his decision to seek a postsecondary degree. Dale specified that his ability to persist in college is defined by “sheer willpower sometimes” and his love of learning:

Also, just like I like, I love learning like I love learning about things. You know, it doesn't really matter what it is. I just like the engagement of like, you know, being taught things. Some people don't really like the class or environment, but I think I really do. I really enjoy like having somebody lecture me on a subject or on a topic or something like that, I don't know. I, I really enjoy like a school setting. Gives me a lot of happiness. It does spark joy.

Dale earned an associate degree from this community college and has transferred to a four-year degree-granting program.

Neal dropped out midway through high school. It was through a connection to an adult education program that he completed his high school equivalency and matriculated for postsecondary opportunities. His first thought was to join the military, but then figured he could be successful if he pursued his passions, so he pursued the arts at this community college. His goal for attending college was initially to pursue a bachelor’s degree at first but based on interactions with some of his professors he decided that he wanted to work toward the completion of a master’s degree. Neal noted that his attendance at this community college supported his passions:
I think the most motivating thing is that going to [community college] made me realize that my passions, the things that I wanted to do and be successful in, were possible, and that's a huge motivation is that, uh not being told, but being shown that your goals are achievable is a huge boost not only to your motivation but maybe your ego as well and so that, that probably kept me into in it for a little bit.

Elias cited his work ethic as the factor that attributed to his ability to persist in college. He distinguished his work ethic to be the driving factor for persistence and noted he was “Always good and trying to complete what I start. Not give up.” His motivation was “to achieve the goal that I had set for myself, getting an associates.” Elias reached his goal of degree attainment and earned an associate degree at this community college.

Adán noted that having a sense of community, finding the spark for learning, making his family proud, and being able to provide for himself contributed to his motivation and persistence. He reflected, “I guess to a certain extent my motivation was finding that spark that like kind of reason why I wanted to learn.” If he understands the context and the application, then he finds the purpose. He equated the need to understand why to the difficulty he experienced with mathematics, remarking:

That was one thing for me, that's why I had a hard time with math was the why. Like okay, you can have this problem that there's a bunch of variables and things that need to process, that need to happen, but why? Like what is the application? What is the reason behind it so if I can provide context for myself. Then I have a purpose.

Much like Adán, Beto also noted the community support that attributed to his ability to persist. He cited the support from tutors, staff, and having an end goal to
complete an associate degree and certificate. Beto stated, “Probably seeing the end goal, after finding and actually choosing to stick with my first degree and my certificate, I was kind of just like the end goal on different things that I can do.” Having an end goal in sight and the support to achieve the goal contributed to his success. Beto did complete an associate degree.

Lastly, Tobias attributes his ability to persist to his stubbornness and not accepting no for an answer when it came to school as he explains here:

I don't take no for an answer when it comes to school, which has really been one of the main things that has gotten me through my college career. The fact that I, you know, will not accept the failing grade for a class, and if I get one, well, I'm going to retake it and I'll take it again and again and again, until I pass it up.

Tobias gives an example of his ability to persist, as he did not find success the initial time he engaged in pre-calculus coursework and trigonometry. He took the class and completed the coursework on his third attempt. Tobias specified,

Most people I would say probably would give up which you know it’s kind of hard to take it a third time after that, 'cause it is a kind of a shot to the morale. But I really attribute my stubbornness to, you know, not give up, to keep pushing at it, and eventually I'll get it.

Tobias earned his associate degree and transferred on to a four-year degree to pursue a bachelor’s degree.

Protective factors, such as cultural capital and support from the family and community, were identified as key elements influencing the persistence and retention among the participants in this study. Additionally, self-efficacy has been recognized as
another influential factor in academic achievement. Bandura et al. (1996) proposed that a parent’s sense of academic efficacy can be linked to their child's scholastic accomplishments. These beliefs profoundly impact various aspects including aspirations motivation, perseverance, resilience, critical thinking skills, attributions of success and failure, and vulnerability to stress and depression (Bandura et al., 1996). The connection between self-efficacy and scholastic achievement emphasizes the role personal beliefs and attitudes in shaping educational outcomes highlighting the important of importance of fostering a positive sense of academic efficacy to support student success.

**Summary**

**Answering the Research Questions**

The primary objective of this research study was to gain comprehensive understanding of challenges faced by academically underprepared male students in a community college system. The study aimed to address two specific research questions. The first question focused on identifying the risk and protective factors experienced by academically underprepared male students within a community college in Northern New Mexico. By exploring these factors, the study sought to shed light on the various influences that impact the academic and socio-cultural experiences of male students, potentially affecting their degree attainment.

The second research question aimed to investigate the influence of these identified risk and protective factors on persistence retention and degree attainment among academically underprepared male students in a rural setting at a community college in Northern New Mexico. This part of the study sought to examine how the experiences of these students, particularly those who engaged in remediation, influenced their
educational outcomes. By delving into the experience and outcomes of academically underprepared male students, the study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of unique challenges and factors that impact their education in a community college context, including the identification of risk and protective factors. By identifying these factors, the study aimed to shed light on the potential barriers and sources to support and influence the academic success and degree attainment of academically underprepared students at this community college.

Table 6 highlights that risk and protective factors are key elements that significantly impact the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared students in community colleges. These factors can impact their degree attainment and overall success in the educational journey. Understanding these factors can help identify potential challenges and develop effective strategies to support these students.

Risk factors refer to circumstances or characteristics that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes or hinder academic progress. Examples of risk factors for academically underprepared students included a lack of academic preparedness, limited financial resources, inadequate social support, or external responsibilities and obligations. On the other hand, protective factors or factors that mitigate the impact of risk factors and promote positive outcomes. These factors contribute to resilience and academic success despite challenges. Protective factors included access to academic support services, mentoring relationships, a sense of belonging within the community college, financial aid and scholarships, and opportunities for involvement with staff and faculty.
By identifying and addressing both risk and protective factors, educational institutions can create a supportive environment that enhances the academic success and degree attainment of academically underprepared students. This understanding can inform the development of targeted interventions, programs, and support services to help suits overcome challenges and thrive in their college experience.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Preface

The primary objective of this research study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by academically underprepared male students in a community college system, particularly in a rural setting in Northern New Mexico. The study aimed to address two specific research questions. The first research question was, “What are the risk and protective factors experienced by academically underprepared male college students, at a community college, in Northern New Mexico?” The first question focused on identifying the risk and protective factors experienced academically underprepared male students within a community college. By exploring these factors, the study sought to shed light on the various influences that impact the academic and socio-cultural studies of male students potentially affecting their degree attainment.

The second research question aimed to investigate the influence of these identified risk and protective factors on the persistence, retention, and degree attainment of academically underprepared male students in the same community college. The second research question was, “What influence do these risk and protective factors have on persistence retention and degree attainment at this rural, Northern New Mexico community college?” This part of the research aimed to examine how experiences of these students, particularly those who engaged in remediation coursework, influenced their educational outcomes. By delving into the experiences and outcomes of academically underprepared male students, the study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and factors that impact their education in the community college context, including the identification of risk and protective factors. By
identifying these factors, the study aimed to shed light on the potential barriers and sources of support that can influence the academic success and degree attainment of academically underprepared students at this college community.

The analysis of the collected data in this study provides insight into the experiences of academically underprepared students in the context of a community college. By focusing on the experiences of academically underprepared male participants in community college, this study contributes to the existing literature by shedding light on their unique journey. These insights gathered from the participants' experiences provide valuable information regarding the risk and protective factors that influence their degree attainment. These findings expand our understanding of the challenges faced by academically underprepared male students and offer important implications for supporting their educational success. These findings provide valuable information to further research and implications regarding practice in this field.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

The analysis of the collected data in this study not only confirmed various points emphasized in the existing literature, but also provided new insights that contribute to our understanding of experiences of academically underprepared students attending a community college system. These findings have significant implications and provide valuable information to further research and practice in this field.

