Understanding College Preparedness of First-Semester College Students

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UNDERSTANDING COLLEGE PREPAREDNESS OF FIRST-SEMESTER COLLEGE STUDENTS

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The college preparedness of first-year, first-semester, undergraduate students was researched and analyzed in this study. The research entailed a purposeful selection of 10 first-year, first-semester, undergraduate student participants that transitioned into a four-year public university, University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), from a Nevada public high school. Participants who graduated from a Nevada public high school were chosen because Nevada exhibits low-performing K-12 public education trends. Using qualitative methods (i.e., a phenomenological approach), students were interviewed using semi-structured and open-ended interview questions. The interviews were used to ascertain student participants’ perceptions of their academic lived experiences transitioning from high school to college. The research presents two key findings. The transition from high school to college is a dichotomous experience comprising of both self-efficacy and autonomy and emerging as positive and negative.

Keywords: college preparedness, first-semester, transition, sociocultural
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“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

~Tale of Two Cities

You are representative of the best of times, the wisdom, the belief, the light, and the hope. You guided me through the darkness and uplifted me when I needed it the most. Thank you for exhibiting to me what it means to be a mentor, advisor, and scholar.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Regina M. Florence; my father, William E. Florence III; my brother, William E. Florence IV, and my precious dogs Thumper, Bambi, Bella, Blossom Amalia, and Butterfly Jasmine. I thank you all for your love and support. I too love you beyond the measure of space and time. Because of you,

“\(\text{I remembered that the real world was wide and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had the courage to go forth into the expanse, to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils.}\)"

~ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

As a final dedication, here is to you Grandma Mary Lou! Although we never met, I can’t help but feel that you have been my guardian angel throughout this process and in life. We (you, momma, and I) walk this journey called life together, three spirits, two worlds, and one love that forever endures.
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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Study

Higher education institutions have a vested interest in student success; “retention and completion are important for an institution, since benefit can accrue from positive public perceptions of their success levels” (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p. 9). As a result, it is essential to explore how best to retain and complete students. One manner of exploration is to understand first-year, first-semester, undergraduate students’ perceptions of their academic lived experiences transitioning from high school to college. The rationale for concentrating on first-semester undergraduate students is their propensity to leave college before completing a degree (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Thus, making the student population vulnerable to an early departure and resulting in adverse outcomes for higher education institutions.

Students starting college after the transition from high school may perceive their academic preparedness with feelings of confusion and insecurity (Boden, 2011). This sense of uncertainty is because undergraduate students enter the first-year of college at different levels of college readiness (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016). For instance, some students begin needing developmental education designed to minimize the gap in student learning from high school to college (Jeffcoat et al., 2014). Others enter feeling overwhelmed and susceptible to the pressures of newfound responsibilities and academic demands (Taylor, Doane, & Eisenberg, 2014). With an array of possible setbacks, it is imperative to conduct research designed to understand the complexities and nuances associated with the academic lived experiences of first-semester undergraduate students transitioning from high school to college.

This chapter will provide a general review composed of eight sections: (a) overview of the literature, (b) theoretical perspective, (c) purpose statement and research question, (d)
overview of the method, (e) limitations and delimitations, (f) definitions, and (e) significance of the study.

**Overview of the Literature**

An overview of the literature consists of four primary areas regarding first-year undergraduate students. The areas include (a) college preparedness, (b) first-year students’ transition to college (c) first-year student success and (d) sociocultural theory. A more developed and thorough literature review is presented in chapter two.

**College Preparedness**

A student’s experience of college preparedness is considered a complex developmental process that commences before high school (Cabrera, Deli-Amen, Terenzini, Lee, & Franklin, 2006). The complexity derives from a multifarious set of factors that inform a student’s readiness for college; the factors of college preparedness are (a) cognitive skills, (b) non-cognitive skills, (c) learning strategies, and (d) social capital attainment (Duncheon, 2015; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). In addition to these factors, researchers have declared an inability to adequately align college preparedness standards between secondary and postsecondary institutions. Holles (2016), for example, asserted that communication and partnership between these institutions is compulsory to establishing academic benchmarks for students transitioning from high school to college. Therefore, to understand the difficult process of transitioning from high school and college, it is advantageous to investigate first-semester undergraduate students’ perceptions of their academic lived experiences.

**First-Year Students’ Transition to College**

According to a recent survey conducted by the national nonprofit Youth Truth (2016), only 45 percent of 165,000 junior and senior high school students between 2010-11 and 2014-15
reported feeling positive about their college and career readiness. The outcome of the survey is thought provoking, especially when also considering 87 percent of the same students indicated a desire to pursue higher education (Youth Truth, 2016). A possible basis for high school students feeling disheartened is the lack of college preparation occurring within secondary education.

A survey distributed by Achieve (2015), a leading organization in college and career readiness, established that 78 percent of college faculty and 62 percent of employers considered public high schools deficient in preparing students for higher learning. This finding is significant considering that, “adolescents [tend to] leave high school faced with multiple educational and occupational choices” (Schneider, Klager, Chen, & Burns, 2016, p. 107). Thus, to constructively confront the educational choices and experiences associated with transitioning from high school to college, social supports along with social and cultural capital are suitable mechanisms for developing college preparedness.

Three factors influencing college preparedness are (a) social support, (b) social capital, and (c) cultural capital. Social support when transitioning from high school to college can enhance a student’s psychological well-being (Taylor, Doane, Eisenberg, 2014). Social capital provides members of a community (i.e., first-year college students) the resources necessary to gain information when forming either casual or intimate relationship (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007, p. 1146). However, cultural capital is indicative of “significant support and encouragement from family and community upon which a student could draw to influence his or her desire to attend college” (Nora, 2004, p. 182). Therefore, the transition to college requires students not only be supported within their first year but also to be equipped with the social and cultural capital to navigate the postsecondary environment and achieve academic success.
First-Year Student Success

The transition from high school to college is analogous to transitioning from one culture to another (Hunter, 2006). According to Hunter (2006), college culture may be viewed from an anthropologist’s perspective because,

For new students, college presents a foreign set of norms, traditions, and rituals, and a new language and environment… [Therefore,] making the transition from being a high school student to being a successful college student does not happen instantaneously, and it certainly does not occur by simple osmosis. (p. 4)

In fact, a student’s familial and academic characteristics before transitioning into college inform their “institutional, academic, and social experiences” within the first-year of college (Tinto, as cited in McDonald & Farrell, 2012, p. 221). Consequently, these pre-entry attributes can enhance a student’s likelihood of success by increasing motivational beliefs and learning strategies (Alkharusi, 2016).

Success within the first-year of college is affected by both background and precollege variables (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). The background and precollege variables associated with first year college success include: (a) enrollment choices, (b) academic preparation, (c) aptitude and college readiness, (d) family and peer support, (e) motivation to learn, and (f) demographics (e.g., race, gender, and socioeconomic status) (Kuh et al., 2006). So, academic preparation for college is grounded in both social and cultural attributes influencing a student’s “goals, commitments, institutional experiences, integration, and high school outcome” (Porchea, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2010, p. 753).
Sociocultural Perspective

According to Cabrera, Deil-Amen, Prabhu, Terenzini, Lee, and Franklin Jr. (2006), precollege students deficient of the social networks and relationships meant to bolster postsecondary academic social and cultural capital are less likely to be prepared for college. For example, a student’s learning environment, which includes classroom interactions, has a significant impact on their overall learning outcomes (Pickett & Fraser, 2010). According to Järvenoja, Järvelä, and Malmberg (2015), social interactions through collaborative learning are crucial in the development of knowledge across various social contexts. From a sociocultural perspective, the transition from high school to college involves a student’s ability to seek tools and strategies from the environment to negotiate challenges that arise when adapting to new experiences (Maunder, Cunliffe, Galvin, Mjali, & Rogers, 2013). Hence, the sociocultural theoretical framework is applicable to understanding college preparedness because of the influence social expectations and contextual factors have on persistence and degree completion (Miller, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

First developed by Vygotsky in the 1930s, sociocultural theory is a theoretical perspective used to analyze how people live and work; the purpose of the theory is to analyze the subjective interpretations of a situation based on a person’s historical and cultural norms (Schreiber & Valle, 2013; Creswell, 2007). In respect to knowledge acquisition, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory underscores the mediation of social interactions and cultural tools on students’ learning and concept interpretation (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). Phillipson and Renshaw (2013) established a sociocultural analysis framework useful for the educational context. The framework was inspired by Rogoff’s (1995) three planes of observational development for
sociocultural activity and included: (a) participatory appropriation, (b) guided participation, and (c) apprenticeship. Phillipson & Renshaw’s (2013) five planes of sociocultural theoretical analysis include: (a) cultural-historical plane, (b) institutional plane, (c) social plane, (d) personal plane, and (e) mental plane. This sociocultural theoretical analysis is suitable to the research because of the intent to investigate first-semester undergraduate students’ academic lived experiences transitioning from one educational context to another. Therefore, the sociocultural theoretical framework guides this study.

**Purpose Statement**

Now, more than ever, college dropout rates outnumber high school dropout rates (Aldeman, 2015). The increase in college departure is partly because of Common Core State Standards and the inability to provide the knowledge and skills necessary for college and career success for among K-12 students (Conley, 2014). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2014), an affiliate of the National Student Clearinghouse designed to influence educational policy, reported that 31 million students over a 20-year period failed to graduate. The consequence of such inability is a decline in the U.S. rankings from first in the world for four-year degree completion to a twelfth (Whitehouse.gov, 2015). Eventually, the long-term outcome has significant implications for the U.S. economy; a college degree is an unfailing gateway to the middle class (Whitehouse.gov, 2015). Thus, there are national economic consequences associated with not adequately preparing and graduating students.

Investigations into undergraduate student persistence should include the exploration of college preparedness when transitioning from high school to college. College preparedness is exemplified by a student having the social capital and skills to navigate postsecondary education (McGaughy & Venezia, 2015, p. 2). Considering that 84 percent of college students reported a
gap in their college preparedness, it is important to increase persistence among first-year undergraduate students and ensure they can contend with a growing competitive global market (Springer, Wilson, & Dole, 2014; Adams, 2014). Therefore, it is suitable that the following research question will be investigated: how do undergraduate students experience their academic transition from high school to college? The purpose of this study is to understand the academic experiences of first-semester college students specifically, first-semester undergraduate students that have transitioned from a state with low K-12 public education performance trends.

**Overview of Methodology**

This qualitative study uses transcendental phenomenology. Phenomenology has been described as “seminal for analyzing the constitution of sense in social reality” (Eberle, 2014, p. 187). Transcendental phenomenology is useful when a researcher is attempting to study a phenomenon by bracketing or, setting aside one’s thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and biases of the phenomenon; that is concentrating on the experiences of a phenomenon from a novel perspective (Perry, 2013; Ashworth, 1999). However, this study will take a less orthodox view of transcendental phenomenology by (a) acknowledging one’s perception of the phenomenon and then, (b) setting aside those perceptions to examine it from a new perspective (Smith, 2005; Diprose, 2008). Thus, herein, college preparedness was researched with the intent to acknowledge the researcher’s prior understanding of first-semester undergraduate students while also relearning the phenomenon through the perceptions of student participants.
Definitions

The following are definitions of key terms referenced within this study:

- **College Preparedness** - A study conducted by Byrd and MacDonald (2005) described college preparedness as applicable to students who are skilled in time management, goal-oriented, and can advocate for themselves as a learner (p. 28).

- **Unprepared (i.e. for college)** - Students that are lacking academic preparation when transitioning from high school to college (Rodríguez, 2015).

- **Bracketing** - The mitigation of potentially detrimental preconceived thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and biases of a phenomenon (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

- **Bridling** - When a researcher constrains their understanding of a phenomenon to view it from the perspective of the subject (Dahlberg, 2006).

- **Phenomenology** - The phenomena that occur within one’s experiential situation (Bruzina, 2012, p. 288).

- **Eidetic Reduction** - The visualization of the unchanging aspects of a phenomenon (Bednarski, 1962).

- **Essences** - The universality and individualistic nature of a phenomenon (Zhang, 2009).

- **Sociocultural** - The type of learning that is socially and culturally situated (Kozulin, 2003).

- **Cultural Tools** - Ideas, signs, symbols, beliefs and talk that occur within the environment; the tools serve to shape an individual’s cognitive development (Goswami, 2011).

- **Mediation** - The process by which social and cultural tools are used to mediate innate mental and behavioral functions and conform them to the cultural norms/activities that occur within the environment (Damianova & Sullivan, 2011).
• **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)** - The use of formal or informal instruction, by a more advanced adult or peer, that challenges an individual beyond their ability to subsequently facilitate learning that leads to development (Vadeboncoeur, 2013, p. 19; Petrová, 2013).

**Limitations and Delimitations**

**Limitations**

• Bracketing personal experiences can be a significant challenge when conducting transcendental phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). The reason for this challenge is because the researcher is required to abandon previous notions of the phenomenon to “free ourselves from covert epistemic and normative commitments—from presuppositions” (Aldea, 2016, p. 22).

• Bridling personal experience can also be a challenge when conducting transcendental research because the researcher must set aside thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and biases of a phenomenon (Diprose, 2008).

**Delimitations**

• Participation is delimited to first-year, first-semester, college students who have transitioned from a public high school in the state which the research site is located.

• The research is also delimited to one site, a four-year research university.

**Significance of the Study**

There is a need for more qualitative studies exploring first-year undergraduate student perceptions of their college preparedness after transitioning into high school from college. Especially among students that have transitioned from a state with low K-12 public education performance trends. Using sociocultural theory as the guiding framework, this research study
sought to expand on college preparedness literature by exploring first-year, first-semester, undergraduate students’ academic lived experiences transitioning from high school to college. Capturing these experiences provided a more nuanced investigation of the phenomenon beyond what statistical methods could provide. The data analyzed was represented two key findings. Thus, readers of this paper should complete it with more insight students’ experience of transitioning from high school to college.

**Summary**

There is a need to expand on the existing literature regarding the high school to college transition. This study will contribute to that expansion by investigating students’ perception of the phenomenon (e.g., transitioning from high school to college) within an educational context where K-12 public education has low-performance trends. Additionally, the study will be useful in understanding the cultural tools (e.g., language, symbols, text) mediating or facilitating college preparedness knowledge for first-semester undergraduate students’ who transitioned from high school to college. Chapter Two is a review of the literature. This chapter delves more deeply into the subject background, college preparedness, first-year students’ transition to college, first-year student success, and sociocultural theory.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This literature review includes five principal objectives. The first principal objective is the delineation of background information and issues corresponding to the topic. Second, the scholarly research on college preparedness is thoroughly reviewed. Third, research regarding the high school to college transition is presented. Fourth, the determinants of first-year college success are discussed. Fifth, to conclude this chapter, sociocultural theory and its applicability to this research is explained followed by a chapter summary. Familiarity with all five principal objectives should support the reader in understanding college preparedness among first-year, first-semester, undergraduate students.

Background

The landscape of American higher education has been considerably transformed by societal changes occurring within the U.S. (Benjamin, 2003). For example, the lion’s share of American students lack college preparedness after graduating from high school; subsequently, many feel pessimistic about their college readiness (Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015; Harris Poll, 2015). In fact, in the 2014 academic year, only 68 percent of high school graduates immediately transitioned into college (“Fast Facts,” NCES, 2014). This statistic informs that 32 percent of high school graduates are at an eventual disadvantage when navigating the job market alongside younger, more educated, competitors (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005).

