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# Why Do They Stay? The Experiences and Perceptions of Traditional Age Male College Students that Influence Persistence Beyond the First Year in College

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# Why Do They Stay? The Experiences and Perceptions of Traditional Age Male College Students that Influence Persistence Beyond the First Year in College

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male college students that influence their persistence beyond the first year in college. This qualitative study uses Moustakas' (1994) approach to transcendental or psychological phenomenology. The researcher collected data at two different small, private, 4-year liberal arts institutions situated in New York State. Semi-structured interviews were utilized as the primary source of data collection to capture the experiences and perceptions of traditional age (19 years old) male undergraduates, midway through their second year of college and enrolled full-time. This study uses Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory as the theoretical framework for examining traditional age male college student persistence. There were four themes that emerged from the data analysis: (a) a constellation of supportive relationships, (b) the pressure to succeed, (c) just get it done, and (d) from transition to transformation, hitting the reset button. The themes in this study align with the four components or 4 S's of transition theory, which are situation, self, support, and strategies (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). By fostering mentoring relationships, creating programs specifically for males, and establishing a safety net of academic and social support for young men, executive leaders at institutions of higher education may improve the experience and persistence of traditional age male students beyond the first year of college.

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Why Do They Stay? The Experiences and Perceptions of Traditional Age Male College  
Students that Influence Persistence Beyond the First Year in College

By

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of the requirements for the degree  
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## **Dedication**

I begin my acknowledgements with a heartfelt thank you to my husband, best friend, and the love of my life, Joe Lambert. Without your love, encouragement, and support, I'm not sure that I could have persisted past my own first year being back in college. For over two years, while I attended classes and had overnights at the Victor Microtel, you took care of our family, our pets, and our home. You pushed me to "get to work" and consistently told me how proud you are of me. You listened when I had bad days, and we celebrated when I had good days. I cannot thank you enough for all that you do to support my personal and professional goals. I love our life together, and I love you.

To my dissertation chair, Dr. Shannon Cleverley-Thompson, and dissertation committee member, Dr. Joshua Fegley, your constant encouragement, positivity, and guidance through this process gave me the courage and confidence to keep going. Shannon, thank you for challenging my writing with your "Who says?" and "So what?" questions. You always took my writing and my thinking to a deeper level, and I'm grateful for your insight, recommendations, and perspective. I admire your knowledge and value your mentorship. Josh, your experience working with male undergraduates, the resources you recommended to me, and your unwavering kind encouragement were invaluable to me. Thank you for sharing stories with me about your students and your own research; the direction you provided helped me immensely. I would sometimes go into our dissertation meetings feeling like I was going to disappoint the two of you, but I

always left feeling great about where I was in my dissertation journey because of your unwavering support. Your belief in me and in the work that I was doing was motivating and personally gratifying. I also want to thank the faculty of the DEXL program; I am a better person and a better leader as a result of your teaching and shared knowledge.

This dissertation is dedicated to my two sons, Patrick and Sean, and to my three grandsons, Cooper, Jake, and Ryan. I truly believe that education changes people in a positive way. Being educated leads to critical thinking, diversity of thought, and appreciation for others who may be very different from you. I am so proud of my sons, who are both college-educated and good, kind men. Patrick and Sean, thank you for always being so supportive of my educational goals and career ambitions. I love you both so very much. To my grandsons, you can do whatever you want in life, and I don't want you to settle for what is easy. Set your sights high, and I know that you will reach your goals, whether or not they include going to college, but I hope you do. Grandma will always love you and be proud of you. You inspire me to make higher education a better place for males to be successful.

Lastly, thank you to my awesome Cohort 11 (from heaven) family for making this journey so much fun. To my team, Enlightened Minds, Gina, Chris, Marlowe, and Madeleine, I could not have gotten through a few classes so well without your brilliance and teamwork. I can honestly say that I loved learning from you and with you, and I'm deeply grateful we ended up together.

## **Biographical Sketch**

Elizabeth A. Lambert is currently the Dean of Student Success and Chief Retention Officer at Keuka College and has worked in higher education for 29 years. As a traditional age college student, Elizabeth earned her first degree, an Associate in Applied Science in Executive Secretarial Sciences, from Corning Community College in 1983. In 1999, she earned her Bachelor of Science degree from Excelsior College in Liberal Studies with a dual concentration in Psychology and Human Services. Elizabeth earned her Master of Science degree in Student Personnel Administration from the State University of New York College at Buffalo in 2003. Elizabeth was honored as the recipient of 2018 Visionary Leadership Award presented at the EAB CONNECTED National Summit in October 2018. This award recognizes an individual who—through leadership, vision, and commitment to innovation—has helped their institution see significant, positive change. Elizabeth began her studies at St. John Fisher College in May 2016 in the Doctorate in Executive Leadership program. Elizabeth pursued her dissertation research in the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male college students that influence persistence beyond the first year in college under the guidance of Dr. Shannon Cleverley-Thompson and Dr. Joshua Fegley. Elizabeth earned the degree of Ed.D. in Executive Leadership in 2018.

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male college students that influence their persistence beyond the first year in college. This qualitative study uses Moustakas' (1994) approach to transcendental or psychological phenomenology. The researcher collected data at two different small, private, 4-year liberal arts institutions situated in New York State. Semi-structured interviews were utilized as the primary source of data collection to capture the experiences and perceptions of traditional age (19 years old) male undergraduates, midway through their second year of college and enrolled full-time. This study uses Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory as the theoretical framework for examining traditional age male college student persistence. There were four themes that emerged from the data analysis: (a) a constellation of supportive relationships, (b) the pressure to succeed, (c) just get it done, and (d) from transition to transformation, hitting the reset button. The themes in this study align with the four components or 4 S's of transition theory, which are situation, self, support, and strategies (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). By fostering mentoring relationships, creating programs specifically for males, and establishing a safety net of academic and social support for young men, executive leaders at institutions of higher education may improve the experience and persistence of traditional age male students beyond the first year of college.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The persistence of college students has been an ongoing issue in higher education institutions in the United States for decades (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). The terms “persistence” and “retention” are often used interchangeably when discussing attrition in higher education; however, these terms are distinctly different. Persistence is defined as continued enrollment or degree completion at any higher education institution, including one different from the institution of initial enrollment (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014). Alternatively, retention is defined as continued enrollment within the same higher education institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014). According to Hagadorn (2005), and as defined by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2016), retention is an institutional measure and persistence is a student measure. This means that institutions do the retaining and the students are doing the persisting (Hagadorn, 2005).

### **First-Year Retention and Institutional Impact**

Despite the amount of research that has been conducted on first-year retention, colleges have not realized significantly improved retention rates (Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013). As noted by Tinto (1975, 1993), college attrition is most likely to occur during or immediately following the first year of college. Tinto (2005, 2016) further asserts that initiatives to promote student success are often hindered when research is centered around student attrition rather than on student persistence.

Since the 1980s, transforming and improving the first-year college experience has been at the heart of retention efforts on college campuses (Alexander & Gardner, 2009). Nationally, nearly 50% of all first-year students do not continue to the second year at the same college in which they originally enroll, and 10% completely drop out of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Many institutions see freshmen retention as a critical component to the academic and financial success of a college or university (Tinto, 2009). The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that just less than 60% of students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at a 4-year institution in fall 2010 completed that degree within 6 years (McFarland et al., 2018). Over 40% of students who did not persist to degree completion equates to a significant amount of lost tuition dollars, as well as state and federal aid, for colleges and universities (Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2012).

Institutional retention rates reported to governmental agencies, such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), are available for public viewing. Potential students and their families explore retention rates and graduation rates when choosing a college because of the financial investment and abundance of choices of similar institutions (Olbrecht, Romano, & Tiegen, 2016). When a high number of students leave during or after the first year, prospective students may reconsider attending (Olbrecht et al., 2016). The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (IPEDS, 2016) reports an average of 20% of first-year students who began in the fall 2014 at a private 4-year college did not return for a second year. The American College Testing Program, better known as ACT, conveys that the median first-year to second-year retention rate reported by private 4-year colleges was 75%, and the median degree-completion rate was 57% (Habley, Valiga, McClanahan, & Burkum,

2010). These percentages indicate that approximately one quarter of first-year students may not return to their freshman institution in the following year; therefore, an institution enrolling 5,000 freshmen can expect to lose approximately 1,250 of them.

From an institutional perspective, colleges are creating programs and support systems to assist students in navigating the first year and provide a foundation for retention and success (Tinto, 1993; Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005). For example, high impact practices encompass a variety of educational programs that are associated with increased college student retention and engagement (Kuh, 2008). Many colleges are focusing their efforts on high impact practices that engage and challenge students, such as first-year seminars, learning communities, undergraduate research, and supportive advising structures (Greenfield et al., 2013). Common characteristics of high impact practices include activities that promote active and collaborative learning, facilitate student-faculty interaction, explore diverse worldviews, and provide an opportunity for experiential learning (AACU, 2017). As noted by Upcraft et al. (2005), retention initiatives, such as high impact practices, are much more complex and interconnected than they were decades ago, when the belief was that students who did not persist into the second year of college was attributed exclusively to ability and/or motivation. Due to the scholarly research on first-year students by Greenfield et al. (2013), Kuh (2008), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), and Tinto (1975, 1993, 2016), educators now know much more about the first-year student experience and the personal and environmental factors which affect retention.

## **Student Persistence Past the First Year of College**

From a student perspective, sometimes leaving college, or perhaps, deciding not to attend college may be an appropriate decision. According to Morrow and Ackermann (2012), most students do not leave college because of academic issues; approximately 65% of students departing a university cite non-academic reasons during the exit process. Carlson (2016) argues that current American society pushes high school students to go to college, yet not all students thrive on academics. For some high school graduates, career and technical education is an option in lieu of attending a 4-year institution (Carlson, 2016). For students from low-income families, the pursuit of a bachelor's degree comes with substantial costs and risks, including not finishing after having incurred substantial debt. The typical college student today borrows a significant portion of the cost of their education due to increased tuition and decreased financial aid (Lyons & Hunt, 2003).

For many individuals, transitioning from high school to college can be a difficult and stressful adjustment phase. Morgan (2013) asserts that “the first-year student experience is a critical transition period for new students” (p. 1442). First-year college students may not be familiar with the rigor of academic and cocurricular activities in college, as well as the challenge experienced when transitioning from a family support system to one that is much more autonomous (Keshock & Adkins, 2014). College students in their first year often encounter a variety of demanding responsibilities including developing new relationships with peers and faculty, organizing academic classes, and managing finances, all in an atmosphere that can be more complicated, stressful, and rigorous than high school. A first-year transition presents a unique set of

stressors that can be difficult for some students to navigate (Carter, Locks, & Winkle-Wagner, 2013).

A factor that has been empirically tested and regularly documented over many years is that students who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities are more likely to persist to degree attainment (Astin, 1977, 1993; DeAngelo, 2014; Kuh, 2008; Tinto, 1993, 2009). Educationally purposeful activities can include membership in campus clubs and organizations, participating in extracurricular activities, performing undergraduate research, and being part of a learning community. Both academic and social development are at the core of first-year programs specifically designed for students to have a successful transition from high school into the college environment (Jafee, 2007). Tinto (2009) asserts that many undergraduate students do not persist in college because they feel disconnected from peers, professors, and administrators at the institution during their critical first year of university study. Likewise, Bean (1982) notes that students do not persist when they are only slightly, as opposed to fully, committed to their institutions. When undergraduates are actively engaged in educational endeavors both inside and outside the classroom, they are more connected to the campus and feel some sense of enduring obligation and commitment (Kuh, 2008; Tinto, 1993).

The first known freshman retention study examined factors of mortality from college of the 1925 freshmen class at the Utah State Agricultural College (Peterson, 1933). In 1925, there were nearly twice as many men (205) as women (115) enrolled in the freshmen class. At the end of the first year, 50% of the men and 35% of the women left Utah State Agricultural College (Peterson, 1933). Since the Peterson (1933) study, male student enrollment has fallen gradually over the years, with 1978 being the last year

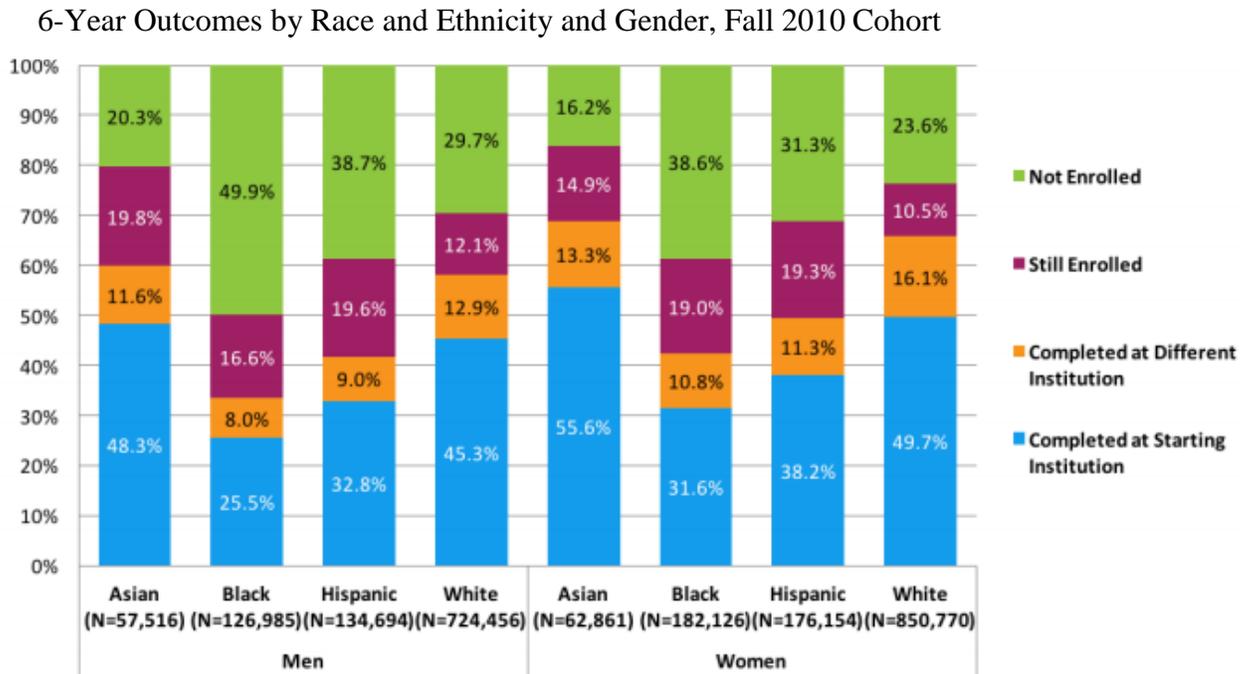
that males were enrolled in college at a greater rate than women (Conger & Long, 2010). More recently, Kena et al. (2016) noted that in addition to decreased enrollment by males, baccalaureate graduation rates have increased to 6 points higher for females (68%) than for males (62%) at private, nonprofit institutions.

### **Problem Statement**

There is a growing concern over the performance and persistence of men in higher education, and the expanding gender gap in college over the past 30 years (Conger & Long, 2010; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; King, 2006). In the early 1970s, men were more likely than women to graduate from college; however, the pattern began to reverse in 1978 (Conger & Long, 2010; Ewert, 2010). Nationally, there is nearly a 40-60 male-female ratio at private, not-for-profit institutions, and females dominate higher education across all types of schools (Borzelleca, 2012). Women tend to excel and persist in college environments, and men are more likely to drop out (Ross et al., 2012; Upcraft et al., 2005). Males also continue to fall further behind females in academic achievement, which includes credits earned and grade point average, in post-secondary education (Conger & Long, 2010).

Many females are outperforming males prior to entering college. Enrollment rates are lower among males than females, and those male students who do enroll are at higher risk for not persisting in college than their female counterparts (Ewert, 2010). Women tend to have higher high school grade averages than men, are more likely to graduate from high school, and are more likely to take rigorous course loads in high school (Peter & Horn, 2005). DiPrete and Buchmann (2013) noted that between 1972 and 2004, females were found to have statistically significant higher high school grades

than males, with the grade point average gap remaining relatively constant at 0.24 to 0.30 over the time period. “Poorer academic performance at the beginning of college further increases the likelihood that men, relative to women, will disrupt their college experience” (Ewert, 2010, p. 744). Moreover, Figure 1.1 shows that the proportion of women outnumbering men in college attendance, persistence, and degree attainment are evident within most racial groups, with the exception of Asians, from 2010 through 2016 (Shapiro et al., 2017).



Note: This table represents all students who began postsecondary education in the fall 2010. Students with missing gender data were excluded from the above figure.

*Figure 1.1.* Six-year outcomes by race and ethnicity and gender, fall 2010 cohort of all students who began postsecondary education. Reprinted with permission. From “Overall Completion Rates by Race and Ethnicity,” by Shapiro et al., 2017, *A National View of Student Attainment Rates by Race and Ethnicity – Fall 2010 Cohort* (Signature Report 12b), p. 11. Copyright 2017 National Student Clearinghouse.

There are numerous explanations that have been proposed to explain the gender gap in postsecondary education (Kleinfeld, 2009). Some studies cite the elevated dropout rates of young men from high school (Orfield, 2006; Winters & Green, 2006). Among all high school students, only 68% of males graduate compared to 75% of females (Education Week, 2014). National data indicates that boys in every state in the United States will leave school prior to high school graduation at a higher rate than girls (Stillwell, 2010). Another explanation for the college gender gap is the influence of the Women's Movement in raising the expectations for achievement and independence of girls (Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006). Some females are now aspiring to professional careers and putting off marriage and having children (Kleinfeld, 2009). Many young women are also more academically prepared entering college (Nord et al., 2011). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Nord et al., 2011), female high school graduates completed more challenging curricula and continue to earn higher grade point averages than male graduates. In 2013, female high school graduates averaged higher grades than their male counterparts in all subjects, with the largest gap (3.38 vs. 3.12) evident in English (ACT, 2014). Some boys may have an anti-school, anti-education mentality that has roots in kindergarten and by middle school, they have lost interest in school (Marcus, 2017). According to Kleinfeld (2009), the gender gap, with females outnumbering men in both enrollment and achievement, may begin as early as elementary school and then persist through secondary school and into college. Gaining a better understanding of how college environments and experiences affect male students may provide additional information on how to decrease the gender divide in college (Sax, 2008).

Colleges are now concerned about providing role models and mentors for males (Marcus, 2017). Since the declining enrollment and persistence of males in college has been ongoing for approximately 30 years, many boys in American communities lack male role models who have attended and persisted through college (Marcus, 2017). When a young man drops out of college, he may not only return home without a degree but also with a sense of disappointment and despair (Riseman, 2016); it is also likely that he will leave college owing some form of debt with less job prospects than a college graduate (Marcus, 2017). According to Abel and Deitz (2014), individuals with a bachelor's degrees earn 56% more, on average, than individuals with only a high school education.

### **Emerging Institutional Support Designed for Male Students**

Some colleges have support structures specifically designed for engaging male students in their persistence efforts. The Community College of Philadelphia (2017) has established a Center for Male Engagement, which provides targeted academic and non-academic supports designed to enhance their male students' college experience. Academic support, such as on-site computers, a resource library, and a quiet study area are provided in the Center to build skill sets. In addition, the Center for Male Engagement is staffed by support coaches who serve as student advocates and learning specialists to provide supplemental instruction in English, math, and science (Community College of Philadelphia, 2017). Non-academic supports offered by the Center for Male Engagement include providing access to cultural and social events, career development, and leadership development training (Community College of Philadelphia, 2017).

York College (2017) in Jamaica, NY has established a Men's Center and a Male Initiative Program, which are both designed to contribute to the improvement of enrollment and graduation rates of underrepresented populations, particularly male students. The Men's Center offers a mentoring program where the mentor is a faculty or staff member or an upper-class student who can assist male students with academic barriers early on to prevent the problem from escalating (York College, 2017). A monthly forum, called "Barbershop" is arranged by the Men's Center, where students can openly express opinions on a variety of topics (York College, 2017). York College has also established a Beta Chapter of Pi Eta Kappa, a fraternity and honor society for urban male students to encourage academic excellence. In addition, the Men's Center and Male Initiative Program coordinates an annual men's conference to highlight achievements and experiences of men in the college community (York College, 2017).

In 2009, the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) joined Achieving the Dream, a national reform network between the private sector and community colleges that promotes best practices for improving student retention and achievement (Johnson, Williams, & Wood, 2015). By joining Achieving the Dream, CCBC established a goal to improve the persistence and academic success of minority males. CCBC's purposeful efforts since that time yielded a Male Student Success Initiative, which includes an all-African American male orientation course taught by faculty or staff of color (Johnson et al., 2015).

By providing targeted academic and non-academic resources, the Community College of Philadelphia, York College, and the Community College of Baltimore County have developed programming initiatives designed to improve the persistence and success

of male students, particularly in underrepresented populations. Targeted academic support includes providing dedicated staff, mentoring, and instructional resources. Non-academic support offered includes social engagement, career development, and leadership opportunities. The programs at the Community College of Philadelphia, York College, and CCBC are focused primarily on minority males, however, enrollment is open to all men, regardless of race or ethnicity.

At all three large, urban colleges, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2017), over 60% of the total college enrollment is comprised of underrepresented populations, yet only a third of the enrollment is male. As noted in Figure 1.1. (Shapiro et al., 2017), the persistence of Black and Hispanic male students is significantly lower than those of White men. Much of the recent research is focused primarily on underrepresented populations, and the studies have been conducted at mostly large, public colleges in urban communities (D’Lima, Winsler, & Kitsantas, 2014; Farmer & Hope, 2015; Haywood & Sewell, 2016; Swanson, Vaughan, & Wilkinson, 2015).

This study will investigate the persistence of male college students midway through their sophomore year of college who are attending two different small, private, 4-year liberal arts institutions situated in NY State. Small, private, liberal arts colleges tend to have a less diverse and more homogeneous student population (Scholarships.com, 2018). The two research settings for this study are predominantly White institutions (PWIs), and do not currently offer any special programming directed at male students. Although the cost of tuition is higher at a private college than a public institution, private colleges do not receive any funding from state legislatures (Lauryn, 2017). Therefore,

small, private, nonprofit colleges operate independently and may not have the resources to provide extensive targeted programming specific to the persistence of traditional age male students.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory is used as the theoretical framework to better understand undergraduate male college student persistence. Transition theory has been revised several times since its inception, and the additions have led to a realistic resource for assisting college students to manage change (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Transition theory allows for the integration of both individual and cultural differences because the structure of the theory places emphasis on the individual's perspective and his or her own personal situation. Transition theory is a psychosocial model of development to explain factors related to a life transition to determine how much of an impact the transition will have on the individual (Evans et al., 1998).

**Applying transition theory to traditional-age college students.** Even though Schlossberg's transition theory is typically characterized as an adult development theory, the theory can be applied to traditional-age college students (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Evans et al. (2010) cautioned that "educators should avoid creating a false dichotomy between adult development and college student development when identifying theories that can be helpful in understanding and working with students" (p. 213). When investigating the topic of college persistence, transition theory will serve as the lens for the proposed study to examine a traditional age male student's perceptions of: (a) the situation of transitioning from high school to college life, (b) the

student's personal and demographic characteristics, (c) the types of social support accessible to the student during the transition, and (d) the coping methods that the student employed.

**The impact of transition.** Schlossberg (1981) describes transition theory as a way of analyzing how human beings adjust to transition. Schlossberg (1981) contends that adapting to change is affected by the interaction of: (a) the individual's perception of the transition, (b) characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition, and (c) the characteristics of the pre-transition and post-transition. In a later revision of the model, Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) define a transition as any event, or non-event, that brings about a change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. A non-event is a transition that is anticipated or expected but does not happen, such as acceptance to a specific college. Schlossberg et al. (1995) stress the crucial role of perception in transition theory, noting that a transition only exists if the person experiencing it notices the impact of the change. The freshman year is a transition where changes have a direct and substantial impact on new college students as they adjust to new expectations and responsibilities (Whitbourne, 2002).

