COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT FIRST YEAR FALL TO FALL PERSISTENCE: EXPERIENCES OF SUCCESSFUL FIRST-TIME-IN-COLLEGE HISPANICS AT A PREDOMINATELY HISPANIC STUDENT COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN THE SOUTH TEXAS/MEXICO BORDER REGION

A Dissertation

by

LUZELMA G. CANALES

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2010

Major Subject: Educational Human Resource Development

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ABSTRACT

Community College Student First Year Fall to Fall Persistence: Experiences of Successful First-Time-In-College Hispanics at a Predominately Hispanic Student Community College in the South Texas/Mexico Border Region. (December 2010)

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As the United States and Texas become increasingly dependent on the success of Hispanics in higher education based on degree attainment, decision-makers and policy-makers are looking for strategies for addressing the education attainment needs of the Hispanic population. The purpose of this naturalistic inquiry was to understand 1) the barriers experienced by successful first year (fall to fall) first-time-in-college Hispanic students at a predominately Hispanic student community college on the South Texas/Mexico Border Region, 2) the expertise/knowledge required to successfully overcome these barriers during the first year (fall to fall) in college, and 3) based on these findings, offer suggestions and recommendations for addressing the barriers experienced by Hispanic students enrolled in such community colleges. More specifically, the researcher examined the barriers experienced by students during the first year of college, and based on their experiences, the expertise required to overcome those

barriers. The study utilized Padilla's (1991) Student Success Model as the primary theoretical framework for the study.

The data analysis led to the identification of six barrier categories, which included: 1) transition from high school to college; 2) personal and family commitments; 3) institutional support; 4) student accountability; 5) instructor issues; and 6) developmental studies/college readiness. In the findings, I include the role of general college knowledge and academic college readiness in students successfully completing the first year (fall to fall) of college. The researcher utilized the results of the study to develop the ***Community College Student Success Model for First-Time-in-College Students***, which was adapted from Padilla (1991, 2001) and Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, and Treviño (1996). The researcher recommends utilizing Lynham's (2002) General Method of Theory-Building to move towards the development of a theory for Hispanic student success in predominately Hispanic community colleges. The researcher also recommended the development and implementation of collaborative programs and services between the public school districts and the community college for facilitating the acquisition of general college knowledge by high school students before they graduate from high school.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to Oscar Canales, Jr., my husband. We embarked on this journey in 1998 with the decision that I should pursue a graduate degree, which then transitioned to pursuing a doctorate from Texas A&M. You, Michael, Danny, and Crystal have always been my greatest cheerleaders. I thank you for the amazing job you did in ensuring that the kids never missed a birthday party, family gathering, sports activity, school trip, and so many other events while I was in class, working on assignments, and completing the dissertation. I could not ask for a better support system. I attribute my success in completing this journey to the very strong foundation that you provided for our family. My dedication would not be complete if I did not recognize my children (Michael, Danny, and Crystal). You always understood when I was not in attendance at your respective activities. I am proud of the young adults you have become and look forward to seeing you accomplish your own goals in life. To my mother, sisters, brother, brother-in-law, nieces, and nephew, I thank you for always ensuring that Oscar and the kids had the support that they needed while I was in class, working on assignments, or completing the dissertation. Thank you for supporting my goal. Viva la familia!

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Above all, I would like to thank the students who participated in my study and applaud their courage for sharing their experiences and trusting me to tell their stories. I admire their persistence and resourcefulness as they balance their multiple obligations. I wish them luck as they continue their journey to degree attainment.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my family for supporting my goal and for being my greatest cheerleaders. I am especially grateful to my husband and my children for understanding the time commitment for completing the program and the dissertation. I look forward to taking a family vacation to celebrate this amazing family accomplishment.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Setting the Stage

In *The World is Flat*, Thomas L. Friedman (2006) described the new opportunities and challenges of the global nature of business. In response to questions about benefits of a flat world to the United States, he stated,

> There will be plenty of good jobs out there in the flat world for people with the right knowledge, skills, ideas, and self-motivation to seize them. But there is no sugar-coating the new challenge: Every American today would be wise to think of himself or herself as competing against every young Chinese, Indian, and Brazilian. (p. 276)

As the world transitioned from Globalization 1.0 to Globalization 2.0 to Globalization 3.0, Friedman (2006) proposed that in business we have also moved, from countries, to companies, to individuals having to "…think globally to thrive, or at least survive" (p. 276) in this flattened world. Stated simply, individuals are competing with people from throughout the world for jobs. The term globalization is commonly used to describe the impact of technological advances on the ability to complete transactions in an international market (Borga & Zeile, 2004). There are a number of indicators used to judge and compare a country's competitiveness with that of others, thus providing a

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This dissertation follows the style of *Human Resource Development Review*.

means for ranking countries within a global perspective. Ranis, Stewart and Samman (2006) proposed 12 categories of human development, which are critical to a country's ability to compete in a global market: (1) Human Development Index (HDI), (2) mental well-being, (3) empowerment, (4) political freedom, (5) social relations, (6) community well-being, (7) inequalities, (8) work conditions, (9) leisure conditions, (10) political security, (11) economic security, and (12) environmental conditions. However, HDI is the more universally accepted index by countries who are members of the United Nations.

The HDI is accepted by national leaders as an indicator of the quality of life of its population (Chatterjee, 2005; Ranis, Stewart, & Samman, 2006), which translates into a country's ability to remain competitive in the 'flat world' of business in a number of ways. The authors of the United Nations Development Programme (2006) *Human Development Report 2006* described HDI as follows:

> The HDI provides a composite measure of three dimensions of human development: living a long and healthy life (measured by life expectancy), being educated (measured by adult literacy and enrollment at the primary, secondary and tertiary level) and having a decent standard of living (measured by purchasing power, PPP, income). (p. 263)

The measures utilized to determine a country's HDI make it quite clear that to remain competitive in the knowledge based economy of the 21st Century, countries must pay attention to the literacy and education levels of its people. The authors of the *Human Development Report 2006* also suggested that the role of education in a country's ability

to compete in this knowledge based economy is exasperated by the kinds of knowledge and skills required for the jobs of today and the future. “Moreover, the structure of the American economy has changed such that it is increasingly dependent on college-educated workers” (Gandara, Horn, & Orfield, 2005, p. 255). This fact was reinforced with President Obama’s (2009) announcement of *The American Graduation Initiative*. On July 14, 2009, President Obama announced his goal is to increase the number of Americans with degrees and credentials by 2020, so that the U.S. can reestablish itself as a leader in the proportion of Americans with high levels of educational attainment. The goal requires an additional five million community college graduates by 2020 (Obama, 2009).

Increased Role of Education

In a speech given at Macomb community college on July 14, 2009, President Obama (2009) stated, “Now is the time to build a firmer, stronger foundation for growth that will not only withstand future economic storms, but that will help us thrive and compete in a global economy” (p. 1). He added, “But we also have to ensure that we're educating and preparing our people for the new jobs of the 21st century. We've got to prepare our people with the skills they need to compete in this global economy” (p 1). The President further acknowledged the role of education in competing globally by articulating his goal that “By 2020, this nation will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world” (Obama, 2009, p. 1).

The Human Resource Development (HRD) community is divided in the role of HRD in globalization (Marquardt, 2007). Marquardt (2005) argued, "… human resource development professionals have a responsibility to step in and take the leadership role, and to be sure that globalization has a human face with long-term benefits for all of humanity" (p. 129). Marquardt (2007) further proposed that the Human Resource Development (HRD) community "can assist economic development through the development of workforce skills and intellectual capital" (p. 289) during this time of globalization.

> As unskilled and semiskilled work becomes less needed, it is important that the HRD community encourages countries to put greater effort into developing high-quality education systems so that people can be prepared for the more skilled jobs of the future regardless of their gender, social group, or ethnicity. (Marquardt, 2007, pp. 289-290)

Marquardt (2007) clearly articulated his belief that the HRD community has the opportunity to be leaders by embracing globalization and recognizing "the leading role not only in economic development and workplace learning, but also in the political social, environmental, cultural, and spiritual development of people" (p. 290).

According to the authors of the *Human Development Report 2006*, "…progress in education is critical for human development in its own right and because of the links to health, equity and empowerment" (United Nations Development Programme, 2006, p. 267). These authors argued that the "…large educational inequalities of today are the income and health inequalities of tomorrow" (p. 268). The United States prides itself on

being a leader in providing educational opportunities for its people, yet the country continues to struggle with the disproportionate numbers of ethnic minorities facing low levels of literacy and a related growing educational attainment gap among the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. Although attainment gaps exist at all points along the education pipeline, much attention has been given to such issues within the K-12 system (National Research Council, 2002).