According to Perna and Armjio (2014), a possible rationale for the subpar college enrollment outcomes is the persistent failure to align curriculum and assessment standards between secondary and higher education systems. The failure to bridge secondary education and college academic standards occurs despite deliberate federal and state legislation, such as No
Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Common Core Standards (CCSs), which are purported to improve K-12 educational outcomes and prepare students for college (Skinner & Feder, 2015). Case in point, NCLB holds schools accountable for ensuring students’ achievement by employing standardized testing measures (Cosner & Jones, 2016). Conversely, a shift away from the dependency on standardized tests and towards a more democratic system, where students of various socioeconomic backgrounds are incentivized to achieve higher education, has been proposed as a constructive alternative (Guinier, 2015). This alternative approach was reflected in a 2015 speech by former Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, who stated, “we must shift incentives at every level to focus on student success, not just access” (Homeroom, 2015, para. 7).

Thus, when considering a movement towards academic success, it is important to examine how appropriately the American public K-12 school system is preparing high school students for college.

Common Core Standards (CCSs) were created and implemented in select states across the U.S., claiming students would be prepared for college and career (Shanahan, 2015). The CCSs constituted a comprehensive standardized K-12 curriculum within the American public K-12 school system (Phillips, 2015). The issue, however, is that the CCSs curriculum is lacking the substance needed for postsecondary learning because of minimal input from the college sector (Zarra, 2015, p. 68). For instance, nonprofit organizations have examined the American K-12 education system using set measures designed to assess state performance. The 2017 *Quality Counts Report Ranking* examined states’ performances using three indices:

- **Chance for Success Index**, merging 13 indictors to determine a student’s chance for success, which includes postsecondary enrollment and attainment.
- **School Finance**, scrutinizing educational funding across districts within each state.
- \textit{K-12 Achievement}, examining achievement across 18 measures corresponding to reading and mathematics.

(“Nation Earns a C,” 2016)

The report gave the nation an overall C report card (i.e., 74.2 out of a possible 100) (“Nation Earns a C,” 2016). The grade report for the American K-12 education system signifies deficits across multiple considerations. Therefore, it is crucial to understand college preparedness among transitioning high school graduates that are considered most at-risk for failing to persist due to such statistical findings and predictions.

The student participants in this research all graduated from a Nevada public high school. Based on the 2017 \textit{Quality Counts Report and Ranking}, Nevada has consistently held its 51st position as the lowest ranked state in the nation for K-12 public education (“Nevada Earns a D,” 2017). The state received a D average report card for achievement and adult outcomes, which were ascribed based on a 60 percent high school graduation rate along with a 41 percent postsecondary attainment rating among adults between 18-24 (Education Week, 2017). The state’s ranking marks a significant issue for both educational and economic achievement outcomes. Nevada’s growing racial diversity and education of English language learners in its public schools both support a need to understand how best to serve students (USA Today, 2014).

Since the 1970s, there has been a steady rise in the need for skilled workers thereby eliciting a higher premium on the college educated (Elitas, Ercan, & Tumen, 2015). In fact, in 2009, former President Barack Obama announced an initiative to make the United States number one in the world for college completion rates by the year 2020; however, by 2018, the U.S. will be short by approximately 300 million college degree earners (Seifert, Henry, & Peregrina-Kretz, 2014; Humphreys, 2012). As stated by Hout (2012), having an “education makes life better”
both economically and socially because college educated individuals “acquire new skills and perspectives that make them better workers, life partners, and citizens” (p. 394 -396). Therefore, it is essential to explore the literature to understand college preparedness and the factors associated with persistence beyond the first year of college.

**College Preparedness**

The history of college preparedness began with the requirement to develop core aptitudes such as reading, writing, mathematics, and science skills among undergraduate students in the late 1800s (Almeida, 2015). Current approaches to college preparedness, however, are much more comprehensive. The approaches to college preparedness include not only an emphasis on the perception of core academic content but also a focus on cognitive skills, non-cognitive skills, and learning strategies (Duncheon, 2015). Also, there is an emphasis on a learner’s access to postsecondary social capital (Duncheon, 2015; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009).

As reported by Howie (2011), cognitive skills include the use of mental strategies and processes to problem solve. For example, critical thinking is a cognitive skill useful in analyzing written text (Wallace & Jefferson, 2015). Researchers examined college students’ development of cognitive skills using pre-class course assignments designed to enhance comprehension of assigned readings. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the hypothesis that Class Preparation Assignments (CPA) increased students’ cognitive skills and motivation to prepare for class, thus creating more time for enriched class lectures (Ewell & Rodgers, 2014; Wallace & Jefferson, 2015).

Ewell and Rodgers (2014) conducted the study using 48 college students (i.e., 24 in a class with the normative use of CPA assignments and 24 in a class with more than the typical use of CPA assignments). The supposition was that CPAs improved student preparation by (a)
prompting students to read the required material, (b) guiding students through the difficult reading material, and (c) requiring students to apply the knowledge gained (Ewell & Rodgers, 2014). Each student was asked to complete a survey regarding the effectiveness of CPAs both within the two CPA classes and across both CPA classes (Ewell & Rodgers, 2014). The result of the study was that the use of CPAs increased motivation and stimulated high cognitive functioning (Ewell & Rodgers, 2014, p. 206). Thus, the practice of building cognitive skills positively affected students’ motivation (i.e., a non-cognitive skill) to engage in class preparation activities.

Non-cognitive skills encompass attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors such as maturity, motivation, self-concept, interpersonal skills and personality variables (Duncheon, 2015; Thomas, Kuncel, & Credé, 2007). According to Komarraju, Ramsey, and Rinella (2013), the main difference between cognitive and non-cognitive abilities are that cognitive abilities inform what a student can achieve and non-cognitive abilities inform what a student will achieve because of both personality and motivational factors. For instance, Morrow and Ackermann (2012) conducted a study examining the intent to persist among first-year undergraduate college students.

Morrow and Ackermann (2012) assessed how a sense of belonging and motivation impact a student’s desire to persevere beyond the first-year of college. Two questionnaire scales and a self-report assessment were used to measure sense belonging, academic attitudes, and academic persistence (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). The finding of the study was that faculty support and peer support increased a student’s sense of belonging and motivation to persist (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). The findings of Morrow and Ackermann (2012) correspond to a plethora of additional literature referencing social integration and culture as influences on a
student’s commitment to persist (Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2008). For example, psychosocial and non-cognitive factors contribute to a student’s performance outcomes and general decision to persist when sustained by social interactions establishing a sense of belonging among first-year undergraduate students (Porchea, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2010).

Although comprehension of core academic content, cognitive skills, and noncognitive skills all contribute to postsecondary readiness and persistence, college preparedness is meaningful only if social capital is also considered. Social capital is critical to college readiness because it represents a student’s awareness of college admission proceedings and methods for success when entering higher education (Roderick et al., 2009). That is to say, students that possess the social capital for college typically have the knowledge to confront the complicated admission process and comprehend the college culture and standards (Roderick et al., 2009). This literature review will delve into this particular aspect of college preparedness more deeply by exploring the many ways in which social interactions and cultural influencers affect a student’s postsecondary experiences and perceptions of the first semester of college. However, it is important to first gain a brief understanding of college unpreparedness.

The Unprepared

Students that are considered the least ready for higher education are those that lack the adequate preparation when transitioning from high school to college (Rodríguez, 2015). Melzer and Grant (2016) identified unprepared first-year college students as: (a) predominantly low-income, minority (e.g., African-American and Hispanic-Latino) students whose parents did not attend college; (b) learners who attribute motivations and academic failures to factors outside of themselves; (c) having low self-efficacy and/or low confidence in their academic abilities and performance; and (d) unrealistic about their academic abilities thus, resulting in a low propensity

Students that personify some, if not all, of these traits are at greater risk for not achieving academic success and are less inclined to transition or complete college (Davidson, 2015). Therefore, it is pertinent to explore how the traits correspond to the high school to college transition as well as the factors associated with first-year student success.

**First-Year Students’ Transition to College**

An important factor in the investigation of college preparedness among first-year, first-semester, undergraduate students is the experience of transitioning from high school to college. In 1961, Silber, Hamberg, Coelho, Murphy, Rosenberg, and Pearlin (as cited in Feldman & Newcomb, 1969), conducted interviews with students anticipating the transition from high school to college. From the interviews, the researchers revealed that students readied themselves for college by developing a self-image that (a) reflected on previous situations in which mastery was achieved and, (b) perceived college as the next step in one’s growth process (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969). However, despite statements of a constructive self-image, it was later true that first-year undergraduate students were,

Compounded by frustrations involved in moving from a system where one is an established member -- the former high school and home community -- to a system where one is only a novice. Therefore, regardless of the degree to which the new college environment matches what the entering freshman expected, he [or she] faces a variety of unexpected academic, intellectual, and social challenges. (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969, p. 89)
Since this conclusion was reached, various current studies have been conducted on the process of transitioning from high school to college.

According to McGaughy (2015), students that are considered prepared for college have the knowledge to effectively transition from one stage in their educational track. Much of the knowledge and skills possessed by college prepared learners are obtained in the last two years of high school, a critical time for students to improve their grades and engage in the extracurricular activities that help to improve their college portfolio (Sutton, Muller, & Langenkamp, 2013). This is particularly true because the transition to college can be difficult for students who lack proper familial and academic support (Sutton et al., 2013). To ensure students are successful in college, it is important to examine the previous research highlighting the factors crucial to a positive transition.

Lee, Dickson, Conley, and Holmbeck (2014) investigated the high school to college transition attempting to understand self-esteem and its influence on depressive symptoms that can occur in the first-year of college. Low self-esteem and struggles with depression are highly probable among first-year college students because of greater expectations and significant challenges that may lead to feelings of insecurity about academic competence (Shim, Ryan, & Cassady, 2011, p. 151). The researchers recruited a multi-cohort of 1,118 first-year, first-semester, college students from a Midwestern University (Lee, Dickson, Conley, & Holmbeck, 2014). Relying on the use of longitudinal data, participants were surveyed at three points in time over a 35-week period. The survey instruments were used to address the following psychosocial constructs: self-esteem, social support, and disengagement coping (Lee et al., 2014).

The researchers used four different assessment scales and analyzed the data through both moderated and mediated means to determine how the psychosocial constructs impacted
depressive symptoms (Lee et al., 2014). The results were that self-esteem and social support were bidirectional, meaning that self-esteem can be enhanced through the support of friends and peers if perceived as consistent and beneficial to social engagement (Lee et al., 2014). They also found that disengagement coping (i.e., the strategy of ignoring stressors thereby increasing stress) increased depressive symptoms in the first-year student participants (Lee et al., 2014). The findings align with the assertion that students must learn to cope with the college environment and its intellectual and social demands to preserve psychological well-being (Wintre et al., 2011). Thus, instead of avoiding challenges faced when transitioning from high school to college, it is preferable to confront them with social support.

Social supports from parents, mentors, and peers have been considered helpful in attaining the diverse set of skills needed for college success (Malone, 2009). In fact, a study conducted by Smith and Zhang (2009) the perceptions of their experience transitioning from high school to college. The purpose of the study was to investigate the degree of helpfulness parents, teachers, counselors, peers, new student orientation programs, and first-year seminar are the transition from high school to college (Smith & Zhang, 2009). New student orientation programs are a means of welcoming students into the college environment with the purpose of enhancing the likelihood of academic success (Greenfield, Gardner, & Keup, 2013). First-year seminar courses provide students with extended instruction on academic success skills and strategies (Greenfield et al., 2013).

Recruiting student participants from a Carnegie Southeast doctoral research university, the researchers selected subjects enrolled in one of four different courses (Smith & Zhang, 2009). Of the 579 participants, 299 first-year students were included; the remaining participants were designated as sophomore students and above (Smith & Zhang, 2009). The researchers’
findings were that mothers were the most helpful resource in the college transition process followed by fathers, teachers, peers, and counselors (Smith & Zhang). However, each of these factors provides varying degrees of social capital useful in successfully navigating the high school to college transition.

In another study, Brouwer, Jansen, Flache, & Hofman (2016) investigated the impact of social capital on the self-efficacy of first-year college students and derived at an opposing conclusion. According to Brouwer et al. (2016), it can be difficult for students to develop social capital when transitioning into a college simply because they feel uncertain of what the experience will be like. The researchers investigated the impact of social capital on study success, as mediated by self-efficacy (Brouwer, Jansen, Flache, & Hofman, 2016). Three forms of social capital were explored: (a) family capital, a source for emotional support as well as knowledge of post-secondary education (that is, if they have attended college); (b) peer capital, a source for collaborative learning and support among fellow students also engaged in similar learning experiences; and (c) faculty capital, a source for mentorship, advice, information, and feedback (Brouwer et al., 2016).

The researchers recruited 398 first-year college students, with an average age of 19, from a research university in the Northern Netherlands (Brouwer et al., 2016). Guiding by social capital theory, the participants were given questionnaires regarding the three forms of social capital as well as academic success and self-efficacy. Using path analysis, the researchers found that faculty capital and peer capital were most important to first-semester success (Brouwer et al., 2016). The researchers stated,

We determined that the more students asked for help from their fellow students, the more likely they were to become friends; this friendship then offered an important mediator for
help or advice seeking, fellow students’ support, and first semester study success. The mentor contributed indirectly to first-semester study success, through self-efficacy…

(Brouwer et al., 2016, p. 115)

Thus, the literature on the high school to college transition demonstrates a significant relationship between first-year, first-semester, student success and social support systems.

**First-Year Student Success**

Apart from encouraging student involvement in the campus community, first-year student success has traditionally been predicted by variables such as high school grade point average (GPA) and standardized test scores (Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012). According to Sparkman, Maulding, and Roberts (2012), however, GPA and standardized test scores account for only 25 percent variance in outcomes. There are other non-formative variables that also help in predicting academic success from freshman year through to graduation (Sparkman et al., 2012; Harackiewicz, Tauer, Barron, & Elliot, 2002).

Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006) identified background characteristics and precollege experiences as two categories of predictors equally important to student success. The background characteristics and precollege experience variables include: enrollment choices, academic preparation, aptitude and college readiness, family and peer support, motivation to learn, and demographics (that is race, gender, and socioeconomic status) (Kuh et al., 2006). Each of these variables is explored to best understand how they impact student learning outcomes and persistence among first-year undergraduate college students.

**Enrollment Choice Is a Matter of Context**

An important consideration in determining first-year student success is understanding the student’s choice in college or university (Kuh et al., 2006). In other words, deducing the proper
college fit based on considerations of “cost, location, size, student-to-faculty ratio, counseling and advising services, student body composition, and areas of study offered or special area of focus” (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013, p. 121). Ultimately, a student’s decision is often made based on personal characteristics and environmental influences. For instance, a high school student’s general perception of college choice is influenced by demographic (e.g., socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, age) and academic preparedness characteristics (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009). College choice is also influenced by: (a) the positive reinforcement a student receives from others, (b) the goals and aspirations a student possesses, and (c) the quality of higher education information gathered (Nienhusser, Vega, & Carquin, 2016). All these characteristics are influenced by the need for students to familiarize themselves with the academic standards set by the dominant culture, which can be strenuous for some racial and ethnic minorities as well as those of low socioeconomic status (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Therefore, it is important to examine enrollment choice based on the social and cultural capital a student holds.