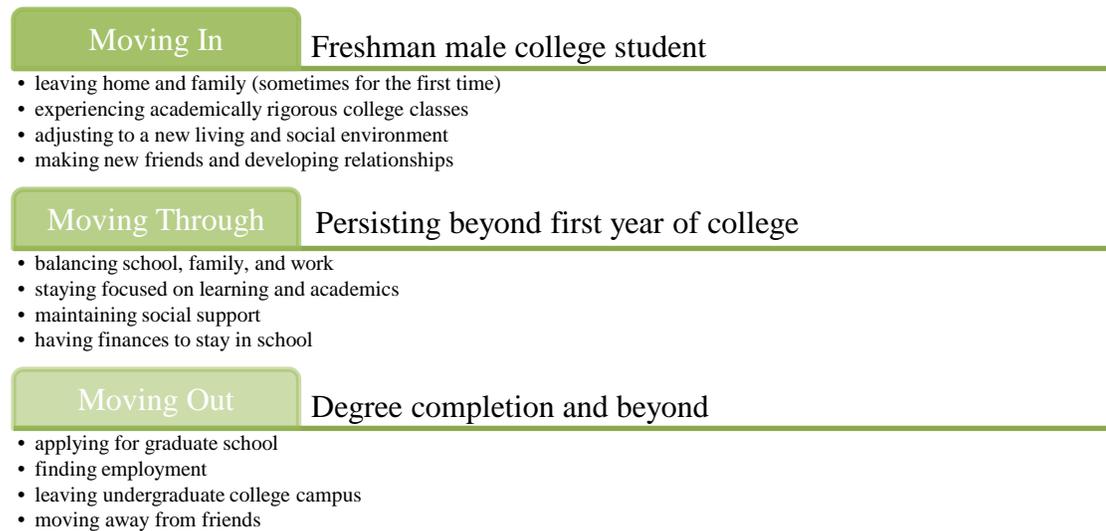
To comprehend the significance that a transition has on an individual, the type, context, and impact of the transition must be considered. Schlossberg et al. (1995) describe three types of transitions: anticipated transitions (e.g., moving away for college), unanticipated transitions (e.g., death of a family member), and non-events (e.g., not being accepted to a first-choice college). The context refers to the person's relationship to the transition and to the location where the transition takes place. Impact is established by how much the transition alters a person's daily life (Schlossberg et al.,

1995). For instance, when investigating the persistence of a traditional age male transitioning from high school to college:

- type = an anticipated transition
- context = freshman in college
- impact = evaluated by examining:
  - the individual's role as a student, friend, child, and worker
  - the daily routines of studying, socializing, and working
  - relationships with friends, faculty, and parents
  - the individual's perceptions of self (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002)

**Transition theory phases.** Dealing with a transition is a process. The time needed by an individual to achieve a successful integration of a transition will vary, depending on the person and the transition (Evans et al., 1998). Transitions may lead to personal growth; however, regression or failure are also possible (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg et. al. (1995) note that transitions consist of a series of phases, which are labeled, “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out.” Moving in includes the assumption of new roles and relationships, engaging in a variety of new activities and routines, and meeting a complex set of new challenges (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002). Moving through college involves increasing emotional intelligence, progressing from autonomy to interdependence, and developing integrity (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002). When the transition is in the last phase, moving out, the focus is on contemplating the future (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002). Figure 1.2 describes what these phases might mean for a male undergraduate student who is transitioning through college.

## Transition Theory Phases



*Figure 1.2.* Description of phases of transition theory for a male college student. Adapted from Schlossberg et al. (1995), *Counseling Adults in Transition*.

**Coping with transition – the “4 S’s.”** Individuals may react differently to different transitions because of their unique assets and varied resources. According to transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995), there are many factors necessary for coping with change when moving in, moving through, and moving out of a transition (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002). Schlossberg et al. (1995) identified four components that influence a person’s ability to cope with transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. These components are known as the 4 S’s (Schlossberg et al., 1995) and are illustrated in Table. 1.1. The first “S” component is the individual’s situation (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002; Evans et al., 1998). The following factors are considered important to the situation: trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience with a similar transition, concurrent stress, and assessment of who or what is responsible for the transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

The second “S” transition component is self (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002; Evans et al., 1998). Factors considered important to self are classified into two categories: personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Personal and demographic characteristics include socioeconomic status, gender, age, state of health, and ethnicity/culture. Psychological resources include ego development, outlook, resilience, commitment, spirituality, and values (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Support, the third “S,” refers to social support, and four types are specified: intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002; Evans et al., 1998). Schlossberg et al. (1995) suggest that social support can be measured by identifying the person’s constant supports, supports that are to some degree role dependent, and supports that are likely to change.

Lastly, the fourth “S” is strategies or coping responses (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002; Evans et al., 1998). Coping responses are allocated into three categories: those that modify the situation, those that control the meaning of the problem, and those that assist in managing the stress afterward (Evans et al., 1998). Individuals in transition may also make use of four coping modes or methods: information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior (e.g., denial, wishful thinking, distortion). Those who are the most effective at coping, use more than one coping method and employ flexibility. A balance of resources in terms of situation, self, support, and strategies influences his or her coping effectiveness (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The proportion of assets to liabilities assists in clarifying “why different

individuals react differently to the same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times” (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 57).

Table 1.1

*The 4 S's*

<p>Situation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• trigger</li> <li>• timing</li> <li>• control</li> <li>• role change</li> <li>• duration</li> <li>• previous experience with a similar transition</li> <li>• concurrent stress</li> <li>• assessment of who or what is responsible for the transition</li> </ul>	<p>Self</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• personal and demographic characteristics (socioeconomic status, gender, age, state of health, and ethnicity/culture)</li> <li>• psychological resources (ego development, outlook, resilience, commitment, spirituality, and values)</li> </ul>
<p>Social Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• intimate relationships</li> <li>• family units</li> <li>• networks of friends</li> <li>• institutions and communities</li> </ul>	<p>Strategies (or coping responses)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• modify the situation</li> <li>• control the meaning of the problem (regulate feelings)</li> <li>• manage stress</li> </ul>

*Note.* Four components that influence a person’s ability to cope with transition, and the factors associated with each of the 4 S’s. Adapted from Schlossberg et al. (1995), *Counseling Adults in Transition*.

Some males experience going to college as a life transition based on the type, context, and impact this change may have in their life. There are three phases of a life transition that can be applied to male students entering college: moving in, moving through, and moving out. The 4 S’s, situation, self, support, and strategies, help describe the factors that may influence a male student’s ability to cope with the transition from high school to college. In accordance with transition theory, if a male sophomore considers his first year of college to have been a life transition, then he utilized coping

mechanisms to advance through the moving in phase of the transition. This study examines coping strategies employed by traditional age male college students in both the moving in and the moving through phases.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male college students during their first year of college, which led them to persist into their sophomore year. This study is focused on identifying factors that may influence persistence for first year male students, who are transitioning to college after high school. This study will investigate the persistence of male college students midway through their second year of college who are attending two different small, private, 4-year liberal arts institutions situated in NY State. There are numerous research studies available on the topic of college student persistence, however, those that specifically focus on small, private liberal arts colleges are limited (Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Gansemer-Topf, Zhang, Beatty, & Paja, 2014).

### **Research Question**

A phenomenological qualitative approach to the proposed study of persistence of first year male students leads to the following research question: What are the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male undergraduate college students that influence persistence beyond the first year in college?

### **Potential Significance and Importance of the Study**

College administrators, faculty, and staff may benefit from the study by learning more about the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male undergraduate college students past their first year of college. Davis (2002) calls on researchers to reinvestigate

male college student development focusing on their specific experiences. Understanding why male students choose to persist in college and what coping methods they employ may have implications for higher education professionals in relation to student engagement, relationship building opportunities, and both curricular and cocurricular activities. Enrollment management staff can use the information obtained through the study during the recruiting process to increase enrollment of male undergraduates by better addressing their anticipated needs. As noted by Schlossberg (1989), during stressful situations or a period of transition, individuals often freeze and can only identify one option when problem solving (e.g., leaving college). Practitioners in both student development and academic affairs may be able use the results of the study to create institutional support systems that offer appropriate alternatives to what may be the only foreseeable option of dropping out for male students. There is a substantial body of literature which investigates the struggles of males and the goals they are not realizing, but there are few studies that explore men reporting positive outcomes (Heys & Wawrzynski, 2013). This study focuses on the reasons why some male students stay or persist in college, not why they leave or drop out.

Using transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995) as a lens to examine freshman male college student persistence, four components would be considered that influence a person's ability to cope with transition: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) support, and (d) strategies or coping responses. Similar studies on male student persistence focus on family support, peer support, and institutional support. Much of the emphasis in the questioning is framed with an institutional perspective, rather than a student perspective,

even those relating to mattering and sense of belonging (Holt, 2014; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Turner, 2016).

This study investigates traditional age male students' perceptions and experiences of college transition situations and how they seek support and employ coping strategies. According to Evans et al. (1998), even though the transition model may be complex and pose some challenges due to the number of variables, more qualitative and quantitative studies are needed using transition theory as a theoretical lens. Conducting a study with traditional age male college students using the 4 S's of transition theory as a framework to investigate how male students persist past their first year of college will contribute to the body of knowledge which currently exists in the literature.

### **Summary**

First-year student success and retention are critical issues for many colleges, who are being judged by their peers, government agencies, and perspective students on their ability to support and retain students (Olbrecht, Romano, & Tiegen, 2016). Although the retention of college freshman is a prevailing problem in higher education, the performance and persistence of male college students past their first year of college has been an increasing problem for decades (Conger & Long, 2010; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; King, 2006). Males from all racial backgrounds are less likely than females to persist to undergraduate degree completion (Aud et al., 2012; Ewert, 2010). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reports that, regardless of race, an average of 56.6% of women versus an average of 48.3% of men completed baccalaureate degrees in 6 years (Shapiro et al., 2017).

This study will use Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory as the theoretical framework for examining undergraduate male college student persistence. By using transition theory and the 4 S's (situation, self, support, and strategies) as a lens to investigate the persistence of undergraduate male college students, the study may potentially increase practitioners' understanding and the ability to assist with various transitions that male students experience while moving into and moving through the college environment.

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male college students during their first year of college, which led them to persist into their sophomore year. The study contributes to the body of knowledge which currently exists on male student persistence, however, the emphasis is placed on what strategies and resources students employ to stay in college, rather than focus on why students drop out. In Chapter 2, a review of the literature related to the persistence of traditional age male college students will be discussed. Chapter 3 explains the details of the research design methodology for this qualitative study. A detailed analysis of the results of this study are presented in Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 includes the findings, implications, limitations, and recommendations for practice and future research.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms appear frequently in the study:

*Attrition:* The number of students who leave their program of study before it has finished. Attrition rates are often used as performance indicators of higher education providers (Higher Education Academy, 2015).

*First-year programs:* Institutional programming initiatives designed to integrate new students into the academic and social culture; these programs are also aimed at reducing attrition through positive and frequent interaction (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993).

*First-year student:* A student who has completed less than the equivalent of 1 full year of undergraduate work; that is, less than 30 semester hours (IPEDS, 2016).

*Freshman:* A first year undergraduate student (IPEDS, 2016).

*Persistence:* Continued enrollment at any college — including one different from the institution of initial enrollment — in the fall semesters of a student’s first and second year (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014).

*Retention:* Continued enrollment at the same college in the fall semesters of a student’s first and second year (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014).

*Student engagement:* The time and effort students devote to activities that are linked to desired outcomes of college (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007).

*Transition:* Any event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

Student persistence and degree completion continues to be a challenge for institutions of higher education (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013). Colleges have invested a substantial amount of resources into initiatives (e.g., new student orientations, first-year seminars, developmental courses, advising, tutoring, and counseling) with the goal of retaining students through degree attainment (Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013). Tinto (1993) argues that efforts to improve student success are hindered when research concentrates on why students leave college rather than on why students stay in school and persist. Additionally, male and female students experience college differently (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005); and male students are at a higher risk for persisting in college than their female counterparts (Ewert, 2010).

The gender gap in education begins during elementary school, continues through middle and secondary school, and endures through postsecondary education (Aud et al., 2012; Blackhurst & Auger, 2008; Kleinfeld, 2009). Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature related to the persistence of traditional age male college students. Additionally, the 4 S's of transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995): situation, self, support, and strategies are used as a framework for the literature review. Transition theory will provide a theoretical lens for the proposed study to examine the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male undergraduates who persist past the first year in

college. The chapter summary will identify gaps in the topic of the persistence of male college students which emerged from the literature review.

### **Foundation of the Gender Gap in College**

Several studies are included in the review of the literature to explore where gender gaps in college originate and begin to emerge in the educational pipeline (Blackhurst & Auger, 2008; Conrad-Curry, 2011; Kleinfeld, 2009). Since women are leading men in college enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment (Conger & Long, 2010; Ewert, 2010; Shapiro et al., 2017), Blackhurst and Auger (2008) and Kleinfeld (2009) have conducted studies to explore the basis of the gender gap in postsecondary education. Some studies cite the elevated dropout rates of young men from high school to explain why males are not pursuing college degrees (Chaplin & Klasik, 2006; Orfield, 2006). According to Education Week (2014), among all high school students in the United States, female students graduate at a rate 7 percentage points higher than their male classmates. Statistically, the graduation rate favoring females (85%) over males (78%) can be found in every state and has remained resistant to change over the years. (Education Week, 2014).

A further explanation for the college gender gap is the influence of the Women's Movement in raising the expectations for achievement and independence of girls (Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006). Females are breaking away from traditional gender roles and are now aspiring to prestigious careers and putting off marriage and having children (Kleinfeld, 2009). Young women are also more academically prepared than young men upon entrance into college. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Nord et al., 2011), in 2009, female high school graduates completed more

challenging curricula and continue to earn higher grade point averages than male graduates.

Examining the developmental pipeline issues that begin in childhood and continue to emerge through adolescence will assist in better understanding why males are falling behind in educational achievement. Several qualitative studies have explored the gender gap in postsecondary enrollment by investigating emerging patterns in children's education. Blackhurst and Auger (2008) argue that "the gender gap in college enrollment originates long before high school and has its genesis in early developmental experiences" (p. 150). Blackhurst and Auger (2008) investigated the relationship between gender and children's educational and career aspirations and expectations as precursors to the college enrollment gap.

Using structured, individual interviews with elementary and middle school children, Blackhurst and Auger (2008) explored how gender and educational and career aspirations are connected to postsecondary education requirements. Of the 115 participants interviewed, there were 70 males (60%) and 45 females (40%). Wave 1, which was the initial data collection, occurred when participants were in the first, third, and fifth grades. Two years later, in Wave 2, the same children were interviewed again when they were in the third, fifth, and seventh grades. The progression through grade levels was necessary to evaluate developmental differences in boys' and girls' future aspirations.

The participants' interview responses were coded to allow for the calculation of descriptive statistics, which included frequency and percentage distributions by gender and grade level. To further explore gender and developmental differences, Blackhurst

and Auger (2008) utilized chi-square analyses. In Wave 1, 65% of girls aspired to careers where a college education is required, however, only 21% of boys identified careers where a college degree is necessary. In Wave 2, two years later, the percentages were 62% and 27% respectively. Also, while there were no significant gender differences in Wave 1, the second wave revealed that 60% of boys compared to 24% of girls aspired to highly sex-typed careers. For boys, this means they aspire to work in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as a “professional athlete, construction worker, or firefighter” (Blackhurst & Auger, 2008, p. 155), and many of the careers do not require a college education.

Blackhurst and Auger’s (2008) study suggests that girls are more likely than boys to emphasize career advancement in their rationale for attending college, and girls are also more likely to aspire to careers that require a college education. An analysis of the results indicates that differences in boys’ and girls’ career aspirations broaden as children age and may be contributing factors to the gender gap in college. Strengthening Blackhurst and Auger’s (2008) assertion that the gender gap is likely to broaden as children age, Kleinfeld (2009) reported similar findings in high school students. Kleinfeld (2009) chose college freshmen, as well as high school seniors, high school counselors, and school administrators as participants for a similar investigation of the gender gap in college. Using several data sources, the purpose of Kleinfeld’s (2009) study was to investigate the mindsets of young men and women regarding their decision to attend college and if the students perceived a gender gap in school success.

Kleinfeld (2009) began with exploratory research, using approximately 490 college freshmen, who were asked to interview two males and two females about their

college decisions and influences on their plans. The freshmen interviewed their close friends and relatives, and then wrote papers on their investigation of the gender gap in college. The information obtained from the interviews was used by Kleinfeld (2009) to develop questions for the interviews conducted later in the study. In the next step of Kleinfeld's (2009) systematic study, data was collected from 99 high school seniors using semi-structured interviews and single-gender focus groups of nine students. In addition to collecting data from the high school students, interviews were also conducted with counselors and administrators, who were referred to as "key informants" (Kleinfeld, 2009, p. 175).

Through an analysis of the interview transcripts, Kleinfeld (2009) found that 54% of the young women, as opposed to only 21% of the young men, expressed enjoyment of the school experience. Of the high school students interviewed, young women (72%) were more likely than young men (49%) to view college as a "vital educational investment" to their future success (Kleinfeld, 2009, p. 177). High school young men expressed interest in unrealistic careers, such as "designing video games, owning a recording studio, directing movies, or becoming music stars" and had no idea how they would go about getting into these jobs (Kleinfeld, 2009, p. 178). Of the students interviewed, 58% noticed a gender gap in school success and enrolling in college. Three themes emerged from the students' explanations for the gender gap: (a) young men are lazy, (b) young men do not plan ahead, and (c) young men are easily distracted and prone to peer pressure (Kleinfeld, 2009).

Gender differences in educational expectations and aspirations may begin in elementary school, continue to widen through middle school and into high school, and

carry over into college. Blackhurst and Auger's (2008) and Kleinfeld's (2009) studies contribute to the body of knowledge in understanding the foundation to the gender gap in college. Blackhurst and Auger (2008) revealed that three times as many girls than boys aspired to careers requiring a post-baccalaureate degree. Similarly, Kleinfeld (2009) revealed that females were significantly far more inclined to seek careers requiring a college degree than their male counterparts. Even though the Blackhurst and Auger (2008) and Kleinfeld (2009) studies were conducted roughly 9 years ago, the gender gap continues to be a problem in college attendance and persistence. The current study advances the research into post-secondary education to investigate why traditional age (18-21 years) male college students decided to attend college (individual situation) and what coping mechanisms (self, support, and strategies) males employ to persist past their freshman year.

As indicated by national data, boys in every state in the United States will leave school prior to high school graduation at a higher rate than girls (Stillwell, 2010). Another early indicator of males falling further behind females academically is evidenced in standardized test results, which may also be influenced by gender regarding level of performance in specific subject areas (Mead, 2006). In addition to the qualitative studies by Blackhurst and Auger (2008) and Kleinfeld (2009), a quantitative study was conducted by Conrad-Curry (2011) also investigating the issue of the gender gap in secondary schools. The main purpose of the Conrad-Curry (2011) study was to examine reading achievement gaps between 11th grade boys and girls. Conrad-Curry (2011) analyzed 4 years of American College Testing Program (ACT) reading scores, which were disaggregated by sub scores and demographic characteristics (e.g., income,

race/ethnicity). The ACT reading test conveys three scores: a cumulative reading test score and two sub scores for arts/literature and social studies/sciences (ACT, Inc., 2012). The goal of the ACT program is not to assess knowledge but to require students to derive meanings, draw conclusions, and make comparisons and generalizations (ACT, Inc., 2012).

The study sample was a subset of the Midwestern state's entire 11th grade population for the years 2007-2010, which produced a sample size of 510,875. Parametric tests were conducted on ACT scores to interpret relationships between the scores and gender and/or demographic factors. Conrad-Curry (2011) conducted an analysis of the variables, which revealed that across all years with one exception, girls exceeded boys in overall ACT reading test scores. The single instance of boys exceeding the girls' test scores was not found to be statistically significant (Conrad-Curry, 2011). It may be that gender norms are a barrier to improving boys' reading skills. Reading has been argued to be feminine in nature, particularly as it relates to literature, and that reading threatens masculinity (Sadker & Zittleman, 2005).

Conrad-Curry (2011) also found that female students surpassed male students in the arts/literature reading subtest in 2007, however, in the years 2008 through 2010, the male students scored higher than the females in the social studies/sciences reading subtest. Additionally, Conrad-Curry (2011) noted that another scoring pattern emerged, although boys outscored girls in the social studies/science subtest, the ratio of their scores including arts/literature, to that of their female counterparts was close to 2 to 1. The margin that the females achieved over the boys was intensified by scoring differences. The Conrad-Curry (2011) findings, along with those of Blackhurst and Auger (2008) and

Kleinfeld (2009), suggest that male students approaching graduation from high school are at a developmental and academic disadvantage when entering college, which may have an impact on student success and persistence, and contributes to the gender gap in college. This study expands on the research of Blackhurst and Auger (2008), Kleinfeld (2009), and Conrad-Curry (2011) by further examining the gender gap in post-secondary education, and since these studies were conducted more than 5 years ago, the current study provides a more recent investigation of the gender gap in college.

### **Transition Theory 4 S's**

This study investigates the persistence of male students past their first year in college by using the framework of the 4 S's (situation, self, support, and strategies) of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. The first S, situation, focuses on the students' transition from high school to college. The second S, self, examines the strengths and weaknesses that the student brings to the transition. The third S, support, describes sources of support available to the student during the transition, and the last S, strategies, explores coping strategies used by the student to persist through the transition.

**Situation.** The first S of the 4 S's in transition theory is situation (Schlossberg et al., 1995). When students begin college for the first time, their individual situations can be very different. Some students are ready for the transition from high school to college, and others may be facing pressure from peers or family members or encountering other personal barriers (e.g., lack of finances, academic preparedness, family illness). According to Chickering and Schlossberg (2002), when making a transition, the total situation must be examined, and the situation is constantly changing. How a student

assesses the transition to college (such as positive, negative, or in between) makes a difference in their ability to cope (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002).

*Transitioning to college.* Transitioning from high school to college is often a difficult and stressful adjustment phase for students who will encounter both challenges and opportunities for growth, and who will experience the loss of what is familiar and a fear of the unknown (Paul & Kelleher, 1995). As noted by Carter et al. (2013), students are faced with a variety of demanding responsibilities in the first year of college. Freshmen are developing new relationships with peers and faculty, organizing academic classes, and managing finances, all in an atmosphere that is more complicated and rigorous than high school (Whitbourne, 2002). First year responsibility factors may present a unique set of stressors that can be especially challenging for some students to navigate.

The college transition is a time of increased exploration and new experiences for freshmen; however, there is also a role change, a loss of social support, increased responsibilities, adapting to new surroundings (Schulenberg, Sameroff, & Cicchetti, 2004). Cambiano, Denny, and DeVore (2000) assert that investigations pertaining to college persistence have traditionally focused on academic factors, but research has expanded and now incorporates non-cognitive factors. Conley, Kirsch, Dickson, and Bryant (2014) examined the longitudinal course of psychosocial adjustment for freshman students at three different points during their transition to college: during the week prior to start of the academic year, at midpoint, and then again at the end of the first year of college. Conley et al. (2014) examine longitudinal trajectories by gender, along with various aspects, consisting of: (a) psychological functioning (well-being and distress),

(b) cognitive-affective strategies (strengths and vulnerabilities), and (c) social well-being (Conley et al., 2014). The participants in the Conley et al. (2014) quantitative study included two consecutive first-year student cohorts, 1 year apart, yielding a sample of 2,095 ( $M_{age}=18.49$ ; female 68.7%) students.

The measures for the Conley et al. (2014) study included demographic information, and at each time point, participants completed validated measures assessing multiple aspects of psychosocial adjustment. Correlations and descriptive statistics of psychosocial adjustment variables (psychological functioning, cognitive-affective strategies, and social well-being) for males and females were analyzed and built into a longitudinal latent growth measurement model. The psychosocial adjustment variables demonstrated longitudinal invariance, which allowed for comparisons of scores across a period of time.

The central finding of the Conley et al. (2014) study was that both males and females faced acute declines in the domains of psychosocial adjustment during the first semester in college. However, females continued to experience additional elevations in psychological distress after the transition, while males' distress plateaued after the initial increase. Conley et al. (2014) describe that females may focus more on emotions than males, which explains the elevated rates of psychological distress in females. For males, avoidance or suppression of emotions might be the approach for handling this developmental transition, which explains the plateau in distress (Conley et al., 2014). The results of the Conley et al. (2014) study suggest that the transition to college creates a major change in well-being, which signifies a critical time of psychosocial adjustment for a majority of freshmen, particularly in the first few months of college. The Conley et

al. (2014) findings also indicate that male students may be challenged with problem solving during their college transition. The ability to problem solve provides a mechanism to relieve the stress and anxiety experienced while adjusting to the college environment (Gefen & Fish, 2013).