In *The Knowledge Economy and Postsecondary Education*, the National Research Council (2002) suggested it was timely for higher education systems to address the continued and growing educational attainment gap for ethnic minorities. Yet, as the face of the United States becomes more diverse, the educational attainment challenges also become more diverse. Benitez and DeAro (2004) summarized the problem as follows:

> Given the increasingly diverse population in the United States, and the national interest in fostering a skilled workforce and an educated and engaged citizenry, all educators must work to support these students; minority student success is no longer a minority issue. (p. 35)

Shantz and Rideout (2003) and McCabe (2000) suggested that as we entered the 21st century, the structure and process of the education system remained unchanged and, as a consequence, ineffective in adequately preparing individuals for a new, knowledge-based economy. Sanchez (2003) and DiConti (2004) described a knowledge based economy as one that is founded on easy access and analysis of information and driven by knowledge. In a similar vein, Kemp (2006) argued:

> To accomplish information-age educational goals, major systemic changes are essential, in line with major changes occurring in other sectors as we evolve into the information age: from standardization to customization, from compliance to initiative and from compartmentalization to integration and process orientation. (p. 20)

Evidence of a knowledge based economy can be found in both the demand for an increase in the number of higher skilled jobs and the vanishing of jobs available for unskilled workers (McCabe, 2000). McCabe reported that higher skilled jobs require the use of computers and critical thinking skills, which allow "…workers to reason through complex processes rather than follow rote behavioral instructions for how to complete discrete steps of larger processes" (p. 21). Between 1950 and 1990, unskilled labor jobs decreased from sixty percent to thirty five percent. During this same period, the number of higher skilled jobs increased from twenty percent to sixty five percent. McCabe also reported that industry experts predicted that during the early part of the 21st century, over eighty percent of jobs would require some form of postsecondary education. On July 14, 2009, President Obama stated, "So we've already taken some steps that are building the foundation for a 21st century education system here in America, one that will allow us to compete with China and India and everybody else all around the world" (p.1).

"In Texas, business and industry continues to move away from *labor*-based systems … and toward *knowledge*-based systems" (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2004, p. 9). Failure to acquire postsecondary education will have severe implications for both individuals and nations. At the individual level, those with

only a high school diploma will not have the ability to compete for higher paying jobs (Andersson, Holzer, & Lane, 2003). Moreover, people without a postsecondary education are less likely to own a home. According to McCabe (2000), competition for higher skilled jobs is no longer limited to U.S. citizens. For example, during the 1990s, the number of work visas issued to "…foreign-born, highly skilled workers" (p. 23) for highly specialized jobs in the U.S. increased dramatically. An individual's failure to acquire postsecondary education clearly impacts the dimensions of the HDI, for example, on being educated (through enrollment in the different levels of the education system) and on having a decent standard of living (through influencing the purchasing power of individuals). The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2004) reported,

> The link between education and prosperity is undisputed. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor, a person leaving a community college with a two-year associate degree can expect to earn a median salary of more than $36,400 annually – more than $7,000 over the median salary of a high school graduate and about $14,000 more than the median salary of a high school dropout. In addition, opportunities for job advancement are much more common for community college graduates. (p. 5)

In a special study for the U. S. Census Bureau, Day and Newburger (2002) reported the annual earnings for an individual based on educational levels. Table 1 reflects the mean annual earnings by education level as reported by these authors for the U.S. Census Bureau in July 2002. Day and Newburger (2002) defended using the mean annual earnings as follows:

> Though medians provide a measure of central tendency less sensitive to outliers, and so are often used in describing earnings data, means present fewer computational difficulties, both in modeling the synthetic work-life estimates and in creating statistical procedures to test these estimate. (p. 2)

Table 1. Annual Earnings by Education Level

Education	Earnings
No High School	$ 18,900
High School Diploma	$ 25,900
Some College	$ 31,200
Associate's Degree	$ 33,000
Bachelor's Degree	$ 45,400
Master's Degree	$ 54,500
Professional Degree	$ 99,300
Doctoral Degree	$ 81,400

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, July 2002

It is evident that an individual's earning potential clearly increases as the educational attainment levels increase. Experts agree that a country's ability to increase its gross national product (GNP) is tied to the level of education of its citizens (Borga & Zeile, 2004). As a person's income level increases, his/her purchasing power also increases, which has a direct impact on a country's GNP as demonstrated by its definition. A country's GNP is defined as the total dollar value of a country's final goods and services produced for consumption and/or sale for a particular time period (Panigrahi & Sivramkrishna, 2002).

From a national perspective, the U.S. could jeopardize its economic standing if the number of its citizens obtaining a postsecondary degree does not increase to meet the demands of the knowledge-based 21st century. Without an educated workforce, tax

revenue necessary for such programs as Medicare, Social Security and others could be eliminated or reduced by the federal government. Evidence of this effect can be seen in the federal government's decision in the late 1990s to increase the retirement age from 62 to 67 years to qualify for full benefits from Medicare and Social Security (Purcell, 2000). Gandara (2004) argued, "… [the] undereducation of Latino students constitutes a social and economic liability for the United States" (p. 56). Furthermore, MDC Inc. (2004) argued, "Education beyond high school is increasingly essential to people who want to earn a middle class income, and community colleges play a crucial role in preparing individuals for careers and baccalaureate programs" (p. 1). It is, therefore, imperative that we understand the educational realities and challenges of the current population of the United States.

Educational Attainment National Overview

In 2003, 84.6 percent of adults 25 years and older held a high school diploma, 52.5 percent completed some college, and 27.2 percent completed a bachelor's degree (Stoops, 2004). Four years later in 2007, the numbers remained almost unchanged with 84.5 percent of adults 25 years and older holding a high school diploma, 54.4 percent completing some college, and 27.5 percent completing a bachelor's degree (Crissey, 2009). These numbers would be acceptable for a 20th century economy, but not for a knowledge based economy (Kodrzycki, 2002). Unlike the 21st century knowledge based economy, Kodrzycki (2002) argued that the 20th century economy job market did not require skills obtained through a postsecondary education. A U.S. Census Bureau News

release dated March 28, 2005 presented a significant difference in the education attainment when segregated by ethnic groups.

Examining educational achievement of specific U.S. populations highlights additional challenges. The U.S. Census Bureau (2005) revealed that while 49.4 percent of Asians and 30.6 percent of Whites hold a bachelor's degree, only 17.6 percent of African Americans and 12.1 percent of Hispanics persist to attain a bachelor's degree. When contrasted with the respective size and growth rates of these population groups, these numbers suggest that the current postsecondary education system is primarily failing African Americans and Hispanics.

Exacerbating the lack of postsecondary educational achievement of Hispanics is the size and growth rate of this population group (McCabe, 2000). Although more Hispanics are entering postsecondary education through community colleges and universities, less than half complete a recognized award or degree. Hispanics currently comprise approximately 14 percent of the U.S. population, a figure that is expected to reach 24.5 percent by the year 2050 (McCabe, 2000, 2003). Given these demographic dynamics of the Hispanic population and the mounting impact this group can be expected to have on the national, regional and global health and well-being of the country, the United States is becoming increasingly dependent on the educational achievement of this population group as demonstrated by the data (McCabe, 2000; Suarez-Orozco, 2005). These emerging population group changes, therefore, represent new challenges for the U.S. education system of the 21st century and beyond.

McCabe (2003) emphasized the continuing growth in this educational achievement gap at all levels of the education system for Hispanics and African Americans who, he said, continue to fall behind at every level of educational attainment, "…from high school graduation and college enrollment to earning degrees and certifications" (p. 17). The early part of the 21st century continued to reflect this large educational attainment gap in high school graduations. For example, where 90 percent of Whites, 86.8 percent of Asians, and 80.6 percent of African Americans reported having a high school diploma, only 58.4 percent of Hispanics obtained a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Historically, Hispanics have not participated in higher education at the same rates as non-Hispanics (Quigley & Bailey, 2003). McCabe (2003) asserted:

> Minorities have made some educational progress in recent years, but the achievement gap between minority and majority students is still troubling. Hispanic Americans comprise approximately 14 percent of the 15- to 19-year old population, but they earn only 7 percent of the associate degrees and 6 percent of the bachelor's degrees. (p. 16)

At the commencement of the 21st century, community colleges enrolled over half of the students participating in higher education nationally (Allison, 1999; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Gonzalez, Olivas, & Calleroz, 2004; Kraemer, 1997; McCabe, 2000, 2003; Nora, 2000; Saenz, 2002). Furthermore, more Hispanics enroll in community colleges than any other racial/ethnic group (Rendon & Nora, 1989). MDC Inc. (2004) reported that community colleges "enroll 44 percent of all undergraduate

students, including 46 percent of all African American students, 55 percent of all Hispanics and 55 percent of all Native Americans" (p. 1). Saenz (2002) supported that community colleges are increasingly becoming the starting point for Hispanic students participating in higher education. He insisted, however, that although the number of Hispanics entering higher education is larger than in the past, the trend may be misleading in that "…the transfer and persistence rates [of Hispanics] are among the lowest" (p. 2) of any ethnic group. McCabe (2003) and Gonzalez, Olivas, and Calleroz (2004) agreed that higher rates of college withdrawal exist among Hispanics. These high withdrawal rates are perceived to have contributed to the low numbers in degree attainment by Hispanics (Rendon & Nora, 1989; McCabe, 2000; Bailey and Alfonso, 2005). Attinasi (1989), McCabe (2000), Anderson (2004), and Bailey and Alfonso (2005) argued that low degree attainment for Hispanics is primarily due to low persistence rates.