Two perspectives used in researching enrollment choice cultural capital and social capital (Reddick, Welton, Alsandor, Denyszyn, & Platt, 2011). According to P. Davies, Qiu, and N.M. Davies (2014), cultural capital is defined as the “cultural knowledge and repertoire of communication skills which enable an individual to interpret and communicate signals in social settings” (p. 805). Social capital, on the other hand, is defined by the “information and resources embedded in the social network” (Hill, Bregman, & Andrade, 2015). For example, in a qualitative study guided by the social capital framework, Ceja (2006) conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 20 first-generation Chicana high school seniors in the greater Los Angeles area. The results of the study were that: (a) parents lacked the ability to properly advise their student on college planning; (b) despite a failure to possess knowledge on college
planning, parents supported their student both morally and financially with the college choice process; (c) siblings served as a source of knowledge on the higher education experience; and, (d) the student participants felt an obligation to share their college choice knowledge with younger siblings (Ceja, 2006). According to Ceja (2006),

[The] parent’s ability to help their children plan for college was very limited... [which] made it difficult for them to assist their daughters as they experienced the college choice process...To this end, school and community-level efforts must work together with parents to develop programmatic interventions focused on increasing parental familiarity with the college choice process. (p. 101-102)

The researcher’s call of action to communities and schools has been reflected in research studies designed with the intent to investigate how the school environment impacts college choice. For instance, Engberg and Wolnick (2009) examined the effects of the high school environment on enrollment choice with the purpose of understanding the influence student-level and school-level characteristics had on the decision to enroll in either a two-year college or four-year university. So, using human, social, and cultural capital theories, the researchers reported that resources acquired through social networking in the educational environment could influence a student’s educational development (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009).

To properly assess how student and school characteristics influence college enrollment, data were obtained from the Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) survey on U.S. high school to college to workforce transition trends (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). Various schools across multiple regions were identified, and 26 senior high school students from each school were selected and surveyed between 2004 and 2006 (Enberg & Wolniak, 2010). The first finding of the study was that socioeconomic status had a greater influence on enrollment choice than race
(Enberg & Wolniak, 2010). This finding could be predicated by many factors. For example, a study conducted by Palardy (2014) affirmed that peer influences have an impact on the educational motivations, values, performance, and attitudes of students educated in the same high school environment and from similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

The second finding is that, in terms of high school context, human, social, and cultural capital variables had the greatest influence on college enrollment choice; specifically, the influences include: (a) high school courses taken, (b) aspiration of family and friends to attend college, and (c) college linking activities (Enberg & Wolniak, 2009). This study supports that social and cultural context has a significant effect on a student’s academic trajectory. Thus, because students that lack the cultural and social capital for enrollment choice are “disadvantage[d] in the competition for academic credentials” it is essential to consider how prior experiences and guidance on postsecondary planning affect the transitioning student’s enrollment choice as well as future choices concerning academic major and career decisions (Person & Rosenbaum, 2006, p. 95; Hill, Bregman, & Andrade, 2015; Deutschlander, 2016; Workman, 2015).

Support in Bridging the Gap

According to Perna and Armijo (2014), high school academic preparation and college readiness are important for students transitioning from high school to college. Yet, “28% to 40% of students enroll in a remedial course at least once in their college careers” (Kramer et al., 2016 p. 435). Additionally, a significant number do not persist beyond the first-year of college (Porter & Polikoff, 2011). These statistics support a need for enhanced preparatory strategies. Preparatory strategies are important since the determination of college success is strongly driven by how a student starts out. Therefore, it is important to explore how college preparation during secondary education can enhance a student’s likelihood to succeed.
The prospect for achieving college success is much lower for college students who are of low socioeconomic status and from urban communities (Ng, Wolf-Wendel, & Lombardi, 2014). Other individual characteristics impacting college success include unrealistic goals, low self-confidence, low motivation, lack of strong support groups, lack of academic demand expectation, and being unprepared for academic challenges (Horton, 2015). As a result, it is imperative to understand how to address the needs of academically disadvantaged students.

In a qualitative study involving 13 first-generation college students from an urban high school, researchers Reid and Moore (2008) investigated (a) the students’ perceptions and attitudes toward overall high school preparation for college, and (b) the strengths and weaknesses of the students’ high school preparation for college. Following the principles of social capital theory, a total of 13 predominantly first-year/first-generation college students enrolled at a four-year university were asked a series of semi-structured interview questions regarding their preparation for college (Reid & Moore, 2008). The researchers uncovered a need for families and schools to work jointly to ensure support for students making the transition from high school to college (Reid & Moore, 2008). Moreover, they advocated for bridging the gap between secondary and postsecondary education by instructing students on time management, study skills, technology use, challenging coursework, and college application information (Reid & Moore, 2008). For example, one student participant’s reflection on his/her high school preparation experience was that despite performing well in class there was a lack of social support and encouragement to participate in advanced coursework before transitioning to college (Reid & Moore, 2008, p. 253). This was a regrettable outcome, and supports the need to encourage students to challenge themselves.
The student’s story accords with the literature, which suggests that even students who perform well academically in high school may struggle at college level course work (Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013). There are factors that do ensure college readiness, irrespective of background or prior high school performance, and they are: (a) academic behavior, such as attending class on time and participating in in-class discussions; (b) academic perseverance, remaining focused and engaged with course work; (c) social skills, interpersonal skills that afford effective communication between peers and teachers; d) learning strategies, techniques used to support cognitive functions; and (e) academic mindset, positive thinking about oneself that contributes to increased academic performance (Roderick et al., 2013). These factors can be encouraged through support programs designed to prepare students for college.

Parikh (2013) conducted a qualitative transcendental phenomenological study to understand the experiences of urban high school students in the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program or GEAR UP. The study included criterion sampling of nine African-American and bi-racial future first-generation college students between the ages 14 to 15 (Parikh, 2013). The researcher interviewed the students and identified specific themes from the data (Parikh, 2013). The results of the study indicated that the relationships formed with GEAR UP counselors helped to increase students’ positivity and self-efficacy about college and career planning (Parikh, 2013). Therefore, although academic preparation and college readiness are closely tied to demographic and secondary educational circumstances, students can engage in deliberate relationships with others that facilitate behaviors constructive in improving the probability of attaining success and persisting in higher education.
Family and Peer Support

The pursuit of academic success for the transitioning first-year undergraduate student is strongly contingent on family and peer support (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). This form of support for recently transitioned first-year undergraduate students is positively correlated with having high self-esteem and psychological adjusting to the college environment (Tinsley, Albert, & Dwelle, 2014). The rationale for family support having such favorable results is because the stress that derives from college academics can be alleviated through the assistance of family who functions to facilitate positive acclimation (Cheng, Ickes, & Verhofstadt, 2012). An example of family support is sibling support; older siblings provide valuable advice regarding school and career plans due to previous experiences making similar decisions (Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, 1996). Conversely, Holland (2011) described peer support as providing a student with the encouragement to be actively involved in their campus community.

The influence of both family and peers on a first-year college student’s academic success has been explored in the literature. In a study conducted by Strom and Savage (2014), assessed the relationship between family and peer support on persistence by surveying a random sampling of first-year traditional college students across two time periods, the beginning and end of the first-year of college. The results suggested that family and friend support had a significant impact on a student’s commitment to the goal of graduation (Strom & Savage, 2014). This is partly because, according to Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981; Schieman and Taylor, 2001 (as cited in, Rayle, & Chung, 2007), feelings of “mattering to others are increased when individuals believe that other persons in their lives care about them, their goals, and their futures” and strengthens their institutional commitment despite academic stressors (p. 30).
Feelings of mattering to others were explored in a mixed method study conducted to understand the influence of friendship on college completion. Using social capital theory, researchers Cheng, Calarco, and Kao (2013) analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to discern the influence best friends have on college knowledge and completion. Involving a four-wave examination of approximately 15,000 participants between 1994-2008, the researchers uncovered that,

Friendships may provide access to successful adult role models who can, by virtue of both expectations they enforce and the example they set, shape adolescents’ orientations toward college and also equip them with the skills, strategies, and information necessary to achieve a college degree. (Cheng, Calarco, & Kao, 2013)

Thus, since sources of support help recently transitioned first-year college students engage in both active problem solving and information seeking, it is also possible that such support might increase a student’s prospect of persisting towards college completion (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007, p. 270).

**Mentorship and Motivation**

According to Haynes, Daniels, Stupnisky, Perry, and Hladkyj (2008), the first year of college is often met with many challenges. Motivation has been shown to increase a student’s propensity to persist despite those challenges (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). “Motivation in academia” is defined as “the factors that influence a person to attend school and obtain a degree” (Clark & Schroth, 2010, p. 19).

The best type of academic motivation is intrinsic motivation, which is reflective of the highest form of self-determination (Cortright, Lujan, Blumberg, Cox, DiCarlo, 2013). This form of motivation is based on expending time and energy for the sheer pleasure and enjoyment of the
task (Clark & Schroth, 2010). Intrinsic motivation is most often exhibited in students who are highly conscientious about their academic performance; that is students who are disciplined and organized to attain an academic goal (Komarraju, Karau, & Schmeck, 2009). One way of developing this conscientious nature in students is through student and instructor interactions, which are represented in the form of a mentoring relationship (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010). More specifically, mentor relationships between instructors and students can have a positive sustained influence on academic performance before and during college.

As with the benefits found in family and peer support, students who receive mentoring from a non-familial adult are “more likely to complete high school and engage in health-promoting behaviors” (Holt, Bry, & Johnson, 2008, p. 301). For instance, a qualitative study involving 28 freshman honors college students at a top-ranked university were asked to participate in a focus group to understand academic motivation from their perspective (Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014). The researchers conducted four focus groups sessions over a two-week period with the students during their first-semester of college. Researchers discovered that interests and motivations were mainly inspired by high school teacher interactions that were: (a) positive social relationships, (b) grounded in the teacher having knowledge of core content, (c) driven by assigned tasks in which the task value was clearly delineated, and (d) instrumental in enhancing students’ self-efficacy (Siegle et al., 2014). Additionally, students characterized their teacher as being passionate, hard working, and capable of delivering academic content in an effective manner (Siegle et al., 2014). It is necessary to consider if students form similar relationships with faculty in college.

In a study by Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya (2010), 242 first-year undergraduate students from a mid-sized Midwestern university were asked to complete a survey
using scale designed to measure faculty and student interactions. The purpose of the study was to examine aspects of student-faculty interactions as predictors of academic self-concept, motivation, and academic achievement (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010, p. 335). The researchers noted that informal discussions about students’ academic goals with a faculty member could affect academic motivation and achievement by serving a student’s cognitive and emotional needs (Komarraju, et al. 2010). Thus, academic motivation among recently transitioned first-year college students is best when intrinsically derived and backed by positive social relationships with those more knowledgeable and capable of guiding a student before and during college; moreover, increasing a student’s motivation and self-efficacy.

**Self-Efficacy and Social Persuasion**

Self-efficacy, as it relates to academics, is described as an individual’s belief in his or her ability to successfully execute an academic task (Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007). Fostering this personal attribute in first-year college students is imperative because of the favorable effects it has on academic success, persistence, and career development (Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, & Murdock, 2012). For instance, Jackson (2002) conducted a study using social-cognitive theory to examine the influence motivational email messages had on college student performance. This strategy for investigating self-efficacy is known as social persuasion. Social persuasion “suggests that if others give an individual reinforcement for a behavior, then he or she is likely to have higher self-efficacy” (DeWitz, Woolsey, & Walsh, 2009, p. 22). The use of social persuasion to increase self-efficacy was investigated by DeWitz, Woosley, and Walsh, 2009).

Researchers DeWitz et al. (2009), assigned 123 students from a public undergraduate Midwest institution to three categories based on exam scores; the three categories included above average, average, and below average scores. Participants in all categories were informed that
extra-credit could be received if they emailed the instructor. Of the 72 students that emailed the instructor, a message emphasizing (a) the students past successes, (b) comparable success stories (c) encouragement to remain focused, and (d) stress reduction tips were subsequently replied (DeWitz et al., 2009). The result of this social persuasion was that motivational email messages increased students’ self-efficacy and academic performance (DeWitz et al., 2009). Therefore, positively influencing students’ first-semester experiences through social persuasiveness.

**Experiences of First-Semester College Students**

There have been many research studies conducted over the years in which the experiences of first-year, first-semester, college students have been investigated. For instance, Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfe (1986) examined first-year student persistence by conducting a longitudinal study from 1976-1977 among 763 freshman college students from a midsized independent residential university. Using Tinto’s model of college persistence, the first-year, first-semester, undergraduate students were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their institutional commitment and aspiration to graduate from college (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1986, p. 157). Then, a follow-up instrument was distributed in the second semester (Pascarella et al., 1986). The researchers concluded that the experience of participating in two-day orientation programs was positively correlated to student socialization and persistence; the orientation eased students’ insecurities about transitioning into college (Pascarella et al., 1986, p. 170).

A possible explanation for the influence socialization has on persistence is that positive interactions in the college environment increased a first-year undergraduate student’s commitment to their academic goals (Burgette & Magun-Jackson, 2008). The influence of such social interactions was explored, some years later, by Christie and Dinham (1991) who sought to
understand socialization among freshman college students. These researchers conducted a qualitative study exploring institutional and external influences on freshman student integration (Christie & Dinham, 1991).

After interviewing a random sample of 35 first-year college students with questions also guided by Tinto’s theory, the researchers discovered that forces external and internal to the institution influenced student’s perceptions of their social integration into college. More specifically, extracurricular activities, peer relationships, and faculty relationships positively influenced persistence (Christie & Dinham, 1991). Thus, these earlier studies highlight how college preparedness among first-year, first-semester, undergraduate students is strongly influenced by institutional social interventions, which can positively alter students’ perceptions of college and the general desire to persist.

Later studies, also emphasizing social interactions, sought to understand the academic experiences of first-year college students. The first study was conducted by Gibney, Moore, Murphy, and O’Sullivan (2011), and involved the participation of 1,227 first-year, first-semester, college students from the University of College Dublin (UCD) who were asked to recall their experiences within the first-semester of college (Gibney, Moore, Murphy, & O’Sullivan, 2011). The purpose of their study was to understand the multitude of factors impacting the high school to college transition. Using an online survey, the researchers studied students’ motivations, expectations, concerns, perceptions of ability, time allocation, and time management (Gibney et al., 2011). The outcome of the study suggested that institutional support through campus immersion helped in transitioning students into postsecondary education (Gibney et al., 2011). Students’ sense of belonging to the college environment was the central predictor of persistence, especially for students considered at-risk (Jones, Brown, Keys, & Salzer, 2015). Therefore, a
significant contributor to students’ sense of college preparedness is a student perceiving himself or herself as a member of the social culture.