Similar to Conley et al. (2014), but specifically examining male college students, Olmstead, Roberson, and Fincham (2016) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the effects of early psychological stress on college adjustment. The Olmstead et al. (2016) study was limited to a sample of freshman college men ( $N=216$ ; ages 18-21). Participants were examined at three different times during the semester (week 1, week 8, and week 15), each time completing an online survey. Using Radloff's (1977) 10-item Depression Scale (CES-D), psychological distress was measured at week 1. At week 8, loneliness was measured using the 8-item UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996), and neuroticism was measured using the 6-item Personality Inventory--Revised (NEO-PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992). Two 10-item subscales (Baker & Siryk, 1986) were used at week 15 to measure academic and social adjustment.

Olmstead et al. (2016) found that one in four male participants reported psychological distress at clinical depression levels at the very start of their first semester in college. Men who were more distressed at week 1 also reported greater feelings of loneliness and neuroticism at week 8. Overall, Olmstead et al. (2016) found that men's early psychological distress is likely to continue and create problems in college adjustment. The findings of Olmstead et al. (2016) reinforce the earlier results of Conley et al. (2014), whereas males reported high baseline levels in cognitive-affective vulnerabilities (e.g., dysfunctional thinking, suppression, avoidant coping) in the first few

months of college that did not show evidence of subsiding by the end of the year (Conley et al., 2014). Conley et al. (2014) and Olmstead et al. (2016) both suggest that unlike their female counterparts, male freshman college students experience a significant amount of stress early on in their transition to college, which is likely to plateau but persist throughout their first year. This study investigates the sources of academic and social stress during the transition to college so that practitioners may better understand how to support male college students experiencing stress during their first year.

**Self.** The second of the 4 S's in transition theory is self (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The personal and demographic characteristics of high school students may have an impact on their transition to college. As described by Schlossberg et al. (1995), self includes strengths, weaknesses, and psychological resources the student brings to the transition. Other considerations of self are previous experience with the transition, whether the student believes he has options, if the student feels a sense of control, and whether the student considers himself optimistic and resilient (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002). There may be times when some college students feel overwhelmed, defeated, or marginalized (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002); however, help-seeking behaviors and attitudes can assist with a positive academic adjustment (Holt, 2014).

In support of the considerations of self, Ewert (2010) describes two specific factors, characteristics and precollege success indicators, that are discernable prior to college enrollment and provide insight into the gaps in college completion rates. The first factor includes characteristics such as gender, race, parental and peer influence, and self-motivation (Ewert, 2010). The second factor involves precollege success indicators, such as high school performance, which can signify whether or not a student was

academically prepared to successfully complete a degree program in college (Ewert, 2010). Examining the variables in both areas, personal characteristics and precollege factors, can help to identify and explain trends and gaps in persistence to degree completion among college students (Bean, 1982; Tinto, 1997). Self includes feelings of control, optimism, and resiliency during a transition. If college students do not possess positive psychological resources (e.g., outlook, commitment, spirituality, and values), seeking professional support may be necessary before it has an impact on well-being and persistence in college.

*Male help-seeking attitudes for academic distress.* Many males perceive they do not have a strong social support system for coping with academic stress (Marshall, Liu, Wu, Berzonsky, & Adams, 2010; Rayle & Chung, 2007). Men can also feel inhibited and have a less favorable attitude about seeking help than women (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Vogel et al, 2011). As posited by Holt (2014), help seeking behaviors in college is an under examined, yet critical issue to explore, and our understanding is largely limited to students' receptivity of services. Males' hesitation to seek help is a combination of their socialization, the social construct of masculinity, and the meaning of interdependence in a particular situation (Addis & Mahalik, 2003).

Help-seeking attitudes and behaviors of college students have been linked to parent attachment both theoretically and empirically (Larose & Bernier, 2001; Lopez & Gormley, 2002). Holt (2014) conducted a quantitative short-term longitudinal study in a small, residential, liberal arts college in the Northeast. Holt (2014) examined first-year students' attitudes, by gender, about academic help seeking and how attitudes are mediated by parent attachment. Two web-based surveys were used as the instruments in

this study; one at the beginning and one at the end of the first semester. All first-year students were invited to take the first survey, and 204 completed it. Only students who completed the first survey were then invited to take the second survey. Participants for the Holt (2014) study were 93 first-year students who responded to both surveys ( $M_{\text{age}} = 18.09$ ; female 64%; White 68%, Asian/Asian American 18%, Black/African American 5%, and Hispanic/Latino 5%). The surveys measured parent attachment, attitudes about academic help seeking, and academic adjustment. Gender was examined both as a predictor of help-seeking attitudes and academic adjustment, as well as a potential moderator.

Using a regression analysis, Holt (2014) found that higher levels of parent attachment predicted more favorable attitudes about academic help seeking, and females held more significant favorable attitudes about academic help seeking than males. Parent relationships define students' ideas about accepting assistance from others when challenges are encountered (Newman, 2000). The findings from Holt's (2014) study suggest that close relationships with a parent may foster an attitude of openness to receiving academic support on the part of the college student, thereby making a more successful academic adjustment. However, males were less likely than females to seek help for academic support.

***Mattering, marginalization, and sense of belonging.*** College students who are optimistic about having the power to control some aspects of their own life tend to experience less stress and achieve more academically (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002). Conversely, while establishing autonomy, students who are transitioning from high school to college may face loneliness and isolation while building a new support network

(Sand, Robinson, Kurpius, & Dixon Rayle, 2005). Being connected and mattering to others can be an important consideration when exploring factors of college student persistence. Feelings of mattering and marginalization have been found to have a direct relationship to whether a college student succeeds or fails (Schlossberg, 1989). Mattering is when an individual perceives that he is important, significant, and of concern to another person or entity (e.g., an organization, the world); whereas, marginalization is when a person feels that he does not belong, does not matter, and is not significant to others (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989). A sense of belonging is defined as when members of a community feel that they belong and that they matter to each other (McMillian & Chavis, 1996). College students' perceived mattering and sense of belonging was examined by Marshall et al. (2010) and Morrow and Ackermann (2012), who focused their quantitative studies on the importance of relationships and connectedness early on in the college experience.

The first year of college can be a key developmental time period for transitioning young adults. Individuals are not sure of their social role in the new college environment and may feel marginalized until their role is established (Schlossberg, 1989). Feeling marginalized may minimize a college student's psychological resources such as his outlook, specifically optimism and self-efficacy (Evans et al., 1998). Marshall et al. (2010) performed a 3-year longitudinal study to examine perceived mattering of new college students to mother, father, and friends, how it varies over time, and if there are differences between gender groups and living arrangements. The participants in the Marshall et al. (2010) study were 484 young adults (ages 17 to 21) in their first 3 years of undergraduate education. For three consecutive fall semesters, participants completed

surveys online, and each year a single item was used to collect updated data on participants' living arrangement. The growth trajectory of perceived mattering was analyzed using a multiple indicators multilevel latent growth model and revealed that mattering to mother declined slowly over time, however, mattering to father and friends remained stable. An additional finding was that the effects of gender and living arrangement on perceived mattering remained invariant or unchanged across time. Lastly, results indicate that females perceive themselves as mattering to parents and friends more than males (Marshall et al., 2010).

Similar to Marshall et al. (2010), Morrow and Ackerman (2012) conducted a quantitative study to assess the importance of sense of belonging and motivation of traditional age first year college students in predicting intention to persist in college. Participants ( $N=156$ ) consisted of first year undergraduate students ranging in age from 18-23 years. The participants completed an online survey, which included questions about their experiences during their freshman year of college. Unlike Marshall et al. (2010), the survey was administered only once during the summer following completion of the students' first year of college. Morrow and Ackerman (2012) performed standard multiple regressions to determine if sense of belonging and motivational attitudes of first-year college students were related to intention to persist. Morrow and Ackerman (2012) found that students who reported receiving more support from faculty and who perceived more support from peers, were more likely to intend to persist at the university and return in the fall of their sophomore year. Also, personal development emerged as the only significant motivating factor for first-year undergraduates in predicting persistence of students in college. Personal development is explained as establishing distinct goals,

such as getting a good job and succeeding in society (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). The more students agreed that personal development was a motivating factor for attending college, the more likely they were to persist to their sophomore year in college (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). This study further examines if the role of personal development and goal setting influences the persistence of traditional age male college students attending small, private colleges.

There are also several qualitative studies that have specifically explored how mattering and marginalization impacts males in college (R. Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Schieferecke & Card, 2013; Turner, 2016). Following an in-depth phenomenological interview methodology, R. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) used interview protocols to obtain a deeper understanding of the experiences of White male first-generation, working class, first-year college students. Designed as a multiple case study, the participants originally included six male freshmen; however, two of the students withdrew from the project after their second interview. Interviews with the remaining four participants took place every 2 to 3 weeks during their first semester in college at an urban, public research university located in the South. Interviews with the male students were designed to provoke responses about the type and level of support they were receiving from faculty and staff at the college (R. Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008).

Based on ongoing data analysis of the transcripts, R. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) chose three major themes on which to structure the data: (a) separation, (b) transition, and (c) incorporation. The themes were based on Tinto's (1988) work on student attrition. Separation involves parting with former associations

and is characterized by a decline in interactions with friends in past groups (Tinto, 1988). Tinto (1988) explains that transition is a period of time in which the student begins to interact in new ways with members in new groups. The last theme, incorporation, involves new interactions with the new group and establishing active membership in that group (Tinto, 1988). R. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) found that participants perceived and articulated a distant relationship with faculty, which included both fear and risk, from the very beginning of their college experience. The data from the interviews indicate that the male participants struggled to meet family and institutional expectations and to achieve academic success (R. Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). This study further investigates the extent to which family and faculty relationships impact persistence and academic success.

Comparable to R. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008), Schieferecke and Card (2013) conducted a phenomenological study to investigate male students' perceptions of mattering and marginalization at a mid-sized public institution where the majority of students were female (63%). The participants in the Schieferecke and Card (2013) study were recommended by faculty and staff, and included 21 full-time male students, with the class standing of sophomore, junior, or senior. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews, consisting of nine identical questions, with each of the participants. Research notes and interview transcriptions were analyzed by coding statements and stories which offered an understanding of how males perceived that they mattered or were marginalized through their college experiences. Three themes of mattering were identified: (a) praise, (b) investing in me, and (c) sense of community,

and three themes of marginalization emerged: (a) the unseen, (b) insignificant, and (c) the outsider (Schieferecke & Card, 2013).

The themes of mattering and marginalization revealed some insight into why male students persist or drop out. Men reported experiencing praise most often in the classroom, and any positive acknowledgement toward them was enough to make them feel that they mattered (Schieferecke & Card, 2013). Conversely, where large lecture-style classes were experienced, men reported that they felt unseen and did not connect to the class or the instructor (Schieferecke & Card, 2013). When professors, faculty advisors, and peers spent time, energy, and resources on them, the male students shared perceived feelings of mattering and interpreted the situations as others investing in their success. However, when faculty were unhelpful and failed to provide needed assistance when approached, the men reported that they felt insignificant (Schieferecke & Card, 2013). Lastly, feelings of mattering were reported when belonging to a peer group, organization, or team. When the men felt that they did not fit in with their surroundings, perceptions of marginalization were reported (Schieferecke & Card, 2013).

Similar to the research conducted by R. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008), Turner (2016) focused his phenomenological study on the freshman experience with male students from a large, public research institution. Current and former male students were solicited for participation via email. The final participant sample consisted of 16 male students (age 18-24; 7 African American; 3 White; 3 Asian American; 2 Hispanic American; and, 1 Native American), who were classified as a freshman, sophomore, or freshman dropout. Interviews were conducted both in person and via telephone. The interview transcripts were coded into themes that influenced participants'

decisions of whether to persist at the same institution, transfer to another college, or completely drop out of college (Turner, 2016).

The three major themes that emerged from Turner's (2016) study include: (a) social engagement, (b) study skills behavior, and (c) instructor-student relationship. Social engagement in cocurricular activities such as freshman events, intramural sports, fraternities, learning communities, and clubs and organizations were reported to not only foster relationships but also to connect the male students to vital campus resources to make the transition to college easier. Social engagement was viewed by 94% of participants as essential to integrating freshman males into the college community and fostering a sense of belonging (Turner, 2016). A major challenge reported by the male participants was feeling academically underprepared for the study skills necessary to succeed in college. In addition, participants identified professor helpfulness, one-on-one meetings, accessibility, and faculty being somewhat familiar with each student as being factors that developed a positive instructor-student relationship (Turner, 2016).

In all three qualitative studies, (R. Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Schieferecke & Card, 2013; Turner, 2016), the instructor-student relationship emerged as a critical factor in perceived feelings of mattering and sense of belonging. Men reported perceived mattering whenever professors acknowledged them in a positive manner, such as a simple comment or a note on an assignment. However, if classes were large and the professor was distanced, male students reported feeling insignificant, invisible, and disconnected from the class and the instructor (Schieferecke & Card, 2013; Turner, 2016). When faculty instructors and advisors provided guidance, attention, and encouragement, the male students shared that they perceived that they were of value to

others (Schieferecke & Card, 2013; Turner, 2016). According to Turner (2016), male students were apt to ask more questions, discuss their problems, and persist when faced with academic challenges when a relationship with a professor was fostered. In both Schieferecke and Card (2013) and Turner's (2016) studies, peers and student organizations were frequently referenced by male students as factors which influenced feelings of mattering.

When some male students reported perceived feelings of marginalization, it was most often related back to class and social experiences in their freshman year of college (Schieferecke & Card, 2013). In Turner's (2016) study, most of the participants reported feeling like they did not possess effective study skills to prepare them for the rigor of the college academic environment; however, belonging to a learning community or study group was found to be the most helpful method to learn better study strategies. Feeling a sense of community (e.g., belonging to a group, team, or organization) contributes to feelings of mattering; "men considered themselves to matter when they were part of something bigger" (Schieferecke & Card, 2013, p. 94). Similarly, Turner (2016) found that males expressed a need for strong social engagement during the first year of college. Schieferecke and Card (2013) and Turner (2016) found that innovative social activities and collaboration beyond the classroom will increase the likelihood of academic persistence and success of male students. This study expands the findings of Turner (2016) and Schieferecke and Card (2013) by further examining first-year college readiness, social engagement, and academic collaboration outside of the classroom for traditional age male college students attending small, private, liberal arts institutions.

**Social support.** The third of the transition theory components of the 4 S's is social support or support from others, which is critical for students adapting to a new living and learning environment (Schlossberg et al., 1995). For many students who are in transition, social support is essential for handling stress (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002). Social support for college students can come from family members, friends, peers, faculty, and student personnel. Sources of support can be both positive and negative and have an impact on the stress levels of the student (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002). For instance, a parent might convince the student to get involved in extracurricular activities but then later complain that the student is too busy and doesn't come home on weekends anymore.

***Social support and academic stress.*** The first year of college and transitioning to a new academic and social environment can be a stressful time for new college freshmen (Conley et al., 2014; Olmstead et al., 2016). Support from friends and family has been identified as an important connection for many first-year college students to successfully navigate the college transition and help balance academic stress (Sand et al., 2005). Many times, first-year students arrive at college ill prepared to handle the academic demands, cultural differences, and recent independence experienced during the transition to college life (Braxton et al., 2014).

It is possible that a college freshman's experiences of support, stress, and perceived feelings of mattering will affect his or her decision to persist past the first year. The issue of social support and academic stress was explored by Rayle and Chung (2007) in a quantitative study of first-year students in college. The primary purpose of Rayle and Chung's (2007) study was to explore the relationships among social support from

friends and family, academic stress, and perceived mattering in the first year of college and to see if there were notable differences between male and female students. Perceived mattering is the psychological tendency to recognize one's self as significant to others (Marshall, 2001).

Rayle and Chung (2007) recruited participants through freshman level education classes at a large, 4-year southwestern university. The final sample consisted of 533 college freshmen; of these students, 32% were male, 68% were female, and 26% identified as racial/ethnic minorities. The mean age of the total sample was 19.64 years, and the majority of the students lived on campus. Survey packets were distributed during class time, and participation was voluntary; however, extra credit was offered as an incentive by the instructors. Instruments measuring the outcome variables were included in the survey packet: (a) the Daily Hassles Index for College Stress (Schafer, 1987) measures perceived academic stress of college students, (b) Perceived Social Support Inventory (Procidano & Heller, 1983) is used to measure perceived social support from family and friends, and (c) the Interpersonal and General Mattering Assessment (Dixon Rayle, 2004) measures perceptions of interpersonal and general mattering to others. In addition to the survey, participants also completed a demographic sheet to collect students' age, gender, race/ethnicity, and living environment.

Rayle and Chung (2007) initially analyzed data using Pearson chi-square tests to compare male and female students on demographic variables. Additionally, data was examined by multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVAs), which is a statistical technique for determining significance of differences among means with several variables (Holosko & Thyer, 2011). The variables in the Rayle and Chung (2007) study include

academic stress, social support from friends, social support from family, and mattering to friends and to the college. Rayle and Chung (2007) found that social support from family and friends and perceptions of mattering to the institution significantly predicted levels of academic stress ( $p < .05$ ). The students who reported that they felt supported by friends and family and also perceived mattering to their colleges reported experiencing less academic stress (Rayle & Chung, 2007).

Further results in the Rayle and Chung (2007) study suggest that gender is related to first-year students' levels of academic stress and that social support appears to be a moderator of academic stress. An examination of mean scores indicated that females reported greater perceived social support from family, greater perceived mattering from friends, and slightly greater perceived mattering to the college overall (Rayle & Chung, 2007). Even though the women reported that they felt more supported and also perceived they mattered more to friends and family than the men, they also reported experiencing greater academic stress (Rayle & Chung, 2007). The findings of Rayle and Chung (2007) mirror the results by Marshall et al. (2010) that some women feel more supported and perceive mattering more to their friends and family than do men.

Transitioning from high school to college may be a time of increased vulnerability for freshmen who often are navigating through new academic and social environments (Laursen & Collins, 2009). First-year college students have been found to report high levels of depression and anxiety (Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Palucki Blake, & Tran, 2010), which may be associated with increased risk of dropping out of college (Hartley, 2012). To build upon the results of Rayle and Chung (2007), Taylor, Doane, and Eisenberg (2014) conducted a study to examine longitudinal relations among

internalizing symptoms (depression and anxiety), perceived social support, and ego-resiliency during the first year in college. Ego-resiliency is described as a personality trait indicating how likely a person is to adapt to stress and change within their environment (Block & Block, 1980). Higher levels of ego-resiliency indicate that individuals are better able to adapt to stressful situations.

Participants were recruited during orientation activities and via email at a large southwestern university. Selection criteria for participants included living within 35 miles of the university and attending the following fall after graduation from a local high school. Taylor et al. (2014) surveyed participants at three different points in time during the freshman year. There were 82 participants for the first point in time, which was during the spring of their senior year of high school prior to attending college. The second point in time was fall of the freshman year of college, which included 76 participants. The third point in time was spring of the freshman year of college and included 71 participants. At each point in time, participants completed a questionnaire. Taylor et al. (2014) used structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the stability of internalizing symptoms, perceived social support, and ego-resiliency across three points in time to test the internal and external factors that contribute to adjustment to college for transitioning freshmen. SEM is a statistical modeling technique that is used to establish relationships among variables. An important component of SEM is that observed variables are recognized as representing a limited number of underlying constructs that cannot be directly measured but only inferred from the measured variables (Holosko & Thyer, 2011).

Results from the SEM indicated that across time, internalizing symptoms (depression and anxiety) were negatively correlated with perceived social support from friends and family and were also negatively correlated with ego-resiliency. Ego-resiliency was positively correlated with perceived social support from friends but not from family. Additionally, internalizing symptoms were negatively associated with perceived social support from friends, while there was a positive association between ego-resiliency and perceived social support from family. Taylor et al. (2014) results suggest that over time emotional health may negatively relate to a college student's perceived social support from peers. Also, ego-resiliency is a critical factor for coping and adapting to the college environment with perceived higher levels of social support across time. Perceived social support predicted better psychological adjustment to college. Students who are stressed and possess poor emotional health may be less academically motivated, display externalizing behaviors such as alcohol consumption, and are at increased risk of dropping out of college (Hartley, 2012).

The quantitative studies of both Taylor et al. (2014) and Rayle and Chung (2007) highlight the importance of perceived social support to first-year college students during their transition from high school to college. The support of family and friends helps to alleviate stress and anxiety and improve emotional well-being for freshmen, which allows for a more successful transition to college (Rayle & Chung, 2007; Taylor et al., 2014). This study expands the knowledge base of previous studies investigating the perceived support given by family and friends to first-year college students. However, this qualitative study additionally explores the specific perceptions and experiences of

traditional age male college students and how social support has impacted their persistence beyond the first year of college at a small, private 4-year institution.

*Social support and college adjustment.* Encouraging support from family, friends, and peers can positively affect students' persistence, academic achievement, and college adjustment (Bandura, 1993). Spruill, Hurt, and Mo (2014) conducted a quantitative study to determine what efficacy factors predict persistence to graduation of male students. Efficacy is defined as, "to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391).

Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF) were used to conduct the Spruill et al. (2014) study. The 1,226 participants included Black (30%), White (39%), and Hispanic/Latino (31%) male students in the NLSF sample from 28 highly selective colleges in the United States. Spruill et al. (2014) utilized three variables that relate to efficacy (parents, peers, and self) and added the variable of race. Positive parental efficacy can increase academic and career goals; conversely, negative or low parental efficacy can be harmful to persistence due to lack of parental guidance (Smith & Fleming, 2006). Peer influence can also be positive or negative, "depending on the values of the peers and the level of self-efficacy possessed by the individual student" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students with high self-efficacy best utilize their intellectual abilities and skills to succeed in college (Bandura, 1986); however, students with low self-efficacy may question their intellectual abilities and likelihood to succeed in the academic setting (Ewert, 2010).

Four key findings were reported by Spruill et al. (2014). The first finding is that race has a negative effect on the persistence of male college students; being Black

negatively influenced persistence to degree (Spruill et al., 2014). The second finding is related to parental efficacy. Participating in activities with parents while in high school and having parents who clearly convey their educational values positively influences the persistence of male students (Spruill et al., 2014). The third finding is related to peer influence; participants with friends who valued finishing high school and going to college were positively associated with persistence to degree (Spruill et al., 2014). The fourth finding is that none of the self-efficacy factors were found to be significant in predicting time to degree for male undergraduates. A possible explanation is that the students in the NLSF sample might have possessed similarly high levels of self-efficacy since they were enrolled in selective institutions (Spruill et al., 2014). This study further explores the influence of parental and peer social support relationships of male undergraduates transitioning to college.

Personal and interpersonal factors may be predictors for adjustment to college (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007). Factors of self-esteem, parental education, parental support, and peer support were examined by Toews and Yazedjian (2007) in a quantitative study, specifically to determine if they varied by race and gender. Participants in the study were 838 freshmen (ages 17 to 19); however, only responses from White ( $N=694$ ) and Hispanic ( $N=189$ ) students were considered, due to the small number of Black respondents (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007). Participants completed an online survey in their second semester at a public university. Demographic information was obtained through the Office of Institutional Research, and personal and interpersonal factors on college adjustment among freshmen were measured using standardized instruments. Correlational analyses using Pearson correlations were conducted to determine

relationships between the study variables of self-esteem, parental education, parental support, and peer support. A multiple regression model was used to examine the extent to which the variables were predictive of college adjustment among freshmen across race and gender (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007).

The results of Toews and Yazedjian's (2007) study reveal that personal and interpersonal factors predicted a moderate portion of the variance in college adjustment, especially for females. A multiple regression model revealed that self-esteem was highly predictive of a favorable adjustment to college among all groups, except for Hispanic males. The correlation of self-esteem and adjustment to college was not statistically significant for Hispanic males, which was likely due to the small sample size for the group. In addition, parental education (whether or not a parent completed college) was a significant predictor of college adjustment, but only for females, which may suggest that parents may be talking about their own college experiences more with their daughters than with their sons or that females perhaps process the conversations differently.

Although the studies were 7 years apart, the findings of the Spruill et al. (2014) study were comparable to Toews and Yazedjian (2007), who found that peer support was a predictor of college adjustment; however, this finding was most significant for White females. Parental support was not determined to be a significant predictor for college adjustment for any of the groups; however, parallel to the Spruill et al. (2014) study, Toews and Yazedjian (2007) noted that although parental support is a primary resource for students, it may have the most impact in discussions about college prior to arrival. This study explores the influence of parental discussions about attending college on the persistence of traditional age males.