Persistence is defined as "…the quality of continuing steadily [to achieve the educational goal] despite problems or difficulties" (Encarta, 2006). In other words, persistence refers to continuous enrollment in coursework and consistently meeting the incremental milestones required for degree attainment, including, for example, persisting from term to term, and year to year as demonstrated by the award of a degree. Given the size and continued expected growth of the Hispanic population, along with the number of Hispanics attending community colleges, individual and national wellbeing can be expected to become increasingly dependent on the success of Hispanics at these institutions (De los Santos et al., 2005). In *Preparing Latinos/as for a Flat World: The*

Community College Role, Gonzalez-Sullivan (2007) suggested that community colleges will bear a great role in preparing Latinos for the flat world. The College Board (2008) further suggested:

> American community colleges are the nation's overlooked asset. As the United States confronts the challenges of globalization, two-year institutions are indispensable to the American future. They are the Ellis Island of American higher education, the crossroads at which K-12 education meets colleges and universities, and the institutions that give many students the tools to navigate the modern world. (p. 5)

The importance of community colleges in preparing the educated workforce of the future is also supported by the investment made by the Lumina Foundation through the *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count* initiative, "a multi-year initiative that addresses a national imperative: increasing the success of underserved students at community colleges" (MDC Inc., 2004, p. 1). In the four years since implementation, the Lumina Foundation and other partner foundations have invested close to $100 million to support the work community colleges are engaged in addressing the educational attainment gap at the national, state, and local level.

Educational Attainment State and Regional Overview

The state of educational attainment in Texas led to the development of the *Strategic Plan for Texas Public Community Colleges: 2005 – 2009* outlining the role of

community colleges in the creation of an educated workforce. In the updated plan published in 2008, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2008) articulated,

> Historically, Hispanics and African Americans have been under-represented in Texas higher education. As recently as 2007, these groups accounted for 54 percent of the state's population age 15-to-34, but only 39 percent of the state's college and university enrollment. African Americans and Hispanics make up a major part of the state's labor and leadership pool. Unless significantly greater numbers of students from these populations enter higher education and successfully complete degree or certificate programs, Texas faces an uncertain economic and political future. The window of opportunity for successfully educating these groups at the same rate as Whites is narrowing – only 10 to15 years, if the retirement of the post-World War II "Baby Boomers" from the workforce is used as a measure. (p. 5)

In *Bordering the Future: Challenge and Opportunity in the Texas Border Region*, John Sharp (1998) reported, "Border residents must share a commitment with state and local leaders to post-high school education that can lead to dramatic, lasting job gains and economic prosperity" (p. 49). Understanding the critical role of education for the future economic prosperity of the State, the Texas Higher Coordinating Board (2001) established four goals for institutions of higher education and outlined these goals in *Closing the Gaps: The Texas Higher Education Plan*. Two goals very much had to do with increasing the number of Texas citizens participating in higher education and completing degrees.

The local workforce board commissioned TIP Strategies, Inc. to conduct a study to better understand the impact of the current educational attainment levels of the population and the strategies required to respond to business and industry's need for a prepared workforce. According to the company's website, "TIP stands for Theory Into Practice" (www.tipstrategies.com/about). The study included the Lower Rio Grande Valley service area, which includes Hidalgo, Starr, Willacy, and Cameron Counties. In the *Industry Cluster Analysis for the Lower Rio Grande Valley* report, TIP Strategies, Inc. (2005) reported,

> Despite its largely positive economic climate, however, the region faces daunting challenges from a workforce development standpoint. Chief among them is the lack of educational attainment among area residents. Nearly one-half (48.7 percent) of the region's working age population does not have a high school diploma. Although college enrollment at local institutions continues to climb, the region's high school graduation rate lags that of the state, suggesting that education levels will remain a significant barrier to improving the employment prospects of residents. This issue will become even more critical as the Valley, like the country as a whole, transitions from an industrial- to a service-based economy. (p. 2)

The report's author further suggested,

> In speaking with local industry leaders and human resource managers a number of challenges were identified that created barriers to hiring and career advancement in the region. These challenges focused on the composition of the

> workforce, including the impact of young workers and the low levels of educational attainment in the region, as well as the outlook of local workers, including attitudes towards work and workplace ethics. Poor communication skills and, in some cases, limited English proficiency were also seen as major obstacles. The lack of qualified applicants with managerial and professional or technical skills was cited as a specific challenge for local human resource personnel. Insufficient information about the skills of the local labor force, as well as the burden created by assessment and screening requirements, was also among the issues identified. (p. 4)

The state of educational attainment levels is not surprising given the fact that two of the region's counties did not have access to a community college until 1993.

Educational Attainment Hidalgo and Starr Counties

South Texas College (formally known as South Texas Community College) was created by legislative mandate as a response to local leaders' reaction to a report by two consultants hired by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to determine the need for the Texas State Technical College extension campuses to continue to operate as independent campuses. The reaction was specific to the recommendation by the consultants that the McAllen, Texas campus be merged with the main campus in Harlingen. According to *A Chronicle of the Conversion of the McAllen Extension Center to the South Texas Community College* (1993), this recommendation led to the local community forming a steering committee to study the need for a comprehensive

community college in Hidalgo and Starr Counties. As reflected in Figure 1, Hidalgo and Starr Counties are located in deep South Texas along the Texas/Mexico border. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), Hidalgo and Starr Counties' population are predominately of Hispanic origin at 89.5% and 97.4%, respectively. The U.S. Census Bureau (2008) reported a population of over 700,000 for Hidalgo County and 61,000 for Starr County.

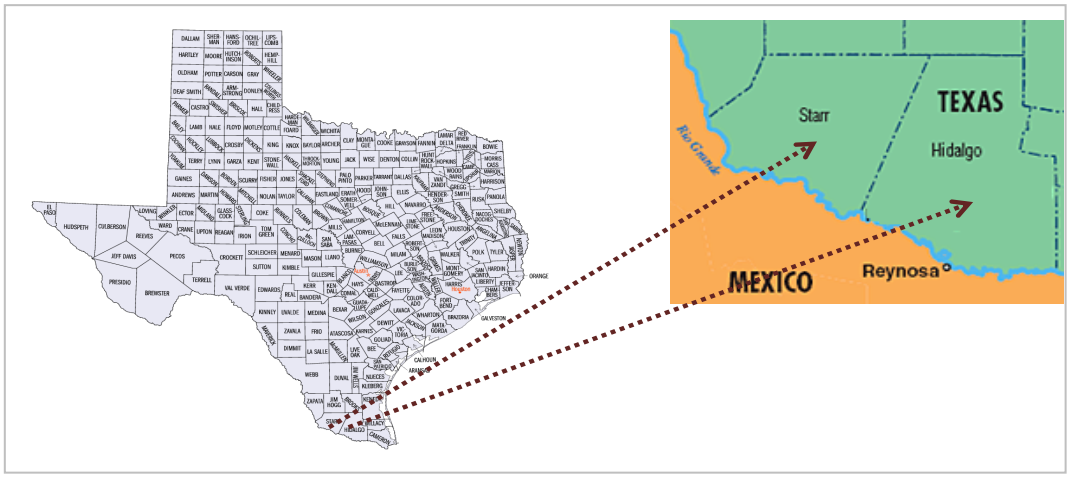

Figure 1. Map of College Service Area

The steering committee hired Dr. Alfredo de los Santos, Vice Chancellor of the Maricopa County Community College System to conduct a study on the need for a community college to serve the people of these two counties. Dr. De los Santos reported that the residents of Hidalgo and Starr Counties did not have access to a community college. He noted that the closest community colleges were in Laredo and Brownsville. The distance the residents of Hidalgo and Starr Counties would have to travel to attend

these colleges is reflected on Table 2. The table represents a range from the nearest and furthest city in each county to the respective community colleges.