Clark (2005) delved more deeply into the social experiences of first-year, first-semester, college students by using qualitative methods (i.e., phenomenology) to determine the challenges associated with the high school to college transition as well as how students confront such challenges. The researcher investigated these challenges, and the strategies used to adapt to the transition, by employing the views associated with sociological based theories. Interviewing eight second-semester college students about their first-year experience, the researcher discovered four themes: (a) overcoming an obstacle, perceiving a weakness in either an interpersonal or academic skill and overcoming that weakness through such methods as peer interactions; (b) seizing an opportunity, participating in specific opportunities that allow a student to achieve their academic goals; (c) adapting to change, discovering strategies to adapt to the new experience confronted in college; and (d) pursuing a goal, developing strategies crafted to attain a goal (Clark, 2005). Thus, the themes support the contention that first-year undergraduate students are resilient in their ability to thrive in the face of challenges that occur within the college environment.

Ultimately, the study herein contributes to the literature by expanding the understanding of first-semester college students’ experience transitioning from high school to college. Guided by sociocultural theory, the participants were asked to share their transition from high school to college along with their perceptions of the first semester of college. Attaining an understanding of this specific group of first-year, first-semester, undergraduate students’ perceptions will provide a deeper appreciation for their academic lived experiences. Furthermore, it will contribute to research on college preparedness, first-year students, and the high school to college
transition. For example, Tierney (2014) investigated the social and cultural experiences of one student’s transition from high school to college.

The Impact of Social and Cultural Experiences

Tierney (2014) explored college preparedness by investigating the experiences of one transitioning, high school to college, student who represented traits of unpreparedness. The student was a low-income Latino male with little knowledge of college processes. The purpose of the study was to examine the cultural adjustment of transitioning from one context to another (Tierney, 2014). Tierney stated that the intention was to,

Move beyond the assumption that we all are atomized beings capable of whatever actions we desire, as if by simple sheer determination one individual will succeed and another will not. Instead, individual agency exists within a cultural heterogeneous framework that makes academic success possible for some and not others. The challenge is to understand this cultural framework, how individuals make sense of it, and given that sense-making develop suggestions that enable them to succeed. (p. 97).

The researcher revealed that the enactment of cultural flexibility enabled the student to adjust to his new academic environment despite contrasting experiences had in his old neighborhood and family home. Cultural flexibility is defined as an individual’s ability to,

“...navigate different social and cultural settings, to embrace multiple forms of cultural knowledge and expand...understanding of self, and to hold inclusive perspectives about others who differ in myriad social aspects or identities” (Carter, 2010, p. 1531).

To understand a student's transition into college, research must consider the influence of social and cultural experiences within and before the first-year, first-semester, of college.
Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky developed sociocultural theory after exploring the “relationships between language and thought, instruction and development, every day and academic formation, and a host of others” to further understanding of socially and culturally situated learning (Kozulin, 2003, p. 1). The theorist believed that knowledge of oneself couldn’t be accomplished without the support of social influence from others; this includes the influence of parents, teachers, and peers (McCaslin & Hickey, 2001). The benefits of social influence on the college preparedness and academic transition of first-year college students have been explored in the literature. Thus, from the exploration of the literature, is important to discuss one research study and then distinctly define the precepts of sociocultural theory as they relate to the educational context.

The significance of support through social influence was investigated in a study conducted by Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin (2014). The purpose of the study was to use the intergroup dialogue paradigm to understand how a college transition intervention, designed to eliminate the social-class achievement gap, would influence first-year, first-generation, college students’ decision to use college resources and increase their academic performance (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). The study took place at an undisclosed private university and involved the participation of 147 students, 66 of which were first-year, first-generation, college students. Using quantitative methods, the researchers administered an entry survey, intervention, and end of the year survey to all participants (Stephens et al., 2014). The researchers randomly assigned the participants to observe one of two discussion panels, a standard discussion panel and a difference-education panel (Stephens et al., 2014).

The difference-education panel was the research intervention or, what was termed, the difference-education condition (Stephens et al., 2014). What separated this panel from the
standard panel was the use of mostly first-generation college seniors sharing their real-life stories about both adjusting to college and the academic success strategies utilized (Stephens et al., 2014). The findings of the study presented two themes that emerged from the participants’ survey responses and a short video testimonial activity (i.e., the participants sharing lessons learned at the end of their first-year of college with next year’s students) (Stephens et al., 2014). The two themes that emerged were “(a) people’s different backgrounds matter, and (b) people with backgrounds ‘like mine’ [i.e., first-generation students] can succeed” (Stephens et al., 2014, p. 4). Furthermore, the first-generation participants were found to be: (a) proactive in seeking college resources; and (b) improved their academic performance from the beginning to the end of the first-year of college (Stephens et al., 2014). The researchers concluded that the use of intergroup dialogue had a constructive influence on the academic decisions and performance of first-year, first-generation, college students.

Stephens et al. (2014) demonstrated the impact of social influence, via dialogue, on the academic experiences of first-year college students. According to Wells (1999), dialogue or language has been deemed essential to obtaining knowledge. This is because language “not only appropriates the culture’s chief means of interpersonal communication but also its ways of making sense of experience, as these are encoded in the discourse contributions of coparticipants in those activities” (Wells, 1999, p. 51). Vadeboncoeur (2013) discussed language as deriving from one’s cultural and historical experiences. This mechanism for attaining knowledge is one of many underscored in sociocultural theory and analysis.

Phillipson and Renshaw (2013) examined sociocultural theory within the educational context by using scholarly literature to construct a framework of sociocultural planes. The five planes are depicted in Table 1. They are an expansion of Rogoff’s (1995) three planes of
achievement and learning in the educational context. Each plane is reflected in the literature in the following ways: (a) cultural-historical, the exploration of how family and pre-college academic experiences inform student perceptions of college; (b) institutional; the various institutions, such as family and school, college students are forced to navigate; (c) social; the social interactions with family, peers, and faculty that assist to acclimating to a culture; (d) personal; the skills and strategies students acquire from their social interactions and implement without assistance; and (e) mental; the internalization of knowledge gained from the environment that influence cognitive processes. Four of the five planes in this sociocultural framework are guiding this study. The four planes include cultural-historical, institutional, social, and personal. The rationale for only including these planes is because the mental plane, which encompasses cognitive functions, cannot be captured through interview data alone. Thus, four of Phillipson and Renshaw’s (2013) planes of sociocultural theory will guide this current study.

**Summary**

The literature review presents the transition for high school to college as an experience involving both social and cultural aspects that assist in the preparedness for college. Some of these aspects include the involvement of family, teachers, and peers who inform and support the transitional experience of first-year undergraduate students. Chapter Three explains the methodology used to investigate the research question. The chapter also establishes the validity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the research.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Planes</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural-historical</td>
<td>The cultural-historical events that challenge the experiences of a student through the <em>mediation</em> of language and social interactions; thereby, leading to cognitive development due to the <em>zone of proximal development</em> (ZPD).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>The plethora of institutions (i.e., college, work, family etc.) with distinct <em>cultural tools</em>, mediated through various means, that merge to develop learning across institutional settings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>The interactions that occur between the student and others, either verbal, nonverbal, virtual, and face-to-face, that establish the cultural expectations in the environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>The solo activities, formerly practiced through social interactions, that a student engages in with the assistance of cultural tools that mediate cognitive processes. Moreover, allowing for a comparison of the student’s performance in relation to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental</td>
<td>The internalization of knowledge acquired from the environment. With the internalization, students develop cognitive functions (i.e., remembering, reasoning, imagining, associating, emoting etc.) that expand new ways of thinking and permit the articulation of thoughts to others in the environment.</td>
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Chapter 3

Methodology

This study sought to answer the following research question: How do undergraduate students experience their academic transition from high school to college? In Chapter Two, the review of the literature described factors related to successful transition into college. There is a need to expand on the existing literature regarding the high school to college transition. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to capture the academic lived experiences of transitioning from high school to college.

Methodological Approach

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach. The phenomenology is grounded in the philosophical and psychological precepts and is noted as a pure discipline involving the ability to discern and describe an experience with certainty (Cerbone, 2014; Käufer & Chemero, 2015). Through this methodological approach, the academic experiences of first-year, first-semester, undergraduate students were gathered and analyzed to provide a deeper understanding of the transition to postsecondary education. Furthermore, it will assist to answer the research question based on the academic lived experiences of student participants.

Applicability of Qualitative Research

According to Denzin and Lincoln (as cited in Flick, 2007, p. 2), qualitative research methodology is the study or interpretation of phenomena within the natural environment. It is specifically beneficial when a researcher requires adaptability to align their design approach to the context in which the research is taking place (Maxwell, 2013, p. 4). This research sought to understand the academic experiences of first-year college students; moreover, students who have transitioned into college from a state with low K-12 public education trends. By using the
qualitative method, the study could address complexities and nuances associated with first-year undergraduate student experiences. Thus, this qualitative study provides a rich description of the high school to college transition among first-year undergraduate students in a manner that explains the essences or, the ways in which students experienced their semester.

**Applicability of Transcendental Phenomenology**

Husserl developed transcendental phenomenology based on the contention that it was important for a researcher to bracket or set aside any presuppositions of a phenomenon to avoid judgments that may influence a participant’s understanding of the phenomenon (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010). This form of phenomenology requires the researcher to explore an experience limiting prejudgments to understand the essences of the experience with a purest spirit (Madison, 2009). By contrast, Vagle (2009) described the positionality of a researcher conducting a phenomenological study as “already in an intentional relationship with the phenomenon under investigation” suggesting a move away from bracketing to instead constraining perceptions of the phenomenon. In other words, the researcher would not and should not cut off their understanding but constrain reliance upon it (p. 586; Dahlberg, 2006). Merleau-Ponty first introduced this approach by asserting that “transcendental unity is already disrupted by the transcendence of experiencing subject…the fact that others can see us, and touch us, and interact with us makes it impossible to reduce them, or our bodies, to constituted unities in our own consciousness” (Gallagher, 2010, p. 184). Therefore, this study used what is deemed as Merleau-Ponty’s approach to transcendental phenomenology.

**Merleau Ponty’s Approach**

According Matthews (2002), Merleau-Ponty deviated from the purist perspective of phenomenology to adopt a more Heideggerian perspective. Merleau-Ponty theorized that,
“Phenomenological reduction is not a retreat into a pure subjectivity, a pure cogito, but a relative ‘putting out of play’ of the kinds of theoretical and practical interests that normally involve us so closely with our world that we cannot see that relationship clearly. It is essentially a humanizing activity, but not a form of subjectivity or idealism. That is, it places the human subject at the heart of the world, seeing even the project of objective scientific understanding as the pursuit of a certain kind of human significance” (Matthews, 2002, p. 38).

For this study, I used Merleau Ponty’s approach to relearn first-year students through the perspectives of the participants. Having taught first-year students for almost three years, it was necessary to acknowledge my own lived experiences to then restrain them and subsequently reshape understanding through the perspective of my subjects.

The first-year, first-semester, undergraduate students in this study experienced the phenomenon of transitioning into a four-year public research institution for the first time moreover, from public high schools in a state with low K-12 public education trends. That means they experienced the academic transitioning that takes place when a first-year undergraduate student adapts to the academic environment and culture of a post-secondary institution. Because the aim of this study is to understand this transitional experience, it is fitting to utilize phenomenology processes associated with analyzing it.

**Phenomenological Design**

The unit of analysis for this phenomenological research design was first-year, first-semester, college students who were enrolled in a first-year seminar course at a four-year public university. Based on the guidelines outlined by Moustakas (1994), all interview data was analyzed in a manner that assured the procurement of collective meaning or, essence of the
phenomenon. However, before describing the procedures for data collection and analysis, critical facets of this qualitative study must be addressed. These facets include (a) the sample site chosen, (b) the sample selection criteria, (c) the purpose statement, and (d) the research question.

**Sample Site**

The goal of this study was understanding the high school to college transition. The student participants are first-semester undergraduates at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The reason for selecting this university is because it is in Nevada. Nevada is a state with low K-12 performance trends, as highlighted in the 2017 *Quality Counts Report and Ranking*.

The sample site was University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Founded in 1957, University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) is described as a research university with nearly 28,000 students [and] more than 2,900 faculty and staff. The university additionally has an internationally recognized program in hotel administration and other degree programs in creative writing, law, architecture, and dental medicine, fine arts, science, and education (College Portrait, 2017). However, one of the university’s most notable characteristics is the diverse student population, as depicted in Table 2.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas ranks fifth in the nation for campus ethnic diversity by the U.S. News Best Colleges 2017 report (U.S. News, 2017). The ethnic diversity present at UNLV is equally reflected in the local K-12 school district. Serving 320,400 students in grades K-12, the ethnic student population most represented in district classrooms is Hispanic/Latino students at 45.7% (“Fast Facts”, Clark County School, 2016). Additional statistics regarding this district include: a) 60.32% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch; b) 18.48% are English Language Learners; and c) 72.07% of high school students graduated in 2014-15 (“Fast Facts”, Clark County School, 2016). Though there was no data on how many of the county’s high school
graduates transition into UNLV, it has been reported that 82% of enrolled new freshman at UNLV graduated from high school in the top 50% of their class. Their average GPA was 3.28 (College Portrait, 2017).

Table 2.

*Undergraduate Student Demographic Breakdown (2015, Fall)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>13,302</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>10,449</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan Native</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3,605</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/Black</td>
<td>1,794</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>6,233</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>8,335</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
<td>2,230</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>919</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity Not Reported</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Low Income Students**

| % of Undergraduate Student Who Are Low Income Students | 35%    |

Adapted from “College Portrait”, 2017 (http://www.collegeportraits.org) by College Portrait.

**Sample Selection Criteria**

The sample selection criteria used for this study was purposeful and convenience sampling. Purposeful sampling is useful when a researcher desires to obtain participants that are likely to provide ample data about the phenomenon being studied (Palinkas et al., 2015). Convenience sampling is a research sample selected based on convenience and not representativeness; the student participants in this study may not represent the at-risk population reflected in former studies on Nevada education (A.S. Reber, Allen, & E.S. Reber) Specifically, the participants of this study had to meet certain criteria. The use of criteria was based on a need to remain true to the purpose of the research and students’ shared experience. The criteria for
sample selection included: first-semester undergraduate college students at least 18-years of age, who recently transitioned into the university from a Nevada public high school. An additional component was that each participant be enrolled in a first-year seminar course. Generally, first-year seminar courses are designed to “assist students with the transition to college by acclimating them to the institution” (Bailey, Cranton, Flannery, 2011, p. 8). The first-year seminar course is mandatory for all entering first-year undergraduate students at UNLV.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand the academic lived experiences of first-semester college students. The study used first-year, first-semester, undergraduate students who transitioned into the college from a public high school in a state with low K-12 performance education trends. The research is designed to answer the following research question: How do undergraduate students experience their academic transition from high school to college?

**Data Collection Procedures**

Phenomenological research primarily rests on the use of in-depth interviews that typically include five to ten subjects (Creswell, 2007). For this research study, interview data were collected from a total of 10 first-year, first-semester, undergraduate students at UNLV. The student participants of this study all transitioned into the college from a public high school in a state with low K-12 performance education trends. Additionally, all were enrolled in a first-year seminar course located within the university’s College of Education. Each student was recruited and interviewed based on prior approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interviews conducted took place on the University of Nevada, Las Vegas’s main campus. Each interview occurred during the students’ midway through the first semester of college in fall 2016. The first
interview transpired on October 27, 2016. The last interview occurred on November 17, 2016. Prior to the interviews, students gave their informed consent to participate in the study by filling out a short response form (please see Appendix A) and retained possession of an information sheet provided during recruitment.