Friendships and peer support appear to play a critical role in the college transition process for young adults. Since many college students are living away from home for the first time, social skills and the ability to make friends may play a key role in a successful college adjustment. When freshmen are socially integrating into the college environment and attempting to make new friends, they may experience friendsickness, the grief that they feel over the loss or change in the relationships with precollege friends (Paul & Brier, 2001). Family environment may be a determinant of friendship quality, and Wise and King (2008) established that few studies had examined this connection, especially among college students.

Wise and King (2008) conducted a quantitative study to examine the relationship between family environment and best friendships. The Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1994) and the Acquaintance Description Form—Revised (Wright, 1991) were administered privately and anonymously to 408 undergraduate college students, who were recruited through a variety of social sciences classes. The majority of the participants were women (74%) and Caucasians (94%), who were raised in relatively small and intact family structures. A gender interaction analyses was conducted by Wise and King (2008) and determined that family environment is a modest predictor of college friendship quality, more so for women than men. Women tended to recall and describe their family environments as being more moral, cultured, and emotionally expressive than men. Males and females were equally inclined to describe a best friend of the same gender. Women tended to rate the quality of their best friendship as being much higher than men rated their best friendship on most all positive traits, including overall friendship quality (Wise & King, 2008). The findings of the Wise and King (2008) study

were consistent with an earlier study by Bagwell et al. (2005), which reported that females generally have higher-quality friendships in young adulthood than males. Wise and King (2008) results are similar to those of Toews and Yazedjian (2007) and Spruill et al. (2014), which reinforces that over time, findings are consistent that peer relationships play an important role in a student's positive adjustment to college. This study further investigates how peer relationships influence a male student's transition to college and persistence past the first year.

Social support for a successful adjustment to college now extends beyond face-to-face interactions with others. Social media is now prevalent in the social interactions of college students, with Facebook being the most embedded site (Smith, Salaway, & Caruso, 2009). Yang and Brown (2015) conducted a quantitative study to link social competence with college adjustment using traditional age student perceptions about the usefulness of Facebook. Students at a major university in the Midwest were recruited via in-class announcements and invited to complete a short, confidential survey administered during the class. The classes used for recruitment were introductory and advanced classes in education, engineering, and computer sciences. There were 353 students who completed the survey in class. Anyone who completed the survey over the age of 25 was excluded from analysis, assuming that they were not at the same developmental level as the traditional age students attending college. There were 321 surveys analyzed with most participants being female (58%) and White (84%), with ages ranging from 18 to 25 years old. The sample included mainly freshmen (28%) and sophomores (32%), but also had representation from juniors (22%) and seniors and above (18%).

Yang and Brown (2015) developed a hypothesized model composed of four sets of variables: social competence, Facebook usefulness, Facebook use, and college adjustment. Prior to testing the hypothesized model, the researchers used an exploratory factor analyses to identify participants' perception of Facebook usefulness. The factor analyses produced a four-factor solution including: seeking and sharing personal information, gaming, maintaining social connections, and pursuing romantic or sexual relationships. A path analysis was then conducted on the hypothesized model, which supported the hypothesis. Yang and Brown (2015) findings suggest that Facebook interaction with on-campus friends was related to better college adjustment. Socially competent students reported better college adjustment when they considered Facebook useful in maintaining social connections, which led to more engaged Facebook interaction with on-campus friends. Conversely, socially competent students were less satisfied with college life when they considered Facebook useful in pursuing romantic or sexual relationships, and thus engaged with strangers through the site. Students who were less socially competent disregarded Facebook as a tool to pursue romantic relationships, therefore, engaging with less strangers and more on-campus peers; these students displayed higher satisfaction in college. The use of Facebook to communicate with off-campus friends was not found to be associated with college adjustment (Yang & Brown, 2015).

The results of the Yang and Brown (2015) study suggest that virtual interactions with on-campus peers are more beneficial than those of off-campus friends in relation to college adjustment. Tinto (1975, 1993) also asserts that a successful adjustment to college requires social integration through peer communication. Therefore, research

suggests that regardless of the mode of communication, in-person or through social media, relationships with on-campus friends have a positive impact on the transition to college life (Spruill et al., 2014; Toews & Yazedjian, 2007; Wise & King, 2008; Yang & Brown, 2015). This study further explores how social support of on-campus peers impacts the transition and persistence of traditional age male college students beyond the first year of college.

**Strategies.** The fourth and last transition theory component of the 4 S's is strategies, which are actions that students can take to cope with a challenging situation (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002). Actions may include seeking help from institutional services which provide academic and social support to students. Schlossberg et al. (1995) assert that strategies, or coping responses, are divided into three categories: (a) those that modify the situation, (b) those that control the meaning of the problem, and (c) those that aid in managing the stress in the aftermath. Strategies can benefit students by helping to manage stress and by controlling the meaning of situations to keep things in perspective. First-year students are more likely to be successful and persist to degree attainment when colleges target at-risk populations of students with intentional initiatives (Upcraft et al., 2005). A variety of student support services that assist with developing success strategies are offered by most colleges.

***First-year seminars.*** Institutions are developing first-year academic and social initiatives to provide an environment which assists students make a positive adjustment to college. High impact practices encompass a variety of educational programs that correlate with better retention and engagement (Kuh, 2008). Several quantitative studies (DeAngelo, 2014; Swanson et al., 2015) were conducted to examine the effect of student

engagement, both inside and outside of the classroom, on the persistence of male college students.

First-year experience or freshman seminar classes are now offered at many colleges for new college students. First-year seminars are designed to teach students college success strategies (Kuh, 2008). Students who participate in a first-year experience course are retained and graduated at rates higher than nonparticipants (Miller & Lesik, 2014). Swanson et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative longitudinal investigation of the relationship between participation in a first-year seminar (FYS) and male student persistence. The participants were first-year, first-time male college students who opted into FYS from a medium-size, public research university. The FYS was an academic-based course and was taught by specially selected and trained faculty. Class size was small, highly interactive, and discussion based with an emphasis on student-centered instruction and real-world application.

To explore if participation in the optional FYS had an impact on male student persistence, Swanson et al. (2015) compared first and third year attrition rates among male students who participated in FYS with those who did not. The data was analyzed by performing an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to establish differences in persistence, first-semester GPA, and cumulative GPA between male FYS participants and non-participants. The results indicated that male students who participated in the FYS program demonstrated first-year persistence rates up to 20% higher than nonparticipants and earned higher first-semester grade point averages. The FYS cohort was again reviewed in their third year, and at that time, persistence rates were almost 25% higher

for male participants than nonparticipants; for male minority students, the difference increased to 34% (Swanson et al., 2015).

First-year seminars are important for connecting male freshmen to their instructors, to success resources, and to other students inside of the classroom; however, to maximize persistence efforts, it is essential to integrate engagement opportunities for male students outside of the classroom (DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011). By conducting a quantitative longitudinal study, DeAngelo (2014) investigated how the first-year experience affects student persistence both inside and outside of the classroom. DeAngelo (2014) used derived data from 25,602 students from 487 4-year institutions that participated in a 2007 Freshman Survey (TFS) and a 2008 Your First College Year (YFCY) survey. The TFS is administered during freshman orientation, and the YFCY is administered at the end of the first year of college.

DeAngelo's (2014) study included key variables which are intended to identify student involvement outside of the classroom. "The key variables include discussing course content with other students outside of class, working on a faculty research project, having meaningful and honest discussions about race/ethnic relations outside of class with students from racial/ethnic groups other than your own, and having intellectual discussions outside of class with students from racial/ethnic groups other than your own" (DeAngelo, 2014, p. 56). The key variables have been connected to learning outcomes of a liberal education (AACU, 2007). The data was analyzed by DeAngelo (2014) using blocked binary logistical regression to predict intent to persist for a second year at the same college. This statistical approach allows the researcher to effectively analyze how a

specific set of experiences a student has in his first year impacts his choice to re-enroll (DeAngelo, 2014).

DeAngelo's (2014) findings indicate that students who are engaged academically outside of the classroom and who frequently or occasionally discuss course content outside of class are significantly more likely to intend to return for their second year than students who do not. Interaction term modeling, whereby examining effects between variables, revealed that the benefit of engaging academically outside of the classroom is also conditionally related to gender, place of residence, and participation in a first-year seminar; results suggest that men benefit from discussing course content outside of class more than women (DeAngelo, 2014).

The findings from both the Swanson et al. (2015) and DeAngelo (2014) studies suggest that in terms of persistence, male students may benefit more than female students from not only taking a first-year seminar course, but also connecting with faculty and peers outside of class to discuss course content. This discovery is especially informative since data from DeAngelo's (2014) study reveals that a much higher proportion of males (54%) than females (46%) report not discussing course content outside of class. The findings of Swanson et al. (2015) and DeAngelo (2014) are further supported by the qualitative studies conducted by Turner (2016) and Schieferecke and Card (2013), which suggest that innovative social activities and collaboration beyond the classroom will increase engagement and contribute positively toward the success and persistence of male college students. First-year programs, such as FYS, may assist male students with transitioning to college and acquiring constructive academic habits. This study explores

how supportive programs during the first year of college contribute to the persistence of traditional age male students.

*Academic advisement.* Academic advising is an essential mentoring approach where male college students have an opportunity to connect with faculty outside the classroom. Light (2001) asserts that good advising is “the most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience” (p. 81). In a quantitative study which was aimed at evaluating academic advisement related to student needs, expectations, and success, Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, and Hawthorne (2013), primarily sought to demonstrate that academic advising does have an impact on student academic performance. A secondary goal of the Young-Jones et al. (2013) study was to examine group differences on notable variables, such as gender. More specifically, the study investigated how interactions with an advisor predicted student responsibility, self-efficacy, academic study skills, and perceived support.

Participants in the Young-Jones et al. (2013) study included 611 undergraduate students. The participants were predominantly White (90.5%) with an age range from 18-25 years, and included mainly freshmen (59.6%,  $N=301$ ). Data collection was performed using instruments created specifically for the Young-Jones et al. (2013) study and administered online. The instruments included a student self-assessment, a survey of student expectations of advising, and a student demographic form (Young-Jones et al., 2013). A multiple regression was performed with the dependent variable being current grade point average (GPA), and “the predictor variables were advisor accountability, advisor empowerment, student responsibility, student self-efficacy, student study skills,

and perceived support” (Young-Jones et al., 2013, p. 11). Demographic differences were investigated using a series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs).

Since the first-year is critical to persistence toward degree completion (Tinto, 1993; Upcraft et al., 2005), Young-Jones et al. (2013) focused their findings on factors that predict success for freshmen college students, compared by gender. Although academic advising was found to be a source that impacts student success for all students, significant contrasts were identified related to student responsibility based on gender (Young-Jones et al., 2013). Pairwise comparisons revealed that in general, female students were found to have a higher sense of responsibility and to have higher expectations of advisor availability and accountability than male students (Young-Jones et al., 2013). The results of the Young-Jones et al. (2013) study suggest that young women are more responsible than young men and take an active role in their own academic success during their first year in college. The Young-Jones et al. (2013) findings are further validated by both the Vogel et al. (2011) study and the Holt (2014) study, which found that males hold unfavorable attitudes about help seeking and may choose not to use academic support services. Consequently, the inability to ask for help when needed may have a negative impact on academic success and persistence for male college students. This study builds on the studies of DeAngelo (2014), Swanson et al. (2015), and Young-Jones et al. (2013) by further investigating help-seeking actions and strategies employed by traditional age male undergraduates which have influenced their persistence past the first year in college.

## **Methodological Summary**

In reviewing the literature pertaining to the persistence of male college students, many of empirical studies utilized various quantitative approaches within the positivist paradigm. Comparatively, there were far less phenomenological and case studies found on this topic.

The quantitative studies cited in this paper utilized latent growth curve modeling (Conley et al., 2014; Marshall et al., 2010), short-term prospective study design (Olmstead et al., 2016), predictor models (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Rayle & Chung, 2007, Spruill et al., 2014; Toews & Yazedjian, 2007; Wise & King, 2008), structural equation modeling (Vogel et al., 2011), logistic regression (DeAngelo, 2014), multiple regression analyses (Young-Jones et al., 2013), multivariate analysis of variance (Conrad-Curry, 2011), and analysis of covariance (Swanson et al., 2015). For the quantitative studies, data was primarily collected through surveys, using validated measures to assess the responses; however, a few studies used institutional data (Swanson et al., 2015) and derived data (DeAngelo, 2014). Many of the quantitative studies employed various analyses that determined dependent and independent variables for differences in persistence, out-of-class experiences, conformity to gender roles, gender differences in psychological functioning, and academic and social adjustment.

Although the majority of the qualitative studies reviewed in this paper were from the perspective of the social constructivist worldview (R. Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Schieferecke & Card, 2013; Turner, 2016), a few other studies were more aptly positioned in the post-positivism paradigm (Blackhurst & Auger, 2008; Kleinfeld, 2009), as they took a more scientific approach to the research and employed rigorous

methods of qualitative data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Several of the empirical studies used case studies as their strategy of inquiry, while the others used a phenomenological approach. The commonality of these studies is that they were all investigating the phenomenon of gender inequality in higher education. The participant criterion used for the case studies was traditional-age male students who were enrolled in or had just completed their freshman year of college (R. Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Turner, 2016). However, participants for the phenomenological studies included both males and females, as well as college upperclassmen. Findings from most of the qualitative studies were presented as themes.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 2 describes issues in male students that begin in childhood and continue to emerge through the years to form the foundation for the gender gap in college. Furthermore, the 4 S's of transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995) were used as a framework for the literature review to examine traditional age male college students' ability to cope with the adjustment to the first year of college. Situation, the first S, was used to explain the transition from high school to college and how male students experience increased levels of psychological distress, which is likely to peak during their first few months of college and then persist through the first year (Conley et al., 2014; Olmstead et al., 2016).

The second S, self, was used to explain the help seeking attitudes and behaviors in males. Men feel inhibited and are more reluctant than women to seek help when needed (Vogel et al., 2011). Holt (2014), however, posits that a close relationship with a parent may foster an attitude of openness to seeking and receiving support services in male

students. Self was also examined for male college students through the literature related to mattering, marginalization, and sense of belonging. Females perceive that they matter more to family and friends than do males (Marshall et al., 2010). Several studies found that faculty and peer support are related to intention to persist for males (R. Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012), and feeling a sense of community contributes to male students' feelings of mattering (Schieferecke & Card, 2013; Turner, 2016).

Social support is the third S, and support from friends and family was found to be a moderator of academic stress (Rayle & Chung, 2007). Friendship and peer support appear to be critical factors in determining a successful transition and adjustment to college for males (Spruill et al., 2014; Toews & Yazedjian, 2007), even though women tend to rate the quality of their friendships higher than men (Wise & King, 2008). The last of the 4 S's is strategies. Many colleges are developing initiatives to assist students to make a positive transition from high school to college. Male students who take advantage of first-year retention initiatives (e.g., FYS courses and academic advisement) and develop strategies to connect with faculty and peers outside the classroom, are more likely to be actively engaged and persist in college (DeAngelo, 2014; Young-Jones et al., 2013).

Using transition theory as a theoretical lens allows for the examination of male students who persist past the first year in college employing four components that influence a person's ability to cope with transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. Conducting a phenomenological qualitative study using the 4 S components as a framework, contributes to the body of knowledge which currently exists in the literature

related to male student persistence. This study addresses the lack of research on traditional age male college students at small, private 4-year liberal arts colleges by investigating factors which have influenced persistence past the first year in college.

Chapter 3 outlines and discusses the research design, research context, research participants, data collection, and data analysis for this study, which examines the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male college students which have influenced their persistence beyond the first year in college.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology**

### **Introduction—General Perspective**

The persistence rate, or percentage of students who return to college at any institution for their second year, is continuing to drop nationally (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014). For students age 20 or younger, the persistence rate is down 1.8 percentage points since 2009, with 4-year private colleges demonstrating the biggest drop of 2.8 percentage points (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014). Over the past several decades, there has been a gender shift in college degree completion, with female attainment exceeding males at each education level (Aud et al., 2012). Additionally, women are outnumbering men in college attendance, persistence, and degree attainment, which is evident within every racial group in America (Shapiro et al., 2017). Nationally, there is nearly a 40-60 male-female ratio at private, not-for-profit institutions, and females dominate higher education across all types of schools (Borzelleca, 2012). Male students are no longer earning college degrees at rates higher than the previous generation (Ryu, 2009). Kena et al. (2016) noted that baccalaureate graduation rates are 6 points higher for females (68%) than for males (62%) at private nonprofit institutions. Women tend to excel and persist in college environments, and men are more likely to drop out (Ross et al., 2012; Upcraft et al., 2005).

This study is focused on identifying possible factors that may influence persistence for traditional age (18-21 years) male students, regardless of race or ethnicity, who are transitioning to college after high school. This study is guided by the following

research question: What are the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male undergraduate students that influence their persistence beyond first year in college?

Chapter 3 explains the details of the research methodology for this qualitative study. The research context will be described, the recruitment of participants will be explored, and the procedures for data collection and analysis will be defined. This study is designed to address the gap in qualitative research which currently exists for the topic of persistence of male college students. Therefore, to investigate the problem of male students persisting past the first year of college, a qualitative phenomenological approach best addresses the research question by exploring the experiences and perceptions of participants in this study. Qualitative research is an approach for examining and understanding the meaning individuals attribute to a problem (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenological research focuses on understanding the essence of a shared, lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

More specifically, Moustakas' (1994) approach to transcendental or psychological phenomenology was used to guide the study. Transcendental means "in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Since it is unlikely that sophomore male undergraduates have ruminated extensively on why they have persisted in college thus far, this approach allows for the students to naively reflect upon experiences and perceptions of their transitional first year and share them with the researcher.

Moustakas' (1994) approach is focused mainly on the description of the experiences of participants, as opposed to the interpretations of the researcher. The procedures outlined by Moustakas (1994) consist of: (a) identifying the phenomenon to

study, (b) the *epoche*, which is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, (c) bracketing the question or setting aside the researcher's own experiences, and (d) collecting data from several people who have shared the same experience. Since the researcher is a higher education professional whose work is focused on retention efforts, the *epoche* and bracketing serves to identify personal familiarities and judgments and to partially set them apart to focus more fully on the shared experiences of the participants.

### **Research Context**

Many of the studies on the topic of male student persistence have been conducted at large, public research institutions in urban communities. There are numerous research studies available on the topic of college student persistence, however, those that specifically focus on small, private liberal arts colleges are limited (Astin & Oseguera, 2012). This study takes place at two different small, private, 4-year liberal arts institutions, situated within NY State. The researcher has no connection to the undergraduate male students at either of the two institutions.

The first research setting is situated in a suburban community in NY State; there are approximately 2,700 undergraduate students enrolled, close to 40% of which are male. Table 3.1 indicates that while the freshman female student retention remains relatively unchanged from 2013 to 2015, the freshman male student retention continues to decline each year.

The second research setting is situated in a rural community in NY State; there are approximately 1,000 undergraduate students enrolled, 30% of which are male. The college operates in trimesters; therefore, students complete three semesters per year. As indicated in Table 3.2, male student retention is higher than the overall retention at this

institution. In fact, males are persisting past the first year of college at this institution at a higher rate than that of females. However, although the retention of both genders declined from 2014 to 2015, there was a steeper decline in that of males (8% vs. less than 1%).

Table 3.1

*Retention Data for Research Setting 1*

Fall Entering Year	# of Students in Cohort	# of Students Returning	Overall Retention	# of Males in Cohort	#of Males Returning Sophomore Year	Male Student Retention	Female Student Retention
2013	521	460	88.3%	210	186	88.6%	88.1%
2014	597	513	85.9%	254	211	83%	88%
2015	552	467	84.6%	224	177	79%	88.4%

*Note.* Entering year is for first-time, full-time freshman cohort. Data was obtained from the public website and the Office of Institutional Research at research setting 1. Reprinted with permission.

Table 3.2

*Retention Data for Research Setting 2*

Fall Entering Year	# of Students in Cohort	# of Students Returning	Overall Retention	# of Males in Cohort	#of Males Returning Sophomore Year	Male Student Retention	Female Student Retention
2013	320	262	81.9%	80	67	83.8%	81.2%
2014	329	260	79%	113	96	85%	75.9%
2015	255	193	75.7%	87	67	77%	75%

*Note.* Entering year is for first-time, full-time freshman cohort. Data was obtained directly from the Office of Retention & Advocacy at research setting 2. Reprinted with permission.

**Research Participants**

For a phenomenological study, Moustakas (1994) recommends interviewing 12 to 15 participants. Polkinghorne (1989) advises that researchers interview from five to 25 individuals who have a common experience, and Creswell (2014) notes that sample size for phenomenology typically range from three to 10. The objective of interviewing

multiple participants is to reach saturation, or when gathering data no longer reveals new insights (Creswell, 2014). Inclusion criteria for participants in the proposed study will consist of: (a) traditional age (18-21 years old) male undergraduates, (b) midway through their second year of college, and (c) enrolled full-time. Alternatively, exclusion criteria will be: (a) female students, (b) students over the age of 21, and (c) part-time enrollment status. Since this study investigates persistence past the first year in college, sophomore males best represent the phenomena as participants to reflect upon their transition from high school to college. The target goal for participants in this study was six to 12 sophomore participants. Although 10 male students completed both the consent form and the demographic questionnaire, there were six respondents who completed the interview process. Two respondents were actually freshmen but classified as sophomores due to credit accumulation, one did not respond to requests for an interview, and one did not show for his interview. Therefore, there were six participants who completed the interview process, three male students from each research setting.

### **Instruments**

In qualitative research, such as a phenomenological study, the researcher is the key instrument (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher collects data through document examination, observations, and interviews. For this study on the persistence of male college students, the following instruments were used to collect data: (a) demographic questionnaire, which includes questions designed to identify students who meet the inclusion criteria for participation, (b) face-to-face interviews, and (c) field notes.

Open-ended questions focused around Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory guided the interview protocol. Transition theory is a psychosocial model of development

which establishes a systemic framework to provide an understanding of factors related to a life transition to determine the degree of impact it will have at a particular point in time (Schlossberg, 1981).

### **Data Collection**

Purposeful sampling strategies was utilized to identify male students who have persisted past their first year in college. Constructing a sample using a purposeful method is vital in capturing the shared experiences of participants (Creswell, 2014). For this phenomenological study, use of this criterion sampling technique assisted the researcher in selecting participants who have a similar lived college experience.

Participants were recruited with the assistance of institutional research and student affairs staff at both colleges. Two modes of recruitment were utilized. First, an email was sent to all male college sophomores inviting them to participate in this study. Attached to the email was an introductory letter explaining the purpose of the study and a link to a consent form, as well as the demographic questionnaire. Each student who completed a consent form and a demographic questionnaire received a reply to confirm receipt and to inform him when to expect to be contacted if he was selected as a participant in this study.

The second form of recruitment were posters inviting male sophomore students to participate in this study. With permission from each college, the posters were displayed strategically across campus (e.g., men's restrooms, men's locker rooms, and in the residence halls most populated by male sophomore students). The posters included the researcher's cell phone number and email address so that students interested in learning more about the study had direct contact information. The incentive for participation in

this study was a \$20.00 college store gift card, which was provided to participants at the beginning of the interview.

Prior to conducting this study, approval from the Institutional Review Boards at St. John Fisher College and the colleges where the study took place was obtained. The researcher contacted participants and disclosed the purpose of the study and use of the study data. Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The researcher described how the participants' privacy will be protected by using their choice of a pseudonym or fictitious name, as well as through confidential handling and storage of the data. Before proceeding with this study, informed consent from participants was obtained.

Along with a self-administered consent form, a demographic questionnaire was completed and submitted electronically. The demographic questionnaire consists of questions designed to identify inclusion criteria, as well as other basic participant background and academic information. Data collected included contact information, race, ethnicity, GPA, extracurricular activities, and program of study. The demographic questionnaire consists of 15 brief questions and could be completed in less than 5 minutes.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted one-on-one with the participants at each of the research locations in a private room at the college using carefully constructed, open-ended questions. Each participant chose a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity. An unexpected outcome of this fictitious name choice was that four of the six participants chose a name beginning with the letter J, such as Jack, Jay, James, and Jake. The interview protocol was developed using Moustakas' (1994) general interview guide for

transcendental phenomenology. Phenomenological interviews are an informal, interactive process of collecting data (Moustakas, 1994). The interview began with a “social conversation or a brief meditative activity aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114).