Table 2. Distance to Existing Community Colleges, 1993

College	Distance (one-way trip)
Laredo Community College	
Hidalgo County	129-166
Starr County	106-129
Texas Southmost College	
Hidalgo County	56-76
Starr County	76-100

Source: Google Maps (http://maps.google.com/maps)

The educational attainment levels of the residents of these two counties were powerful indicators of the compelling need for a comprehensive community college. Along with the high numbers of residents without formal education, Hidalgo and Starr Counties suffered of double digit unemployment rates, 24.1% and 40.3% respectively. Table 3 includes the demographics presented by De los Santos (1992) in his proposal to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to create South Texas College. De los Santos (1992) limited the data to only include the 18 years and older population, which represents college going age population in the two-county area. Table 3, therefore, only represents a portion of the total population for both Hidalgo and Starr Counties.

In 2008, the educational attainment levels in Hidalgo and Starr Counties presented a disturbing look at the continued low levels of educational attainment in the two counties. The educational attainment levels in 2008 for the United States, Texas, Hidalgo County, and Starr County are presented in Table 4.

Table 3. Educational Attainment of Persons 18 Years Old and Over, 1990

	Hidalgo	Percent	Starr	Percent
1990 Population	383,545		40,518	
Less than 9th grade	86,705	22.61	12,018	29.81
9th/12th-no diploma	38,634	10.07	4,130	10.19
High school graduate/GED	51,830	13.45	4,667	11.52
Some college, no degree	35,409	9.23	1,889	4.66
Associate degree	6,869	1.79	422	1.04
Bachelor's degree	16,026	4.18	883	2.18
Graduate or professional degree	7,544	1.97	530	1.31

Source: *South Texas Community College: A Proposal to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board* by De los Santos (1992)

Table 4. Educational Attainment Demographics, 2008

Education Level	U.S. % of Population	Texas % of Population	Hidalgo County % of Population	Starr County % of Population
Less Than 9th Grade	6%	11%	31%	41%
9th Grade to 12th Grade	9%	12%	16%	21%
High School Diploma	29%	24%	21%	18%
Some College	22%	23%	15%	10%
Associate's Degree	6%	5%	3%	2%
Bachelor's Degree	18%	17%	9%	4%
Graduate Degree and Higher	10%	8%	5%	4%
Total	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Source: EMSI Complete Employment - September 2007 and Prepared by South Texas College Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness

The data in Table 4 provides evidence of Hidalgo and Starr Counties continuing to trail the country and the state in the percentage of its 25 years and older adult population that hold a high school diploma, some college, or a degree. Over two thirds of the population had less than a high school diploma, with 42% having less than a 9th grade education. The percentage of individuals with an associate degree or higher is not growing at the same rate as the percentage of students with some degree. The data clearly demonstrate

that these two counties have a serious problem in students persisting to degree attainment.

Unlike Texas and the United States, Hidalgo and Starr Counties are a majority minority region. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), Hidalgo and Starr Counties' Hispanic population are 89.5% and 97.4%, respectively, while Hispanics comprise only 35.7% of the total population in Texas. Although enrollment at South Texas College increased from approximately 1,000 students in 1993 to over 27,000 in the Fall 2009, the stagnant degree completion and persistence rates continue to contribute to the low educational attainment levels in Hidalgo and Starr Counties. A historical perspective of the fall-to-fall persistence rates for first-time-in-college students at South Texas College from 1996 to 2006 is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Fall-to-Fall Persistence Rates at South Texas College, 1996-2006

	Fall 1996	Fall 1997	Fall 1998	Fall 1999	Fall 2000	Fall 2001	Fall 2002	Fall 2003	Fall 2004	Fall 2005	Fall 2006
FTIC Cohort	1,180	1,441	1,925	1,931	2,173	3,201	1,992	3,811	2,273	2,102	3,105
Retained Fall-to-Fall	504	775	958	947	1,146	1,468	1,062	1,898	1,163	1,116	1,653
Percentage Retained	43%	54%	50%	49%	53%	46%	53%	50%	51%	53%	53%

Source: Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, South Texas College

Even with these low percentages, Community College Week (2007) reported that South Texas College ranked in the top one hundred of associate degree producers in the United States. In 2007, South Texas College ranked 73rd among the nation's 1,195 community colleges in awarding associate degrees in all disciplines; first in awarding

associate degrees in education; and third in awarding associate degrees to Hispanics. In 2009, South Texas College climbed to 41st in awarding associate degrees in all disciplines (Community College Week, 2009). With approximately 95% Hispanic enrollment, South Texas College could impact the nation's picture of Hispanic student success by increasing persistence rates, which will translate to higher rates of degree attainment for Hispanic students in the region, state, and nation.

The preceding descriptive analysis included the role of education in the economic wellbeing of the nation, state and local regions; and the anticipated impact thereon by the rapidly growing Hispanic population and the lack of educational attainment of this ethnic group. Following, then, was an overview of the educational attainment levels of the national, state, and regional populations. The overview was followed by the educational attainment levels for the residents of Hidalgo and Starr Counties in Texas, which lag the nation and state in the level of education of its population. Having set the stage for the problem, the following sections include a detailed description of the problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, operational definitions, assumptions, delimitations and limitations, and the significance of the study. The following section begins with the problem statement.

Statement of the Problem

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a statement of the problem is critical to the design and conduct of a naturalistic inquiry. They further suggested that such a statement should justify the need for the study and thereby address a problem that

emerged from the literature. The following subsections articulate the context and statement of the problem, the latter in the form of a problem syllogism (Guba, 1978), for this proposed study.

The Context of the Problem

The 21st century knowledge based economy requires a high skilled labor force, which in turn requires that individuals complete higher education. There is an increasing need for high skilled labor for the United States and Texas, specifically, to remain competitive. Peterson and Assanie (2005) argued, "The key issue facing Texas will be to reduce the economic and educational disparities prevalent among the state's ethnic groups as the population continues to grow and evolve" (p. 37). Furthermore, given the size and rapid growth of the Hispanic population, Texas is increasingly becoming dependent on the educational achievement of the Hispanic population. Petersen and Assanie (2005) offered evidence that by 2020 Hispanics will represent the majority and dominant population in Texas. They further suggested, "Hispanics are expected to make up the majority of the labor force in Texas by 2040" (p. 42). However, the new growth of the Hispanic population presents a new challenge for the education system of the 21st century as it relates to the education attainment success gap. Therefore, this gap must be addressed, and furthermore determining and addressing the barriers to successful progression to obtaining a higher education is an essential way of addressing this gap. Overcoming the low success rate among Hispanics will ensure that Texas can remain competitive in a knowledge based global economy. "For the Texas economy to remain

robust, it is essential that the state's education system make progress on at least two fronts: (1) investing in resources to improve overall student achievement, and (2) developing programs that help bridge the educational attainment gap between racial and ethnic groups" (Peterson & Assanie, 2005, p.43).

The Problem Statement

Given the context of the problem presented in the previous section, the need to explore the experiences of successful first year fall to fall first-time-in-college Hispanics enrolled in community colleges is particularly urgent in regard to the ability of the United States and Texas to remain competitive in the 21st century knowledge based economy. Research relevant to the experiences of successful first year fall to fall first-time-in-college Hispanics enrolled at community colleges is lacking in the existing research.

An increasing number of Hispanics are choosing to start their higher education journey in community colleges. However, less than half of Hispanic students in community college persist to complete a degree. Furthermore, Hispanic students attending community colleges appear to face many different barriers to successfully completing a college degree. Therefore, the knowledge students must have about an institution may be one approach to overcoming barriers to completing a college degree. By understanding the experiences in the first full year as first time community college students, we may begin to develop a roadmap for success.

As the researcher, I found that existing empirical research supports the fact that Hispanic community college students are experiencing barriers to successful degree attainment. However, authors of existing research recognized a gap in the understanding of the experiences of these students as they encounter barriers and how they overcome these barriers. Furthermore, policy makers, community college administrators, faculty, and staff have pre-established expectations about the knowledge that students have as it pertains to persisting in higher education and meeting their educational goals, more specifically obtaining a college degree.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this naturalistic inquiry was 1) to understand the barriers experienced by successful first year (fall to fall) first-time-in-college Hispanic students at a predominately Hispanic student community college on the South Texas/Mexico Border Region, 2) to understand the expertise/knowledge required to successfully overcome these barriers during the first year (fall to fall) in college, and 3) based on these findings, offer suggestions and recommendations for addressing the barriers experienced by Hispanic students enrolled in such community colleges to increase first year fall to fall persistence. More specifically, the researcher examined the barriers experienced by students during the first year of college, and based on their experience, the expertise required to overcome those barriers.

The findings may 1) inform policy makers, administrators, faculty and staff in developing effective procedures, services, and programs to address and/or minimize the

barriers to academic success experienced by students in higher education; 2) serve to inform the development and refinement of theories on student persistence in higher education at a local level; and 3) add to the literature on persistence of Hispanic students enrolled in a predominately Hispanic student enrolling community colleges.