**Time of Collection Data**

To ensure that the student participants had enough time to reflect on their experiences within the first semester of college, each was interviewed after the mid-semester. The decision to wait provided enough time for thoughts and attitudes to form about college as well as for the social relationships to develop between instructors and peers. As previously stated, sociocultural theory guided this study, and social interactions and cultural assimilation were believed pivotal to understanding the academic experiences among first-semester college students. The time of data collection was based on the following considerations: a) *familiarity*, students establishing familiarity with their college and classroom environment; b) *routine*, students acclimating to a weekly routine or schedule; c) *skills and strategies*, students forming skills and strategies for maintaining academic performance; d) *tactics*, students developing tactics for facing challenges that may arise; and e) *recall*, students being able to recall their academic experiences in high school before too much time had passed.

**Number of Participants**

The number of participants studied was based on attaining a point of saturation. However, due to certain constraints, a preliminary selection of ten participants were recruited. After interviewing seven students, patterns began to emerge from the interviews. To validate these patterns, three additional interviews were conducted. In sum, ten interviews were completed between October 27, 2016 and November 17, 2016.
Participant Solicitation

Participants were solicited for this research upon entering five different first-year seminar courses held within the university’s College of Education program. First, a semi-formal introduction about the study and I was made. Second, students were then informed of the requirements for participating in the study. The requirements included the following: a) in the first-year, first-semester, of college (i.e., no prior experience taking a college course on a university or college campus); b) at least 18-year of age; and c) transitioned into college from a Nevada public high school. Students that met these requirements and consented to participate in the study agreed to a) have their interactions in their first-year seminar class observed and b) partake in a 30-45 minute on campus interview, which was audio recorded. Lastly, students were assured that every effort would be taken to protect their confidentiality. That meant that names as well as any other identifying factors (such as, the instructor's name, course name, course section, etc.) would be changed to ensure your anonymity.

Once the introduction was complete, a short response form and attached information sheet was handed out to the entire class. The students were asked to take a minute to read the statements listed on the short response form. If all the statements applied to them and they were interested in participating, the students were asked to check the box that stated, 'Yes, all statements above apply to me and, I am interested in participating'. There was also a place for them to print their full name along with their university email address. If one or more of the statements did not apply to the students, they only checked the box that stated, 'No, one or more of the statements does not apply to me'; no name or email address was necessary. The very act of a student providing their name and university email address to participate in the study was an act of consent.
Students were then asked to detach the information sheet from the short response and keep it for their personal records. Next, the students were requested to flip the short response form to the blank side and place it inside an envelope, regardless of whether they answered 'yes' or 'no'. Finally, it was made clear that all those who agreed to participate in the study and provided their university email address could expect to receive an email from the researcher the next morning with a linked image (please see Appendix B) to a Qualtrics form. The Qualtrics form allowed the selected participants to pick a date, time, and location on the university’s main campus to conduct the interview. Once a date, time, and location was chosen, I sent a Google Calendar reminder to the participant with my direct phone number.

**Human Subjects and Ethical Considerations**

One of the most important components of human based research is the ethical consideration that comes along with conducting it. That is why this study incorporated definitive measures to ensure student participants were protected. The first of these measures was verbal and textual communication of anonymity and confidentiality safeguards. This communication occurred at three points in time: a) during recruitment, b) before the interviews, and c) after the interviews. During recruitment, I informed all prospective participants that neither their names nor any identifying features would be used in the study. This was followed by an assurance that the students’ first-year seminar instructor would not be privy to any details regarding the research, which includes those who participated in it.

The students then were asked to complete the Short Response Form (SRF) and retain possession of the Information Sheet. The Information Sheet contained all verbally communicated details about the study such as criteria for participation in the study, minimal risks involved, voluntary opt in and out, and privacy protections. Additionally, when I met with each participant
for his/her interview, I reiterated before and after that no information regarding their involvement in the study would be disclosed. The promise made to the students has been successfully kept. The study resulted in minimal risks to the participants, and the storing of all interview data has been securely maintained in two locations. The first location is my password protected USB drive. The second location is the USB drive is stored in the Principal Investigator’s locked office. Thus, all the necessary ethical considerations were made to ensure student participants were, and will be, shielded from harm.

**Phenomenological Interview**

An essential form of the data collection process for a phenomenological study is the use of open-ended comments and questions that are informal and repetitive (Moustakas, 1994). Open-ended and in-depth interviews are suggested to solicit as much information from the participant as necessary to gain a holistic perspective of their experience (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) suggests starting out with broad questions that provide substantive feedback on the phenomena experienced. As a result, an open-ended interview instrument was created (please see Appendix C) specifically for this research and, it was guided by the overall research question. The interview instrument for the research involved questions related to the academic experiences that occurred in high school as well the first-year, first-semester, of college. Overall, the questions were devised to gain the essences of first-semester undergraduate students’ academic lived experiences.

Considering that a phenomenological approach was used, the interview questions were limited to 10 questions in all. These questions were then expanded based on the emergence of thoughts expressed by the participants. The questions were organized in the following way: (a) questions regarding participants’ academic experience as a high school student; b) questions
regarding participants’ academic experience as a first-year college student; and (c) culminating questions regarding how the participants viewed themselves as a student. Each interview was audio recorded via a digital recorder. I then memoed after each interview, and the audio recordings were transcribed using the online transcription software tool called Transcribe after each session. The online software is password protected and does not store files of any kind. After the transcription, a Microsoft Word document version was downloaded and saved. From these, interviews were listened to once again and I memoed any additional thoughts. Lastly, for privacy protection, transcriptions were saved in a password protected USB drive and stored in the Principal Investigator’s locked office.

Data Analysis

From the start of the data analysis process, I followed Moustakas’s (1994) phenomenological methods and procedures. The first of the procedures was to undergo the epoché process. Because I too had experience transitioning into the same university from a Nevada public high school, it was imperative that I reflect my transitional experience. Next, after conducting each audio-recorded interview with a participant, I used analytic memos to record my thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions. Then, the interviews were transcribed using online transcription software. Next, I engaged in six levels of analysis inspired by Moustakas (1994) and Husserl’s approach to phenomenological investigations. The practice includes a phenomenological reduction. The first step in the practice was to use Husserl’s eidetic reduction to ascertain themes and sub-themes from the data. Then, the essences of students’ experiences were comprehensively expressed in succinct key findings.
**Epoché Process**

According to Moustakas (1994), the epoché process is,

A preparation for deriving new knowledge but also as an experience itself, a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and look and see them again, as if for the first time. (“Chapter 5”, 1994, p. 3)

As previously mentioned, I used the Merleau-Ponty approach to epoché. This approach contends that one cannot and should not totally set aside their predilections, prejudices, or predispositions but constrain them to relearn the phenomenon through the perspective of others (Matthews, 2002). Therefore, to engage in such a practice, I have decided to briefly share my experience with the high school to college transition.

When I transitioned into UNLV from a Nevada public high school, I was a remedial learner. Initially I felt one semester behind my peers. However, I later learned that how you start college does not predict your academic future. For instance, in my first-semester as an undergraduate I was very committed to my coursework. I relied heavily on my college instructors/professors for guidance. My parents also helped by being emotionally and financially supportive of my ambition to achieve a college degree. Though my older brother and sister did not complete college past the first year, I was determined to persevere beyond the adversities and be academically successful in the first-year of college.
Analytic Memos and Transcriptions

Memos in qualitative research assist the researcher to “clarify thinking on a research topic, provide a mechanism for the articulation of assumptions and subjective perspectives about the area of research, and facilitate the development of the study design” (Birks & Chapman, 2008, p. 69). After each interview, I used analytic memos to record my thoughts, attitudes, and perspectives about the data. This practice continued when reviewing transcriptions and audio recordings at additional points in time. Each transcription was created through dictation using an online transcription and dictation software program called Transcribe. This software allows the user to listen to a mp3 audio of the interview and dictate the dialogue into text format. When dictating with Transcribe, I created a password-protected account. I then dictated the interviews into a word processor and downloaded them as a compatible Microsoft Word file. Once I completed the dictation, I closed the browser, thereby eliminating all the dictation.

Levels of Analysis

I used exactly six levels of analysis to categorize the essences of the academic lived experiences of first-year undergraduate students. This analysis was based on Clark E. Moustakas’ (1994) procedure for phenomenological research. An educator and researcher, Moustakas produced highly cited literature on qualitative phenomenological research. Moustakas outlined explicit steps for conducting and analyzing studies of this nature.

The organization and analysis of phenomenological data begin with a focused review of the transcribed interviews (Moustakas, 1994). I reviewed all 10 interviews twice. The first review was conducted in conjunction with the audio recordings and memoing. This review concentrated on the verbatim responses of the participants. The second review was conducted using horizontalization or, being open to the valuable nature of statements collected. All unrelated
statements were discarded from further analysis. I took each of the horizontalized statements and subsequently devised meaningful units based on the coding process. Coding is described as assigning a “word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute” to the data (Saldaña, 2009, p. 3). The codes were then clustered into four essences. The reviews and coding represent levels one through three of the data analysis process.

The next step in Moustakas’ data analysis is to generate textural and structural descriptions. Textural descriptions are verbatim examples from the transcript (Moustakas, 1994). Structural descriptions are the setting and context for the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Instead of creating textural and structural descriptions, I examined the meaningful units and memos across the 10 participants to further understand the emic perspective and develop additional codes that were more comprehensive than the first. Then, an eidetic reduction process involving the consistent facets of a phenomenon across experiences was used to assist in substantiating the four essences of the data. Finally, the essences of student participants’ academic lived experiences were reduced into two key-findings useful in understanding the college preparedness of first-semester undergraduate students. The examination of meaningful units and memos, the eidetic reduction, and the establishment of the essences and findings represent levels four through six.

**Validity and Credibility**

The purpose of establishing validity in qualitative research is to ensure that all alternative explanations or interpretations of a phenomenon do not threaten the findings of the study (Maxwell, 2013). A manner of averting such threats is to establish credibility and trustworthiness strategies (Creswell, 2014). However, before implementing such strategies, it is imperative to
recognize the types of threats that can occur. The first type of threat is researcher bias. The researcher allows his or her personal values, beliefs, or preconceptions to positively or negatively influence how the data is evaluated (Maxwell, 2013). Because I followed the principles of phenomenological research, I bracketed or set aside all thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions of the phenomenon as I have experienced through memoing. Additionally, following the tenets of qualitative research, the emic or “insider” perspective was used to gain a deeper understanding of the community (Gaber, 2016).

The second type of threat is reactivity or, the influence of the researcher on the participant (Maxwell, 2013). I was very careful to not persuade my participants. I relied on the interview questions. Along with an additional set of impromptu questions. These questions permitted a deeper understanding of thoughts, ideas, and perceptions that were brought up by the participants. Overall, I was quite conscientious about establishing trustworthiness with my participants and had no prejudgments nor made any attempts to lead the students.

**Trustworthiness**

Guba and Lincoln (1982) described several criteria for establishing trustworthiness within a naturalistic inquiry. The criteria used in this research was triangulation through interview, observation, referential adequacy materials, and multiple drafts (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). A total 10 first-year, first-semester, college students participated in this study. Out of those 10 participants, eight were observed in their first-year seminar course. I observed the eight students across two first-year seminar classes to witness a small perceive their academic experience. The observations amounted to five additional hours. These additional hours provided a valuable opportunity to perceive the classroom environment, memo emergent thoughts, and gain exposure to the class culture. Regarding referential adequacy of materials, audio recordings and memos
were relied on in this study. I audio recorded all the interviews with the participants and memoed thoughts and ideas about them that occurred as I read the transcriptions. This process allowed me to get closer to the data. Lastly, multiple drafts of the data presentation and discussion of the findings helped refine the essences and key findings. Thus, these three criteria for establishing trustworthiness were supportive in developing a rooted connection to the data.

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study with a phenomenological approach was to understand the academic experiences of first-semester college students. This study recruited students from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas who transitioned from a Nevada high school; Nevada is a state with low K-12 performance trends. Each student was in their first-year, first-semester, of college and enrolled in a First-Year Seminar (FYS) course. The 10 undergraduate student participants selected engaged in one in-depth phenomenological interview about their academic experiences within first-semester of college. The interviews occurred within the fall of 2016. They were then comprehensively analyzed, guided by the sociocultural framework, using a method derived from Moustakas (1994). The analysis of the interviews was based on a six-level process. After completing this process, the essence of the students’ academic experiences was expressed and reduced into two-key findings.
Chapter 4

Data Presentation

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the academic lived experiences of first-year, first-semester, undergraduate students. Specifically, students that have transitioned into a university from a Nevada public high school. The research question in this study was: how do undergraduate college students experience their academic transition from high school to college? To answer this question, qualitative methods with a phenomenological approach were used. Sociocultural theory was the theoretical framework guiding the study. A total of 10 first-year undergraduate students were interviewed at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in the fall of 2016. See Table 3 for a list of participants’ pseudonyms and their interview dates.

Table 3.

First-Year, First-Semester, Undergraduate Students/Student Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>October 27, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>November 1, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>November 1, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>November 3, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mario</td>
<td>November 3, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kailani</td>
<td>November 7, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>November 8, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe</td>
<td>November 8, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teresa</td>
<td>November 10, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>November 17, 2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All interviews took place in the Fall of 2016 on the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) campus in Nevada. To protect the identity of the participants, all names have been changed. Each participant was recruited from one of three First-Year Seminar courses in the College of Education, at UNLV. Many, if not all, of the participants were majoring in either primary or secondary education. The participants were first-year, first-semester, college students who transitioned into UNLV from a Nevada public high school.

Demographic information was also collected from the participants. This information included race, gender, and high school ranking. Though the names of students’ high schools are
not mentioned, the information provided should assist in illuminating their secondary educational context. Overall, five students who chose to participate in this study attended top 10, nationally ranked, high schools in Nevada. See Table 4 for a complete breakdown of the race, gender, and students’ high school information.

Table 4.

*First-Year, First-Semester, Undergraduate Semester Students/ Student Participants and High School Rankings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>U.S. News High School Rankings</th>
<th>U.S. News College Readiness Index</th>
<th>U.S. News Graduation Rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White/ Caucasian</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White/Caucasian and Latina/Hispanic (Mexican)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina/Hispanic</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>#4 in Nevada (Nationally Ranked)</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mario</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Latino/Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teresa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian (Vietnamese)</td>
<td></td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kailani</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hawaiian Pacific Islander</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White/ Caucasian</td>
<td>#10 in Nevada (Nationally Ranked)</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White/ Caucasian</td>
<td>Nationally Ranked</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White/ Caucasian</td>
<td>Nationally Ranked</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The interview data collected from the student participants demonstrates their transition experience in the form of four essences. The four essences are,

1. Confidence
In what follows, I present data that demonstrates how confidence, independence, isolation, and (cautious) optimism figured into the transitional experiences of students in the study. These terms capture the essence of the ways in which students experienced their semester and thus I refer to them as essences in the remainder of the text.

**Confidence**

The essence of confidence was revealed in students’ perceptions of their preparedness for college academics. The following statements represent the experiences in which this essence was demonstrated in the data.