Risk and Protective Factors

The student integration model (SIM) (Tinto, 1975) focuses on understanding the dropout process in higher education by examining the interaction between individuals and
institutions. It draws on Durkheim's theory of suicide to explore the factors influencing dropout behavior. However, Tinto acknowledged that applying Durkheim’s theory of suicide alone does not provide a comprehensive explanation for the various forms of dropout behavior exhibited by different individuals. Nevertheless, the SIM contributes to our understanding of educational persistence by highlighting individual qualities and dispositions that are relevant to student success. It identifies key predictive concepts such as individual characteristics, educational expectations and institutional commitment that can influence the student's decision to drop out of postsecondary institutions (Tinto, 1975). In relation to the research on academically underprepared males in community college setting, the same can provide additional insight into the analysis of risk and protective factors that impact educational experiences.

By considering individual characteristics such as prior academic preparation, support structures, personal motivation, as well as the student’s level of institutional commitment, motivation, and sense of belonging, a better understanding of the interaction between an individual's and institutional alignment is noted and how the risk and protective factors may influence persistence retention and degree attainment.

Based upon the data analysis, the risk and protective factors emerged and offered insight in the shaping of the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared students in community colleges. These factors had a direct impact on their degree attainment and overall success in their educational journey. Understanding and addressing these factors is crucial in identifying potential challenges in developing effective strategies to support these students. Risk factors encompass circumstances or characteristics that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes or hinder academic
progress. Examples of the identified risk factors for these academically underprepared students included inadequate academic preparedness, limited financial resources, insufficient social support, or external responsibilities and obligations.

Impact on Persistence, Retention, and Degree Attainment

However, the protective factors acted as mitigating factors that counterbalanced the impact of risk factors and promote positive outcomes. These factors contribute to resilience and academic success despite the challenges. Protective factors identified in this study included access to academic support services, faculty and staff support, mentoring relationships, a sense of belonging within the community college, financial aid and scholarship opportunities, and opportunities for involvement with staff and faculty.

Having a direct connection to a faculty or staff member served as a protective factor for overcoming obstacles and barriers, while allowing for guidance, mentorship, and support for students. Colleges and universities must create relevant opportunities to increase interaction outside of the classroom and provide directed student support. A contributing protective factor to the success of these participants was their connectedness and integration into the college campus.

By identifying and addressing both risk and protective factors, educational institutions can create a supportive environment that enhances the academic success and degree attainment of academically underprepared students. This understanding can inform the development of targeted interventions programs and support services to help these students overcome challenges and thrive in their college experience.
Limitations and Challenges

While this study provided valuable insights into the experiences of academically underprepared male students in a community college system, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research project. These limitations include sample size, generalizability, time frame, need for longitudinal study, and self-reporting bias. Recognizing these limitations is important for providing transparency and context to the research findings.

The research study was limited by the sample size. As this qualitative study is based on the experiences of seven academically underprepared male community college students, the generalizability of the findings may be limited. The small sample size may impact the representativeness of the findings. Additional research opportunities might consider expanding the sample size and diversifying the participant pool to enhance the external validity for future studies.

The next limitation of this study centers on external validity and generalizability or the extent to which this project's findings can be generalized to real-world settings outside of this community college's context. Variables such as the participants’ characteristics, specific community college resources, and research questions may limit the validity of the findings. This study focused on a specific context, namely a community college in Northern New Mexico with a specific subset of participants. As this is the case, the findings may be limited and not fully generalizable to other community colleges or academic institutions in different regions or cultural contexts. The unique characteristics of the participants in the specific institutional setting limit the broader applicability of the findings.
The design of this study does not fully capture changes over time. A longitudinal study that follows academically underprepared students from college to degree completion will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and factors influencing their success. The study relied on self-report data, which may be subject to participants’ recall bias or social desirability bias. Participants may have provided responses that align with societal expectation or perceived academic norms, potentially influencing the accuracy and reliability of the findings.

These limitations of this study should be considered when interpreting the findings. The small sample size and specific context may restrict the generalizability of the results to other community colleges academic institutions. Additionally, the lack of longitudinal data hinders the ability to capture changes over time and establishes causal relationships. The reliance on self-report data introduces the possibility of recalling social desirability biases. Nonetheless, recognizing these limitations can guide future research efforts to expand the sample size diversify participating groups, adopt longitudinal studies, and employ multiple data sources to enhance the understanding of academically and are prepared male students. The awareness of these limitations can guide future research endeavors, addressing potential gaps, and refining methodologies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the academically underprepared male student and inform effective support strategies.

**Implications**

**Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study may have important implications for educators and policymakers and their efforts to support academically underprepared students. This study
highlights the need to reevaluate current practices and policies related to developmental education and support programs. The identified risk and protective factors influencing the academic success of underprepared students can guide educators in designing more effective interventions and instructional strategies. Policymakers may use these findings to inform policy changes that promote equitable access to quality education and provide adequate support for underprepared students. By addressing the specific needs of academically underprepared students, educators and policymakers can work toward improving educational outcomes, to include increasing persistence retention and degree attainment.

Implications for educators and policy makers include the implementation of co-requisite models for developmental education and mathematics and English courses. These models involve providing academic support and instruction simultaneously with college level coursework, rather than requiring students to complete separate remedial courses before advancing the credit bearing courses. This study identified several factors that extended the time to completion of the associate degree for participants. One significant factor was the requirement for participants to complete multiple levels of remedial mathematics courses or English courses before advancing to college level coursework. In addition, another contributing factor was the enrollment of participants on a part-time basis for a brief period.

By adopting a co-requisite model, educators and policymakers can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of developmental education allowing academically underprepared students to progress more quickly toward degree completion. Bettinger and Long (2009) noted the increase in the number of requirements and extending time to
degree completion negatively impact degree attainment. Accelerating learning and prioritizing high-level skills while working to build the foundational knowledge will support persistence in degree completion. The approach may provide students with the necessary support while keeping them on track with their academic goals, increasing their chances of success in college. Moreover, policymakers can allocate resources and design policies that support the widespread implementation of corequisite models ensuring equitable access to quality education for students.

The participants at the rural community college had a shared experience of feeling academically underprepared when they first entered. Even though a few participants mentioned having some level preparedness, all of them had to take developmental coursework in addition to their regular degree-related classes through their academic journeys. These perspectives emphasize the significance of offering adequate support and resources to foster academic success and address the challenges encountered by academically underprepared students in community colleges. By ensuring the availability of necessary assistance, educational institutions can help these students overcome their initial educational challenges and achieve their academic goals.

The developmental coursework at this college supported the remediation of the requisite basic reading, writing, and mathematics skills to include paired computer assisted mathematics labs. These courses developed the fundamental skills of students to improve the students’ educational outcomes. Participants noted the academic tutoring provided a level of academic support and engagement. For these reasons, the developmental education coursework served as a protective factor and supported overcoming the academic barriers of underprepared students entering postsecondary
institutions. Including developmental coursework at this college, particularly in reading writing and mathematics skills, was found to be beneficial or a protective factor for students. The use of paired computer assisted mathematics lab helped develop essential skills and enhance educational outcomes. The provision of academic tutoring also emerged as a significant support mechanism, fostering engagement, and assisting students in overcoming academic barriers. These findings highlight the importance of implementing comprehensive development educational programs that address specific skill gaps and provide necessary support services. Institutions of higher education, educators, and policymakers may consider integrating similar supportive measures into developmental coursework to better prepare underprepared students for success in post-secondary institutions.