The purpose of the study is followed by the research questions "…that will guide the inquiry, and … determine how data are to be collected [analyzed and reported]" (Merriam, 1998, p. 60).

The Research Questions

Research questions play a number of very purposeful roles in any disciplined inquiry. Providing further clarification, Maxwell (2005) suggested,

> …the function of your research questions is to explain specifically what your study will attempt to learn or understand. In your research *design*, the research questions serve two other vital functions: to help you to focus the study (the questions' relationship to your goals and conceptual framework) and to give you guidance for how to conduct it (their relationship to methods and validity). (p.67)

With this purpose in mind, the following research questions were used to guide the research and other design procedures (which are presented and discussed in the next sections) for the study.

1. What were the experiences of successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas during their first year (fall to fall)?

2. What barriers had to be faced and overcome by successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?
3. What knowledge did successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas have to have in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?
4. What actions must successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas take in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?

As with any study, it is helpful to provide a list of operational definitions of terms frequently used in the description of the study. I provide these definitions in the following section.

Operational Definitions

The following definitions are offered to establish a common understanding of the terms frequently utilized in the study.

1. Completion: a student success indicator measured by course and degree completion (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2008).
2. First-time-in-college: descriptor utilized to designate the initial term of enrollment by a student at the community college (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2008).

3. Minority students: a term used to describe students of Hispanic, African American, and Native American ethnicities (U. S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2004).
4. Predominately Hispanic community college: a community college with over ninety percent Hispanic student enrollment (South Texas Community College, 2002).
5. Student persistence: a student success indicator measured by student re-enrolling from term to term (Tinto, 1997).
6. South Texas: The Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts (2008) defines South Texas as a 28 county region along Texas/Mexico border region, which includes Hidalgo and Starr Counties.
7. THEA: The Pearson Education, Inc. Program Overview website (http://www.thea.nesinc.com/TA11_overview.asp) describes the THEA as the Texas Higher Education Assessment, which "was approved by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board … for use by Texas institutions of higher education as an assessment instrument to evaluate incoming students" for college readiness.

Assumptions

As the researcher, I accepted some basic assumptions about the quality of the data utilized for this study. Basic assumptions help make the boundary of representation

of the data clear and explicit. To this end, the following four assumptions were made about the study data:

1. The focus group and individual interview participants were open and honest in their responses to the questions;
2. The existing focus group data sets were collected utilizing the Padilla's (1991, 2001) Student Success Model (SSM);
3. Interpretation of existing focus group data sets accurately reflects the responses of the participants; and
4. The data collected and analyzed accurately reflects the student participant perspectives.

Outlining the study assumptions also became necessary, because I relied on existing data sets as sources against which to triangulate the newly collected study data sets.

Delimitations and Limitations

In addition to assumptions pertaining to the study, there are a number of delimitations, the latter representing the self-imposed (by the researcher) boundaries applicable to the study. These delimitations, in turn, inform the restrictions (also known as limitations) of the study. The following description provides insights into the delimitations and subsequent limitations applicable to this study.

This study was conducted within the boundaries of South Texas College, a community college in the South Texas/Mexico border region. South Texas College has

three comprehensive campuses and two specialized campuses. The study, however, was further delimited to include only participants from the three comprehensive campuses, which are known as the Pecan, Mid-Valley, and Starr County Campuses. The study was further focused on the lived experiences of successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students at this predominantly Hispanic community college in South Texas who have persisted through their first year (fall to fall) of enrollment at this college. These delimitations were then used to inform the identification of limitations applicable to the study.

The study was limited to Hispanic students' perspectives on successful first year (fall to fall) persistence of first-time-in-college students at a predominantly Hispanic student community college in south Texas, where first year persistence was defined as fall-to-fall persistence. A further limitation pertained to the data collection, which was limited to three focus groups of six to seven students, conducted over a ninety minute time period each (Patton, 1990; Krueger & Casey, 2000). Furthermore, the participants were purposefully selected from first-time-in-college Hispanic students enrolled in South Texas College's Pecan, Mid-Valley, and Starr County Campuses during the Fall 2006 semester and reenrolling in the Fall 2007 semester. The study also included three in-depth interviews of approximately one hour per student from the same population group. Although this approach to data collection limits the transferability of the study findings, the approach facilitated increased trustworthiness in the data, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Significance of the Study and Applicability to Human Resource Development

In the previous sections of this chapter, I articulated the challenge that community colleges are facing with increasing the number of Hispanics completing college degrees. President Obama (2009) communicated the emerging role of community colleges in preparing a competitive workforce for the United States to maintain a leadership role in the 21st century global economy by increasing the number of Americans with degrees. As the Hispanic population continues to increase in size and growth rate, the United States and Texas become increasingly dependent on the success of Hispanics in higher education based on degree attainment demanding that decision- and policy-makers identify strategies for addressing the educational attainment needs of the Hispanic population (McCabe, 2000, 2003). This need was articulated by the Texas Workforce Investment Council (2009) as a critical issue for Texas.

> In recent years, the Council identified and discussed several trends that affect the availability of qualified workers including the increased demand for middle-skilled jobs, the need for more adult literacy and English language training, and shifting demographics (e.g., maturing population, Hispanic population growth). These and other critical issues must be addressed to ensure that Texas prospers and builds on the economic growth of the last decade. (p. 10)

Quigley and Bailey (2003) emphasized, "Community colleges are increasingly being seen as key institutions in the strength and development of their local economies" (p. 70). In response, community colleges must gain a greater understanding of the

barriers that students face in persisting to degree attainment. The first step is to understand the experiences of community college students during the first year (fall to fall) of college through an HRD lens as proposed in this study.

Swanson (1995) and Swanson and Holton (2001) defined HRD as "a process for developing and unleashing human expertise through organization development and personnel training and development for the purpose of improving performance" (p. 4). Swanson's (1995) definition focused on "(1) training and development and (2) organizational development" (p. 208). Wimbiscus (1995) added, "… the field of HRD has emerged as a discipline charged with the development of people, processes, and organizations so that all three may contribute to improved organizational effectiveness and success" (p. 5). Additionally, McLean (2004) suggested that HRD "… has traditionally been defined in the context of the individual, the work team, the organization, or the work process" (p. 269). However, the need to address regional, international, and national HRD continues to be the focus of scholarly debate among the HRD community (McLean, 2004; Lynham & Cunningham, 2004; Lynham &Cunningham, 2006; McLean, 2006; McLean, 2007; Wang & McLean, 2007; Ahn & McLean, 2006). McLean and McLean (2001) proposed the need for a more extensive definition for national human resource development (NHRD).

> Human resource development is any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop adults' work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity, and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/team gain,

> or for the benefit of an organization, community, nation or, ultimately the whole of humanity. (p. 322)

Cho and McLean (2004) further proposed "five models" (p. 382) for NHRD: 1) centralized, 2) transitional, 3) government-initiated, 4) decentralized/free-market, and 5) small-nation. These authors suggested the United States would "fit" (p. 385) the decentralized/free-market model.

> Under this model, the major forces pushing HRD efforts come from the competitive market. HRD has been normally regarded activities at the enterprise level. The private sector is mostly responsible for education and training, although the state supports the private sector in an indirect way. Second, the model is based on a firm individualistic value in which individuals are responsible for their own learning and growth. (p. 385)

Cho and McLean (2004) further suggested that excellent NHRD leads to "desirable outcomes" (p. 389) including improving "the quality of higher education institutions" (p. 390) along with "the quality of primary and secondary education" (p. 390). Using the NHRD lens, community colleges are tasked to improve the performance outcomes that will lead to increased student success and degree attainment of the Hispanic population.

State, regional, and local leaders validated the role of community colleges in preparing a competitive workforce in a predominately Hispanic region (Hidalgo and Starr Counties) through the creation of South Texas College by legislative mandate (South Texas Community College, 1993). In *South Texas Community College: A Proposal to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board*, De los Santos (1992)

recommended the creation of South Texas Community College as a means to improve the educational attainment levels of the predominately Hispanic population of the region and to improve the economic viability and competitiveness of the region.

As such, the creation of South Texas Community College in 1993 operationalized McLean and McLean's (2001) definition of HRD. Through use of a "process" (McLean & McLean, 2001, p. 390), the creation of South Texas Community College contributed to short and long term benefits at the local, regional, state, and national levels. Additional evidence was provided by the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts (2008) and the Texas Higher Education coordinating Board (2004, 2008) when these organizations articulated the role of community colleges in preparing a skilled workforce and increasing educational attainment among the Hispanic population as a priority for Texas to maintain a competitive advantage in the 21st century global economy.