The duration of each individual interview was approximately one hour. To ensure confidentiality, interviews were spaced apart sufficiently so that no two participants saw each other entering or leaving the room. All interviews were recorded utilizing a hand-held digital recorder; a backup recording device was also nearby in case of technical problems. In addition to recording the dialog, the researcher took detailed field notes during and after the interview. Field notes are a tool for noting descriptive and reflective observations regarding the research purpose and questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lastly, academic and social support resources (e.g., tutoring, counseling, advising, mentoring, campus organizations, etc.) were reviewed from the college websites to better understand the experiences of the participants and assist with application of transition theory.

### **Data Analysis**

For transcribing digital recordings, Rev online transcription service (<https://www.rev.com/transcription>) was used; however, the researcher transcribed the demographic information and field notes. Deductive analysis was used for applying transition theory to the data. Deductive analysis is used to test a theory (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Even though transition theory is typically characterized as an adult development theory (Evans et al., 2010), this study explored the lived experiences of traditional age male students through the lens of transition theory.

A priori or “in advance” codes were generated from the 4 S’s of transition theory (Schlossberg, 1995). Next, open or level 2 coding was conducted for hypothesis testing to confirm or disconfirm any assertions developed thus far (Saldana, 2016). The last step in coding was level 3 or axial coding, to build connections and develop categories. Moustakas (1994) calls this coding process horizontalization to develop meaning units or themes. The themes were used to write a descriptive narrative to address the research question of what the participants experienced that influenced their persistence past the first year of college.

Following data analysis, several validation strategies were utilized by the researcher using the researcher’s lens, the participant’s lens, and the reviewer’s lens. A validation process is necessary for assessing the accuracy of research findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher confirmed evidence through the triangulation of multiple data sources (e.g., transcripts, field notes, and a demographic questionnaire) to clarify emerging themes. The triangulation of data sources tests one source of data against another, looking for patterns of thought and behavior, and focusing on key information relevant to the phenomena to develop rich, textual descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Member checking was used so that participants could reflect on the accuracy of their experiences and perceptions in the interview transcript. As a final validation strategy, the researcher conducted an external check by having a peer in higher education examine the findings, analyses, and inferences were supported by the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Reviewing and talking through the data with the external reviewer brought about the strong connection between emerging themes and transition theory. By employing these three validation strategies, the researcher corroborated accuracy and

trustworthiness of the results through the researcher's lens, the participant's lens, and the reviewer's lens.

### **Chapter Summary**

This study investigated the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male undergraduates which have influenced their persistence beyond the first year in college. A qualitative phenomenological approach best addressed the research question by exploring the shared lived experience of male participants who all persisted into the second year of college. Transcendental or psychological phenomenology was used to guide the study to encourage participants to freshly, as if for the first time, reflect upon their transitional first year of college. The framework for this research design was described for this study.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Introduction**

Male college students are not persisting past the first year in college at the same rate as their female counterparts (Conger & Long, 2010; DePrete & Buchmann, 2013; Ross et al., 2012). A literature review outlined several ways that males and females experience college differently and suggested male students are at a greater risk for not persisting in college (R. Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Shieferecke & Card, 2013; Turner, 2016). The purpose of the study is to identify possible factors that may influence persistence for traditional age (18-21 years) male students, who are transitioning to college after high school. This chapter is guided by the research question: What are the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male college students that influence persistence beyond the first year in college?

Chapter 4 describes in detail the findings of the phenomenological study, which are organized into four major themes based on an analysis of the transcripts of the interviews with the research participants:

1. A constellation of supportive relationships.
2. The pressure to succeed.
3. Just get it done.
4. From transition to transformation, hitting the reset button.

The data analysis was supplemented by a demographic questionnaire, field notes, and an external review of the findings.

## **Participant Demographics**

Results derived from the demographic questionnaire revealed, as shown in Table 4.1, data provided from six 19-year old male college students, who were midway through their second year of college and enrolled full time. The participants chose their own pseudonyms during the semi-structured interviews. While all of the participants identified as being White, one participant also identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native. Four of the six young men live on campus and two are off-campus commuter students. One commuter student lives with his parents and the other lives with his grandparents. Both of the commuter students held jobs while attending classes full time; however, none of the residential students had jobs at the time of this study. Two of the residential students were athletes. All six participants were attending small, private, 4-year, liberal arts colleges. Two of the six participants were majoring in career programs, business and finance. Only one of the participants attended high school outside of NY. The participants self-reported grade point averages, which ranged from a 2.1 to a 3.93.

Participant 1, Steven, was the first male student to respond to the recruitment efforts for this study. Prior to attending college, Steven lived at home with both of his parents. Although his parents live close by the college he is attending, he chose to live on campus. Steven mentioned that his father had a degree in computer programming, so he is not a first-generation college student. Steven is still living in a community in which he is familiar, and he has an off-campus friend group at a local martial arts center where he takes classes. Steven holds a secondary black belt in Taekwondo. Steven appears to be intellectual, enjoys learning, and does math for fun. Steven appears to be focused on his academics but struggles with anxiety and sees a local therapist. He stated several times

during the interview that he isn't interested in the social aspect of college and that other young men in his residence hall learned quickly that he would not drink alcohol or party. Steven stated, "I'm not a very big social person. I'd rather spend my time learning something to better off my future and possibly others' futures, based on my career." Steven is focused on the challenge of learning, taking 19 credit in his first semester. His major is mathematics, with minors in sustainability and biology. Steven said that he grew up just knowing that he would be going to college, "It was always in my head that I was always gonna go anyways."

Table 4.1

*The Research Participant's Demographics*

Participant pseudonym	Age	Research setting	Home state	Race	Major	GPA	Housing status	Cocurricular activities
Steven	19	1	New York	White	Mathematics	2.65	on campus	Math Club
Jay	19	1	New York	White, American Indian or Alaskan Native	Pre-Engineering	3.63	on campus	Physics Club, rugby, rowing, Campus Ministry
Jake	19	1	New York	White	Finance	2.8	on campus	Track & Field, Finance Committee
Jack	19	2	New York	White	Business	2.1	commuter	job at college kitchen
Cameron	19	2	New Hampshire	White	Biology/Education	2.7	on campus	Christian Fellowship, Martial Arts Club, Improv Club
James	19	2	New York	White	Biology	3.93	commuter	Gamma Sigma Epsilon, Beta Beta Beta

*Note.* Information was taken from participants' demographic questionnaires. Grade point averages are self-reported.

Participant 2, Jay, presented as a friendly, somewhat shy, and respectful young man. Jay said things like, “yes, ma’am” and “I reckon” several times throughout the interview. Jay’s hometown is several hours away from his college, and at the time of the interview, his parents were having marital problems because of his father’s drinking problem, and he was sorry that he couldn’t be there for his younger sister. Jay’s father was in the military, his family lives close to an Army base, and his parents were pushing him to pursue ROTC, which Jay rejected. About a month after classes started, Jay and his hometown girlfriend ended their relationship. Jay was having a tough time dealing with the situation, and he sought support from a college counselor to get through it. Jay stated that he really didn’t want to go home very often; he liked being on the college campus. Jay excelled academically in high school, and he participated in the National Student Leadership Council in Yale for 10 days between his junior and senior year of high school. Jay is a pre-engineering major, and he plans to immediately pursue his master’s degree upon completion of his bachelor’s degree. Jay is a rugby player, participates in several clubs, and is involved with the church and campus ministry. Jay said, “as a kid, I went to private Catholic school,” so going to college was “almost kind of the expected thing to do.”

Participant 3, Jake, appeared to be the most outgoing of the participants. Jake appeared to be very self-assured and comfortable throughout his interview. Jake’s family lives close to the college he is attending and although he could have commuted, he chose to live on campus. Jake has a close relationship with both of his parents, who are divorced but still live nearby the college. His father is a college employee. Jake did not start college focused on academics, but he got back on track during his second semester.

Jake enjoys college life and is socially engaged; he stated that he has no problem making friends or talking to people. However, Jake claims that he is both an introvert and an extrovert, depending on the situation. Jake got especially animated when he spoke passionately about expensive sports cars. Jake is an athlete on the track team and participates in several clubs and intramural activities. Jake shared that his first semester in college was “okay, grade-wise, just okay.” In his sophomore year, Jake reported a 2.8 grade point average. Jake said that he knew for a long time that he “definitely wanted to go to college” and more specifically, he knew that he would be going to the college he is attending.

Participant 4, Jack, was the only young man who grew up without parents. Jack stated that his father “wasn’t there” and that his mother was a crack addict who didn’t graduate from high school. He began working construction jobs when he was 12 years old. When asked about who he consulted when deciding to attend college, Jack said, “Everything was by myself.” He was raised by his grandparents and still lives in their home close by the college he is attending. Jack commutes to campus each day. During his first year of college, Jack worked 40 hours a week while attending classes as a full-time student. When asked about how he balanced work and school during his first year of college, Jack stated, “There was no balance. I didn’t sleep.” Jack also did not have any time for social activities. Jack is a soft-spoken, serious young man who seemed at ease and spoke candidly during the interview. Jack appears to be very proud of being a first-generation college student and of what he accomplished prior to college, “I did have the grades. I did have the repertoire. I graduated with over 40 high school credits, so I definitely had the smarts.” Jack mentioned that he is paying as he is going and that he

has not taken out any loans. In his second year of college, he has cut down his hours at work and is now participating in some campus activities with friends. Jack shared that since he stopped working 40 hours per week during his first year of college, his grades have improved because he is now getting more sleep. At the time of this study, Jack self-reported a grade point average of a 2.1, which is just above a C average.

Participant 5, Cameron, was the only participant who lived in another state than the college he is attending. He does not have the opportunity to travel or commute home on the weekends to see his family as do the other participants. Despite the distance, Cameron reported that he has a close relationship with his parents and both his maternal and paternal grandparents. During the interview, Cameron seemed nervous and slightly uncomfortable, perhaps shyness. He stated that he did not consider college as his first option; he initially considered the military, but medical conditions prevented him from enlisting. Cameron decided that he wanted to be a teacher, and he is double majoring in education and science. Similar to Jay, Cameron broke up with his hometown girlfriend shortly after his first semester began, and he worked with campus counseling services to move through it. Cameron also discovered a local church where he has made friendships. From his responses, Cameron's transition to college appeared to be difficult. Cameron used phrases such as, "stumbling in the dark," "swept off my feet," and "I had to figure out how to live basically from scratch all on my own." Cameron's first semester grades were not as good as those he achieved in high school, but he reports that they are improving.

Participant 6, James, is also a commuter student like Jack, but has a much different home life. He lives at home with both of his parents, who own and operate a

family farm, raising pigs and rabbits. James's career goal is to be a large animal veterinarian, and he has been focused on this goal since he was a child. He knows that he has many years of college ahead of him to achieve this goal, but he is "raring to go." James is articulate and focused on his academics, and he stated that he maintains a consistently close relationship with his family since he started college. When a question was posed to him, James appeared to choose his words thoughtfully and provided concise and succinct answers. Up to this point in college, James has faced few barriers to success and seems to be acclimating to college life well as a commuter student. James seeks resources as needed and has connected very well to his faculty academic advisor. James appears to be balancing work, school, and family life well. James was, however, the only participant who disclosed that the college he is attending was not his first choice. James was aiming for an Ivy League college and was disappointed when he was not accepted.

Three of the male participants were attending research setting 1, and three participants were attending research setting 2. Both research settings were small, private, 4-year, liberal arts colleges in NY State. Additionally, both research settings were predominantly White institutions (PWIs). All six participants shared the same lived experience of persisting past the first year of college and were currently enrolled midway through their second year.

### **Data Analysis and Themes**

Analytic reflection on the data for this study included examining the meanings and essences of participants who have shared the same experience (Moustakas, 1994), upon which a set of themes emerged. Each theme is connected to the experiences and

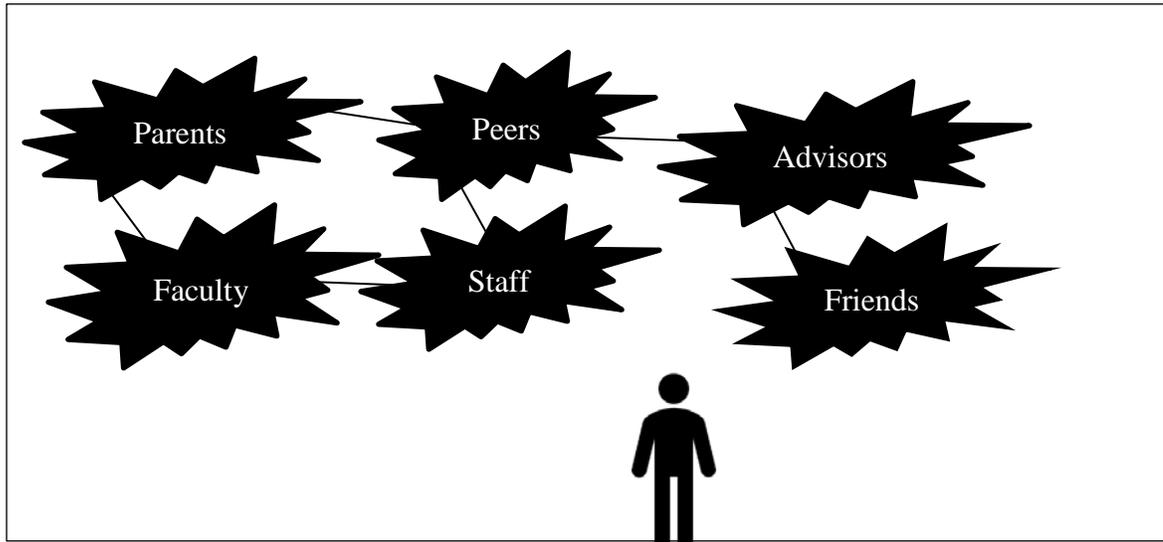
perceptions of traditional age male college students that influence persistence beyond the first year in college.

**Theme 1: A constellation of supportive relationships.** Forming relationships and making connections with others is an important component of transitioning to college life for traditional age freshmen (Lambert, Husser, & Felten, 2018; Upcraft et al., 2005). The male students who participated in this study shared they have supportive relationships with a collection of individuals representing parents, peers, professors, academic advisors, community members, and others, as shown in Figure 4.1. A constellation of supportive relationships is described as multiple sources of help, guidance, encouragement, and support. The following sections highlight how a constellation of supportive relationships influenced persistence in the first year of college and beyond for participants in this study.

*Parents as mentors.* Five of the six participants described situations where one or both of their parents provided support which contributed to their persistence in college. The young men discussed how their parents provided guidance and encouragement when they needed it most. Parental support seems particularly poignant at the beginning of college before relationships are established with others in the campus community. When students are in the beginning stages of a transition, they are in the “moving in” phase of transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Moving in includes assuming a new role and relationships, engaging in a variety of new activities, and striving to meet new challenges. During this time, staying connected to their parents may have been comforting for some of the participants. Once on-campus relationships were established, the participants widened their constellation with peers, friends, faculty, and staff. Jack was the only

participant who did not have an ongoing, supportive relationship with his parents; he was raised by his grandparents, and he shared little about his relationship with them.

#### A Constellation of Supportive Relationships for a Traditional Age Male College Student



*Figure 4.1.* Visual representation of a constellation of supportive relationships.

Steven's parents are married and live close by the college he is attending, and he communicates with them on a regular basis. When he was asked about whom he turns to when a situation in college causes him to be anxious, he responded that he would first contact his parents.

They'll help me make an informed and best decision possible. I don't know. If it's a big decision I needed to make, I don't want to rush into it. I want to have someone else look at what's going on as well as me looking and seeing what's going on.

Steven shared that he relies on his parents to guide his decision making because he trusts them to steer him toward making the best choice. Steven went on to talk about advice his father provides regarding academics.

My dad is always willing to offer advice on certain situations like what classes to necessarily take for elective classes and, which classes to immediately make the top priority. When you really think about it, major courses come before the liberal arts courses just 'cause there's so many liberal arts courses that you can take. You can't progress in your major if you do poorly in your major courses. My dad also says if you do bad in one of your major courses, don't get disheartened 'cause you can always take it again. That's the good thing and you will have to take it again if you wanna progress because major courses build on each other. Liberal arts courses do not.

Steven's father is advising him not to give up and encouraging him to persist even if it takes multiple attempts to successfully complete a course. Steven's father also went to college, so Steven trusts his guidance. Much like Steven, Jake's parents also live close to the college he is attending, and Jake stated that he also looks to his father for guidance when making decisions. Jake said that both his mom and his dad, although divorced, have always been his trusted advisors, guiding him toward making wise choices. Jake's father is employed at the college where he attends, so he is able to seek out advice whenever he needs it.

My parents were always good at listening to my opinion and that's a separate thing, 'cause they're divorced now. Even before that, they would treat me with respect, which I think has had a big outcome on who I am today. They didn't

really baby me, which I liked. I thought that was very good. You make some good decisions, you make some bad decisions. You have to learn on your own, you know, but I really did respect that they were listening. They were willing to hear me out, even if it wasn't something they were going to do. They still would listen to what I was saying and respond to it and give me reasons. If I wanted to go do this, they would say, "Well, you can't. I'm hearing you out on this, but this is why I don't think you should go do this," or "This is why you can't do this," which I liked.

If I ever have questions, basically the first person that I go to, is my dad because if I say, "Hey. Do I need this class or this class," he can just pull it up and say, "Yup" or "No, you don't."

Jake's parents wanted him to justify his requests to them, and by listening and questioning, provided a response supported by reason. They appeared to be modeling decision making skills to Jake, which to a college student, is essential for success and persistence. First year college students immediately begin making decisions with little information, although the consequences of their decisions could be considerable (Light, 2001).

Similar to Jake, Cameron stated that his parents recognize that he is an adult and support him through the decisions that he makes pertaining to college. Although they live in another state, both his parents and his grandparents have been a source of support and guidance before and during college, providing proactive emotional support and encouragement.

They're very supportive in that they recognize that I'm an adult and that college is my decision and what I want to do is my decision, and I've just felt nothing but waves of support for whatever college I wanted to go to or whatever I wanted to major in when I was searching for college. Now that I'm here, just whenever I'm struggling or whenever I'm having a bad day, they just reach out, they call me, or send me care packages, just little encouraging things. It's always really nice. Both of my parents will do that, and then my grandparents on both sides will send me lots of little things. Actually, with my one grandmother, we set it up where every week we just call each other and talk for maybe half an hour, just talk about what's going on in our lives.

Cameron's family demonstrates on an ongoing basis that they are available for support and advice, although he is the one responsible for making his own decisions. Cameron's responses implied that he was close to his family before leaving for college, and he is continuing to maintain this relationship even though he is attending an out-of-state college.

When James, a commuter student, was asked about his decision to go to college, he disclosed that he sought his parents' advice first. James was asked about what he specifically discussed with his parents prior to making his decision.

Obviously, the financial aspects of going to college. The logistics. Being a commuter student, it made more sense to commute, so getting the logistics of transport and my individual schedule relative to their schedules and how the family environment would still be intact.

James worked with his closest advisors, his parents, to make decisions about how to best afford going to college and how to do so that would be the least disruptive to his family since he is a commuter student. While transitioning to college life, participants in this study began to widen their constellation of supportive relationships from parents to friend groups both on and off campus.

*Peers and community friends as mentors.* Each participant spoke of having strong, supportive relationships with peers or friend groups, which appeared to have helped them adapt to student life and the rigors of college. Many of these bonds were formed early during the first semester in college for the participants, who persisted past their freshman year. When asked about how he found his friends to be supportive in college, a big smile came across Jay's face as he reflected on his experience.

Oh, I have tight, really close friends and there's five of us in total, and when my best buddy, whenever I was down, he'd always be there. He's a commuter. So how we first met was I was borrowing rides off of him, you know to go grab something. We'd just hang out, you know, and we got very tight even though we came from extremely different backgrounds and everything. But we would be able to talk about very deep kind of things and all that, and we'd be able to engage each other on a very personal level, and then it kind of expanded to one of his buddies and I got very close.

Jay, whose parents were having marital problems, continued to discuss more about his best friend and how he would provide encouragement during stressful times. Jay disclosed that once his parent's relationship was “. . . stirred up a little,” knowing that

he could seek guidance and support from a friend whenever it was needed helped him persist through occasional challenges.

I got a lot of support from my buddy, I won't say his real name but, my best friend at the time. He is a commuter and we go on long rides and stuff, and there's a couple times where I was having a really rough day and I was like, man, you up? And he said, yeah, I'll pop right over. And he was right there, and he'd show up in his car and he'd run to the gas station, he got two cigars and he's like, we both had a rough day, I think we both need one of these. And we'd go over to a park.

Without the consistent support of his parents after the start of college, Jay connected to a diverse network of peers on campus for friendship and support. However, for the young men in this study, friend groups are not necessarily all made on the college campus. For example, Cameron, who was the only participant from outside of New York State, sought mentoring and support at a local church.

I found a church. I have a lot of support there from both some older people and some kids closer to my age. I guess they're much better about venting with ... especially like some of my friends at the church it's really great just having people to talk to and pray with each other. They know that I'm always there for them and I know that they're always there for me, day or night, or whatever. A lot of my friends on campus I also happen to go to church with, so we'll carpool to church. We have bible study, or we plan little events and stuff.

Cameron extended his constellation of supportive relationships to an off-campus church, where he established relationships with others who shared similar values of religion and prayer, and which also included some of his on-campus friends. He shared

that this supportive structure included both older and younger friends whom he could connect with over a variety of activities. Where Cameron extended his supportive relationships off-campus, Jake, a residential student and finance major, preferred to establish connections on campus, particularly with an upperclassman in the same major who serves as a role model and mentor to him.

I have a lot of friends here. One of my really good friends, he is basically doing the exact same major. He wants to be a financial planner but he's 2 years ahead of me so he's a good, I guess you could say role model a little bit. He's doing well for himself, working a couple of jobs. It's funny, cause this one guy I keep mentioning, who's 2 years older than me, he's a finance major, doing the same thing as me, he's also on the track team and on finance committee so we're really similar, and we look like twins so it's kind of funny.

Alternatively, as a commuter student, Jack has maintained his closest friend relationships off campus. Jack shared that his closest friends did not finish high school or attend college, but they are supportive of his decision to continue his education. When he talks about how his friends view him, Jack's pride is evident.

My friends love that I'm doing what I'm doing. They always told me out everyone, that I'd be the one that goes. They all dropped. Like I said, they all dropped out. Most of them dropped out late middle school/early high school, so they knew I was the support. I was the one that could do it by myself because they weren't ever in my classes and stuff like that. So, my friends absolutely love . . . I bring them on campus every once in a while to play pool, go to the campus pub, go to a little restaurant here, and stuff like that.

Serving as a role model to his hometown friends creates almost a reverse supportive relationship for Jack. He is setting an example of educational success to his friends by sharing his college experience and environment. Jack appeared to be proud that his friends admire and support his educational goals, which may motivate him to strive for success and persistence.

James is the second of two commuter students in this study; however, unlike Jack, he has started to lose touch with his hometown friends. James has started to develop a new friend group on campus, particularly those students with similar majors in the science department.

I have a great set of friends. The ones from high school I don't really hear from a whole lot because they're all over the state, they're all over the country. I don't really hear a lot from them. They still get in contact with me every now and then. In terms of support, I would say my friends on campus are very supportive and very helpful and we have a, in the Science Department especially, we have a close-knit family that really likes to help each other out in our studies and in our social life, as well.

James refers to his peers as a family, which demonstrates how much he values the supportive relationships that have developed. Since he has chosen friends with common interests studying in the same academic department and likely with shared faculty, James and his friends can learn and problem solve together. Similarly, Steven has formed a few friendships with other male students in his major. Steven reported that his friends are “. . . always willing to study ‘cause they also want to do well.” Friends with common

curricula also share the same professors and can motivate each other to do well academically by studying together and supporting one another.

All six participants described how they developed supportive relationships with peers and/or community friends, thus adding to their constellation for a more successful transition to college. In addition to parents and friends, the participants in this study also initiated contact with faculty during their first year of college for additional support.

*Faculty as mentors.* Although the six participants in this study were from two different research settings, they shared similar stories of building supportive relationships with their faculty serving as mentors. Faculty mentoring relationships appeared to grow stronger as the participants were in the “moving through” phase of their transition. The moving through phase involves increasing emotional intelligence, progressing through autonomy to interdependence, and developing integrity (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002). Whether as an academic advisor or a professor in their major, the male students in this study established a mentoring relationship with faculty. Mentoring relationships for college students are described as connecting “with people who take an active interest in and action to advance both your professional opportunities and personal wellbeing” (Johnson, 2014, p. 2). A key component noted by the participants, is that they perceived a welcoming and positive environment from their visits with faculty mentors. Jay, who is a pre-engineering major, reflected on the support and mentoring he receives from the faculty in his major.