The findings of this study highlighted transportation as a significant barrier for academic underprepared students in accessing and succeeding in higher education. Recognizing and addressing transportation challenges can have important implications for practice. Educational institutions can explore various strategies to mitigate transportation barriers for students. This may include developing further partnerships with local transportation authorities to provide discounted or subsidized transportation options for students and implementing shuttle services between campuses and public transit hubs or organizing carpooling programs among students. Facilitating easier access to transportation to institutions of higher education may increase a student's ability to attend class access resources and fully engage in campus activities. Furthermore, institutions may consider leveraging the integration of technology-based solutions to overcome transportation challenges. This may be done by offering additional online or hybrid
courses to reduce the need for daily commuting, providing virtual advising and tutoring services, and implementing remote access to campus resources. By leveraging technology, institutions of higher education can create more flexible learning environments and minimize the risk factor of transportation on student success.

Advocacy efforts by institutions of higher education like this community college are essential. Colleges and universities can advocate for improved public transportation and infrastructure in their respective surrounding communities. Advocacy may allow for ensuring that there are accessible systems of transportation to adequately serve the needs of the community. Additionally, institutions can collaborate with policymakers and community stakeholders to advocate for funding and policies to support transportation access for all students.

The findings of this study suggest important implications for practice, particularly in leveraging the assets and support of the family in supporting academically underprepared students. Recognizing the influence of family dynamics and support systems on students' educational journeys can significantly enhance the effectiveness of interventions and support services. Educational institutions can implement strategies that actively involve and engage families in academic success of their students. This may include providing resources and workshops for families on navigating the college experience, offering opportunities for families to participate in campus events particularly for first-generation college students. Families can provide valuable emotional support, guidance, and motivation to their students, which can positively impact their persistence retention and degree attainment.
Institutions of higher education must create intentional practices with removing the barriers that prevent first-generation college students from fully participating and engaging with faculty and staff outside of the classroom. Participants cited the direct connections and support they had from staff and faculty members. Having a direct connection to a faculty or staff member allowed for overcoming obstacles and barriers, while allowing for guidance, mentorship, and support for students. Colleges and universities must create relevant opportunities to increase interaction outside of the classroom and provide directed student support. A contributing protective factor to the success of these participants was their connectedness and integration into the college campus (Rosenbaum, 2018; Tinto, 1975). In addition, not only was the social support system critical for success, but the academic tutoring also provided a level of academic support and engagement. Not only will first-generation college students be impacted by these supports, but all students will also be impacted by these opportunities.

Another important implication of the study's findings is related to the time to degree completion for academically underprepared male students. The current federally mandated reporting system may not accurately capture the completion rates of these students, as it relies on a specific definition of completion that does not align with the unique circumstances and challenges faced by academically underprepared individuals. This highlights the need for more comprehensive and nuanced approaches to reporting and measuring degree completion, ones that consider the diverse paths and extended timelines that academically underprepared students may encounter in a community college system.
Recognizing the limitations of the current reporting system, policymakers and institutions can work towards developing more inclusive and accurate measures of completion that capture the experiences of academically underprepared students. This should involve considering factors noted such as part time enrollment, interruptions or breaks in studies, and the utilization of support programs and resources that contributes to these students' overall success even if they do not fit within the traditional definition of persistence and completion. By reviewing and adopting a more comprehensive perspective on degree completion, institutions and policymakers can better understand the outcomes of academically underprepared students and develop strategies to support the educational journeys.

**Implications for Leadership**

This study’s findings also have implication for college leaders and students that matriculate from two-year degree granting programs to pathways to four-year degrees. The experiences of the academically underprepared male students at this community college can shed light on the challenges they face in transitioning to and success at four-year institutions. Understanding these challenges or barriers is crucial for four-year institutions to effectively support students to further pursue educational opportunities. This study’s findings can inform four-year institutions about the specific risk and protective factors that impact academically underprepared students' abilities to transfer to four-year institutions.

By identifying these factors, both community colleges and four-year institutions leaders can support the development of targeted interventions and support programs to address the barriers faced by these students and enhance their transfer success rates.
Furthermore, the study's findings underscore the importance of providing resources and support services that specifically address the needs of academically underprepared students who aim to transfer to four-year institutions. These may include remedial coursework, mentoring, programs, and tailored support to help these students overcome academic and social challenges and increase their likelihood of successful transfer and degree attainment at four-year institutions.

The insights derived from this study can also be relevant to the transition from high school to college. The experiences of academically underprepared male students at the community college shed light on some of the challenges they faced when matriculating to higher education. These challenges may mirror some of the risk factors faced by high school students. Understanding these challenges and barriers is crucial for high schools and colleges to effectively support students in their respective institutions to prepare students for the transition from high school to college. High schools can use this knowledge to identify and address areas where students may be underprepared, providing proper resources, scaffolds, and interventions to enhance their readiness for college. By integrating the insights derived from this research into the high school-to-college transition, educational institutions can foster a collaborative approach to further discuss and identify areas for improvement and strengthen support structures and resources available to students at their respective institutions. This concerted effort will contribute to nurturing their academic success and persistence in both high school completion and in higher education.

The findings of this study have significant implications for educational leaders and practitioners seeking to enhance the academic success of students, particularly by
leveraging family support. Recognizing the influential role of families in students' educational journeys, educational leaders can implement strategies that actively involve and engage families, fostering a culture of inclusivity and support within the institution. Collaborations with community organizations and agencies can provide additional resources and support tailored to the specific needs of underprepared students and their families, enhancing their overall educational experiences.

Creating a supportive environment involves effectively communicating initial student expectations to families while respecting the confidentiality of student information under FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) regulations. Best practices such as offering parent orientation sessions can provide families with a comprehensive understanding of the educational process, availability of resources, and empower them to support their students effectively. By actively involving families in students' academic journeys, educational leaders can enhance the effectiveness of interventions and support services. While some aspects of FERPA may restrict family access to certain information, their knowledge of the college's expectations and their unwavering support can foster a mutual understanding and facilitate the educational process.

In addition, this study's findings may have a significant implication for the role of a dean of a college or chief academic officer in developing comprehensive and integrated support programs for academically underprepared students. As the academic leaders of the institution, Deans or CAO's could play a vital role in spearheading the design and implementation of support programs that address the unique learning needs and challenges of academically underprepared students. These programs should aim to
provide comprehensive and integrated support across dimensions of student success, including academic, social, and emotional support. To implement such a program, Deans or CAOs may collaborate with faculty and staff and other student support services to assess the specific needs of academically underprepared students. This can involve conducting needs assessments, reviewing student data, and seeking input from students via a student focus group.

By understanding the specific challenges faced by these students, institutions of higher education can identify where comprehensive support programs are most needed. Once the needs have been identified, these colleges and universities can work with relevant stakeholders to develop and implement the range of support programs and initiatives. Based on the insights and experiences of these participants, programs like academic support services such as tutoring programs, study skills workshops, and supplemental instruction may provide the additional support to improve persistence, retention, and degree attainment. Social and emotional support programs, such as mentoring initiatives, counseling services, and peer support groups can help address the non-academic barriers to success. Additionally, college and university leadership can advocate for the allocation of these resources to fund these comprehensive initiatives. Leaders may need to realign existing resources or collaborate with external partners to secure grants to meet the needs of academically underprepared students ensuring their long-term impact on student success.

Leaders should thoroughly assess the experiences and active engagement of the participants in all support initiatives offered at their intuitions of higher education. It is crucial to consider the potential gendered nature of these services, as certain student
demographics may not readily seek assistance or feel hesitant to ask for help based on their gender or cultural background. To ensure equitable access for all students, leaders can collaborate with their institutional research teams to disaggregate data and make necessary adjustments. This approach will help identify and address any disparities or barriers that may exist, thereby promoting inclusive and accessible support for every student.