In keeping with McLean and McLean's (2001) definition, decision-makers and policy-makers could utilize the findings of this study to make progress towards "desirable outcomes" through "excellent HRD" (p. 389) through improved performance by informing existing and/or new processes, services, and programs to support Hispanic students enrolling in community colleges. Using Marquardt's (2007) argument, the findings provide insights that could be used by HRD professionals to develop training and development programs to improve individual and organizational performance to increase student success by facilitating a greater understanding of the barriers faced by students and the knowledge required to overcome such barriers. More specifically,

Marquardt (2007) recommended "… that HRD professionals focus more attention on training teachers and administrators, as well as policy makers at local, state, and national levels" (p. 290).

Garavan, McGuire, and O'Donnel (2004) suggested that at the individual level, "… the analysis focuses on the examination of constructs such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, motivation to learn, motivation through expectation, personal development, and the need and expectations of learning" (Garavan, McGuire, & O'Donnel, 2004, p. 419). In this study, I provide evidence of the constructs that Hispanic students leverage to successfully persist from fall to fall in their first year of college enrollment.

As the researcher, I can use the findings of this study to develop a local model for persistence of first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominantly Hispanic community college in South Texas. I can also use the findings of the study to inform the refinement of Padilla's (1991) student success model by grounding it in the specific local case study setting. In addition, I could utilize the findings to recommend and inform improved performance at the individual, work team/process, and organizational level at South Texas College (site of field study). By increasing first year fall to fall persistence of Hispanic students, community colleges will be one step closer to meeting the goal of increasing educational attainment for Hispanics.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A researcher utilizes the literature review to assist in identifying what is already known and what is not known about a phenomenon. The literature review is also the basis for establishing "… a foundation – a theoretical framework – for the problem to be investigated …" (Merriam, 1998, p. 51). This chapter includes five major sections: 1) research on student persistence; 2) research on community colleges and student persistence; 3) models of persistence of minority students in community colleges; 4) research on persistence of Hispanic and other students in community colleges; and 5) two kinds of models of student persistence in colleges and universities. The first section, research on student persistence, consists of five subsections outlining the theories in the literature and challenges to existing theories on student persistence.

Research on Student Persistence

The literature on student persistence can be traced to Vincent Tinto's theory in 1975. The following subsections include a synthesis of the research on student persistence.

Tinto's 1975 Theory of Student Integration

Bailey and Alfonso (2005) contended that "Tinto's (1975, 1993) *student integration* model forms the conceptual basis of much of the research on persistence and graduation" (p. 11). Tinto's (1975) student integration theory continues to be the most

cited when conducting searches on persistence. In their own research on the topic, Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) found that Tinto's work has been cited more than 775 times. Tinto's (1975) student integration model was developed to facilitate the understanding of student departure from college and to this end he proposed:

> The process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person's experiences in those systems (as measured by his normative and structural integration) continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout. (p. 94)

Tinto's (1975) student integration model focused on students' interaction within the college environment, which he believes happens through academic and social integration. Tinto (1975) defined academic integration as "… an individual's interaction can be measured in terms of both his grade performance and his intellectual development during the college years" (p. 104). He proposed, "… social integration occurs primarily through informal peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and administrative personnel within the college" (p. 107).

Tinto (1975) suggested that academic and social integration are key factors in persistence for students in college. Tinto further argued that students arrive at college with goal and institutional commitments, which are influenced by background attributes of the individual student, and that these goals and institutional commitments then influence the decisions of students to stay (also termed persist) or dropout from college.

Pascarella, Duby, and Iverson's 1983 Theory of College Withdrawal

Pascarella, Duby, and Iverson (1983) offered an alternative model of college withdrawal in a commuter institution setting, which attempts to explain persistence and/or withdrawal behavior in commuter institutions, particularly urban-commuter universities. They identified intent, commitment to re-enroll, as an additional characteristic to explain the student dropout/persistence decision making process. Pascarella, Duby, and Iverson (1983) expanded Tinto's student integration model to "…be more appropriate in less traditional postsecondary institutions where students reside off-campus" (p. 98). As a result, these authors proposed a model of college withdrawal in a commuter institution setting presenting six new or revised effects on persistence, namely student background characteristics, institutional commitment effect on academic and social integration; academic and social integration effect on institutional commitment; background characteristics and social integration direct effect on persistence; institutional commitment effect on intention; and intention direct effect on persistence. However, this revised model retained social and academic integration as proposed by Tinto (1975) "…as major elements of the model" (p. 99). Pascarella, Duby, and Iverson (1983) suggested,

> … interactions with the social and academic systems of the commuter institution environment do not totally mediate the influence of student pre-college characteristics on subsequent persistence/withdrawal behavior. Rather, as the revised model indicates, student pre-college characteristics can be expected to have rather strong direct effects on persistence. (p. 99)

Bean and Metzner 1985 Theory of Nontraditional Student Attrition

Bean and Metzner (1985) offered a model of nontraditional, "older, part-time, and commuter," (p. 485) student attrition to explain departure of nontraditional students from four- and two-year institutions of higher education, and in support of this model argued:

> Of the 12 million college students enrolled today, over half of the undergraduate students are women, 2 of 5 are over 25 years old, more than 40% attend college part-time, and 1 of 6 is a member of an ethnic minority group. Community colleges rely almost exclusively on older, part-time, commuter students. (p. 486)

These authors suggested that students' decision to withdraw from college/university could be attributed to four sets of variables: GPA, intent to leave, background and defining variables, and environmental variables. They explained further:

> Students with poor academic performance are expected to drop out at higher rates than students who perform well, and GPA is expected to be based primarily on past (high school) academic performance. The second major factor is intent to leave, which is expected to be influenced primarily by the psychological outcomes but also by the academic variables. The third group of variables expected to affect attrition are the background and defining variables–primarily high school performance and educational goals. These effects, however, may be mediated by the other endogenous variables in the model. Finally, the environmental variables are expected to have substantial direct effects on dropout decisions. (p. 490)

By deemphasizing the role of social integration for nontraditional students, Bean and Metzner (1985) supported the notion that social integration has an indirect effect on the decision to dropout (not persist) by nontraditional students. Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) argued, "…the validity of Tinto's theory continues as an open question in liberal arts and two-year colleges and across different racial or ethnic groups" (p. 20).

Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon 2004 Theory of Student Departure in Residential Colleges and Universities and Theory of Student Departure in Commuter Colleges and Universities

Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) argued that retention of college students is perhaps the greatest challenge and problem facing higher education now and in the future. In their monograph, *Understanding and Reducing College Student Departure*, they presented a clear case for continued and increased focus on student retention. They further undertook the task of revising Tinto's (1975) student integration model based on the empirical data supporting the propositions put forward by Tinto as influencing social integration for residential college students. Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) recognized that the student integration model would have to be enhanced to include strong support groups for minority students, and as a result suggested:

> Minority students in residential colleges and universities with small numbers of minority students enrolled may perceive that the potential for community does

> not exist at their institution because few, if any, cultural enclaves or affinity student subgroups exist. Thus, such students experience less social integration because of the lack of communal potential at their chosen institution. (p. 33)

These authors subsequently contended, "… no formal … theory that accounts for student departure in commuter colleges and universities currently exists" (p. 35). As a result, they felt it necessary to develop a model of student departure in commuter colleges and universities based on the learnings from the empirical studies conducted by the researchers. Their proposed model of student departure in commuter colleges and universities was drawn from a conceptual framework that was based on "…economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological" (p. 35) theoretical orientations.

Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) stated, "The identification of factors that influence social integration constitutes a major thrust of a revision of Tinto's internationalist theory. They describe six influences on social integration derived from the body of literature of theory and research on college student departure" (p. 21) from residential schools. These authors propose the six propositions as a means to describe the positive and negative impact of student's perception with (a) institutional commitment to student welfare, (b) institutional integrity, (c) campus community, (d) proactive social adjustment strategies, (e) social interactions, and (f) cost of attendance.

Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) contended that a theory to address "student departure in commuter colleges and universities [does not] currently exist" (p. 35). They, therefore, proposed an additional model based on the learnings of the empirical studies conducted by researchers. Bailey and Alfonso (2005), however,

suggested that this model "leans more toward a four-year college perspective, partly because it relies on a body of research that is dominated by four-year college studies" (p. 12).

The theory's conceptual framework is based on "economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological" (p. 35) theoretical orientations (Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon, 2004). Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) proposed sixteen propositions or elements of a theory of student departure in commuter schools. Table 6 represents the theoretical orientation and respective propositions or elements identified by these authors.