Our department is super small, so we really take care of our own and everything, and that's one of the things that the head of the department, who's my instructor now, made very clear to me. He's like, you know if you ask for recommendation

letters for us, we'll definitely try to take care of you and all that kind of thing.

Where I feel the bigger departments were, "that's not my focus." The next closest would be probably the math department, just because I've seen some of the professors for multiple semesters and everything. But there definitely was, oh yeah, I'm definitely gonna help you, you have to kind of seek their help and all that kind of thing, whereas I feel in the physics department since there are so few of them, you can kind of approach them as a mentor almost, and I find it easier going to them for advice career-wise and all that kind of thing.

Jay perceives that seeking help from his professors is welcomed, which he admits makes it easier for him to go to them for advice. Jay reported mentoring support from a variety of professors, and Cameron also shared that same experience, particularly during a meeting with his faculty academic advisor.

A few professors, yeah. I'd also definitely say especially my advisor. She's been absolutely fantastic in helping me not only plan what I will take, but also just in helping me with where I am right now and different strategies I have to get my grade up. She's really worked with me a lot for really getting me to where I want to go and not to where the standard is, if that makes sense.

Cameron sought out mentoring for how to be a more informed, successful college student from his academic advisor. He reported that his first meeting with her was mandatory when he needed to select classes for his second semester, however, after the first meeting, he would reach out to her for assistance. By stating that his faculty advisor was working to get him to where he wanted to go, Cameron was indicating that his advisor provided personalized care to meet his needs. Cameron said that, "She'd always

fit me into her schedule, hear me out, then help me anyway she could.” A forced interaction with his faculty advisor led to an ongoing mentoring relationship, where like Jay, Cameron perceived he was welcomed.

Similarly, Jack also found a mentoring relationship with a writing instructor that went beyond discussing academics. Jack is a commuter student who was working full time while attending college full time while he was a freshman. In addition to tutoring him outside of the classroom, his writing instructor took the time to address Jack’s lack of sleep. This connection may have been pivotal in his persistence past his first year of college.

On campus? I didn't really find support on campus other than my one writing professor because she worked three jobs and raised two kids when she was getting her masters. So, she was the only one that understood that I'm tired and I kind of needed a little more push to get my work done on time. I'm taking four writing classes, and she was like, “okay, we can meet every week, and I can help you with this, and I'll help you with that. You can take a nap in my office. That's fine.”

And it was just . . . that was a blessing.

Jack needed someone to understand what it was like to both work and go to school full time, sacrificing much needed sleep to manage it all. Jack’s writing instructor mentored him on how to make it work by providing a safe place to talk and rest.

For James, also a commuter student like Jack, who admittedly does not spend much time on campus outside of class, making a connection with a faculty mentor may have been critical to his persistence past the first year of college. James actively pursued these relationships when he needed assistance because his faculty made it easy to do so.

I definitely got the most support from my professors. The professors in the Science department truly care about the fact that students are learning. They don't care so much about, you know, are they getting . . . Let me think about this. They don't care about are all the students getting A's. They care about is each student learning the most that they can and going from there. These professors have very flexible office hours, and I know for a fact that these professors are seeing a lot of students on a rather regular basis. Whenever I go to see a professor for help, they're always very eager and excited to help me get a point across. They're never annoyed. They're never irritated or anything like that. They're always very calm, very happy to see that I'm actually going to get help. They're very happy that I'm engaging them versus then having to get the students to pick up the pace, and they don't have to baby us. We kind of seek help.

James deliberately pursued widening his constellation of mentors with his professors in his major. James perceived a welcoming atmosphere, which made him want to seek out his faculty. James also went on to specifically talk about his faculty academic advisor, who mentors him as a researcher.

Yeah, we have a really great relationship. I actually do research with her, so I've gotten to work with her a lot and it's been very, I feel very comfortable working with her, so I always go to her for help. Well, she's very lax. She's very calm and she never, she's never angry. I've never seen her angry since I've gotten on to college. You know, she's always, no matter when, if she's in her office, she's happy to see me, so it's not like I have to set up an appointment or anything. It's just come in whenever, and let's get work done.

According to James, he has created a strong network of faculty mentors who are not only accessible, but also happy to see him when he arrives at their offices. James perceives that he matters to his professors and to his faculty advisor, which strengthens his ability to persist. Much like James, who worked with his faculty advisor on research, Steven also discussed the importance of having a mentoring relationship with his faculty advisor, who guides him with an educational plan.

I've a mathematics advisor who would help me with planning my college years, possibly afterwards if I wanted to go and get a masters or a doctorate, which I still might end up doing, which is better to have higher, higher education than just the higher education. But I'm also looking at studying abroad, so I have to meet with my mathematics advisor and discuss courses that I could possibly take abroad that would not only fulfill a liberal arts, but not put me behind on my mathematics track.

Steven values the mentoring of his faculty advisor to carefully plan his future choices, which impact the length and quality of his education.

Jake, a finance major, stated that he would rather ask his professor for help directly than seeking academic assistance from a support center. Jake perceives his faculty to be accessible and accommodating, so when necessary, he is comfortable reaching out to them for help.

I mean, if I'm confused on something . . . Let's say I was confused on this thing in my statistics class. I would go to the professor before I would go to the math center, if that makes sense. I would email my professor and say, "Hey, I had a problem with question 5. I'm wondering if we can meet and talk about it or if you

can just break it down for me, before I'll go to the math center." And of course, if that doesn't work, then I will go to the math center, but I haven't really had that experience happen yet.

By actively seeking their help, Jake has been successful in connecting to his professors outside the classroom for academic assistance. Comparably, Jay, whose major is pre-engineering, will proactively pursue faculty even outside his major for assistance outside of the classroom.

I really feel I'll go right to the professor and say, "hey can I sit down with you, can I work on these problems?" One of the classes I'm actually struggling with more is the American Sign Language class. I really don't think my brain is just wired for other languages, but I got up to her and I said, hey you know, can I practice with you? You know a lot of professors here are more than willing to help you out, the better you do the better reflects on them, I think.

Even though Jay perceives that the faculty are helping students to make themselves look better, he still finds them welcoming and supportive.

Learning how to transition successfully into college is essential to persistence, and the participants all described how they established mentoring relationships with faculty. Participants demonstrated proactive behavior by proactively initiating supportive relationships for a variety of needs. Early in the transition to college, some of the participants relied on the support of parents for guidance and encouragement. However, as the young men moved through the transition, they widened their constellation of supportive relationships to include friends and faculty mentors. The multiple sources of support appeared to positively influence the persistence of the participants beyond the

first year of college. The constellation of supportive relationships may be needed specifically for traditional age male college students, since each participant in this study shared a story which could be interpreted as feeling pressure to succeed.

**Theme 2: The pressure to succeed.** At the age of 19, the male participants in this study all appeared to be driven to be successful. They want to provide for their future families and live the American dream of having a nice house, an expensive car, and a well-paying job. When asked what drives him to succeed, Jack, a business major who was raised by his grandparents because his mother was a crack addict, disclosed that he wants to give his children the things that he never had growing up.

I just . . . I want to give my kids everything that I never had, the nice house, nice car, good upbringing, nice neighborhood, the white picket fence.

Jack doesn't mention a wife or a partner who might be able share or contribute to his vision of success. However, Jack did talk about how his upbringing has influenced his resiliency in college.

My upbringing was a big reason why I'm able to persist in college. Back against the wall. Right now, I have my back against the wall, and I'm still fighting doing my best. And if someone doesn't come in with that personality, they could fail. I've noticed that a lot about, not even male college students, female college students, but it is mainly the males. They get something up against that wall, up against the wall, and they're not willing to fight back from it. They have one bad touch, and it just spirals. Two bad touches, three bad touches, and they stop caring, and then they fail out or drop because they can't deal with it anymore.

From his perspective, Jack notes that when some male students feel pressured or “. . . back against the wall . . .,” they may not persist in college. Jack shared that he believes that he has been able to use the resiliency he developed through his childhood to push through the hard times or “. . . bad touches . . .” in college. In addition, Cameron candidly discussed that he feels that the pressure and expectations are higher on men than women, although he is not sure how this stereotype got perpetuated in his mind.

I feel like part of it might just be the grass is always greener on the other side because females say that there's higher expectations on them. A lot of males say that there's higher expectations on them. As a male, I definitely feel that there are at least different, if not more, expectations on males than on females. The stereotype I guess is that the male's the one who provides for the family, he's the one who goes out to the job and the mom stays at home. That's not to say that's what it has to be, but it seems like I'm the one who has to go to college, I'm the one who has to be successful. I have to get good grades, so I can get a good job to support whatever family I may have in the future. I just never really heard anything else growing up, not to say that, like I said, I'm sure that my parents would support me no matter. It's not to say that they directly said that to me, but just where I grew up in school, in church, all these different places that's very much so just what I've seen.

Both Jack and Cameron stated that there was feeling of pressure on males more than females to succeed. Cameron, double majoring in biology and education, perceives from his experiences and background that men are the family providers, and women stay home

and take care of the children. By stating that he feels that expectations are higher for males than females in life, Cameron acknowledged that there is pressure to succeed.

Jake, a finance major, also appears to be driven to succeed and wants others to view him as successful.

I wanna be successful and have a successful family, live in a nice house. It doesn't have to be a mansion but a nice house, in a nice community. I want that success, so that's what kind of drives me. I really wanna be seen as successful. I've got some internships lined up, some shadowing opportunities. I've got a lot of contacts in the financial planning world, which is great. It's all about who you know. I really think it is, especially in business. So, I'm just trying to get my foot in the door. And so, my other goal is to get an Audi R8, which is a super flashy car. It's very expensive, very high end, like \$150,000, so I want to save up for that.

Jake's measure of success is in material possessions. As a sophomore in college, he already has a success strategy to connect with professionals who are established and successful in the field of finance, and who may be willing to hire him in the future so that he can begin earning money.

Some visions of success began very early for these young men. For James, a biology major, who commutes to college so that he can continue to work on his family's farm while going to school, he knew at a very young age what his career path was going to be.

I own a small-scale farm, and I'm raising pigs and rabbits. That started when I was in sixth grade. Ever since then, I've always wanted to become a large animal

veterinarian, so obviously to become a veterinarian you have to go to college, go to grad school, get a doctorate in medicine. That's been my drive ever since, and so far, that drive is still very strong and I'm raring to go.

James vision of success also included attending an Ivy League college. He mentioned that the college he is attending was not his first choice, and he was hurt when he wasn't accepted to his first-choice college. He has been focused on academic success since the sixth grade so that he could attend his dream college.

It hurt. I thought I had a really great transcript. I was in the top 2% of my class in high school. I basically met a lot of other criteria, so I was a little disappointed that they said no, but they probably had a good enough reason to say no because the class when I applied, there were so many applicants. I think there were like 8,000. There was a ton that applied, and it was just such a deep applicant pool even some great students had to get denied. In the end, it is what it is.

Although James did not get into his first-choice college, he is still excelling academically at the college he is attending. He self-reported a grade point average of 3.93, and he is a member of several honor societies. As he stated, his drive to succeed is "very strong."

Similar to James, the pressure to succeed also began at an early age for Jay, a residential student with a reported grade point average of 3.63.

I would say, in growing up especially, my parents were all about almost being the perfect person in grades wise and sports wise and all that kind of thing. So, there was a lot of pressure there to never underperform or you know, find consequence in that, which is good. I always . . . I kinda look back on it now, it was hard, but I do think it was a good thing, because I'm definitely not a lazy person or any that.

I could see how for some people it might not be the best of things, because they might go from that into an independent realm and see that as, oh now I can finally take a break, when they need to not do that the most.

Jay described that the pressure to succeed was placed on him by his parents at an early age. However, he now views this perceived pressure positively because it promotes motivation for him to achieve. Jay is a pre-engineering major, and he began pondering his career goal as a child and continued to consider options as he got older.

As a kid, I kind of flirted with the idea of architecture, and a few other things, but I always kinda settled on this because the more I got into it the more I truly liked it. I went to the National Student Leadership Council in Yale for an engineering conference and spent 10 days. They kind of give you a taste of what you might be doing as an engineer. I just kind of fell in love with it then and there.

Jay disclosed that his family owns a business, and it was always assumed that he would take it over eventually, but he has his own ideas for a career where he can be his own person. He plans to specialize in engineering so that he will stand out and find a good job.

And I'm like, it might be a little harder to find a job, but there's a lot of demand for people that are good in mechanical engineering. So, if I get really good at that, if I focus on my grades and I do thermodynamics electromagnetism you know all this, and the other thing was stack structure, and I really work hard that, if I have some natural talent and a hard work ethic I can kind of raise myself above 50% of the people. And that might be good enough to find myself in a good job.

Jay's drive to succeed in his career may have come from something that his father said to him when he was younger. This one comment is something that Jay has remembered over the years.

I remember pretty young as a kid, we were at a museum and we were looking at something or other, and we were talking about engineering and he said, you know man, those guys, you've got to be smart to do that. And I think that always kinda stuck around that maybe I could prove being smart by doing engineering.

Based on his father's comment, Jay may associate being smart with being an engineer. Jay noted that he ". . . still values my parent's opinions of me, and I still try to impress them and do good by them," which may indicate that he is still driven by the pressure to succeed.

Steven also began planning for his success long before college. Unlike some of the other young men, he is not driven by material possessions. His success is intrinsically driven by contributing to science and the future of others.

I've always wanted to do something that involved something that a high school degree would not necessarily cover. I wanted to use mathematics to model populations of animals and really can't do that based off of what you get in high school. I'm not a very big social person. I'd rather spend my time learning something better off in my future and possibly other's futures, based on my career. Either to work for some government or private association using mathematics to model the growth or decay of certain animal populations. Like the endangered species list. Because my goals, they're not gonna benefit just me. In my view, they're not benefiting just me, they're benefiting my future generations as well.

Steven values the challenge of learning and contributing to society in the future; he is not motivated by money. However, that does not mean that Steven still does not feel pressured to succeed; he disclosed that he has experienced anxiety since he was five, maybe younger. Steven self imposes much academic responsibility and added pressure to succeed by doing more than what is expected. Steven took 19 credits in his first semester in college by adding calculus to the typical freshman load of 15 credits. He also stated that he wrote a research project on something for the psychology department, even though his major is mathematics with minors in both sustainability and biology.

Based on shared perceptions and experiences, the male participants in this study appear to have the added pressure of being successful. The pressure was reported as being both intrinsic and extrinsic. The young men appeared to be driven by the desire to achieve a successful future, although defined differently by each participant. The pressure to succeed may originate with parents, society, or can even be self-imposed. However, each young man said something that can be interpreted as feeling pressure to succeed, which could lead some of the participants to employ a “just get it done” mindset to reach their long-term goals.

**Theme 3: Just get it done.** All of the participants in this study discussed their own efforts, strategies, and use of supportive services to persist past the first year of college, which reflected a “just get it done” mindset. Mostly through self-talk, the young men came up with their own personal coping strategies for motivating action and moving through barriers. Barriers to success are handled with a mindset of just get it done, which is a way to overcome barriers rather than stopping or quitting. Through examination of the participant’s shared stories, different components of the just get it done mindset

emerged. Similar components of the just get it done mindset for obtaining goals include, self-talk, taking responsibility, developing independence, prioritizing tasks, and seeking help when necessary.

When invited to share any experience or perspective about his transition during the first year of college to his sophomore year, Steven responded by emphasizing the need to prioritize and focus efforts on academics as opposed to partying on the weekends to be better prepared for Monday tests.

To be successful, you have to have a straight set, "I need to do this. This needs to get done" mindset or you're not gonna really get anywhere. 'Cause if you're really focused on, 'Oh I wanna go party on the weekend, but I have this test next week,' no. That partying is not gonna benefit you if it's on a Sunday for Monday because if you end up missing classes on Monday, you're not gonna be prepared for whatever is on the exam.

By telling himself, "this needs to get done . . . ," Steven, who lives on campus, was able to focus on the outcome of his choices. Steven described that by adjusting his mindset, he was able to prioritize academics over social activities, such as partying. Comparably, when Jake, who also lives on campus, was asked where he would seek support on campus during his first year, he answered that he didn't think he needed it. Jake went on to say that he knew what he had to do.

I'm very matter of fact so if something's not going my way, I'm not really just gonna sit around and get dug in this deep hole until somebody pulls me out of it. I have to take a hold of myself and say, "Okay. Come on now. It's time to go right now."

When struggling to manage his time to concentrate on working on an essay assignment, Jake told himself, “. . .this work needs to get done . . .”

I just said, "Okay, listen. You're gonna have to . . . This work needs to get done so why don't you carve out some time and get it done," cause once I start something, I can finish it and that is good and bad cause that holds true to a lot of things, whether it's watching TV and "Oh, I wanna finish a show," which is sometimes bad cause you have to do other stuff but then it's also good. If you're writing an essay and you say, "Okay well, I'm gonna start this essay," but then I want to get it done. If I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna do it and get it out of the way, so I kinda had to tell myself that.

Jake, who is on the track team, engaged in self-coaching (or self-talk) to help adjust his mindset on just getting it done. Self-coaching appeared to provide the motivation Jake needs to prioritize what is most important to his success in college. Athletes may use self-coaching to control anxiety and during challenging situations (Hardy, Gammage, & Hall, 2001). Based on his responses, Jake seemed to know that whatever he sets his mind on getting done, he is going to see it through to completion. Jake also added that he doesn't need any on-campus support because when he encounters academic stress, he practices self-talk to motivate action and “push” his stress away.

I'm sure I could go see one of the people on campus, the on-campus staff. I've never really been that stressed cause like I said, I am very . . . I need to take hold of myself. I'm very in control of myself so I can kind of recognize, "Okay. You better sit down and get this done," and kind of push my stress away and say,

"Listen. The only way you're going to get rid of this stress is by actually doing what you have to do, so just do it."

Just like Jake, Jay pushes himself to work harder, expend effort, and get the work done. Jay lives on campus and is majoring in pre-engineering. When asked if he had encountered any barriers to academic success, he responded that he reflects on what needs to be done, and he just gets it done rather than complaining.

I'm not really one that can complain, and you know whenever it comes down to feeling like something's out of my reach, I feel like I kind of put it on myself to work harder, to try and reach for it. A lot of it kinda comes down to if I feel like I'm not getting the grades I really want, a lot of it comes down to okay I want to buckle down and read more I want to read ahead more.

Steven also employs self-talk to manage responsibility and prioritize what needs to get done. Steven was asked to identify barriers to student success that exist in college, and he identified independence and responsibilities as potential barriers in college. Steven responded that he relies on his own efforts to move through barriers to get things done.

One of the major things is you suddenly have all this independence. You have responsibility, you have to find ways to manage these responsibilities, you don't have a choice. If you decide, "Oh I'm gonna sleep for a week," you're going to do poorly in your classes. You have to immediately prioritize what you need to do. You immediately have to determine what is more important. One of the biggest things when people try to begin to transition is they're not prepared necessarily for understanding what changed. There's no one to tell you what to do. You have to

tell yourself what to do, and what you tell yourself that you have to do, you have to do it, you can't just say, "Oh I need to do this, this, and this," and then end up not doing it. You have to do it. There are things that you have to do. You have to attend class, you have to do your course work.

Steven points out that if students are going to be successful, they should approach it from the mindset of not having a choice about doing the work; they have to just do it. Consistent with Steven's reflection on independence and managing responsibilities, Jake values his independence and employs prioritizing as a way to get things done. When Jake was asked about barriers to success, he identified stress as being a "huge one." He said that in the freshmen residence halls everyone is like, "Oh, my mom's not here. I can finally do whatever I want." Jake's strategy to manage the stress of his newfound independence is to maintain strict control of his schedule and his routine.

I still like the independence. I like that. Yeah, I really like the independence rubbing into adulthood. I mean, I'm not a full adult yet. I'm not even . . . I turn 20 in a month and a half, but I still like being able to control what I want to do, when I want to do it because that makes my schedule so easy. I have class at this time, I have a work out at this time, I do work right at this time. I'm very structured. I like the structure. I like a routine and I'm a creature of habit. I'll wake up in the morning, get dressed, do a shower, whatever and then get ready to go to class. I cook a bagel on the way for breakfast, and I like that a lot.

As freshmen, whether residential or commuting, the participants were learning to balance the rigors of attending college. Many of the participants mentioned that a strategy they utilize to help them manage their daily activities more effectively is

developing and maintaining a routine. Jay also placed effort into establishing a routine and a daily schedule; it required more effort at the beginning, but after a while, it became easier to manage. By developing a daily routine, the young men are able to focus on the most important tasks in their day so that they can get more done. Jay was asked what advice he would give to a high school senior about college, and he recommended getting into a comfortable routine.

I like having a little bit of routine in the morning. Sometimes I'll go and work out; I'll come back, and I'll take a shower. And that's just kind of my way of starting the day, if I don't get a shower and then I kind of feel a little off almost. So, it's about getting yourself into a comfortable routine, figuring out, oh this is a time that I'm gonna go study, this is time I'm gonna eat lunch. And then I'd say once you kinda fit into that and you develop a good routine, it's pretty easy to kind of keep sticking to that. It's hard to kinda start it and stick to it at first for the first couple weeks, but once you do it, you know, just days go by. It's the same thing over and over.

Jay, as well as several of the other male participants, realized the importance of managing their time well to independently accomplish the everyday rigors of being a college student. Both James and Jack are commuter students, balancing school demands with work and home life, and both discussed placing a priority on their academic responsibilities over their social life. James mentioned scheduling social activities during times when he has fewer academic demands on his time. James, whose career goal is to be a veterinarian, understands that placing a priority on academics will advance him toward his goal of obtaining his college degree.

I would prioritize my academics over my social life every day, any day. In my case, my friends are very understanding, so if I told them hey, I can't go I have to study, they wouldn't have a fit with me or anything. I would just say let's hang out another time. Let's just schedule something where we can all hang out during break or something.

James arranges his social life around his academic priorities. By noting that his friends are very understanding means that he must tell them that he has to study on a regular basis. When asked about decisions that he makes today that may have been different when he was a freshman, James responded that he makes wiser choices about how he manages his time so that he can just get things done.

Definitely, in terms of time management. Now, I have to set aside a little more time to focus on my academics. Back then, I think I didn't spend as much time, but in the time that I'd spent in freshman year was more of just trying to get a grasp on everything because it was so new and so different. Now, I'm just kind of in the grind getting things done and just really hitting the material more so than trying to get a feel for it in freshman year.

James' response reflects the get it done mindset by overcoming the barrier of managing demands on his time. Placing a focus on his academics prompted behavioral changes which may lead to academic success and goal attainment. Parallel to James, Jack also learned to put an emphasis on his academics to just get it done. When given a scenario about making a choice between attending a social event with friends or preparing for a midterm exam, Jack replied that his focus is on studying.

Studying is way more important. I try to go to bed at least 8 hours before I have to get up, so I can still study on my way to my class. And then sit at my class and study, so I can have some type of recollection of what I need to do. I study on my breaks. I go home after work, and I stay up and study. I'm very, normally, very prepared.

As a sophomore, Jack, a business major, now understands that his academic abilities may be enhanced through the extra efforts of studying. However, during his interview, he shared that he did not do well academically in his freshman year in college, but by employing a get it done mindset and extending the efforts that he puts forth, he has improved his grades in his sophomore year.

Part of the just get it done mindset for the participants includes seeking help when necessary. There were instances when self-coaching was not enough, the young men required the assistance of others to not just get it done, but to get it done well. The male participants in this study were proactive about seeking help when necessary, whether it be from a mentor or from an academic support center. Most of the young men named a writing center and a tutoring center as places where they regularly sought help. James, a commuter with a 3.93 grade point average, was asked what academic supports he used during his freshman year in college and whether he would continue to use those supports.

I would say that using the writing center, tutoring, talking to my professors, talking to other peers that are taking the same classes as myself, those are all tools that I used in freshman year and I expect to, I've actually already used this year, and I expect to use in the future all the way.

James utilized his constellation of mentors and support centers to help him just get it done his first year, and he plans to continue to use those supports to get to his goal of finishing his degree. Conversely, Jack, also a commuter, did not do well academically as a freshman because he worked too many hours to utilize the services of support centers. As a sophomore working less hours, he sought help from multiple sources to improve his grades.