Leaders in positions such as Deans, Chief Academic Officers (CAOs), and other educational leaders have a critical role to play in promoting accelerated learning for academically underprepared students. By understanding the specific challenges faced by these students, leaders can facilitate the necessary changes in developmental education to better support their academic progress. Transformational leaders can actively support and advocate for the implementation of accelerated learning and co-requisite models, which enable students to progress more quickly towards degree completion. By prioritizing the development of high-level skills while also building foundational knowledge, students are better equipped to persist and successfully complete their degrees. This approach provides the necessary support to help students stay on track with their academic goals, enhancing their chances of success in college. In their role as transformational leaders serving as change agents, they can champion these systemic changes within their institutions. Through their leadership, transformational leaders can foster collaboration, encourage open communication, and create a culture of continuous improvement within their institutions. They can promote a student-centered approach and work towards developing comprehensive support systems that address the unique needs of academically underprepared students. By empowering educators to adopt innovative teaching methods
and providing the necessary support systems, leaders can create an environment that effectively meets the needs of academically underprepared students. This includes offering professional development opportunities, resources, and guidance to educators, ensuring they have the tools they need to effectively support students' learning and success. By advocating for systemic improvements, empowering educators, and fostering a student-centered environment, these leaders can make a significant impact in promoting student success and enhancing degree completion rates.

**Recommendations**

**Additional Research**

The findings of this study emphasized the need for future research focused specifically on the male experiences within institutions of higher education. While this study provided valuable insights into the challenges and factors affecting academically underprepared male students, further investigation is needed to deepen our understanding of their unique experiences, needs, and barriers. Future research endeavors can explore additional dimensions of the male experience in higher education such as the impact of gender norms and stereotypes, the influence of social and cultural factors, and the effectiveness of intervention strategies tailored to support male students' academic success and degree attainment. By directing attention toward the underrepresented area of study, future research can contribute to the development of targeted policies and interventions that address the specific needs of male students in higher education settings.

In addition to the focus on the male experience, future research can also consider important themes. Intersectionality is a crucial area to explore, as further research can examine how the intersecting identities of academically underprepared students are
related to their success. Further research can explore the intersectional experiences of academically underprepared students considering factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status gender and other identity markers. Investigating how these intersecting identities shape their experiences and outcomes can provide a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by different student populations and inform targeted support strategies.

Additional research is warranted to investigate the unique challenges experienced by rural communities and students who live in rural communities. Students who live in rural communities face specific challenges that are distinct from those in urban or suburban areas. Students who live in rural communities have limited program offerings. Rural community colleges often have fewer program options compared to their urban counterparts. This can limit the range of educational pathways available to students making it challenging for them to pursue their desired fields of study. In addition, rural community colleges have limited access to resources in terms of libraries, technology, and academic support services. Students may face challenges accessing research materials, computer labs, academic support like tutoring services that may impact educational outcomes. Students who live in rural communities may have limited social support networks. Because rural community colleges may have a smaller student population, this may result in a lack of social support networks in the sense of isolation for students. Exploring these challenges may provide additional insight to inform targeted initiatives to address the unique challenges of students who live in rural communities.

Investigating institutional practices and policies is another key area for future research. Further research can delve into the impact of institutional policies and practices
on academically underprepared students. Examining factors such as placement policies, developmental education programs, curriculum design, and student support services can shed light on how these institutional factors influence the success and degree attainment of underprepared students. This research can inform evidence-based policy changes and institutional practices that better support academically underprepared students.

Exploring the experiences of academically underprepared male students who transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions is another important avenue for future research. Exploring the experiences can be a key area of research and investigating these challenges, supports, and outcomes of these students during the transfer process can inform policies and practices that facilitates successful transition and degree completion at four-year institution institutions of higher education.

Lastly, comparative studies across different community colleges and educational systems can contribute to the broader understanding of the risk and protective factors impacting academically underprepared students. As this study captures data and lived experiences of community college participants, research across different community colleges and educational systems can contribute to a broader understanding of the challenges and effective strategies for supporting academically underprepared students. Qualitative studies may provide insight when comparing outcomes and support systems across diverse contexts into the risk and protective factors influencing student success.

To summarize, future research in the field of academically underprepared students can explore the intersectional identities of these students including factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender to understand how these identities shaped their experiences and educational outcomes. Additionally, investigating the impact of
institutional practices and policies on academically underprepared students can provide valuable insights into effective support strategies. Another critical area for future research is the exploration of the experiences of academically underprepared male students who transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions. Lastly, conducting comparative studies across different community colleges and educational systems can enhance our understanding of the risk and protective factors that influence academically underprepared students. These research avenues will contribute to a broader understanding of the challenges faced by these students and may inform the development of targeted interventions and policies to support their academic success.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the academic and socio-cultural experiences of academically underprepared male community college participants. Through a qualitative case study approach, the research aimed to provide in depth descriptions and rich details by conducting personal interviews to investigate the risk and protective factors influencing the persistence retention and degree attainment of students at a community college in northern New Mexico. The study sought to enhance understanding of these factors to reduce attrition rates and increase graduation rates among academically underprepared male community college students. The research questions focused on exploring the risk and protective factors experienced by academically underprepared male students. Additionally, the study aimed to examine how these factors influenced their persistence retention and degree attainment within the rural context of this community college.
By gaining insights into the risk and protective factors affecting academically underprepared male students, this research contributes to efforts aimed at improving their educational outcomes. Understanding the complexities of persistence and degree attainment among these students was the central focus of this study.
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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Name:

Date:

Interview:

Time:

Location:

Abstract: The experiences of academically underprepared male college students will be investigated. As the intent of the study is to identify and understand the experiences of academically underprepared male students, in a community college system, interviews with program participants may provide insight as to their beliefs, values, expectations, and experiences with faculty and coursework.

The qualitative interview method will consist of a semi-structured interview, which will allow for open ended questioning. The guide will serve as a framework for gaining in-depth knowledge around the issues and challenges facing students in developmental education coursework.

Demographic Questions:

Tell me about yourself, age, current employment status, (how many hours per week do you work? Seasonal work? laid off?), children? their ages? do they live with you? first-generation, did you attend college immediately after high school, first language, financial aid, number of credit hours earned, degree completion, race/ethnicity.

In-Depth Probing Questions:

Question 1: Tell me about your K-12 experiences, both positive and negative.

a) Who were some of your supporters or cheerleaders?

b) When did you realize you wanted to attend college?
c) How prepared were you to enter college?

d) What were your expectations of college?

e) What were family expectations of you?

Question 2: Please tell me about your educational aspirations.

a) What was your goal for attending college and how did you plan to meet that goal?

b) How important to you is a college degree? To your family?

Question 3: What classes did you take your first semester?

a) What was your experience your first semester? What courses did you take and what was the outcome of the semester?

b) Tell me about a typical day in your life while you managed attending college.

c) What has been your experience with remedial/developmental courses? What courses did you take? What was your experience? How did these courses impact you in college?

d) From your perspective, who participates in remedial/developmental education? What are the pros and cons of participating in the remedial/developmental coursework?

e) What changes, if any, would you recommend with the remedial/developmental coursework?

f) How many courses did you complete? What was your most difficult class and why? What was your most enjoyable class and why?

Question 4: Did you feel connected to the college? If so, how? If not, why?

a) What was your interaction like with faculty? What was your interaction like with staff? Other students?
Questions 5: What was the most memorable experience at this college?

a) Were there difficult times during your college attendance? If so, what were these challenges and how did you manage these challenges?

b) Did you experience any major obstacles or challenges achieving a college degree? If so, how did you deal with them? If not, why do you think you did not experience any challenges?

Question 6: Who inspired you to get to where you are now, and how did he/she do this?

a) Was there anyone in your life you aspired to be like?

b) Who were the people in your life who encouraged you to achieve a college degree? What would they say and do to encourage you?

Question 7: If you had a chance to speak to incoming college students, what would be the one piece of advice that you would want them to know?

Question 8: Thinking about your educational experiences, which factors would you attribute to your ability to persist in college? What was your motivation for coming back each semester?

Questions 9: From your perspective, what factors played the biggest role with graduating with a college degree?