The interview data collected from the student participants confirmed thoughts and feelings of confidence or self-assuredness. The finding of self-assuredness was present in students’ addressing their ability to be prepared for college academics. They considered themselves prepared because college proved easier than what they were previously told. For example, the participants discussed having (a) the impression that college is difficult, or that (b) interacting with others informed them of how “hard” or difficult college would be. These individuals included family, friends, teachers, and even internet users (e.g., individuals on social media and in chat rooms). Take Steven for example, his perceptions of college came from both in-person and online interactions with “random strangers.” When Steven was asked, ‘Where did you get your impression of college?’ He stated:

*There wasn’t just one specific person. I frequent the website called Reddit where you can talk with random strangers. There are these threads about college, and everyone’s*
always like, ‘It’s super stressful.’ I don’t know. People in general always talk about how hard college is.

These students’ perceptions of their college preparedness stemmed not only from their experiences within postsecondary context but, the secondary context. For instance, Sarah discussed self-assurance in her academic abilities because of her mindful decision in school choice. Sarah was interviewed alongside her good friend Phoebe. Both seemed very close to one another. They disclosed that they attended the same high school and mostly associated with the same peer group. Sarah described receiving a “pretty decent” education despite it occurring in the state of Nevada.

_I moved here when I was in eighth grade. We just moved around a lot. My mom researched all the schools [in Nevada] and made sure to choose the best in the [Las Vegas] valley. My parents specifically wanted me to have a good education because I know Nevada isn't the greatest. But, she at least chose one of the best in Nevada or, in the city. So, that was pretty cool. We were able to get a pretty decent education in Nevada._

Phoebe, a person who took a little longer to fully express her feelings in the interview, stated that her impression of her education in Nevada was still a quality one. Specifically, she stated:

_Well, I think I learned a lot despite still being in regular classes. I learned just as much. I was pushed just as hard as kids in AP classes. So, that's good._

She continued by describing herself as more prepared than her college peers:

_I think I’m more prepared just because… I think in high school a lot of students don't really care. They just are there because they have to be. Well, I didn't take AP, I took regular [classes]so a lot of them [her classmates] would just slack. My teacher would_
have to beg them, 'Okay, are you guys are doing this assignment?' She would give them multiple chances because they would never do it. I always did my assignments. I never had any missing assignments. So yeah, I think I'm more prepared in that way.

When reflecting on all the participants in this study, Steven expressed the strongest confidence in his abilities as a college student. He would often make statements such as, ‘it might seem pretentious,’ ‘I get that I sound pretentious,’ or, ‘I feel like I’m sounding really pretentious.’ When specifically asked about his perceptions of college thus far (e.g., mid-semester), he said:

*I thought it would be harder. It might be because it's my freshman year but, I'm kind of just cruising right now.*

He continues,

*I thought it would be harder because of how much people talk about how hard it is.

Maybe it does get harder in the higher levels, but I feel like for most people their struggle with schooling comes from their ineptitude, procrastination and all that stuff. I feel like if you're responsible with how you deal with your time, then you should never really have issues. If the material is hard then that's that but the, ‘Oh, I had to write a 10-page essay in one night.’ You probably had like three months to do that. You just didn't do it. So, I went into college with high expectations that it would be difficult. Right now, it's not really difficult.*

As a follow-up question, Steven was asked if considered himself more or less prepared for college. He stated,

*I'm sounding pretentious, but I'm making this distinction because I'm very aware that we’re all from different backgrounds and, I did go to a very good school... Just from*
observing my [college] history class, I feel like I know the material already and everyone else is struggling.

Teresa, a demure student, sought out TED Talks as a resource for self-improvement, had similar sentiments about her perceptions of college academics. However, she focused on college being a place for establishing an equal starting point for students transitioning from high school. She stated:

*I thought it would be a lot harder. But, because I'm not in the Honors College or remedial classes, everyone's kind of starting at the same level. No matter what high school you come from or where you came from in the country, college is like the classes you take in high school. Like, the equivalent of a regular class. My high school was very rigorous and there were a lot of AP and honors classes so... I felt going into college it was going to be a lot harder but, it was a bit like... not easy... but like in the middle. My first-year, first-semester, of college is kind of easy-going.*

Denise, a vivacious and enthusiastic individual, also considered herself more prepared for college and showed confidence by referencing the type of high school she attended and the classes she took. Denise stated:

*What I have above everyone else is that I did go to a magnet school. They expect more from you than a regular high school. So, I do think that it's easier for me to adjust to my surroundings than someone coming from a regular high school. But then again, I only took one AP class and some regular high school students might have taken all AP classes. The workload is way bigger when taking AP classes because those are college-level classes; studying for an AP exam is definitely hard. So, I don't know if I have a step up because of that, or I just have a better mindset coming into college.*
Student participants discussed the independence or freedom as an aspect of transitioning from high school to college. Freedom was described in a manner representative of both excitement and a feeling of obligation to one’s self and others. They were excited because they were independent or free to make choices for themselves without the involvement of others. However, the freedom was also accompanied by feelings of impending responsibility and accountability to themselves and people important to them.

Beth described her experience of freedom by not having the same motivators to keep her academically diligent. Beth, a high-spirited person, shared many stories about her family, specifically her brothers and the competitive nature of their relationship. When asked if she is competitive with her classmates she stated, “Sometimes, if I notice someone else participating a lot, I feel like I have to participate even more just to kind of like get the professor’s attention so that he can understand who I am as a person.’ This behavior is indicative of the need to be recognized as an individual learner independent from her classmates.

Beth described the difference between high school and college by stating:

More freedom. If I don’t want to go to class I don’t have to go.

She continued,

My parents were always strict about our [meaning herself and her brothers] grades because they had our Infinite Campus information. So, if they wanted to check our grades, they could do it whenever. So, I was motivated to keep it up [the grades] so they would be happy when they saw [the grades]. Plus, for softball, I had to keep a 3.0 GPA. So, I was motivated by a lot of outside things to keep my grades up, and that's what made me nervous about college because I don't have the outside things any more checking them constantly.
Beth’s experience of freedom also extended to how she perceived her college instructors/professors and college classes. She stated:

_Just that all of the professors are so free to talk about whatever they want. They don’t care. It just feels like a very free-flowing conversation, and it’s not forced. Because my thought was always, ‘Well, you’re paying to be here; you want to be here, obviously.’ So, it feels like more real conversations with people who actually want to learn._

Sarah also discussed the transition to college as encompassing a newfound sense of freedom. She stated:

_Well, like I knew there would be a lot of freedom, but I didn't know that there would be this much [she laughs]. Because you can just go off and do whatever you want. You can leave in the middle of class... not that I do that or anything... but you can just leave for no reason, and the teachers don't care. I guess just the freedom is just so intense. I guess it's just a lot more than I expected it to be._

Mary’s lack of family involvement left her feeling self-dependent when dealing with her academic struggles. Her experience transitioning to college was stated to be without the help from others. In fact, she described her preparation for college in high school as minimal. She said that the school was “not there for students…I would find out about Senior events two weeks after it happened. I had to be organized for them [the school] because they weren’t organized.” Mary’s self-reliance in pursuing college readiness knowledge was also present in her decision to forgo sharing her academic experiences transitioning from high school to college.

When asked how her parents or friends would describe her as a student, Mary stated:

_How my parents have a really high pedestal for me. They think that I’m good at school. That’s all they have ever really been shown by teachers in high school. I mean, now they’re not_
really involved in my college experience. They don’t know what’s going on. They still think that [I’m a good student], but my friends know that I’m struggling sometimes. I mean they know that I still keep trying, but I’m struggling most of the time with school.

As a follow-up question, Mary was asked why she didn’t share her academic struggles with her parents. Mary said:

They don’t really understand. They didn’t go to college, so they don’t know what’s going on. They really didn’t finish high school either, so it’s not like they would know. I mean my older brother he’s in college right now, so I could talk to him about it. My parents wouldn’t know. They’re in their own world. They don’t really care as long as it’s good.

The essence of independence also emerged in how students described their techniques for learning in college. For example, Mario, a student who is proud of both his individual and family academic accomplishments, discussed how his approach to learning is distinct. He saw studying as an act that must be figured out by the individual.

Everybody's different. Like my sister, she can study with music. If I'm studying with music, I'm just pretending to be studying. I'm not actually studying. Then, I've tried taking notes down, but you know how there’s the whole thing of over highlighting? I just write down everything. So, I need to learn. I just need to figure out how to do it. I guess it sounds really dumb, but sometimes I feel like I don't know how to study. I feel like I don't know how to study for my classes. I think I'm doing okay but sometimes I feel like, ‘Wow I really don't know what I'm doing when I'm studying!’

Katherine also addressed studying as being as being an independent act. Katherine was one of the more positive students. Her perspective on performance outcomes was, “When I say I want to work my hardest it’s not like I need an A…sometimes there are classes you just can’t get an A
in. A letter doesn’t define you its more about what you put into it.” When questioned by friends why she is academically successful, Katherine stated,

> My freshman year, all my teachers were like here are these are different note taking styles, and I was very overwhelmed but then you know I just tried all of them and then I found what worked for me. It was just thinking about what would work for me. How would I learn this? How is this going to help me study? Is playing off of my strengths?

**Isolation**

The essence of isolation was revealed in students’ perceptions of peers and faculty. The following statements represent the many ways this essence was demonstrated in the data.

The students discussed feeling isolation or separation not just regarding of being different from their peers but also when concerning their interactions with college instructors/professors. The separation from peers was expressed by both Mario and Mary before transitioning to college. Their interest in going to college was sometimes considered a questionable decision by their peers in high school.

Mario stated that:

> In school [high school], a lot of people would be like, ‘why are you guys [he and his siblings] all in college? I just don't get it.' I would say, ‘It's just kind of an expectation.’ Because my parents are from Mexico and my mom went to college. So, I think that's been like a really important drive with us [he and his siblings]. Because my mom was the oldest of like eight and she's the only one that actually went to college. She became an accountant in Mexico. So, when we were growing up, my parents were always like, ‘You need to go to school. Then, get your stuff together.’
Mary’s experience with her peers was similar. Like, Mario, she was exposed to peers that considered attending college to be an unusual expectation. She stated:

*I had like a group of friends [in high school], but I felt like only a handful of them wanted to go to college. Most were like, ‘Oh, I think I'm going to work’ or, ‘I don't know. I think I'm just going to chill for a little bit.’ They didn't think about college. At my old high school, everyone was talking about college. We were in our sophomore year and would talk about what was going to happen in two years. Here [at the high school she graduated from], they don't know what they’re doing. At my other school, it was such a different experience, such a different community. I see a lot of kids that went to my old school here on campus, but I hardly see anyone from my high school.*

When I asked if Mary felt odd among her peers, she said:

*My whole life I was taught by my parents, you're going to college. I feel like if you weren't raised like that, then you may think you can't go to college and instead should work. I think I didn't feel odd I felt like everyone has their own opinions about things in life. So, I did feel like it’s okay if a person doesn't want to go to college. Whatever, that's them. That's not my life. I've always felt like I had my own mind set. I always had the intent to go to College, no matter what, right after high school; I would not even wait. So, when these kids would tell me I'm going to go work or I want to go to travel think that's good for them. I would influence them you should go to college but I mean that’s as far as that goes. I wouldn't really care if they did or not. If they didn’t want to go, then I'm not going to pressure them. They're not my kids.*
The experience of having different academic standards than those within students’ academic community had little impact on their academic goal to go to college because the influence of family was more significant.

The concept of separation relates not just to peers but to teachers/instructors as well. Many of the students explained how they felt a less personal connection to their college instructors/professors than their high school teachers. Phoebe talked about her experience of having an impersonal relationship with college instructors/professors as leading her to feel unrecognized, which was opposite from her high school experience. She described her college instructors/professors as not really caring. Specifically, Phoebe stated:

*It doesn't matter to them if you pass or fail. They don't have to keep students for a certain time. They can do what they want. They don't have to meet certain requirements, I don’t think. They can care as much as they want or, not care. But my teachers in high school they were all pretty nice. I think they all were kind of the same. I guess in high school it's more personal because the classes are small. Like lectures in college, they're the least personal. You don't know them, and they don't know you. They don't know your name. So, like in high school, it's more of they know your name. They know you personally.*

Students’ lack of personal connection with college instructors/ professors suggests they are left them to figure out how to approach assignments without close directed guidance from an instructor. Mary concurred with Phoebe’s sentiment, and she stated:

*I feel they don't care if you go to class. They don't care if you're there or you're not. You only go on certain days. It's not every day. Also, the assignments are very different from high school. My last year of high school, there were a lot of essays, but we were prepared for it. They taught us everything that we needed to know for the essays. Now, I don't even*
I know how to start or, how to approach it. It's like the teacher helps but in high school they teach it step-by-step. I think that's the difference. The high school teachers were there for you. In college, they're not really there. They're not going to teach you what you should have learned in high school.

Kailani, a student that transitioned to a Nevada public high school from Hawaii with her two sisters and grandmother, made allowances for college instructors/professors lack of involvement. She stated:

I know that they're busy people. Especially for history, it's like 300 students for one lecture hall. So, I understand if they don't know me. At least they know the lecture, so that's good. I like how they can answer our questions because it's like everyone generally has the same type of questions for the assignments. So, it's not like they need to know me on a personal basis. For high school, I can understand [knowing students personally] that because the classrooms are smaller.

The impersonal interactions had with college instructors/professors encouraged Denise to seek assistance from her former high school teacher. She stated:

Yeah, I think it does. Because they know like, 'Oh, she procrastinates all the time. She going to ask for an extension but, you're not going to give it to her because if you don't, then she's going to get it done when she needs to get it done.' They just knew those little things about me. For example, in math class, I did better when I saw it and then did it again and again. My math teacher senior year was so funny because he was College Prep math. He was like, 'Do you know how hard your math class is going to be in college?' I was like, 'Don't say that to me! This is so scary. I'm trying to pass high school first. Don't say that.' Then, he would say, 'They're not going to come to you individually

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and teach you the way that I do. It's going to be so much harder for you.' He offered to tutor me if I ever needed help studying for math. I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, thank you so much!’ I don't know where I would be without him. Till this day, I still go to him at that school and study with him after school. He's always like, ‘I have to go home. I have a wife and life.’ But, I say, ‘I have to pass this class, and you offered so don't you think that you owe me?’

(Cautious) Optimism

The essence of (cautious) optimism was revealed in students’ perceptions of academic self. The following statements represent the many ways this essence was demonstrated in the data.

Students in this study discussed with optimism as being prepared for college, but also mentioned a thoughtful and cautious or guarded approach to interpreting (a) the interactions they had with others in their life, and (b) how they judged themselves as a student in transition. For Mario, he came from a familial background where the educational expectations were quite high. He said:

\[ \text{In high school, my sister, the fifth one of us, did really well. She was getting recruited by Penn State. She was at the top of her class, and she got the highest diploma in Clark County [Nevada].} \]

The success of Mario’s sister influenced his perceptions of educational attainment and increased his desire to emulate her achievements. However, he also grew up with a sister who did not exhibit academic practices conducive to successful outcomes. Mario stated:

\[ \text{My oldest sister was the first one to start college. I was eight at the time, and I remember she was always struggling, but I didn't really understand why. I think mostly it was just} \]
because of the fact that she would miss manage time. She's like, 'I have a lot to do.' But
then, I would pay attention to the fact that she would just come home and not do anything
else. She would always just put everything off to the last minute. Like now, in college, I
think of it like, 'I don't really feel like I have homework to do, but I feel like I have things
I should be doing.' I've been trying to schedule things while I kind of have the time now
because I work. I think of having more restrictions on your schedule kind of helps. You're
planning because you have to think ahead.