My biggest issue was getting my grades back up to where they're supposed to, and the only way that I got my grades back to up to where they're supposed to, was to go to the tutoring center and writing center, office hours, asking my professor, staying after class with questions, write down questions that I have throughout class, pages in a textbook that I didn't really understand.

Cameron, the only participant from outside New York, did not utilize the supportive resources available during his freshman year, although he admitted to knowing they existed. Cameron also disclosed that he did not do well academically in his first year of college. Cameron expressed that a barrier he experienced was being “. . . blindsided by new expectations and stuff being placed on me that I had no idea would exist.”

I would definitely say I knew about a lot of the supports freshman year, but I definitely didn't utilize nearly as many as I did until . . . I've used a lot more my sophomore year than I had my freshman year.

Cameron and Jack, who both struggled academically in their freshman year, realized that they were not going to get it done without seeking the help of others, so they changed their behaviors to overcome their barriers to success and their grades were improving.

Counseling is another supportive service that assists students to overcome personal barriers to just get it done. Cameron and Jay utilized counseling services in their first year of college. Both young men left their hometown girlfriends when they went away to college and experienced a break up during their first semester in college. Jay struggled through the declining relationship with his long-distance girlfriend until he ended the relationship about a month after starting college. It was at that time he decided he needed to seek help.

Actually, I went to the wellness center here. She was super nice, just kind of helped me like bend my struggles and all that kind of thing. Super nice lady, very motherly almost. I saw her I don't know like how many times but, say about once a week for a little while, and then, just random checkups every once in a while. I haven't seen her in a long time though.

Like Jay, Cameron also ended a serious, long-term relationship with a girlfriend from his hometown in another state right at the beginning of the school year. Cameron said that he was “. . . just able to process through it,” but when asked about whom he talked to while trying to adjust to college life during the first semester, he mentioned that he used the counseling center, as well as friends and family, for support.

We have the therapist in school; I talked to him a little bit. I talk to my friends and family back at home. Yeah, it was mostly through the counseling center and what few friends I made.

Steven, who is from the same town where his college is located, also disclosed that he experiences anxiety and meets with an off-campus therapist on a regular basis.

Even though the participants were attending two different research settings, stories revealing similar strategies for overcoming and moving through barriers were shared. Some of the barriers that the participants faced as freshmen in college were managing a new-found independence, stress, academic preparedness, balancing priorities, and relationship issues. Through analysis of shared stories, just get it done emerged as a unique mindset for the male participants. The components of the just get it done mindset include self-talk, taking responsibility, developing independence, prioritizing tasks, and seeking help when necessary. By employing these components, the participants were able to overcome barriers rather than being stopped by them and giving up. The traditional age male college students participating in this research study are moving through transition to transformation, which is described in the final theme.

**Theme 4: From transition to transformation, hitting the reset button.** All the young men in this study transitioned from high school students into college freshmen, and at the time of this study, had persisted past their first year in college. The academic and social transition and adjustment to college life was easier for some of the participants than others. However, they could all discuss the changes that had occurred moving from the first year of college to the second year. The young male participants are shifting from transition to transformation, and many of them described having to hit the reset button or reinvent themselves to do so.

When James, a commuter student who is majoring in biology, was asked how he would describe his first semester in college, he identified it as a transition phase. James remarked that he quickly learned that he basically had to start all over again and that he had to hit the reset button and start fresh once getting to college.

It's a transition in terms of academics but it's also a transition in terms of your social life because you're put in with a whole new group of people that you don't know. You basically have to start all over again. Study skills in high school didn't really apply all that well to college. I basically had to hit a reset button and just start fresh in college and I picked up rather quickly. I was a very good student in high school and I'm still a very good student in college. It wasn't that hard, but there were still some things that I had to kind of refresh myself on, yes.

Cameron, like James, discovered soon after his first semester began that he was underprepared for the rigor of college. Dissimilar to James, it took Cameron more time to transition academically. In his first semester, he did not earn the level of grades he had obtained in high school. Cameron moved to college from another state and is double majoring in education and science.

It's a little bit cliché, but it was one thing I did not take seriously enough when I first went in. It is nothing like high school. Unless you actually took some sort of college classes before you went to here, before you graduated high school, there's nothing, well I shouldn't say there's nothing that could prepare you, but there's no way of knowing what's before you. It is nothing like high school and nothing like you have ever taken before. It swept me off my feet, I was completely blindsided by that. Academically I'd say the most obvious thing was in high school I had a 3.5 GPA all through high school. Yeah, I never really had to try. I just kind of kicked back. Life was good, I went to college, and then I dropped down to a 2.5 for a semester. Afterwards, I should bring it up a little bit, but it's still nowhere near the 3.5 I had in high school.

Cameron also discussed the initial impact of transitioning to college during his first semester. However, after reinventing himself in his sophomore year, he began to transform academically and socially.

Maybe part of it [the initial impact] was time management. I'd say more so it was just not really knowing what to expect. Like I said before, I just kind of was stumbling in the dark, just showed up. I had an idea, but all my expectations were completely shattered. I just had to reinvent myself. I guess I kind of valued . . . I'm trying to think of how to word this. I valued being able to reinvent myself. I guess that's the biggest thing. Some smaller things that now are starting to come to mind are I really did enjoy my classes. I valued my professors, a lot of them once I was able to figure out how they were able to help me work through some of my academic troubles that I mentioned earlier. Once I found some, I really did value my friends, the kind of social input I had. The very first semester there wasn't much, it wasn't until I established a group base.

Cameron discovered that college is different from high school, and he was not prepared for the transition until he was able to reinvent himself in his sophomore year. Like Cameron, Jack's grades suffered during his transition to college. Jack, a commuter student majoring in business, shared that during his first year of college he was also working a full-time job. There were times when Jack was ". . . basically awake for five day in a row because of work and school." When asked what he values as a sophomore, he responded that grades are now a priority.

Just my grades. My grades are a lot better from last term because I'm not working as much. I'm sleeping. That's what I value the most. I'm not really going

out. I play pool every once in a while, but I just stay home, do my homework, go to class, say hi to everybody, and then go home, do my homework, and go to bed.

During his second year of college, Jack's transformation or reset button included cutting back on his work hours, getting rest, and doing his homework. Jack also discussed how he changed personally and socially because of his transition to becoming a college student. He realized that even though the high school from which he graduated was larger than the college he is currently attending, this experience was enriching his life in ways he didn't anticipate.

It was one of the most rocky but amazing years of my life. I didn't know anything that I was going into, but it was so fun and so hard at the same time. So, it was just a mixture of having fun, meeting people. I really didn't play pool until I came here. I really didn't know how to play golf until I came here. I still never play golf, but I watch it now and stuff like that. It's just opened up so many different realities that I saw that other people grew up the same way, a different way than I did, but we're still in the same spot. I never met someone from a different country until I came here. That was just amazing to me that I could hear their story and how it was over there to open my mind a little bit on how, like I said earlier, life really is.

Whereas Jack reported a social readjustment, for Steven, a residential mathematics major, the transition to college required him to hit the restart button on his writing skills. He described being underprepared from high school for writing at a college level and reported having to adjust to a drastic change in a short time period.

If it was up to me, I would rearrange the way the freshman learning community thing is done. I would put the research ready class first 'cause that's almost more important, to learn how to write in college, and then this other class. 'Cause this other class doesn't really teach you much about writing, so you're coming in from high school and you have this one idea of how to write, and you're being thrown into this other class saying, "No, you don't write like that," which could be one of the reasons why people either transfer out of the school, or just stop altogether 'cause they're unable to adjust to such a drastic change in such a short period of time. Like I was saying, I got here, and the first assignment was due within 3 weeks.

Within the 3 weeks of college, Steven needed to hit the reset button on how he had learned to write in high school to writing at a college level. When asked about what he valued most about his first semester in college, Steven responded that he enjoyed the immediate increase of information and college rigor. He found it relevant to his future career.

The immediate increase of the amount of information that was given, so since I was taking five courses roughly, with four credits each, and then the one freshman seminar course. Lots of different stuff was covered almost immediately. By the third week, I was learning stuff that was not covered in high school that was valuable for pursuing a future career.

Steven responded well to the transition from high school to college and academically reinvented himself during his freshman year of college. However, for Jay, college provided an opportunity to reinvent himself physically and socially during his freshman

year. Jay, a pre-engineering major and rugby player, was able to reset his social skills and meet new friends.

In high school, I was kind of chunkier and a little socially awkward, a little shy here and there and everything. And then I kind of broke out of my shell when I lost a little weight in junior year and everything and then got a little socially awkward, and then I came here, and I was like, oh, you know you can actually choose your friends a little bit versus being forced to kind of be friendly with people. I mean I try to be nice to everybody, but you don't have to . . . you're not forced to spend your time with people that you don't want to. So, it was really good finding people that were very like-minded and their ways very different from me, being able to kind of explore new people and everything.

Jay admitted that he “. . . wasn't ever yearning to be home more than I was yearning to be at school,” and that he didn't get homesick. The social adjustments he made in college appeared to be successful for him to move from transition to transformation.

The participants in this study reported that they were able to make necessary personal, academic, and social changes to reinvent themselves to move through the transition to college. They discovered that high school is different than college, and they needed to refresh study and time management skills, learn new social skills, develop new interests, and adapt to the academic rigors of college. By hitting the reset button or reinventing themselves, the young men participating in this study moved through transition to self-transformation, and by doing so, strengthened their ability to persist in college beyond the first year.

## Summary of Results

This study examined the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male college students that influence persistence beyond the first year in college. Four major themes emerged from the data analysis:

1. A constellation of supportive relationships.
2. The pressure to succeed.
3. Just get it done.
4. From transition to transformation, hitting the reset button.

The four themes are supported by the experiences and perceptions of the male participants in this study who share the same lived experience, persisting past the first year of college.

The first theme, a constellation of supportive relationships, explains how a cluster of meaningful relationships provide academic and social support to increase persistence in male college students. The theme was supported by providing perceptions and experiences of the male participants, which detail how they have maintained and established supportive relationships. Some relationships, such as parents and friends from home, already existed when the participants started college. However, new supportive relationships are established during the first year of college with peers, professors, advisors, and others to guide and support their choices and behaviors. Mentoring relationships with faculty appeared to be especially poignant during the sophomore year of college for the participants.

The second theme, the pressure to succeed, is reinforced by the male research participants through their descriptions of visions and expectations for their future. Each

young man shared how he envisions success. For many of the participants in this study, success is defined as providing for their future families and owning material possessions associated with success (e.g., house with a white picket fence or an expensive car). One participant wants to use his scientific knowledge to benefit future generations. This pressure to succeed may develop at an early age and increase over time.

The third theme, just get it done, is described as a mindset for goal attainment, which may develop due to the pressure to succeed. The components of the just get it done mindset include self-talk, responsibility, independence, self-motivation, prioritizing tasks, and seeking help when necessary. The theme was supported through shared experiences and perceptions by each of the male research participants of how they utilized a just get it done mindset to persist past the first year in college.

The fourth and last theme to emerge from the data analysis is from transition to transformation, hitting the reset button. This theme was also supported through the shared experiences of the male participants. The young men in this study have all transitioned from high school to college. Their experiences and perceptions demonstrate that they are moving from transition to transformation, and they described the changes they employed to persist in college as hitting the reset button or reinventing themselves. The participants reported the need to refresh study and time management skills and reinvent their social skills to adapt to the college environment. Reinventing themselves led to modified behaviors, values clarification, and improved problem-solving skills, which contribute to success and persistence in college.

Chapter 5 discusses the general findings of this study, as well as the implications for higher education professionals and institutions for increasing the persistence of

traditional age male college students beyond the first year of college. Limitations of the research will be also shared. Finally, recommendations for institutional procedures and practices will be outlined to promote the persistence of traditional age male college students.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

Despite the significant amount of research, college student persistence continues to be a problem for institutions of higher education (Bowen et al., 2009; Greenfield et al., 2013). The National Center for Educational Statistics reported that of entering first-year students, an average of 25% did not return for a second year (McFarland et al., 2018). As noted by Tinto (1993), college attrition is most likely to occur during or immediately following the first year of college.

There is increasing concern over the performance and persistence of men in higher education. The expanding gender gap in college has been getting more attention within the past 20 years (Conger & Long, 2010; King, 2006). In the 1970s, men were more likely than women to graduate from college; however, this pattern has reversed (Ewert, 2010). Moreover, the proportion of women outnumbering men in both college attendance and degree attainment are evident within every racial group in America (Ross et al., 2012). Even though men and women take college classes together, use similar campus resources, and often reside in the same residence halls, their needs are not the same (Sax, 2008).

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male college freshman that influence persistence beyond the first year of college. The research is focused on identifying possible factors that may influence persistence for first-year male students, who are transitioning to college after high school.

College administrators, faculty, and staff could benefit from this study by learning more about the experiences of traditional age male college freshmen during their first year of college. Knowing more about why traditional age male students choose to stay in college can have implications for academic affairs and student affairs in relation to engagement opportunities, mentoring relationships, resiliency, and both curricular and cocurricular activities and structures. The main headings in Chapter 5 discuss the implications, limitations, and recommendations of the study, and the chapter ends with a concluding summary.

### **Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study provide several implications related to the performance and persistence of young men past their first year in college. Implications on research and expanding scholarly knowledge in the persistence of traditional age male college students are discussed in the first section. The second section discusses the implications on transition theory, which was used as the theoretical lens in this study.

To expand the body of knowledge which currently exists on male student persistence, it is essential to examine how the results of this study connect with the literature as well as with the theoretical framework of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. This study investigated experiences and perceptions of traditional age male college students to identify the factors which contribute to a student staying in college beyond the first year as opposed to dropping out. Tinto (2016) asserts that higher education professionals continually attempt to retain students through institutional action; however, students aren't looking to be retained. Students want to persist to degree completion regardless of the college from which it is earned (Tinto, 2016).

**Mentoring relationships with faculty.** A constellation of supportive relationships is a theme that emerged from this study and suggests that persistence is increased by establishing and maintaining multiple supportive relationships for a variety of reasons. Some relationships were established prior to college for the participant, such as those with parents and friends from home, while others with peers, staff, and faculty developed after the start of classes. Based on the shared experiences of the participants, one relationship that may be key to a successful transition to college and persisting past the first year is a mentoring relationship with faculty. The young men discussed how a faculty mentor took an interest in them personally. Higher education institutions can foster and influence faculty mentoring relationships with traditional age male students, particularly at small, private colleges where the faculty-to-student ratio is smaller than at large, public universities. Lambert, Husser, and Felten (2018) recommend building a diverse network of mentors during the first year of college. A mentor is a source of wisdom and a trusted advisor who supports the growth and development of their mentee (Reh, 2018). Astin (1977) posed that “student-faculty interaction has a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other student involvement variable (p. 223).”

In support of the knowledge of Astin (1977) and Reh (2018), all of the male participants in this study were able to provide examples of meaningful student-faculty mentoring interactions. Even though the participants were from two different private, 4-year liberal arts college, each young man discussed how some faculty members positively impacted their college experience. Turner (2016) asserts that the instructor-student relationship contributes to a male student’s decision of whether to persist at the same

institution, transfer to another college, or completely drop out of college. The findings of this study are consistent with Turner (2016) and imply that the faculty-student relationship is not only critical to student satisfaction as argued by Astin (1977) but also to male student persistence past the first year of college.

Based on the shared experiences and perceptions of the participants, there are certain characteristics which were described relating to faculty mentors. The faculty mentors provide flexible office hours and, as one participant, James, stated, find time to “always fit me into her schedule.” Faculty who are welcoming, approachable, and genuinely happy to see students when students show up for assistance may strengthen a male college student’s ability to persist. The results of this study suggest that traditional age male college students may need to feel that they matter to the faculty in their major whom they will interact most.

The results of this study are consistent with Schieferecke and Card (2013), who contend that when professors and faculty advisors spent time, energy, and resources on them, male students shared perceived feelings of mattering and interpreted these relationships as others investing in their success. Feelings of mattering, or when one perceives that he is of concern to another person, have been found to directly impact whether a college student succeeds or fails (Schlossberg, 1989). To expand the knowledge of the Schieferecke and Card (2013) qualitative study, which was conducted at a public research institution, this study was performed at two different small private 4-year colleges, which were also predominantly White institutions (PWIs).

Another addition to the existing body of knowledge from this study is that mentoring relationships with faculty within the student’s major appeared to be the most

prevalent with the participants. Contradictory to Holt (2104), who suggests that females hold more significant favorable attitudes about academic help seeking than males, participants in this study were often the initiators in the faculty-student mentoring relationship by proactively seeking assistance when needed. Holt's (2014) quantitative study was also conducted at a small, private college in the Northeast. However, the participants in this qualitative study reported that the welcoming atmosphere provided by faculty mentors made it easy and comfortable to approach them for tutoring, advising, research, and guidance.

Conley et al. (2014) found that the transition to college, which is a critical time of psychological adjustment for most freshmen, initiates a major change in well-being during the first few months of college. To expand the body of knowledge of Conley et al. (2014), this study found that establishing mentoring relationships with faculty who take an active interest in their well-being may assist male freshmen with a successful transition to college. Male college students may also be challenged with problem solving during their college transition (Conley et al., 2014). Consistent with the research of Conley et al. (2014), the male participants in this study shared that they did struggle with some problems or barriers during their transition to college. Moreover, some of the young men sought the assistance of a faculty mentor for problem solving academic issues. The results from this study may imply that faculty mentors who provide a welcoming atmosphere, have flexible office hours, and demonstrate genuine care may improve the chances of college persistence for male students by assisting to overcome barriers to academic success during the college transition.

The young male students in this study did not report feeling intimidated by their faculty but saw them as a source of support and mentoring. Conversely, R. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) found that the White, male participants in their study perceived and articulated a distant relationship with faculty, which included both fear and risk, from the beginning of their freshman year. It is important to note that none of the participants of the R. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) qualitative study persisted to their second year of college, which supports the findings of the current study that establishing supportive mentoring relationships with faculty positively impacts the persistence of first-year male college students. The R. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) study was conducted at an urban research university, and this study was conducted at two small, private, 4-year colleges. An implication of this study may be that some traditional age male college students may be more likely to establish mentoring relationships with faculty, who appear to be less intimidating and more approachable at a small, private college than a large, public university.

**Self-talk motivates action.** Another finding of this study is that possessing a growth mindset, such as, “just get it done,” considerably increases the likelihood that a traditional age male college student will persist past his first year in college. When a person believes that ability may be enhanced through effort, help seeking from others, and by utilizing strategies when faced with a challenge, they are said to possess a growth mindset (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). The young men who participated in this study reported the need to take responsibility, prioritize tasks, and focus their efforts on academics over their social activities. They were all goal oriented and motivated by visions of their future success . They shared experiences that demonstrated utilizing self-

talk or self-coaching to create a mindset of just getting it done to stay focused and in control of accomplishing a task like writing a paper or studying for a test.

Self-talk has been referred to using different terms, such as inner-speech, private speech, or internal dialogue (DePape, Hakim-Larson, Voelker, Page, & Jackson, 2006). Participants in this study used self-talk to motivate action. Based on the shared experiences of the young men in this study, self-talk promotes help seeking and problem solving. Participants, Steven and Jake, shared that to be successful they have to tell themselves, “I need to do this” and “this needs to get done.” Given the results of this study, self-talk may also be used to manage time and prioritize activities to keep the focus on academic responsibilities. Two of the participants were athletes, therefore, the use of self-talk is also a means of self-coaching, which is something they might be accustomed to for motivation. One of the athletes stated that he uses self-talk or self-coaching to “push” his stress away by telling himself that the only way to get rid of his stress is by actually doing what he has to do. The other athlete shared that he coaches himself to work harder and “buckle down” when he is not getting the grades he wants. According to Hardy et al. (2001), athletes may use self-coaching to control anxiety before an athletic competition and during challenging situations. This study supports the findings of Hardy et al. (2001) regarding the use of self-talk by athletes, but also expands the knowledge by applying it to academic situations.

Chickering and Schlossberg (2002) assert that college students who are optimistic about having the power to control some aspects of their own life tend to experience less stress and achieve more academically. Self-talk is also practiced by the participants in this study to manage responsibility and guide wise choices during the transition to

college. As one participant stated, “there is no one to tell you what to do; you have to tell yourself what to do.” Oliver, Markland, and Hardy (2010), assert that historically research has focused on the content of self-talk and not the function that it serves for the person. The current study adds to the body of knowledge which exists on self-talk by focusing on the interpretation and implications of self-talk for traditional age male college students. Study findings imply that traditional age male college students who utilize and employ positive self-talk to motivate action may be more likely to persist in college past their first year.

**Added pressure and career goals.** Results from this study suggest that males may feel added pressure to succeed, and this pressure may begin early in life. The male students who participated in the current study were all 19 years old and driven by the pressure to be successful. However, all six participants appeared to be satisfied with their choice of major in college, and they were focused on their future careers. Providing for their future families and possessing material objects, such as an expensive car or a nice house, were common external motivators for persisting through college and then getting a good job. The young men in this study could vividly describe their visions for success. Kimmel (2010) suggests that society in general reinforces these beliefs through institutional expressions of male power. Many power positions are still held primarily by men. Kimmel (2010) posits that “manhood is equated with power—over women, over other men” (p.28). Kimmel (2010) proceeds to argue that we can see institutional expressions of male power all around us—in government, on boards of directors, and in school and hospital administrations. Society’s expression of power is what young males and those around them are exposed to, and it may be why some young college men feel

pressure to succeed. This study expands the body of knowledge by finding that traditional age male college students may feel an added pressure to succeed due to how society reinforces the perceived power held by males in the United States. The theme of pressure to succeed was not something the researcher found in the body of literature which currently exists related to the persistence of traditional age male college students.

In addition, all the participants in this study articulated a specific career goal which seemed to provide the motivation for them to achieve and persist in college. Consistent with the findings of this study, Morrow and Ackerman (2012) found that personal development is a significant motivating factor for first-year college students in predicting persistence. Personal development is explained as establishing distinct goals, such as getting a good job and succeeding in society (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). According to Chickering and Schlossberg (2002), it is critical for students to choose a major and a future career consistent with their values. The results from this study support the findings of Morrow and Ackerman (2012) and the assertion of Chickering and Schlossberg (2002) in that the participants were resolute on careers that appeared to be consistent with their values, and they were motivated to persist in college by visions of their future success. However, Morrow and Ackerman (2012) conducted their quantitative research at a public, Ph.D. degree granting institution with a racially diverse sample of males and females. The current study expands the body of knowledge to include traditional age male students at small, private, 4-year liberal arts colleges, which were predominantly White institutions (PWI).

The traditional age male college students participating in this study have chosen career goals aligned with their values and could envision their future success, making

them more likely to persist to degree completion to achieve their career goals. Whether their motivation was intrinsic or extrinsic, participants in this study reported being focused on their chosen major, articulated solid career plans, and were driven by their goal for achieving success. All the participants were also resolute on their majors, which may imply that having a solid career goal is a component of persistence in college beyond the first year for some traditional age males. The results of this study also imply that institutions that provide early career development support to young males could help alleviate some of their pressure to succeed and support their persistence in college.

**Reinventing themselves.** The fourth theme in this study revealed that traditional age male college students may have to hit the reset button, refresh, or reinvent themselves to transition successfully to the college environment. In terms of a social life, since many freshmen are living away from home for the first time, they need to meet new people and develop friend groups. Social integration into college life plays a primary role in the college transition (Wise & King, 2008). Hitting the reset button for participants in this study seemed to be needed because study skills learned in high school did not apply in college, and the young men felt that they were underprepared for the rigors of college work. Some of the participants did not do as well academically as they performed in high school until they reinvented themselves into more prepared, focused college students. One participant, Cameron, described being “. . . blindsided . . .” and “. . . swept off his feet . . .” at the start of his first semester. Another student, Jack, called his first semester, “. . . rocky but amazing.”

By reinventing themselves academically, the young men in this study learned new skills related to time management, studying, and academic writing. They also restarted

their social lives by making new friends and experiencing college life. As the young men moved through their freshman year, their value system shifted to focus on academic priorities and what they needed to persist past their first year of college. The results of this study may imply that traditional age male college freshmen may need to be open to learning new approaches for how they learn and how they establish social groups in college. There are also implications for student affairs professionals in offering targeted programming, support, and social networking events to create opportunities for young males to reinvent themselves both academically and socially.