Questions 10: Based on your experiences, if you could improve this college, what would you improve?
APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER RESEARCH

DATE: January 28, 2020

IRB #: 11219
IRBNet ID & TITLE: [1446582-3] Understanding the Academic and Socio-Cultural Experiences of Academically Underprepared Males and the Risk and Protective Factors Influencing Degree Attainment in a Community College System

PI OF RECORD: Viola Florez
SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

BOARD DECISION: APPROVED
EFFECTIVE DATE: January 28, 2020
EXPIRATION DATE: N/A
RISK LEVEL: MINIMAL RISK
PROJECT STATUS: ACTIVE - OPEN TO ENROLLMENT

DOCUMENTS:
• Amendment/Modification - AM Application (UPDATED: 01/22/2020)
• Consent Form - Consent Form 011520 (UPDATED: 01/15/2020)
• Protocol - Protocol 011520 (UPDATED: 01/15/2020)

Thank you for your Amendment/Modification submission. The UNM IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an acceptable risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks to participants have been minimized. **This project is not covered by UNM's Federalwide Assurance (FWA) and will not receive federal funding.**

The IRB has determined the following:

• Informed consent must be obtained and documentation is required for this project. To obtain and document consent, use only approved consent document(s).
• FERPA applies and signed permission must be obtained.

This determination applies only to the activities described in the submission and does not apply should any changes be made to this research. If changes are being considered, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to submit an amendment to this project and receive IRB approval prior to implementing the changes. A change in the research may disqualify this research from the current review category. **If federal funding will be**
sought for this project, an amendment must be submitted so that the project can be reviewed under relevant federal regulations.

All reportable events must be promptly reported to the UNM IRB, including: UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to participants or others, SERIOUS or UNEXPECTED adverse events, NONCOMPLIANCE issues, and participant COMPLAINTS.

If an expiration date is noted above, a continuing review or closure submission is due no later than 30 days before the expiration date. **It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to apply for continuing review or closure and receive approval for the duration of this project.** If the IRB approval for this project expires, all research related activities must stop and further action will be required by the IRB.
Please use the appropriate reporting forms and procedures to request amendments, continuing review, closure, and reporting of events for this project. Refer to the OIRB website for forms and guidance on submissions.

Please note that all IRB records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the closure of this project.

The Office of the IRB can be contacted through: mail at MSC02 1665, 1 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001; phone at 505.277.2644; email at irbmaincampus@unm.edu; or in-person at 1805 Sigma Chi Rd. NE, Albuquerque, NM 87106. You can also visit the OIRB website at irb.unm.edu.
APPENDIX C: STUDENT RECRUITMENT

Announcement of Research
The University of New Mexico

Explanation of Research for Participants

Hello, my name is Diego Trujillo and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of New Mexico in the College of Education. Under the supervision of my faculty advisor, Dr. Viola Florez. The purpose of the research is to explore the experiences of community college, male students who have participated in developmental education. The title of my research project is *Understanding the Academic and Socio-Cultural Experiences of Academically Underprepared Males and the Risk and Protective Factors Influencing Degree Attainment in a Community College System*.

Through one-on-one interviewing, I hope to collect data in order to better understand the various factors that influence students’ persistence and degree attainment. The results from this research can potentially create, update and/or change university policies. Also, trainings may be developed to help university officials, staff, and faculty understand what can be done to support student success.

Participants in this study must meet all the following criteria:

- Be male
- Have completed at least one semester or more enrolled in one or more required courses in developmental education
- Have earned an associate degree or not

Your participation in this study will be confidential, as I will be the only one who knows your identity. The names of the participants will be omitted from the final dissertation. The gathered data will be kept confidential in accordance with the UNM IRB Policies.

Your participation in this study will be greatly appreciated. If you choose to participate, please respond to this email: diegotrujillo@unm.edu

I will schedule the interview at a time that works best for you. We will meet at a location that is comfortable and convenient for you.

Thank you,

Diego Trujillo
WHEN REACHING AN ANSWERING MACHINE OR VOICE MAIL
DO NOT LEAVE TELEPHONE MESSAGES REGARDING RESEARCH
RECRUITMENT

IF SOMEONE OTHER THAN PARTICIPANT ANSWERS THE PHONE
Hello,

Am I speaking to (potential participant)?
- If NO, ask if the desired person is available. If not available, then indicate you will call back, say Thank You and hang up. Do not provide any information that might violate the potential subject’s privacy.

ONCE THE POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT IS ON THE LINE
Hello,

Am I speaking to (potential participant)?

If YES, then continue:

Choose one of the below

My name is Diego J. Trujillo, I am a researcher and doctoral candidate at the University of New Mexico. I am conducting a research study. I am contacting you because you are a community college student who completed at least one semester or more enrolled in one or more required courses in developmental education – or – I received a message from you that you might be interested in this study and I wanted to call you back to talk to you about the study.

May I have your permission to talk to you about this new study?
- If no, say Thank you for your time and end the call.
- If yes, continue as below.

The purpose of this research study is to find out more about the experiences of community college, male students who have participated in developmental education.

If you agree to participate, this study will involve a one-on-one interview that should last no more than 60 minutes. You may choose not to participate. You can refuse to answer any of the questions at any time. There are no names or identifying information associated with your responses. I will digitally record the interview. If you are unwilling to be audio recorded, I will take notes manually. If you allow for the audio recording of the interview, I will later transcribe the recordings. In addition, I will request and review academic transcripts from the college you attended.

Insert risks and benefits
There are no known risks in this research, but some individuals may experience discomfort or loss of privacy when answering questions. The findings from this project will provide information on the experiences of male community college students at the [college]. You will not directly benefit from participating in this study. It is possible that other male community college students will benefit from the research findings. The results from this research may potentially support the understanding of the obstacles faced by students and the supports required for students to be successful.

Insert compensation

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study, and there is no guarantee or promise that you will personally benefit from this research.

You do not have to be in this study, your decision to be in any study is totally voluntary.

Do you have any questions? (Answer any questions)

“OK very good. Are you interested in being part of this study?
  • If no, say Thank you for your time and end the call.
  • If yes then set up appointment for an initial visit with participant
APPENDIX D: EXAMPLE CODED TRANSCRIPT

Interview Date:
Date of Interview: April 07, 2021
Student Interview Transcript

Researcher: Hey good morning. How are you doing?
Dale: Doing pretty good. Got out of the shower, getting caffeinated.
Researcher: Awesome doing well. Thank you. It’s been a while since I’ve had a chance to chat with you.
Dale: Yeah I haven’t seen you in awhile now I think yeah, yeah.
Researcher: Yeah, how are you these days? How are you those days?
Dale: I’m doing pretty good. I’m, um, anxious to get out of zoom meetings. I could say that.
Researcher: I hear you, I hear you. Just like it, yeah, that’s the norm now, I guess is the zoom meeting so.
Dale: Yeah, right?
Researcher: Well good, how have you been?
Dale: Overall, I think I’m doing pretty well. I think my math grades actually went up since we started going online, which is kind of funny.
Researcher: Yeah, so are you still, are you still pursuing your degree there at [college]?
Dale: Yeah, this is my last semester. I’m almost done.
Researcher: Awesome, well good. So thank you for sending back that consent form for me, consent form for me. Uh, but I’m just trying to do a little bit of research on, you know, the experiences of folks in the Community College system that have gone through some of the coursework so this is a great opportunity to get a bit more feedback on your perspectives, things of that nature, so I appreciate your time.
Researcher: If you’ll do me a favor and just tell me a little bit about yourself, age, what, employment, are you working? You know a little bit of background information and then we’ll have some questions for you.
Dale: Well I’m [Dale] 25, I’m not working. I’ve just been on unemployment since the pandemic started and that’s been wonderful. I’ve made more money doing that than my job I’ve ever worked in my life, so that’s exciting. Uh, just been going to school the whole time. I did summer school. I finished the semester when the pandemic started. Then I went to summer school, then I did the fall semester last year and now I’m almost done with this. Well, we’re getting close to the end of this semester. We’ve got another month left, still on the Dean’s list.
Researcher: Awesome, that’s great. That’s great news, uh, so, are you also working?
Date: None, no, just focusing on school.