His experience of viewing both sister’s approach to learning inspired him to meet the demands of
a college education but not without the use of time-management and commitment to studying.

Concerning their peers, these students’ experiences of watching others face difficulties in
their transition from high school to college stimulated a desire to encourage and to uplift them.
The students discussed perceiving the fear of their friend’s failure as a motivator to help them get
back on track academically. For example, Sarah stated:

Yeah, one of our [meaning herself and Phoebe] friends was saying how he’s like really
not passing one of his classes or something. How he has to study and hasn't been doing
anything. I'm glad that I've kept on top of it. But, I'm also one of those people that's like
'what can we do to help?' ‘We don't want you to just be off on your own; we want you to
know that we're here for you.' That, ‘we'll help you with whatever you need.'

Denise had a similar experience with her friend. She influenced her friend to remain diligent and
committed to her studies. She said:

Sometimes she's like, ‘I have to study for this math test, but I'm going to go on a date with
this cute boy.' I'm like, ‘No you’re not! What are you talking about? Don't you have a
math test or something?’ That's the only real class she is struggling with. She's pretty
much on top of her game but for her math class. She just does not want to pass that class. I think like she's just in it to fail, I swear. Everything she says to me, I’m like, ‘do you even care about yourself. Just think about how much tuition costs. Have that as your motivator to study for this test. Even if you don't pass it, just study for it so you can at least say, ‘I tried.’ You're so afraid of failing you're not willing to succeed.’ I'm definitely always there to listen to her when she’s like, ‘math is so hard.’

In addition to helping others make a better academic transition, the students also focused on their own performance in college. They evaluated themselves in relation to their grades on assignments and tests, their peers, and their motivation to achieve academic goals. For instance, Kailani described wanting to achieve her very best as a motivator. Before moving to Nevada, Kailani’s interest in attending college was inspired by her teacher. She stated,

My teacher in Hawaii pushed her students that were low income and had the GPA to go to college. She helped me out a lot. I don’t know. She inspired me to help others so I just went into education because I know if you can inspire just one person that’s good enough.

Kailani’s determination was discussed in her awareness that academic achievements are reached when aiming high. She said:

I don't want to be one of those people that are just doing the least they can. I want to be like, ‘You could do better!’ I want to do better than what I expect for myself to do. Like, for my writing projects. I’ll write down a draft and will just keep revising it through the week before it's due. I'll be like, ‘My last paper is the best.’ So, I'll turn that in.

Denise expressed her interest to maintain an academic performance standard to retain her Millennium Scholarship. Without the scholarship, she knew she could not remain in college, stated:
I think I've done well keeping up my Millennium [Scholarship]. That's one more thing that drives me to keep my grades up. Without my Millennium, I would not be here because I cannot afford this; it's too expensive. But, keeping my grades where they need to be is something that I've done well. Even though I did fail my first midterm in history, I came back from that essentially thinking it's all about perspective. Like, I failed one test but passed the other two. I just think, keeping my grades where they need to be and not thinking like, ‘Oh, I'm going to fail if I don't pass this assignment.’ I need to feel stable to get me past that point. Like, where you're so good you can't mess up or, you messed up, but that's okay.

Denise’s optimistic perspective allowed her to think positively when confronting academic stressors. Steven, however, was struggling to maintain his motivation. Although he expressed confidence in his academic abilities, he was less assured or more cautious in his ability to turn in assignments. He said:

This is kind of personal but I was recently diagnosed with depression, and so I haven't really been feeling the want to go to school. I just kind of have been lying in bed doing nothing. Maybe the school contributes to that, but I don't think it is my motivation is to get that piece of paper. At the beginning of the year, I was extremely motivated. I was like, ‘Yeah, I want to get straight A's all four years.’ ‘I want to be amazing.’ Then I started taking an online class, and I was like I don't want to do this anymore. I stopped turning things in, and now I have to be in that class. Then I'm like, ‘Well, I hit the point of no return,’ and like stopped caring. So, with motivation, I think it's all up to the individual to be motivated. A motivated person can do really well at a really good school or at a really bad school. It's not the school that impacts it.
Though Steven expressed a lack of motivation, Beth described herself as “freaking out” about the prospect of failing college; even though she was satisfied with her grades.

*I'm always freaking out that I'm going to fail. I have the good grades. I even texted my brother the other day, and I'm like, 'Hey, I'm taking six classes, and I have five A's and a B right now, is this good?' He was like, ‘Yes, that's fantastic, relax.’ I was like, ‘Okay, just making sure.’ I feel like I always need to text [him] and be like, ‘A grade dropped. What do I do?’ Usually, in high school, it was just A, B, C, D, there were no pluses or minuses. Now, there's plus and minus, and I'm like, ‘Oh, gosh! Is that more significant?’* Reliance on the opinions of others provided added assurance for these students. For example, Teresa’s approach to ensure that she has put forth better work is to seek the advice of a friend who uses more detail in her writing.

*We took a lot of the same classes in high school. So, all AP and stuff like that. Academically, we are kind of the same. But, one time our AP psychology teacher he kind of used us as examples. Like, for our thesis statements he said that both of ours are good but that she was more detailed. Mine was kind of short and simple, but they were both good. We weren't better than the other or anything. So, I kind of see her for help just to add more detail maybe and, just to add another perspective.*

Similarly, Katherine stated she goes to her brother for added assistance:

*I go to him a lot. He’ll help me, so that's nice. I do bounce ideas off of him especially because he's a science teacher.*
Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand the academic experiences of first-semester college students. Specifically, to gain an understanding of the academic lived experiences of first-semester undergraduate student’s transition from high school to college. The reason for purposefully selecting these undergraduate students was to appreciate the complexities and nuances associated with their college readiness education. Ultimately, four essences were discovered, and they included Confidence, Independence, Isolation, and (Cautious) Optimism. The Chapter Five will discuss the findings, using sociocultural theory as a framework, in relation to the current literature on college preparedness, the high school to college transition, and first-year college students.
Chapter 5
Discussion of the Findings

This study was an investigation of the college preparedness of first-semester undergraduate students through the perceptions of their academic lived experiences transitioning from high school to college. The chapter begins with an overview of the study followed by a discussion of participants’ academic experiences within the first semester of college and ends with a conclusion answering the research question. To answer the research question, data were analyzed, and four essences emerged. The four essences (i.e., confidence, [cautious] optimism, independence, and isolation) were discussed in relation to two overarching constructs, which are self-efficacy and autonomy. This chapter will inform readers of the dichotomous experience associated with the transition from high school to college, (b) provide theoretical implications, (c) present the study’s limitations, and (d) share considerations for future research.

Overview of the Study

This study uses sociocultural theory to help guide and understand the perceptions of 10 first-semester undergraduate students’ academic lived experiences transitioning into college (i.e., University of Nevada, Las Vegas [UNLV]). All students transitioned from a Nevada public high school. These data revealed that students’ perceptions of the transitional experience include thoughts of confidence and (cautious) optimism, which are reduced to self-efficacy. Furthermore, thoughts of independence and isolation, which are reduced to autonomy. Thus, two key findings were deduced from this investigation and they are self-efficacy and autonomy. From a discussion of the two key findings, it can be concluded that the transition from high school to college presents a dichotomous experience of both positive and negative aspects of self-efficacy and autonomy.
Sociocultural Theory

The sociocultural theory provides an alternative perspective to the social cognitive assumptions of first-year undergraduate students and the transition from high school to college. The framework suggests that there are social and cultural factors that influence and facilitate a learner’s knowledge and experience within an environmental context (Kozulin, 1994). For example, using sociocultural theory as a framework, students learn how to be college prepared from social interactions and cultural tools (e.g., signs and symbols) that occurred before and within the postsecondary context.

The Essences as Two Key Findings

Four essences emerged from the analysis of this study. The essences include confidence, (cautious) optimism, independence, and isolation. Each of these essences relates to one of two key findings. The two key findings include self-efficacy and autonomy. Confidence and (cautious) optimism have been reduced to self-efficacy because of students expressed (a) certainty about their college preparedness, and (b) uncertainties about their academic performance when confronted with challenges inducing stress or concern. Independence and isolation have been reduced to autonomy because of students expressed (a) freedom of choice, (b) minimal to no involvement of others in certain aspects of their academic experience, (c) development of personalized approaches to learning strategies and skills, and (d) feelings of separateness from peers and faculty. The following sections provide a more detailed interpretation of each key finding along with the implications for future research, practice, and policy.
Discussion

The following discussion provides an analysis of two key findings: (a) self-efficacy, including confidence and (cautious) optimism; and (b) autonomy, including independence and isolation.

Key Finding

Self-Efficacy: Confidence and (Cautious) Optimism

The first key finding is self-efficacy, which is a reduction of confidence and (cautious) optimism. Self-efficacy in academia is defined as a student’s perception of their confidence when engaged in a specific task (Ferla, Valcke, & Cai, 2009). From a social perspective, self-efficacy is important to cultural competence (e.g., the knowledge of a cultural context) and social adjustment because it is influenced by social persuasion from others, vicarious learning from others, and social cues (Wilson, Ward, & Fischer, 2013; Lent, 2016). According to Lent,

We make sense of our successes and failures through social discourse. Such discourse may affect the lessons, if any, that we take away about our capabilities...or where attributions for success or failure (e.g., task ease or personal ability) are open to interpretation. (p. 582)

The above description of self-efficacy supports that learners can develop confidence in their academic abilities from both social interactions and contextual influences that assist in the development of cultural competence. Specifically, for the student participants who transitioned from high school to college, self-efficacy encompassed assuredness in their college preparedness. The assuredness was developed through interactions and experiences in the precollege academic context and by on-going socially persuasive language (i.e., words of encouragement). Student participants in this study demonstrated self-efficacy by expressing (a)
certainty about their college preparedness, and (b) uncertainties about their academic performance when confronted with challenges inducing stress or concern. Examples of self-efficacy are presented in these data as either confidence or (cautious) optimism.

**Self-Efficacy in the Data**

Students perceived their transitional experience from high school to college with both high and low self-efficacy. The students conveyed confidence in their college preparedness because they felt they were able “to get a pretty decent education Nevada” and found college to be easier considering others stated that “it’s super stressful.” Primarily, students referenced their academic effort in high school as evidence for being “more prepared” for college. They felt “a lot of students don’t really care” about their academic performance.

Some participants believed that most other students “struggle with schooling because of their own ineptitude, procrastination and all that stuff.” Additionally, since many whom self-selected attended top ranked schools in Nevada, they believed their high school prepared them because “they expect[ed] more…than a regular high school.” The perception of themselves in respect to peers framed their ideas about their future academic performance.

However, these students were also cautiously optimistic when confronted with certain academic challenges. They “want to do better than what [they] expect for [themselves] to do.” This was especially true since viewing others struggle in their first-semester of college. Students saw their peers “put things off until the last minute.” Yet, there is a desire to encourage them.

The students did want their friends to “just off on their own” but have someone “always there to listen.” The desire to provide support was accompanied by the need to receive support in return. Students sought out assistance from others to keep from “freaking out that [they’re] going
to fail.” They would “just bouncing ideas” off siblings and friends to get a sense of how to proceed with their perceived challenges, stresses, and concerns in college.

The dichotomous experience of self-efficacy demonstrates that student participants experienced both certainties and uncertainties when transitioning from high school to college that positively and negatively affected their self-efficacy. The following section presents an analysis of both confidence and (cautious) optimism, and guides our understanding of the construct that is self-efficacy with respect to the previous research, including implications for practice and policy.

Confidence

Students’ certainty about their college preparedness derived from confidence obtained from precollege experiences in which college cultural competence (e.g., knowledge of the academic rigor) was achieved. For example, Denise believed herself to be more prepared for college because she had the experience of attending a magnet school. She stated, “What I have above everyone else is that I did go to a magnet school. They expect more from you than a regular high school.” The statement provided by Denise suggests that her precollege academic experiences in a magnet school increased confidence in her college preparedness.

According to Kuh et al. (2008), precollege experiences are a major predictor for college success. For instance, Reid and Moore revealed in a qualitative research study involving 13 first-generation students that the development of academic skills in secondary school helped to bridge the gap from high school to college. The social capital gained in high school perhaps increased students’ psychological well-being and self-esteem, which are two characteristics associated with college persistence (Wintre et al., 2011; Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012).

From a traditional perspective, self-efficacy is about the individual’s belief in his or her ability to successfully complete an academic task (Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007). This may
suggest that self-efficacy is an internally driven concept. In contrast, from a sociocultural framework, academic confidence is influenced by the diversity of a student’s experiences and the affect those experiences have on their perception of self. Specifically, perceptions of their, “roles, abilities, group memberships, and relationships with others” (Laird, 2005, p. 366). This proposes that social factors and environmental context inform how a student views his or her academic abilities. Therefore, these data indicate that students’ confidence in their academic ability comes from precollege experiences in which the cultural environment (e.g., college) gave them the cultural knowledge necessary to feel college prepared. Yet, the (cautious) optimism of these student participants also suggests a comparative lack of confidence or self-efficacy.

(Cautious) Optimism

Data in this study demonstrated (cautious) optimism among first-semester student participants. Specifically, considering their positive outlook, students discussed stresses and concerns about their academic performance. Beth, for instance, expressed how she was “freaking out” about failing despite having good grades. She described how she contacted her older brother to ask, “‘I’m taking six classes and I have five A's and a B right now, is this good?’” Beth’s perceptions of her academic performance revealed that she was seeking support through social persuasive language to gain reassurance about how well she was doing in college. Social persuasiveness has been shown to have a positive effect on academic success (Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, & Murdock, 2012). The persuasion can function to motivate students, which is an important facet of college persistence (Clark, Middleton, Nguyen, & Zwick, 2014).

From a traditional perspective, optimism is based on the expectation that good things will happen in the future instead of bad things (Tan & Tan, 2013). This suggests that optimism is merely a choice in perspective or, viewpoint when encountering life events. In contrast, from the
sociocultural framework, optimism is a culturally ingrained ideal. According to Barr and Gibson (2013), the “culture of hope [of an institution] ...honor[s] the cultural heritages of their students and the surrounding communities” (p. 52). This means that schools have a responsibility to ensure there is an element of student trust and identification with the school that encourages their involvement/commitment (Tschannen-Moran, Bankole, Mitchell & Moore, 2013). These data suggest that (cautious) optimism is influenced by previous experiences with academic challenges, either personal or observed, in one’s environment that lead students to question their abilities. Therefore, there is an indication that students are not as confident about their college preparedness or cultural competency as previously thought; social support may be necessary to increase students’ self-efficacy.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This research suggests that students’ confidence when initially transitioning into college from high school can positively influence their perception of college preparedness to the extent in which uncertainties about their academic performance result in them feeling merely optimistic. This conclusion is significant to the literature on academic transitions (e.g., high to college) of first-semester college students. The significance is in the notion that students transitioning into college may not be as confident in their college preparedness as previously thought or expressed. Additionally, it introduces academic self-efficacy as a construct dependent on contextual knowledge and social support. Because support through activities such as social persuasion can be beneficial to feeling optimistic, it is probable that social interactions, appraising their abilities, and building self-confidence while performing individual exercises will assist to increase students’ self-efficacy (Phillipson & Renshaw, 2013). In terms of policy and practice, these data suggest the need for higher education institutions to continue or introduce
into mandatory transitional programs, such as first-year seminars, support strategies to increase self-efficacy among first-semester college students. The increase of a student’s self-efficacy can be approached by instructors assuring him or her that academic challenges can be overcome (Perry & Steck, 2015). In other words, that students are provided not only with the skills and strategies to succeed, but with the on-going encouragement that academic success is achievable even in challenging circumstances. Providing both competency and encouragement has been shown to influence persistence (Porter & Swing, 2006). One policy consideration is to incorporate collaboration across transitional programs (e.g., federally funded college access and success programs) such as TRiO, GEAR UP, and Upward Bound and first-year seminar courses to develop instructional standards that bridge academic support services and provide continued emotional support/reassurance to first-year undergraduate students.