Table 6. Summary of Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) Theoretical Orientations and Propositions/Elements

Theoretical Orientation	Propositions/Elements
A. Economic	1. Cost of Attendance
B. Organizational	2. Institutional Commitment to Student Welfare
	3. Institutional Integrity
C. Psychological	4. Motivation to Graduate
	5. Control and Order Needs
	6. Desire to Achieve
	7. Awareness Decisions/Actions
	8. Affiliation Needs
D. Sociological	9. Educational Level of Parents
	10. Support from Significant Others
	11. Participation in Communities Learning
	12. Prior Socialization Engagement
E. Other	13. Student Entry Characteristics
	14. Initial Institutional Commitment
	15. Perceived Academic Integration
	16. Subsequent Institutional Commitment

In the following subsection, I include a synthesis of the challenges to existing theories on student persistence that are reflected in the literature.

Challenges to Existing Theories on Student Persistence

Tierney (1999) argued that Tinto's (1975) student integration model was not well suited for minority students and suggested, "Such a model should contend that students of color on predominately White campuses be able to affirm, rather than reject, who they are" (p. 89). It is, therefore, the institution's responsibility to establish formal support systems for these students.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) proposed that existing models do not account for the issues related to diverse student populations. These authors argued that the models do not explain the "…multicultural communities" and "…the problems and experiences of racial-ethnic minorities" (p. 340) in institutions of higher education.

Padilla (1991) investigated ways to help minority students in colleges and universities achieve better persistence related outcomes, for example, successfully completing a course, a term, a degree and/or formal qualifications. He identified the influence of three kinds of knowledge on such student outcomes. The first was the theoretical knowledge taught in formal programs; the second was local, heuristic knowledge learned experientially and culturally; and the third was the compiled knowledge representing a combination of the theoretical and heuristic knowledge. He concluded that institutions should do more to identify, honor and provide for the

acquisition of local, heuristic knowledge and offered an approach for developing a local model of minority student success in college.

Research on Community Colleges and Student Persistence

Quigley and Bailey (2003) and Bailey and Alfonso (2005) argued that research on community colleges is scarce at best. They proposed that research on community colleges must be conducted to attempt to explain the experiences of community college students. They further suggested that the background variables that community college students bring with them must be studied to determine the direct and indirect effects on decisions to remain or dropout of the educational system.

The authors of the studies on persistence of community college students have failed to identify a conceptual framework for Hispanics enrolled in predominately Hispanic community colleges. Zamani (2000) asserted, "… little focus has been given to formulating theoretical models that seek to explain retention and attrition as they relate to students of color" (p. 97). The authors of studies on persistence of Hispanic students continue to focus on students attending four-year institutions (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). McCabe (2003), Bailey and Alfonso (2005), and Quigley and Bailey (2003) suggested that most studies on student persistence continue to focus on four year institutions, which was supported by a thorough search using the JSTOR, EBSCOhost, Wilson, Highwire Press, and ERIC online databases.

Model of Persistence of Minority Students in Community Colleges

In the following section, I present several subsections which are intended to provide an understanding of one model of persistence of minority students in community colleges, Padilla's (1991) Student Success Model. In these subsections, I articulate the three major assumptions of the Student Success Model. The first subsection represents a thorough discussion on the role of this knowledge in assisting students in overcoming barriers. The second subsection addresses the College Campus as a Black Box. The third and final subsection includes a description of how barriers are contextually dependent by institution and student group type.

The Role of Knowledge

Padilla (1991) proposed the Student Success Model (SSM) in response to a lack of models that facilitate understanding "on helping students to succeed after they enroll in a particular institution" (p. 82). He suggested that focusing on helping student succeed once they enroll,

> … has implications for institutions that are seeking ways to be more successful at retaining and graduating students. By shifting the focus to retention and graduation, assessment is viewed from a broader perspective that encompasses not only book knowledge but also what is commonly called "heuristic knowledge. (p. 82)

Knowledge can be defined as "the intellective mental components acquired and retained through study and experience" (Swanson & Holton, 2001, p. 208). Harmon and King

(1985) argued, “Knowledge can be classified in a number of ways” (p. 30). Harmon and King utilized the model in Figure 2 to describe the “varieties of knowledge” (p. 30).

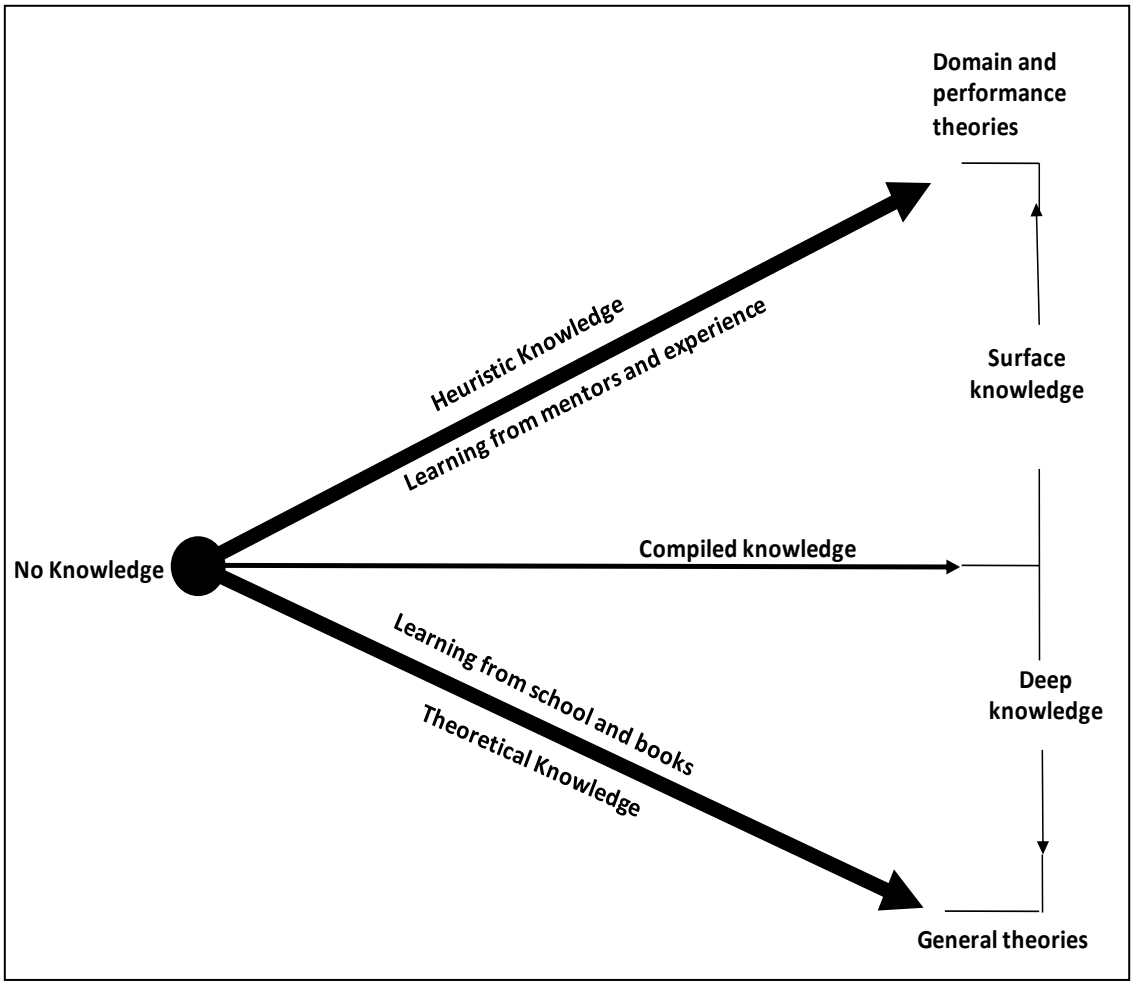

Figure 2. Varieties of Knowledge Adapted from Harmon & King (1985)

Harmon and King (1985) stated,

> The level horizontal arrow describes a dimension that indicates how much compiled knowledge an individual has acquired. By compiled knowledge we mean information that is organized, indexed, and stored in such a way that it is easily accessed. Compiled knowledge is readily usable for problems solving. …

> The compiling process occurs in two complementary ways. First, topics may be studied formally, as in a school or when we attend lectures and read textbooks. … A second way that knowledge can be compiled is by means of experience or by learning from a mentor. (pp. 30-31)

Harmon and King (1985) further suggested that compiled heuristic knowledge provides humans an advantage when faced with problem solving. Padilla (1991) drew from Harmon and King's work to further explain the applications of the three types of knowledge (theoretical, heuristic, and compiled) and the implications for student success in a college campus. The following subsections provide a description of each type of knowledge.