Researcher: Well, good see you, are you first generation? Uh, first talk or college from your family? Tell me a little bit about that.

Date: Uh, my dad has like I think he did like a little bit of college but he didn't finish. Uh, I don't know if my mom has any formal education past high school.

Researcher: Awesome and and at this point, how many credit hours have you earned?

Date: I think after this semester, I'm going to have like over 60.

Researcher: That's awesome. That is awesome and and you're looking at the completion of which degree? Associate of Arts, Associate of Fine Science?

Date: Associate of Fine Science and then, I'm going to transfer to [college] for a four-year.

Researcher: And have you already gotten connected with that program?

Date: Yeah, I've already been accepted and I've already had the transfer fee scholarship waived. I'm in the [program] that's run by [professor].

Researcher: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm very familiar with the [program].

Date: Oh, that makes a whole lot of difference. Let me tell you.

Researcher: So tell me a little bit more about that. What has been your participation in that program?

Date: I think the most engaging part of that has been I'm actually going to be late for a meeting this morning, but I already told him so. It's all good. Uh, the most engaging aspect of that, whereas the interviews that we have with people who are already working in the field, like people who already have the jobs that we want, like talking to them, interviewing them, just like feeling out like what they're looking for in employees, what they're looking for in just like colleagues, and what they're doing doing and what they want from their job. That's been really helpful. I think, just to like really pinpoint what we want to do, who we want to work for, what we're what we're doing out here.

Researcher: And the support, do you do believe that that's contributed so to your successes thus far?

Date: Oh, definitely. That gives the scholarships that they give you or the stipend they give you, financial gain and the professional associations that you could make through that program are pretty stellar.
Researcher: That's awesome and I'm excited that you're going to continue to continue in that in that field, so tell me a little bit about your K-12 experience, both positive and negative. So who, who were some of your supporters or cheerleaders?

Dale: Well, I actually got expelled from high school.

Researcher: Let me think. I think I did OK in school like through middle school. I think I did OK like my freshman year. And then by 10th grade I was really disconnected with school. In general, I didn't want to go. I didn't really see the point. I didn't really see myself like getting educated in the future and I didn't really care. And, uh, I get. What did I get expelled for? I think I got expelled for ditching class and then having. And then it was a possession charge or something like that. I got expelled senior year of high school, but then graduated early 'cause they put me on like as an online course and then I finished that in like a month. So...

Researcher: So you you talked about being engaged and not really seeing yourself moving on to college. What changed?

Dale: I started just...I started just like looking into things myself. I started getting really interested into plants and permaculture and soil and rocks and trees and all of those things and I wanted like a more specialized education outside of like what I was just like reading in my free time, basically. Like I wanted to be more engaged in like a natural resource conservation setting. I guess it is how I'd put it these days.

Researcher: That makes sense.

Dale: And so really like I got out of high school and then just started doing my own research on things that were interesting and then was like maybe I should just get a college education, it seems easier.

Researcher: Were there any particular folks that kind of guided you in that process? Or do you know you said you kind of just were interested in figuring that out and kind of that led you to the tech process.

Dale: Definitely like my uncles were a major role, they were a major contributor to that. I mean, just to having the support of somebody who's had a college education and then ah, I don't know if it's having support in general. Having somebody say like yeah go do it, you do whatever you want that sounds like fun. Go do it.

Researcher: So when you entered college, how prepared were you to enter college?

Dale: Prepared was I? Hmm. I think when I first started at college, I was actually living out of my car. Just so I probably not very prepared like I know, kind of what I was getting myself into and I took like a pretty light load that first semester. I think it looked like 9 credits or something like that. And, uh, I didn't know, I still succeeded. Did pretty well that semester, but maybe I wasn't super prepared when I was entering into it.
Researcher: What about academically?

Dale: Academically, I don't know. I've always done really well in school, like when I am really engaged in it could just be easy to throw stuff quickly. Unless it's calculus, then I have to work

researcher: Hmm, what were family expectations of you in terms of uh, school and college?

Dale: Family expectations? Yeah, just do whatever I wanted. Basically I don't know that there were any expectations necessarily. It was just go do it.

Researcher: Do you feel like there was an expectation to go on to college or just kind of do what you want, do to your heart's content?

Dale: It was more of a just do whatever I want in my heart's content. I don't know. I didn't feel an expectation anyway.

Researcher: So, umm, you talked a little bit about your goals to going into and looking at plants, permaculture, umm, getting connected with the program. What is your goal for attending college and and how do you plan to meet that goal? So moving on beyond your current?

Dale: Well, I want to be a part of some team that's actively engaging in, like combating climate change and you know the effects of it. Maybe not even necessarily climate change as a whole, but just you know aspects of it like I want to be a part of some kind of group that can that will allow me to say like yeah I did something about it. I didn't just watch our whole environment collapse.

Researcher: Now was that, you know, was that your goal early on or through the process of college? Have you kind of just come to that conclusion?

Dale: That was my goal early on or that was why I decided to go to college, cause it's kind of hard to do something like that without a college degree, unfortunately.

Researcher: So you're jumping right into my next question. How important is, how important to you is a college degree and how important is it to your family?

Dale: For me, a college degree is pretty important. You know, it's kind of what I based my whole life off of these days and it's what I have been doing for the past few years. To my family, I think they're more excited to just see me do something. They're just I don't know that they're like specifically excited for me. I mean, I'm sure that they're excited about me going to college like any family would be, but I don't I think. uh. if I was doing anything they'd be excited that I was doing anything and doing it well.

Researcher: Yeah, yeah. Thank you. Thinking about when you first started college or, at college, what semester was that and, and what was your experience like the first semester?
Date: And my first semester, what classes are they taking? I was taking an English class with [Professor]. I was taking the University [course name] class with you, I think. Then I was taking what else was I taking? I was taking a third class, but I can't remember what it was. Oh, it was [course name]. It was like [math course number] math classes or whatever, and I thought I was pretty fun. It really was [Professor] interesting English class. That's still one of my favorite courses. I think he's taken so far.

Date: (Dog in room) Get down! Yeah, you got it OK, sorry dog.

Researcher: Well, what courses? Why? Why [Professor] class? [Professor] is very, she's really good at teaching English, and I think she's really excited about teaching beginning English, and she's really excited about giving people a really solid foundation and like inspiring people to like and actually enjoy technical writing and stuff like that. And I felt really engaged by it. I felt really good and I got a good grade in class.

Researcher: Absolutely, so then, tell me a little bit about what a typical day in your life. Then, well, you're managing, while you're managing attending college. What does it look like?

Date: Well, right now a typical day looks like me sitting on my couch or at my desk staring at a screen. I think I have about 15 hours of screen time. And then outside of that, oh, taking two different math courses and stuff, I really have to stay on top of that. A lot. Biology is typically pretty easy, like I can flip through the book and find all the answers for that. And if I can't find them there, it takes about 45 seconds of internet searching to find the answer for that right now it looks like a lot of computer time.

Researcher: And before the pandemic?

Date: Oh, before the pandemic? Before the pandemic I was working full time and going to school full time, so I was really busy pretty much every day. I was working at the [place of employment] at a restaurant there and oh boy, do we work. Did we work! I can't even imagine pretty much everything is changed up there. I don't think I'll ever be working there again, honestly.

Researcher: Yeah, have you been attending consecutively or have you had any breaks in your schedule in terms of coursework?