Young-Jones et al. (2013) suggest that young women are more apt than young men to take an active role in their own academic success during their first year in college. Conversely, the current study findings suggest that some traditional age freshman males take charge of their own learning needs by reinventing themselves to adapt to the rigors of college. The Young-Jones et al. (2013) quantitative study took place at a large, public university and participants included both men and women, ages 18-25. This study expanded the body of knowledge by contradicting the findings of Young-Jones et al. (2013) with a qualitative study that took place at two small, private, 4-year liberal arts colleges and included only traditional age male college sophomores. Based on the results of this study, traditional age male freshmen at small, private, 4-year colleges may be more likely than those at large, public universities to take an active role in their own learning to reinvent themselves to adapt to the academic rigors of college.

Similar to the current study, Turner (2016) found that a major challenge for freshman male college students is feeling academically underprepared for the study skills necessary to succeed in college. Turner (2016) noted that freshmen males need to be

connected to vital campus resources to make the transition to college easier. The findings of this study expanded the body of knowledge in this area by suggesting that by reinventing themselves, some traditional age male college students will proactively seek out and connect to vital campus resources to be successful, such as writing assistance, content tutoring, and faculty mentoring. The participants reported that they knew what academic support they needed, and they took action to meet their needs. Results of this study imply that institutions of higher education need to provide welcoming and accessible supportive services for traditional age male students. Some young men will actively seek out what they need as long as they know where to get help and perceive a welcoming, open atmosphere. However, colleges need to communicate academic expectations, available resources, and the differences between high school and college learning as early as possible for male freshmen.

**Transition theory.** The results from this study inform transition theory in several ways. The first is that Schlossberg's transition theory (1981) is typically categorized as an adult or non-traditional student development theory (Evans et al., 1998). However, findings from this study are consistent with transition theory and suggest that the theory is applicable to traditional age male college students. Also, there were four main themes that emerged from the data analysis, which were discussed in Chapter 4, and the themes in this study align with all four components or 4 S's of transition theory. Theoretical alignment of the 4 S's of transition theory and the four main themes of this study is outlined in Table 5.1.

Schlossberg et al. (1995) identified four components that influence a person's ability to cope with transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. These components

are known as the 4 S's (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The first "S" component is the individual's situation (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002; Evans et al., 1998). The second "S" transition component is self (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002; Evans et al., 1998). Factors considered important to self are classified into two categories: personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Support, the third "S," refers to social support, and four types are specified: intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002; Evans et al., 1998). Lastly, the fourth "S" is strategies or coping responses (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002; Evans et al., 1998). Coping responses are allocated into three categories: those that modify the situation, those that control the meaning of the problem, and those that assist in managing the stress afterward (Evans et al., 1998).

A constellation of supportive relationships aligns with social support in transition theory. Schlossberg et al. (1995) defines social support as an individual's constant supports. The four types of social supports are intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and communities (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002). The supportive relationships with parents, friends, faculty, and others in the community were found to be an influential factor to male student persistence because of the support, guidance, and encouragement the mentors provided to the young men. In addition, strategies align with the just get it done mindset. According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), strategies are allocated into three categories: those that modify the situation, those that control the meaning of the problem, and those that assist in managing the stress afterward. Just get it done is a unique growth mindset that emerged from this study. The male participants

took personal responsibility and prioritized actions to modify situations, used self-coaching for motivation and problem-solving, and sought help from their mentors and professional counselors to manage stress.

Table 5.1

Alignment of Themes with 4 S's of Transition Theory

4 S's of Transition Theory	Themes	Description
Support	A constellation of supportive relationships	Supportive relationships provide guidance and encouragement and help students to persist through challenges in college.
Strategies	Just get it done	Student possesses a growth mindset and believes that ability may be enhanced through effort, help seeking from others, and utilizing strategies for success.
Self	The pressure to succeed	Personal and demographic characteristics (male, age 19) and psychological resources (outlook, commitment, and values).
Situation	From transition to transformation, hitting the reset button	Changing roles from high school to college student and how the student moves successfully through the transition.

*Note.* The 4 S's are components of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory.

Schlossberg et al. (1995) defines self as including factors classified into two categories: personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources. Personal and demographic characteristics include socioeconomic status, gender, age, state of health, and ethnicity/culture. Psychological resources include ego development, outlook, resilience, commitment, spirituality, and values (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The participants in this study were all White males, 19 years old, and sophomores in college. They did, however, come from different socioeconomic backgrounds and family structures. Two participants discussed being actively involved in local churches. All six participants demonstrated by both words and actions that they value their educational experience and are committed to finishing college to degree completion. The young men

in this study also shared stories and visions for their future, which indicate that they face pressure to succeed. The four themes for this study all contributed to building resiliency in the young men. All of the participants shared the same situation or lived experience of moving through the transition of the freshman year of college and were currently midway through their sophomore year. According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), a balance of resources in terms of situation, self, support, and strategies influences a person's coping effectiveness. The participants in this study appeared to have a balanced proportion of resources, which assisted in a successful transition from high school to college.

Schlossberg's transition theory (1981) is typically categorized as an adult development theory (Evans et al., 1998). However, the four themes from this study are consistent with transition theory and suggest the theory may also be applicable to traditional age male college students. Although an abundance of research studies exist that apply transition theory to non-traditional, adult populations, there have been few studies using traditional age college students as participants. This study adds to the body of knowledge in literature on the application of transition theory.

### **Limitations**

This study had several limitations which could have impacted the results. Although the invitation for participants was sent to all male sophomores at both research institutions, those who completed the consent form and demographic survey were somewhat exclusively White males. In addition to White, one participant also self-identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native. While not desired, this was expected, since both colleges where the research took place were predominantly White institutions with low percentages of diverse student populations. Having a more ethnically and

racially diverse group of traditional age male sophomore students would have brought additional and possibly different perspectives and experiences to the findings of this study, particularly because both research settings were predominantly White institutions (PWIs).

Additionally, this study included six participants from two different small, private 4-year liberal arts colleges in NY State. The participants, who self-selected into the study, constituted a relatively small percentage of the male sophomore classes at both colleges. Therefore, the findings may not generalize to all sophomore male students at the two research settings or at dissimilar institutions, such as large, public research institutions or community colleges. However, this study was purposely conducted at small, private, 4-year college research settings since most of the research which currently exists on male student persistence and retention has taken place at large, public research universities.

### **Recommendations**

The findings of this study lead to several recommendations related to the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male college students who persist past their freshman year. The recommendations are for higher education institutions, executive leaders in the college setting, future research, and male college students entering their first year. This study focused on the reasons why male students stay or persist in college, not why they leave or drop out. Heys and Wawrzynski (2013) emphasize that studies of college men should avoid a deficit mindset and not focus on problems but rather on solutions. Therefore, the results of this study are the foundation of the recommendations

which may lead to the persistence of traditional age male college students beyond the first year of college.

**Higher education institutions.** The findings from this study suggest that the mentoring role of parents and families continue to play an important role in the persistence for some male first-year college students. Therefore, institutions that can create partnerships with parents and guardians can help nurture this student-parent mentoring relationship. Keeping parents informed regarding college resources, policies, and procedures can provide additional support from home for many first-year male college students. Providing an online reference source, such as a parent handbook or website is recommended to ensure parents are aware of the role they play in student persistence through their support and appropriate referrals to campus resources. For example, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University has established a website dedicated to parent involvement; they offer a parent advisory board, a parent and family association, and online resources a parent may seek (Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, 2018).

Based on the findings of this study, once traditional age male college students have established positive and sustained connections with supportive personnel on campus, they are likely to seek help when encountering barriers to academic success or personal and social challenges. Therefore, a recommendation from this study is that colleges and universities focus attention on establishing and fostering relationships as early as possible during the freshman year, particularly for male students. The first year is critical in establishing relationships with faculty, staff, and peers (Lambert et al., 2018). One suggestion to help create these relationships is to establish a peer support system with other males, thus it is recommended to pair or group traditional age males, in similar

majors if possible, for pre-college activities to help them develop early peer relationships. Having a friend on campus who shares similar interests can assist with a better social adjustment in college and a stronger bond with the institution (Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008).

Colleges can also provide opportunities for male students to interact with college staff and faculty outside of the classroom, where personal connections can be made. Elon University (2018) conducted a poll with college students to investigate the types of relationships that matter most to them. Lambert et al. (2018) reports that Elon University polled more than 4,000 college graduates with bachelor's degrees. The Elon University poll revealed that having between seven and 10 meaningful relationships with faculty, staff, and peers were more than three times as likely to rate their college experience as "very rewarding" than those who lacked the same types of mentoring relationships. Prior to the beginning of classes, institutions can assign freshman male students a constellation of college mentors, such as peer mentors, success coaches, and faculty advisors, and then provide opportunities for early, meaningful engagement. Academic departments can host student socials to connect upperclassmen with the freshmen in the same major to encourage peer mentoring and study groups. Colleges and universities should consider implementing ongoing mentoring initiatives designed to improve the persistence and success of male college students, such as a Men's Center and a Male Initiative Program established by York College (York College, 2017).

Most colleges offer new student orientation and some form of freshman seminar; this is where many peer friendships begin to form (Upcraft et al., 2005). Freshmen are meeting many new people and taking in new information during this early transition to

college. The young men participating in this study reported that they felt most supported by the faculty and peers in their respective major. Therefore, offering major specific freshman seminars where the professor and the students share common interests would create early mentoring connections to assist with a successful transition to college. A major specific freshman seminar would include group projects, which foster a sense of belonging, help with processing new information, and build peer relationships (Tinto, 2016). Interactive group scavenger hunts or group problem-solving activities, which take place both inside and outside the classroom, will engage and connect students both academically and socially. At the University of Oregon (University of Oregon, 2018), First-year Interest Groups (FIGS) bring together groups of 20 freshmen to experience a unique themed academic experience. FIGS consist of two paired courses and one college connections class designed to connect freshman with each other, with faculty, with a mentor, and with the college community around an academic theme (University of Oregon, 2018). A FIG could be created for male students in similar disciplines around a theme that may be helpful to persistence, such as self-talk.

Based on the findings of this study regarding the use of self-talk for traditional age male college students, teaching students how to utilize and practice positive self-talk is recommended for inclusion in first-year high impact practices, such as an orientation, a freshman seminar, a FIG, or a learning community. To introduce self-talk, freshmen can begin with self-affirmations. Self-affirmations can be developed early in the freshman year and verbally repeated and practiced throughout the semester to build self-esteem and motivate positive actions. According to Schmeichel and Vohs (2009), self-affirmations include reflecting upon positive aspects of oneself, which strengthens perceived self-

integrity, especially when it includes one's core values. Freshmen seminars can introduce diverse coping skills to students for managing a variety of stressors and to encourage students to believe in their ability to balance the many demands of college life (Sladek, Doane, Luecken, & Eisenberg, 2015).

Since some freshmen are undecided about a major upon entry to college, it is recommended that a specific section of the freshman seminar be dedicated to career explorers. This career explorer section would include similar activities to the major specific sections and could be taught by a career development specialist. Personality and career assessments can be administered to assist students to identify a major by the end of their first semester in college. According to Chickering and Schlossberg (2002), it is critical for students to choose a major and a future career consistent with their values. Grouping undecided students together will also form a community so they realize that there are other freshmen like them who are not resolute on a major. Students who perceive a sense of belonging will likely persist when they feel like part of a community because motivation, learning, and engagement are enhanced (Tinto, 2016).

Colleges should be intentional when choosing potential first-year mentors for traditional age male students. Faculty teaching first semester courses, freshman advisors, and staff in learning centers should be selected carefully. It is recommended that they be learner-centered, caring, and approachable; this may be easier to accomplish at small, private, 4-year colleges with lower faculty-to-student ratios than at larger, public institutions. The results of this study revealed that the participants perceived that many professors and advisors at a small, private, liberal arts college were happy to see them and provided a welcoming atmosphere when they sought help during flexible office

hours. The discussions with faculty mentors were not just about academics but became more personal because the male students perceived that they mattered to their mentors. According to Johnson (2014), sometimes students need to be intentional and take the initiative to expand their constellation of mentors. The results of this study suggest that when male students feel welcomed and supported, they proactively seek help.

Study findings suggest that some traditional age male college students may often be the ones who initiate or seek out faculty support. In order to decrease the gender gap, some faculty may need to be more mindful in their approach in working with some traditional age male college students. Professional development can be offered to instruct faculty working with male freshmen to use appreciative inquiry, an approach that focuses on strengths, positive potential, and self-determined change (Cooperrider & Witney, 1999). Faculty engaging traditional age male college students can foster the just get it done mindset by encouraging and modeling behaviors that may include, self-talk, taking responsibility, developing independence, prioritizing tasks, and seeking help when necessary. Colleges and universities might also consider establishing predictive analytics or an early reporting system to identify male freshmen who are reluctant to initiate engagement with faculty outside the classroom. Once identified, proactive outreach can take place by the faculty.

Tutoring and writing center services were reported as essential academic resources by the male participants in this study. Recognizing that some participants shared that they were underprepared for the rigors of college life, it is critical that institutions provide adequate access to these services for all students, particularly males in their first-year of college. Commuter students participating in this study shared that

the residential campus tended to offer tutoring hours primarily during the evening, and this not ideal for commuters who work and who may have to drive a distance to return to college. Daytime or online tutoring options would be more accessible for students living off campus. Based on the findings of this study, traditional age male students are more likely to initiate a visit to a resource center that offers a welcoming, student-centered environment and also offers flexible hours convenient to all types of student schedules.

**Executive leaders.** To decrease the gender gap in college, it is critical for executive leaders, such as presidents, vice presidents, and deans, who are the decision makers for their institutions recognize that services and supports may need to be established and resourced specifically for male college students. The findings of this study support the research that male students experience college differently than their female counterparts (Conger & Long, 2010; Ewert, 2010; Sax, 2008). It is recommended that executive leaders in higher education adopt the five practices of exemplary leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). The first practice is to model the way by clarifying values and setting an example for others to follow (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). If recruiting and retaining male students is authentically communicated, valued, and consistently acted on by executive leaders at the institution, others in the campus community (e.g., faculty, staff, and other employees) may share these values and model these behaviors.

The second practice, according to Kouzes and Posner (2012), is to inspire a shared vision. Leaders need to be forward thinking and able to communicate to their constituents their vision for an exciting future for the institution. A college president who is able to passionately describe to the college community their vision of a future where men and women are achieving degree attainment at equal levels, may inspire

stakeholders to want to make that vision a reality. Executive leaders can use institutional data to bring visibility to the problem of the gender gap in college. The college president can establish a strategic priority to focus on the recruitment, persistence, and success of male students. However, to make this a shared vision, the campus community must collaboratively decide what actions need to be taken to advance the strategic priority. Leaders can arrange a college-wide task force to establish institutional priorities that will increase buy-in from stakeholders and create the greatest impact on male student retention. Both academic and student affairs leaders can influence persistence of traditional age male college students by implementing programs and practices specifically designed to engage and support young men.

The third practice of exemplary leadership is to challenge the process (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Leaders in higher education need to motivate change by challenging the way things are currently done and seeking innovative ideas from others to transform practices. Leaders in most departments in an institution of higher education can implement trainings for faculty and staff (e.g., financial aid, registrar's office, library, etc.) who want to improve their ability to support and encourage male college students. Academic leaders can explore ways to develop high impact practices, such as undergraduate research and learning communities, which will academically engage and motivate young men both inside and outside the classroom. Executive leaders in academic affairs, such as provosts and deans, should consider providing targeted professional development opportunities to professors and academic advisors who primarily interact with male students. Faculty who teach and advise traditional age male freshmen may be more effective in their role if training was provided on understanding

the unique needs of male college students. Another way to challenge the process is to seek innovative ideas from outside of the institution or what Kouzes and Posner (2012) calls, *outsight*. Creative ideas for positive change to improve male student persistence may be generated from examining a similar, peer institution that may have a lesser or non-existent gender gap.

Student affairs leaders can inspire programming coordinators, as well as students and staff in residence life, such as resident assistants and resident directors, to investigate ways to better support male students through programming, involvement, and social engagement. Seminars which focus on time management, setting priorities, decision making, and accepting personal responsibility would address the factors identified in this study which influence male student persistence. It is recommended that student affairs leaders facilitate programs and student organizations designed specifically for engaging males. Executive leaders in student affairs should also consider professional development opportunities for their staff to learn more about the specific needs of male students so that they can provide more targeted outreach and support. It is important that counseling services be promoted and encouraged for traditional age male college students who are transitioning to college life, especially those who have traveled a great distance to college and are far apart from family and friends. Student affairs professionals are committed to the development of the whole person and dedicated to the holistic philosophy of education (American Council on Education, 1937).

Enable others to act is the fourth practice of exemplary leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Kouzes and Posner (2012) assert that by fostering partnerships and creating trustworthy relationships with constituents, executive leaders in higher education can

advance institutional goals and nurture mutual respect among colleagues. To best meet the unique needs of traditional age male college students, organizational units within a college or university need to integrate staff and resources so that targeted initiatives are developed both inside and outside the classroom. According to Winston, Creamer, Miller, and Associates (2001), student and academic affairs can work together to focus resources on student learning and personal development. To collaborate effectively, executive leaders should work to “develop collaborative goals and cooperative relationships with colleagues” (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 214), and provide an atmosphere of trust and respect. Based on the results of this study, male participants reported being unprepared for the rigors of college. Differences between high school and college need to be outlined prior to the start of classes for college freshmen. Academic and student affairs executive leaders can collaborate on ways to best assess college readiness and academic preparedness for male college students so that supports can be in place for new freshmen. Assessment includes not only course placement testing but also examining study and time management skills. Planning for a successful transition to college for freshmen, particularly males, prior to the start of classes will better inform and prepare the students for college expectations and academic rigor. Persistence and graduation rates for male college students likely will not increase until higher education stakeholders work cooperatively and place priority on institutional efforts toward improving outcomes.

The fifth and last practice of exemplary leaders is to encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). According to Kouzes and Posner (2012), leaders should express pride and communicate to the rest of the organization what has been accomplished to make

people feel celebrated and appreciated. Gostick and Elton (2012) posit that “acts of recognition are investment in the future of your people (p. 155), and when employees are publicly celebrated, they tend to be more loyal, dedicated, and innovative. Once efforts are actively underway at the institution to improve the persistence and success of male college students, executive leaders need to recognize the contributions of those who are positively contributing and achieving results toward the goal. Institutional efforts and positive results toward decreasing the gender gap in college could also be reported to local, national, and social media to inspire other institutions of higher education to take action which will improve male student outcomes in college.

**Future research.** This study highlights the factors which influence the persistence of traditional age male college student beyond the first year of college. The participants in this study were all 19-year old White males who were matriculated into majors at small, private, 4-year liberal arts colleges. Future research should seek a more diverse group of participants. A similar study with more racially and ethnically diverse participants, perhaps Hispanic/Latino, African American, or Black may reveal additional insights of traditional age male college students at small, private PWIs.

Since the traditional age male college students who participated in this study were all matriculated into majors and focused on specific career goals, they may have shared insights that are not generalizable to male students who are undecided about their major or career. Conducting a similar study with male students who are undecided or exploring majors may present something unique about young men who are not resolute on their career choice.

Since college attrition rates are highest between the first and second year (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Upcraft et al., 2005), this study focused on persistence factors between the freshman to sophomore year. However, a study which tracks persistence factors through all years of an undergraduate male would provide additional insights on why males lag behind females in persistence to degree attainment. Another recommendation for future research is to conduct a similar study using traditional age female students to compare and contrast the results with the current study. The results of a similar study with traditional age female college students would identify if the current findings, in particular the just get it done mindset and the pressure to succeed, are unique to males or can be generalized to all college freshmen.

**Traditional age male college freshmen.** Male students entering their first year of college, particularly at a small, private, 4-year liberal arts college, can benefit from the findings of this study. Based on the comments from the young males participating in this study, some of them felt underprepared for both the social and academic aspects of college life. There are some actions that can be taken prior to classes beginning that will help prepare traditional age male freshmen for the transition to college. One of the best ways to prepare for the college environment is to actually experience it; therefore, it is recommended that both residential and commuter male students take advantage of an overnight stay at their new college while spring classes are still in session. Many public and private colleges offer students the opportunity to experience first-hand what it is like to be a student on their campus. A potential male student can shadow a current student to attend some classes, eat the food, sleep in a residence hall, and most importantly, connect

with other male students who are already attending the college. By doing this, the student gets a feel for both the academic and social aspects of college life.

Some participants in this study reported not being prepared for the expectations and rigors of college. Therefore, young males planning on attending college would be wise to talk with other men who are currently attending college or have graduated from a 4-year college to obtain an understanding of what the transition was like for them. This is especially recommended for first generation male college students whose parents do not have bachelor's degrees. Learning from the experiences of other males who have persisted past the first year of college may prepare a new freshman for what to expect during the transition from high school to college. Before classes begin, male freshmen should take note of resources that they may need to access once the semester starts. It is recommended that young males know how and where to find writing support, tutoring, health and counseling services, and their academic advisor. The young men who participated in this study named these areas as places where they found the most support during their first year in college.

Based on the results of this study, it is also recommended that traditional age male college students establish a daily routine and learn to prioritize tasks as early as possible in their first semester. Many of the participants in this study reported that they had to rethink their daily routines in a new setting once starting college. Some of the participants shared that having a routine and a daily schedule helps with time management and accomplishing academic tasks, such as writing papers and doing homework. Additionally, the use of positive self-talk or self-coaching is recommended as a motivation and coping strategy. "Self-talk may enable more effective coping with

stressful events” (Oliver et al., 2010, p. 321). Based on the findings of this study, traditional age male college students who focus their self-talk on their academics and getting things done may increase their chances for success and persistence in the first year of college.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of traditional age male college students during their first year of college, which led them to persist into their sophomore year. This research study included six traditional age (19) male participants who had persisted midway through their sophomore year at two different small, private, 4-year liberal arts colleges, which were PWIs. Results of this research study contribute to the body of knowledge regarding factors that contribute to the persistence of traditional age male college students beyond the first year of college. There is a substantial body of literature which investigates the struggles of males and the goals they are not realizing, but there are few studies that explore men reporting positive outcomes (Heys & Wawrzynski, 2013).

The study utilized qualitative methodology. In depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted one-on-one with the participants at each of the research locations. Additional data was collected using a demographic questionnaire and detailed field notes. All forms of data were thoroughly analyzed and categorized to develop meaning units or themes. Several data validation strategies were utilized, including the researcher’s lens, the participant’s lens, and an external reviewer’s lens. While many research studies investigate the reasons why students leave or drop out of college, the current study was focused on the reasons why students persist or stay in college. Similar studies on male

student persistence focus on family support, peer support, and institutional support. Much of the emphasis in the questioning is framed with an institutional perspective, rather than a student perspective (Holt, 2014; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Turner, 2016). This qualitative study was focused on the student perspective, and the themes that emerged from the data provide insights how young men seek support and employ coping strategies to persist in college. Even though the participants were from two different colleges, their perceptions and experiences were similar, adding validity to the study findings.

The results of this phenomenological study addressed a gap in the current body of literature regarding the persistence of traditional age male college students. Most of the existing research on male college student persistence has been conducted at primarily large, public research institutions. This study included two small, private, 4-year liberal arts colleges as the research settings. Additionally, “just get it done” and “hitting the reset button” are themes unique to this study regarding male student persistence. This study also contradicted previous studies which suggested that males are reluctant to seek help, including utilizing counseling services (Holt, 2014; Vogel et al., 2011; Young-Jones et al., 2013). This study found that traditional age male college students may be the initiators of mentoring relationships, particularly with faculty. In addition, Schlossberg’s transition theory (1981) is typically applied as a theoretical lens for research on non-traditional students; however, the current study confirmed that transition theory may also be applied to traditional age male college students. The four components of transition theory aligned with the four themes that emerged from this study.

Study findings can assist institutions of higher education, particularly small, private, 4-year, liberal arts colleges, in their traditional age male student success and retention efforts. Since this study was conducted at two different small, private colleges, the results and recommendations may be more applicable to like institutions who are struggling with traditional age male student attrition. Higher education leaders in both academic and student affairs may gain a better understanding of why traditional age male students persist in college and how to support their unique needs in the transition from high school to college. By fostering mentoring relationships, creating programs specifically for males, and establishing a safety net of academic and social support for young men, executive leaders at institutions of higher education may improve the experience and persistence of traditional age male students. Colleges that invest in resources that contribute to the persistence of male students beyond the first year of college may realize a positive increase in the retention and degree completion of traditional age male college students.

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