**Key Finding**

**Autonomy: Independence and Isolation**

The second key finding, which consists of independence and isolation, has been reduced to autonomy. Autonomy in academia is defined as an individual’s ability to have a choice in his or her academic future, and be “able to self-regulate and self-organize...[their] actions” (O’Donnell, Chang, & Miller, 2013; Troisi, 2015; Assor, 2016, p. 156). From a social perspective, autonomy can be fostered through supportive relationships that develop a student’s sense of volition and inner motivational resources (Guay, Ratelle, Larose, Vallerand, & Vitaro, 2013; Reeve, 2016).

The description of autonomy indicates that a learner’s independence is about the opportunity to make decisions regarding one’s academic life. Such decisions can be supported through relationships that inspire a reliance on self to: (a) *motivate*, to practice self-
encouragement when working toward academic goals; (b) regulate, to take the initiative to manage academic tasks; and (c) organize, develop a personalized process for handling academic obligations. These data in this study demonstrates autonomy by students expressed: (a) freedom of choice; (b) minimal to no involvement of others in certain aspects of their academic experience, (c) development of personalized approaches to learning strategies and skills; and (d) feelings of separateness from peers and faculty. Examples of autonomy are presented as either independence or isolation.

**Autonomy in the Data**

Student participants also perceived their transitional experience from high school to college as not only facilitating their independence but also isolating them from former sources of support. The students discussed having “more freedom” in college. The freedom was “just so intense” because “you can just go off and do whatever you want” in college. For example, “if you don’t want to go to class” then you don’t have to.

Students’ experience with independence presented the opportunity for them to ask poignant questions like, “how would I learn this? How is this going to help me study? Is this playing off my strengths?” The freedom to be introspective allowed students to “figure out” what works best for them. However, independence also meant a lack of parental involvement. Parents “didn’t really know what [was] going on,” and the freedom made students “nervous about college.”

The feeling of concern also prompted isolation. Students discussed a separation from peers and faculty that resulted in positive and negative outcomes. The separation from peers encouraged the students to have their “own mindset” and remain fervent about their goals. The
separation from faculty conversely, left the students feeling that “they don’t care” and “it doesn’t matter to them if you pass or fail.”

The perception that faculty are “busy people” led students to either seek instructional assistance from former high school teachers who “knew all those little things about [them]” (e.g., their tendency to procrastinate) or seek assistance from peers because faculty are “not really there…to teach you what you should have learned in high school.” The dichotomous experience of autonomy demonstrates that there are both positive and negative aspects associated with the transition from high school to college. The following section presents an analysis of both independence and isolation to understand autonomy with respect to the previous research, including implications for practice and policy.

**Independence**

Independence in this study is demonstrated as a liberating experience with an opportunity for personal growth. The liberation is exhibited in students’ expressions of freedom of choice. For example, Sarah stated, “Well, like I knew there would be a lot of freedom, but I didn't know that there would be this much [she laughs]. Because you can just go off and do whatever you want.” This statement is representative of students’ having the freedom to commit as much time to their academics as they want. When transitioning to college, autonomy is considered educationally beneficial (Cullaty, 2011; Yuksel, 2010). The autonomy to commit oneself to their academics facilitates maturity and responsibility (Cullaty, 2011).

The benefit of autonomy in this study was exhibited in two ways: (a) student’s interest to personalize study strategies taught in class, and (b) student’s ability to motivate themselves toward academic goal attainment. From a traditional perspective, autonomy is grounded in one’s ability to self-regulate or control their thoughts feelings and behaviors when engaged in an
academic task. This suggests that students have the capability to manage themselves and their responsibilities. In contrast, from the sociocultural framework, performing a task without assistance introduces a more personalized understanding of oneself within the learning context. The comprehension of one’s self as a student is to gain an “awareness, interpretation, and understanding of the cultural meaning of his/her social situation” (Wong, 2013, p. 203). This proposes that autonomy is not just beneficial for the completion of any one task but informs a learner of their academic context.

These data suggest that students having independence in college is not necessarily a choice but a condition of the postsecondary environment. In college, students are forced to make decisions that require them to negotiate their academic assistance, ascertain what choices will be appropriate, and take ownership over their own actions (Stroet, Opdenakker, Minnaert, 2013; Sheldon, Houser-Marko, & Kasser, 2006; Benita, Roth, & Deci, 2013). Along with the independence students experience, isolation from former sources of support can be challenging. The challenge presents a comparative need for others. Therefore, it is equally important to understand how students’ separation from support systems can be problematic when required to engage in autonomous learning.

**Isolation**

Students with the freedom to make decisions about their education are also confronted with a sense of separateness from peers and faculty who are often perceived as a source for academic and emotional support. Isolation from these sources of support can impact a student’s ability to receive the knowledge and assistance necessary to feel academically prepared for college. For instance, Mary discussed not having the same type of academic support from college faculty as she did with high school instructors. She stated, that she felt faculty didn’t care and
that high school instructors taught everything students “needed to know” to feel prepared for an academic task. Mary’s statement about faculty involvement means that students do not always have the knowledge necessary to engage in autonomous learning and therefore, may need additional support.

In an empirical research study conducted by D.A. Fazey and J.A. Fazey (2001), involving first-year students, students less mature and who lacked college competency needed more academic support. Therefore, it is important to consider providing such support to first-year college students. From a traditional perspective, isolation or independent learning is about a student taking responsibility and becoming a more self-directed and self-motivated learner (Broad, 2006). Moreover, that these students learn to manage their academic lives by taking ownership.

From a sociocultural perspective, however, an interaction with others is necessary to inform solo performance (Maheux & Roth, 2013). This suggests that individuals learn how to be responsible and self-directed by interacting with others in a similar context. These data presented here indicate that autonomy is beneficial to students’ growth and development yet, instances of support may be necessary for those lacking previous opportunities to develop volition and inner motivation resources. Therefore, students must learn how to be academically autonomous.

**Implications for Practice and Policy**

The research suggests independence and the freedom of choice can be a positive experience for students transitioning from high school to college to the extent in which a student feels isolated from sources of support. This is significant to the literature on the high school to college transitional experiences of first-semester undergraduate students because it introduces a need to adjust the degree of support provided to a student based on their previous experiences as
an autonomous learner. According to Boatman and Long (2016) a student’s engagement in the campus community helps to increase grade performance and persistence. Additionally, positive interactions with faculty can reduce perceptions of academic risk and alleviate stress (Volkom, Machiz, & Reich, 2011). In terms of policy and practice, academic advisors and first-year seminar teachers can better serve students by implementing support services that assist in students developing autonomous learning strategies. For example, using problem based learning (PBL) in first-year seminar courses to encourage students to work collaboratively with peers, solve problems, and then engage in self-study (e.g., self-directed learning) (Kamp, Dolmans, van Berkel, & Schmidt, 2012).

**Limitations of the Study**

This study encompassed three limitations. The limitations include: (a) convenience sampling, (b) hours of data collection, and (c) point in time of interview. Each of these limitations will be discussed in further detail. They are revealed to establish honesty and trustworthiness between the researcher and the reader. Also, considerations of future research will be presented, and finally if subsequent research studies are conducted on a similar topic, the following limitations should be contemplated.

**Convenience Sampling**

This study relied on convenience sampling to recruit participants from one of five different first-year seminar courses. The student participants were recruited on the basis that they (a) had no prior experience taking a college course, (b) were at least 18 years of age and (c) graduated from a Nevada public high school. Out of all the students who were presented with the opportunity to participate in this study and met the qualifications for participation, students who were enrolled in Honors and AP course, or graduated from either top Nevada high schools.
consented. A rationale for this reasoning is unknown, but it is certain that these students did not necessarily reflect the at-risk population discussed in the *Quality Counts Report and Ranking*. Nevertheless, this sample still provides valuable emic knowledge about first-semester college students enrolled in a first-year seminar course at UNLV. For example, students’ willingness to participate is perhaps a reflection of an interest to review their academic performance in the first-year of college, which is encouraged in a first-year seminar class. Transitioning from a high school environment where students were encouraged and challenged to perform their best, these students may perceive volunteering for this research study as an extension of their development as a learner within the first-year seminar course.

**Hours of Data Collection**

The hours of data collection for this study was approximately eight-hours of interview data across all 10 participants and an additional five-hours of observations. The findings are preliminary based on fieldwork hours, which are crucial to a thorough understanding of a participant. An enriched demonstration of the students’ academic lived experiences could have been achieved if time allotted. The recruitment of participants began late in the mid-semester of the fall of 2016. Also, students were recruited from only five different first-year seminar courses in the College of Education. More in depth time and a larger sample to recruit from may have improved the study.

**Point in Time of the Interview**

The decision to interview participants during the mid-semester of the fall of 2016 proved advantageous. This point in time allowed students to reflect on their first-semester of college while also recalling their high school academic experiences. However, it is reasonable to assume that the recall of the students’ high school experiences may not be the purest and most sincere
perspective of their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of college and their college preparedness. Therefore, an interview conducted with students regarding their perceptions of college and their college preparedness while in high school would have increased trustworthiness.

**Implications for Theory**

This study was guided by sociocultural theory. Overall, sociocultural theory proved applicable to the two key findings of this study. Particularly, the various forms of support received from others assisted the students in gaining cultural knowledge about college and the factors associated with achieving academic success. However, the study also supports that limited interactions with others can be beneficial to a student’s academic growth.

**Future Research**

This study revealed two considerations for future research that include: (a) the importance of advanced courses and specialized schools, and (b) the perception that college is easy.

**Advanced Courses and Top Ranked Schools**

Having used purposeful and convenient sampling, all the students who met the criteria for participation and agreed to volunteer in this study were either in Honors or AP high school courses, or graduated from top ranked public high schools. The draw or self-selection of these types of students is worth further exploration. Research on U.S. states’ K-12 public education trends does not always consider the academic performance of students in advanced courses and top-ranked schools.

The *Quality Counts Report and Ranking* highlighted the correlation between U.S. K-12 public education and predictions for lifetime success. Such reports use broad assessments of state educational systems to determine a student’s academic, career, and financial prospects. The types of conclusions made include the likelihood a student is to attend and attain a postsecondary degree. However, researchers should also investigate the college preparedness of students enrolled in
advanced courses and specialized public high schools (e.g., magnet schools, and career and technical academies) within in low-performing states. Academically successful students participating in these courses and schools are often overshadowed in states with dissatisfactory K-12 education markers. What do these students perceive as the factors significant to their college preparedness? Do they perceive being in advanced courses and specialized schools to increase their potential to persist in college? According to Shaw (2014), students would rather be in AP classes than bored in lower level classes. So, how does learning in academically and possibly socially challenging environments mediate students’ perceptions of their college preparedness knowledge? A qualitative study using the phenomenological approach to explore these questions would be beneficial to the literature on college preparedness.

**Is it Really That Easy?**

Another facet of the research worth exploring is the thought that college is not as hard as everyone makes it out to be. The literature is inundated with studies discussing how students find themselves uneasy with the transition from high school to college. According to Park, Edmondson, and Lee (2012), the first-year of college can be difficult because of the academic rigor of college versus high school course work. Nevertheless, there is limited literature discussing the phenomenon of perceiving college as easy. All the student participants in this study felt college was easier than others had previously indicated. Does the socially constructed view that college is academically difficult apply to all or just a select few student experiences within the first-year of college? Is there a specific point in time that first-year undergraduate students begin to perceive their college academic experiences as difficult? A quantitative or mixed method study investigating students’ perception of academic hardship would assist in expanding research on the retention and progression of first-year, first-semester, undergraduate students.
Conclusion

The review of the literature on various topics related to first-year undergraduate students revealed a need for more research designed to explore the complexities and nuances of students’ transition from high school to college. The reason for investigating student transitions in Nevada was to understand the complexities and nuances of the phenomenon beyond the statistical reports. However, the two key findings revealed information applicable to understanding all first-semester college students’ transition from high school to college. The findings of this study suggest that the high school to college transition is a dichotomous experience involving the constructs of self-efficacy and autonomy. Self-efficacy was demonstrated in these data through two essences that are confidence and (cautious) optimism. Whereas, autonomy was demonstrated in these data through two essences as well, which are independence and isolation. Both self-efficacy and autonomy support the following: (a) *self-efficacy*, students’ confidence when transitioning into college influences their perceptions of college preparedness, but uncertainties about academic performance can leave them feeling merely optimistic; and (b) *autonomy*, independence and the freedom of choice can be a positive experience for students transitioning from high school to college however, the extent to which they feel isolated from sources of support that may present an academic issue. Thus, students’ transitional experience may present positive and negative outcomes in the first-year of college, so it is important to provide ongoing academic support to increase their self-efficacy and adjust to autonomous learning.
Appendix A

Short Response Form

Participate in a Research Study Designed to
Understand College Preparedness Among
First-Semester College Students

Short Response Form

Please read the following statements, if all the statement applies to you, then check the appropriate box.

✓ I am at least 18 years old.
✓ I am in my first-year, first-semester, of college.
✓ I had no previous experience taking a college course, prior to enrolling at the university.
✓ I transitioned into the university from a Nevada public high school.

☐ Yes, all of the statements above apply to me and, I am interested in participating.
☐ No, one or more of the statements above does not apply to me.

Since you have selected yes, please clearly print both your first and last name as well as provide your Rebelmail email address on the designated lines below.

Please, clearly print your first and last name on the line above.

__________________________________________

__________________________________________@unlv.nevada.edu

Please, clearly print your Rebelmail email address on the line above.
Appendix B

Linked Image

You've Been Selected
to Participate in a Research Study Designed to
Understand College Preparedness Among First-Semester College Students

Dear Student,
I am pleased to inform, you have been selected to participate in a study designed to understand college preparedness among first-semester college students.

Click this image to schedule an interview session.
Appendix C

Interview Instrument

Interview Questions

1. How did you approach learning in high school?
2. How would you or someone else describe you as a student?
3. What did you think college would be like academically?
   a) Where did you get that impression?
4. How is college different from high school?
5. What has your academic experience here (at UNLV) been like thus far?
   a) What is your experience like in your classes?
6. What has been the most surprising academic experience for you?
7. What do you think you have done well or not as well academically?
8. Do you feel better or less prepared than your classmates?
9. Other than the teacher for the first-year seminar, how would you compare your teachers here to those you had in high school?
10. What concerns, if any, do you have about your current academic performance?
    a) What do you think you could improve?

Demographics

11. What gender do you identify with?
12. What ethnicity (or race) do you identify with?
13. What Nevada public high school did you graduate from?
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