Date: Yeah, so for a while there I was only attending the spring semester. Because I was working this [place of employment] job that was taking me away for summer and fall. That would start in like April, May, typically and then it would last until like October. So I would I wouldn't start attending classes again until January.

Researcher: And that was more of an internship or just just?

Date: Yeah, it was a job. OK, yeah?

Researcher: Job OK.
Date: This summer I'm getting an internship through the through [program] so that's be really cool cause it actually fits into my schedule. I don't have to just like blow everything else off to fit that into my schedule. It actually just fits. It's really nice.

Researcher: Awesome, and when you had that break in time. What made you come back, is that last a what, what motivated you to come back to continue?

Dale: I mean I had started school last and then later got that job. Collide that was still my priority there and uh, I got that job like I met up with the people that I was working with through [program] and [program], something I was doing so that I could pay for school. So it's like my priorities had not shifted from school. I just wanted to do that as well. And that was the only way I could figure out how to do it.

Researcher: Makes sense, so thinking about that developmental math course on when you started with [college], what was your experience like with that with that developmental course? And how did this impact you at that college at [college].

Dale: In regards to that math course, I think I had [professor] as a professor and they thought she was a great beginning professor. Cause she was, you know, really actively engaged in what we're doing. And I think I flew through. I don't think they call it something else whilst I was doing it, but I got through the K&A portion of it. I like it in one semester and then took like the third one. I just took it twice. I think the next semester, and then I think I really made it easier and now I'm doing a lot better in math classes than I would have been if I had not taken those courses. And some people don't like the fact that those are online, but I love learning math in that fashion, to be honest. I think that works really well for me.

Researcher: Why do you suppose that is?

Dale: I think computers communicate in math and humans do not.

Researcher: I agree, I agree. So from your perspective who also was participating in the developmental education classes that you were in? What were some of the pros and cons in in part dealing with that developmental coursework?

Dale: I have no idea who's taking any of those courses with me. I didn't know any of my classmates ever until like last semester that was like the first time I really engaged with any of my classmates was like, as the coursework gets harder. It feels like there's more you almost have to engage with your classmates just to like just you can't just be like a group thing along where you're all thinking about the same things and studying towards the same things. Cause like, I didn't really like talk to anybody in my like those math classes

[Those are online I didn't like hang out with people to talk about, like how to set up an equation or something like that. I do that now with calculus like doing that with [mathematics professor] and a couple other classmates every week and it's really great, but in those developmental stages I did not do that at all]
Researcher: OK. What changes, if any, would you recommend with the within-developmental coursework?

Date: You know it worked really well for me, but, uh, I don't. I don't really know. I think that something to try is to like get people to do less to engage with other people to work on problems like if you're not understanding something just cause like it does really help you in the long run when you start getting into like calculus and stuff like that or even pre-calculus. I mean, again, like I didn't really have too many problems with pre-calculus, but now that I'm in calculus like it's like math and you really have to like you know put a lot of brain thought and so it oftentimes it's like it becomes a lot easier to do it as a group.

Researcher: Sure makes sense what. What math classes are you taking now? You said calculus and what was the other?

Date: I'm taking calc one and trigonometry.

Researcher: Good for you. Yeah, yeah. Uh, so in terms of the pros and cons of the remedial coursework. Was there any negative to starting out in some of the developmental or remedial coursework?

Date: And I can't think of any negatives. I think that some people have like like weird like stigma with it, if they have to start with it. Like it like they feel like they're going to some place or something like that cause they had to do it to start over, but that's just like things that people have told me. I didn't really feel that. I was surprised that I was that far along. It had been years since I did formal math equations and stuff like that, and so once I started. I'm like, oh, here we go. Did that, done with that, moving on.

Researcher: So how many courses have you completed at this point? Just ballpark and what's been your most difficult class and why?

Participant Two: I've probably taken about 20 courses. Maybe, somewhere in there 25-30. Something like that. I don't know. This is my 4th semester. I think, and I think I've done full time, full credits. Every semester, except that first one. I was paying like 15, so I guess that's made up for that. What was the second part of the question? I'm sorry?

Researcher: So the second part is what was what was your most difficult class and why?

Participant Two: Most difficult class. I remember I had a really difficult time with the English and Composition 1 for some reason. Oh wait, I remember. It's because it was my first like initial online class, and I kept forgetting that I was even taking it, and so I would like I'd be like oh crap. And then look at it like the night before and have like a whole essay, right?

Researcher: And you said besides English professor, initial class, what's been your most enjoyable class?

And why?
Date: Uhh, terrestrial ecology with [professor] and I loved that class. It was a really, really, it felt really thorough and in-depth. I'm sure that there are classes out there that go way further than that even 'cause that's only like a 200 level course, but I was so engaged and I was so interested in everything that was going on in that class. It was fun.

Researcher: Was there any particular way she taught the course that made it fun or just the just the content engagement that you than you had with the course?

Date: This content is really always really interesting. I love [professor'] teaching method. I love how she always does this thing when she's lecturing. She'll close her eyes and she'll just like have like the stream of consciousness thing and she'll just like dump information out to you. But also, she's like processing this information as she's saying it and she's like giving you even more based off of what she's saying. I love taking classes with her. And then she's like: don't know there's one. We had an assignment was like a 10 page research or research paper that we had to do in APA about bio genetics and was that it was difficult. It was challenging for sure, but it was awesome. It felt so good after I was done with it. And then, uh, I know. She had me grade like a whole bunch of papers we had to do peer reviews, so I think did like seven peer reviews or something like that. Did the time we were done. I don't know it was it was a good class. It was challenging. But I found because some classes are just challenging but are super boring also. But that one was a lot of fun.

Researcher: That's awesome, but you said that you were able to dig deep around the biotic, bio genetics.

Date: Yeah, it felt good. There was a lot a lot going on in that category around the country. As it turns out, I didn't even know.

Researcher: That's awesome.

Researcher: So we'll shift gears a little bit here. Uhm, in terms of your college experience, did you feel connected to the college? If so, how? And if not, why?

Date: I definitely feel connected to the college just 'cause that's most of what I do. It's kind of like what I gravitate around when I'm picking a place to live seasonally. It's like, oh, like, what's the name that you know the distance from the college? What's the distance from my job like get to school? What am I doing there? You know who am I going to see there like? It's kind of central to pretty much everything that I do those days. Uhh, other than that, like I didn't really like do any of the like things, like I never did showed up to any of the like events that the university held. I don't think. Just went to the university. Yeah, just attended. But that's just a personal choice.

Researcher: Yeah, yeah. So what was your? What was your interaction like with faculty?

Date: Faculty, I've pretty much only interacted with the teachers and my advisor. I love a lot of these teachers. I have to say here's been a lot of support from several of them that is indispensable. Advising on CIR.
Researcher: So what about any of the other stuff members? I know that I've really like engaged with anybody else, honestly. Yeah, like I've seen my professors I talked to my advisor. Outside of that, I don't think I really like talk to anybody like every once in a while I'll see, oh, what's their name, (college administrator). But like I've never like had a conversation with them. They'll just like show up for something with [program] or something like that. Then I'll like watch them present something and then off she goes.

Researcher: And, and what about, I think you mentioned earlier your engagement with students now, what has been, did you feel connected with with students opposing that you know?

Dale: Yeah. Uh, so I think the biggest thing that got me engaged with my fellow students was having an internship that several of us had through, uh, [name of renewal conservationistrict] with, with [person]. And then that wasn't through [program] or anything like we all just happened to get that like, uh, separately, and we also all just happen to be attending the same classes, basically. And that was really what got me to get to know some of my classmates a little bit better. And now that we're all back in classes, there's a few of us that are all taking the same classes like now. We all work together really well, like we've worked like in a job setting outside of school, and now that we are in classes. Together, we know what the other one is going to be doing. We know what to expect from the other one. We just, it's a lot of support that they are giving. Now I feel like.

Researcher: So what's been your most memorable experience at college?

Dale: Probably an astronomy class that I took it was on Mondays and I think it started at like 7:00 PM or something like that or and I lasted until like 10:00 PM. Cause we were out looking at the stars. That was really fun. 'Cause we had these like high class telescopes and we were seeing out all these nebulae like in the middle of the night. And there was this security guy that kept showing up and like trying to like shoo us. And we're like, yo dude, we're in class, you know. But that was a really cool class. I mean, I didn't really get a lot of that, 'cause I'm not an astronomer, it turns out, but it was a lot of fun.

Researcher: Were there difficult times during your college attendance?

Dale: Definitely. Uh, there have been times where like I didn't have a car. And I had nowhere of transportation, so I was taking like the bus around everywhere. And that is not like designed for a lot of classes like sometimes you have to show up like an hour or two before your class. It just means that's the way the bus schedule works. That was frustrating, like I was just walking everywhere. Yeah, there have been times where it's like, like I work like 12 hours, 16 hours or something like that and then have to like come back and have to do homework like just cannot be like 'cause like if you know if you have the next day or in two days or something like that. And I'm not going to have time for it, so yeah, I mean like gets a little dicey sometimes.

Researcher: So at this point, have you had any major obstacles or challenges with achieving your college degree?
Date:
Major obstacles or challenges? Yeah money. That's kind of the main thing from the beginning. If I had had money, I could have just bought a car, but I had no money. I would have just bought an apartment, bought a house, whatever but ever so it goes. Everyone poor when they're in college, right?

Researcher: So if you had to think about somebody that inspired you to get where you are now, how did he/she/they do this?

Dale: Think about something or someone.

Researcher: Either or both.

Dale: Either or both. Down well in terms of like the initial inspiration, like, I'm a millennial like climate change is going to be a very real problem by the time I'm like 40 even it's going to be a major issue that is going to be something we're going to have to face as a planet. Really, so that's a big inspiration that often gives me a debilitating anxiety, sometimes it feels like. And then in terms of like a someone that is giving me inspiration just to like go out there and do it. You know my uncle is really motivated, I guess, is the word to just accomplish something. I think one of his favorite terms is I can do anything for three months. And it makes sense, like, I can tell myself that all the time.

Researcher: That's a great phrase, and I'm going to have to start incorporating that into my life. I can do anything for three months. Well, it is and then becomes, it becomes habit forming, right? It becomes a process that yeah, that's interesting.

Researcher: Was there anyone particular in your life that you aspired to be like is that your uncle is that someone else?

Dale: I aspire to be like me. I aspire to be like myself, honestly. In the best way that I can, is the only thing I really can do.

Researcher: Climate change is kind of driven your goals for completing the degree. Has there been anybody that's been along that pathway that's been encouraging you to complete that college degree?

Dale: Like in terms of like climate change direction? Yeah, definitely [professor] like I feel like she was probably like the first, like educational mentor that have was just like oh no like your feelings are very real. This is what's happening. These there are some things you can do about it. There's some things you can't, but this is what's happening. This is how we study it. This is XY and Z. This is what's going on. And it felt great. Honestly, I think my first class that I took with her was that water resource class that she teaches. Fascinating. Blown my mind. And then I've just been hooked on it ever since. I love taking her classes, I love [professor and geology] classes. Also, the geology professor took her [course], that was awesome. I love physical geology. I didn't even know I like geology and then I started taking those classes.

Researcher: So did they do anything to encourage you along your pathway? Just the engagement with the coursework?
Date: Engagement with the coursework and also I feel like [professor] really has this way of like presenting these issues to people in like a really objective way. Maybe it's objective subjective. She presents it in a way where it's like you don't have to care, you don't have to do anything about this, but like this is really. This is what's happening right now in front of us. And I feel like that is an excellent way to teach things. These like you can believe whatever you want, but like at the end of the day, this is what's going on. I really like that.

Researcher: If you had a chance to speak with some of the incoming college students, what would be the one thing you would want to let them know? So what advice would you have for them?

Date: I would tell them that if they're dressed sort of paying for school, there are so many avenues out there that exist that will pay for it. For you that I didn't know about going into it, but I really wish that I knew about that because I thought for sure I was just going to have to pay for everything out of pocket little, but I know that that is not always true.

Researcher: So tell me a little bit more about that there in terms of those avenues for support.

Date: So I had no idea that [community youth program] even existed, and then I signed up for it and then got like thousands of dollars from [federal program] to pay for that, so that was a good beginning. Then I started going to [program], I started getting money for that and like that was. You know, my education basically been paid for by [federal program] so that that's just like money in my pocket now, just like money in my pocket now. And then on top of that, there's [FASFA]. So like I didn't even start taking advantage of that until like a couple years ago because I didn't qualify for FASFA yet because my parents made too much money so I had to figure out it and then I started getting money from FASFA and then scholarships. Turns out they're not that difficult to get if you just like write in an essay. It worked out.

Researcher: Thank you for thinking about your education experiences. What factors would you attribute to your ability to persist in college?

Date: Hmmm, there's like perseverance sometimes. Also, just like I like, I love learning like I love learning about things. You know, it doesn't really matter what it is. I just like the encouragement of like, you know, being taught things. Some people don't really like the class or environment, but I think I really do. I really enjoy like having somebody lecture me on a topic or something like that. I don't know. I really enjoy like a school setting. It does spark joy.

Researcher: So what's what's your, what's your motivation for attending each semester at this point in your junior in your college career?

Date: Like in junior, oh, I'm so happy to see the light at the end of the tunnel after this semester. Like at the beginning I was like, oh man like I'm really getting into like the grind of like this feels good. This is what people have told me about. Here we go and now that I'm like getting towards the end. I'm just like Oh, like it's right there like I've been grinding for a
minute now and so now it's like a I don't know I'm finally going to get the like a satisfaction of having completed that degree and it's going to feel real good. In like a month, it's coming up.

Researcher: It's around the corner. Yeah, get just a few more things to get through and you're going to be on your way to your next steps. That's awesome.

Researcher: From your perspective, what factors had the most significant impacts your completing a college degree?

Dale: Factors, money, housing 'cause we live in [city] and housing is difficult. Jobs 'cause again we live in a redacted city and finding a reliable job is difficult sometimes. No, I've always felt like I've had like a lot of support mechanisms like socially like I've always had people around me that have been good for me. But housing, money and jobs, it's it's not always an easy thing in [city], unless you already have all of those things and it's really hard.

Researcher: Yeah, and the majority of folks do do not, yeah.

Researcher: So if you could improve this [college], what would you improve?

Dale: Start offering bachelor's degrees that's that would be awesome if I didn't have to go tor to [urban city] to do all this. However, there are some excellent avenues to get four year degrees after this, and I have to say that is really cool that that happens. Uhm, another way to improve. I feel like a lot of the professors are super lax on their grading, which is great in some aspects, but in other aspects it's like why am I working this hard when I could just not and get the same grade, you know? Otherwise, I feel like a, like the the courses that are offered are really cool. The ones that I've taken have been really nice. I don't think that there's been like a single course that I've taken where I was just like oh my God I like I just need to be done with this already. Yeah, that's all I can think of.

Researcher: Awesome. Is there anything else that you'd like me to know about your college experience?

Dale: Oh no, I think we covered pretty much everything. These are some some broad questions it really got me to think about it. Yeah, I can't think of anything.

Researcher: Well, well, thank you I appreciate your time again. You know I'm I'm just trying to get perspectives of of folks that have participated in the Community College system. Uhm, and you know, looking at what factors have contributed to their degree attainment.

Researcher: Couple of demographic questions you said first generation, the number of credits was about 80 degree completion. You'll complete this year, now in May.

Researcher: How old are you? I forgot, ask your age.


Researcher: Race, ethnicity. How do you identify?

A white as can be. I have no idea what a branch of white I am. I'm just white.