Theoretical Knowledge

Padilla (1991) articulated that theoretical knowledge is domain independent and can be explained through laws, axioms, and principles. It is knowledge that is gained through formal study processes such as school and textbooks. Harmon and King (1985) suggested, "Successful students emerge from courses … with a firm grasp of the terms, equations, and laws that constitute the formal theories and accepted principles of their disciplines" (p. 30). They argued, however, that understanding principles, axioms, and laws does not translate application of this "knowledge in any practical way" (p. 30).

Heuristic Knowledge

Padilla (1991) argued that heuristic knowledge is experiential in nature. He suggested that heuristic knowledge is domain dependent and critical in problem solving. Students draw from the heuristic knowledge that is "chunked and stored" (Padilla, 1991, p. 82) until retrieved by students when faced with having to solve a problem encountered on campus. According to Padilla, students can acquire heuristic knowledge through mentors and/or experience.

Compiled Knowledge

Padilla (1991) described compiled knowledge as the "composite of the other two types" (p. 82). He proposed that compiled knowledge increases as a student accumulates both theoretical and heuristic knowledge. Harmon and King (1985) stated, "By compiled knowledge we mean information that is organized, indexed, and stored in such a way that it is easily accessed. Compiled knowledge is readily usable for problem solving" (p. 30). As individuals utilize increased levels of compiled knowledge (heuristic and theoretical) to solve problems effectively, they can be viewed as having expertise (Padilla, 1991, 2001; Harmon & King, 1985). Herling (2000) agreed, "The key to expertise thus appears to lie in an individual's propensity to solve problems" (p. 15). In the following section, I further describe Padilla's suggestion that students can be viewed as experts with theoretical, heuristic, and compiled knowledge necessary to succeed in college.

Students as Experts

By definition, individuals who can draw upon their compiled knowledge to solve daily problems in an effective and efficient way demonstrate expertise in any area under consideration and/or review (Padilla, 1991, 2001; Harmon & King, 1985; Herling, 2000). Herling (2000) suggested, "It is generally agreed that the presence of expertise is readily recognized in an individual's actions" (p.16). Herling (2000) and Herling and Provo (2000) also proposed that expertise is domain specific, and "Individual expertise … comprises related value judgments, knowledge and skill sets, lived experiences, and problem-solving abilities" (p. 5). In a college specific domain, college students demonstrate expertise as they progress to degree completion. Students making progress towards degree completion draw upon their compiled knowledge to effectively and efficiently solve problems (barriers) encountered while in college (Padilla, 1991, 2001; Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez & Treviño, 1996).

Padilla (1991, 2001) and Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez and Treviño (1996) proposed that barriers are contextually dependent at the institution, group, and/or individual level. In the following section, I provide a description of the contextual nature of barriers in the student success model.

Contextual Barriers

Padilla (1991, 2001) and Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez and Treviño (1996) suggested that all students face barriers as they progress through the Black Box (a specific college campus). They further suggested that successful students, students

making progress towards degree completion), utilize compiled knowledge to overcome or negotiate campus specific barriers. The process of overcoming these barriers is a student's ability to "… take effective actions to overcome each specific barrier that they face and that such actions are based on specific knowledge that is relevant to the problem at hand" (Padilla, 2001, p.5). Understanding the knowledge and actions that a student utilized to overcome/negotiate the barriers encountered in a specific campus is critical to developing a local (domain specific) model for student success. In the following section, I provide further description of the Padilla's Student Success Model.

Padilla's Student Success Model

Padilla's (1991) Student Success Model "focuses on the knowledge that … [successful] students possess and the actions that they employ to overcome barriers" (p. 5). In this model, Padilla (1991) argued that successful college students become experts in a specific college as they successfully progress towards their goal of degree attainment. Figure 3 is a representation of the Student Success Model developed by Padilla (1991) and further enhanced by Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez and Treviño (1996). As indicated earlier, these authors suggested that this model is college specific and is intended to represent the key elements in successfully completing a degree.

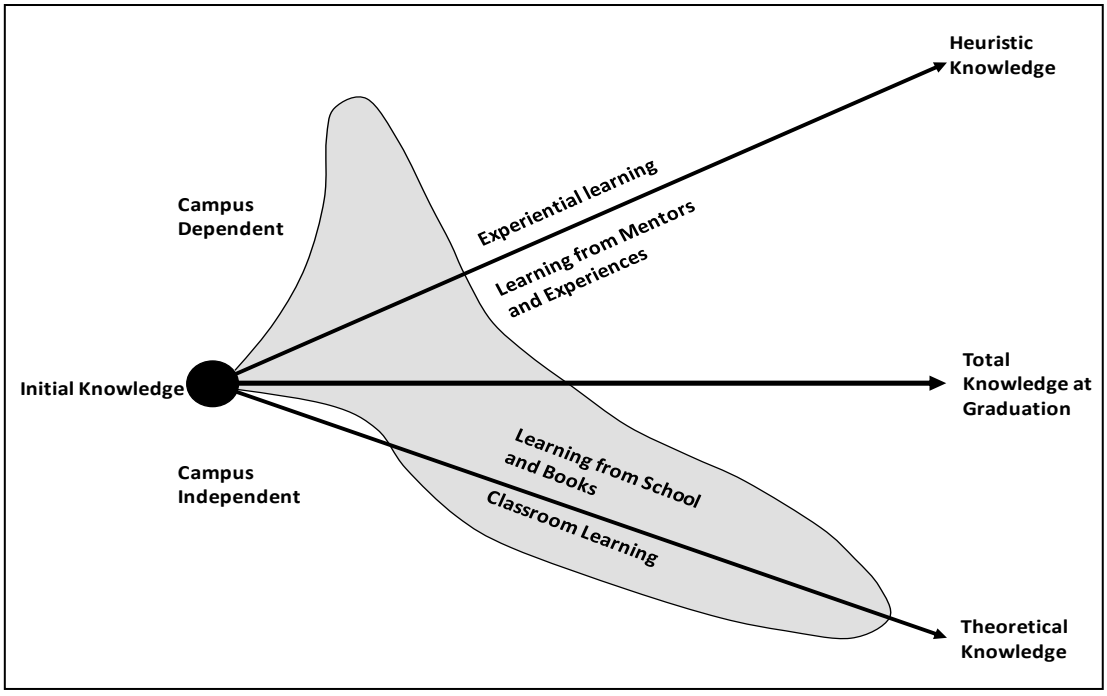

Figure 3. Student Success Model Adapted from Padilla (1991) and Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, and Treviño (1996)

Padilla (1991) first introduced this model in *Assessing Heuristic Knowledge to Enhance College Students' Success*, where he discussed the three types of knowledge and the connection of knowledge to student retention. Padilla (1992) also argued that researchers could utilize dialogical research methods to understand the experience of Chicano college students. Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, & Treviño (1996) further developed Padilla's (1991) model in *The Unfolding Matrix: A Dialogical Technique for Qualitative Data Acquisition and Analysis*. In the adaptation presented by these authors, the model is identified as a Student Success Model that "focuses on the knowledge that students possess and the actions that they employ to overcome barriers" (Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, & Treviño, 1996, p. 4). Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, and Treviño

(1996) argued that college students "are in effect 'experts' at being successful students at a specific college or university" (p. 5). They further suggested that this is consistent with Harmon and King's (1985) premise that "expertise is viewed as compiled knowledge which comprises two key components: theoretical and heuristic knowledge" (Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, and Treviño, 1996, p. 5).

These authors argued that to be successful students must accumulate heuristic knowledge early when they enroll in a college. Through experience, however, we know that most community colleges do not have formal programs or processes to expose students to heuristic knowledge. In addition, we also know that most community college students acquire heuristic knowledge on their own from other students, student groups, faculty, or by self-discovery. We also understand that heuristic knowledge is campus specific and critical in navigating campus specific barriers experienced throughout a student's college journey. Padilla (2001) further explained this concept through his description of a college campus as a "Black Box" (p.3), which is described in the following section.

The College Campus as a Black Box

Padilla (2001) argued that the traditional Input→Process→Output (IPO) model can be used to describe the education process. Rummler and Brache (1995) used the IPO model to describe the *Factors Affecting the Human Performance System*, which include the skills and knowledge an individual must have to successfully complete a task. Padilla (2001) expanded this concept and suggested that students could be viewed as inputs

entering a college campus. While in college, students undergo a campus experience (the process) that Padilla referred to as the "Black Box" (p. 3). He further argued that the output could be a student exiting the "Black Box" as a graduate or dropout.

Padilla proposed that all students experience barriers while undergoing the campus experience. He argued, however, that the output is dependent on a student's ability to successfully navigate barriers experienced during the campus experience. Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the process of the college campus experience as a Black Box.

We know from the literature "that students arrive at any campus with a wide range of background characteristics, interests, commitments, goals, etc." (Padilla, 2001, p. 4). However, what we don't know much about is what happens at specific campuses that lead to decisions to stay or to leave college without meeting degree completion goals.

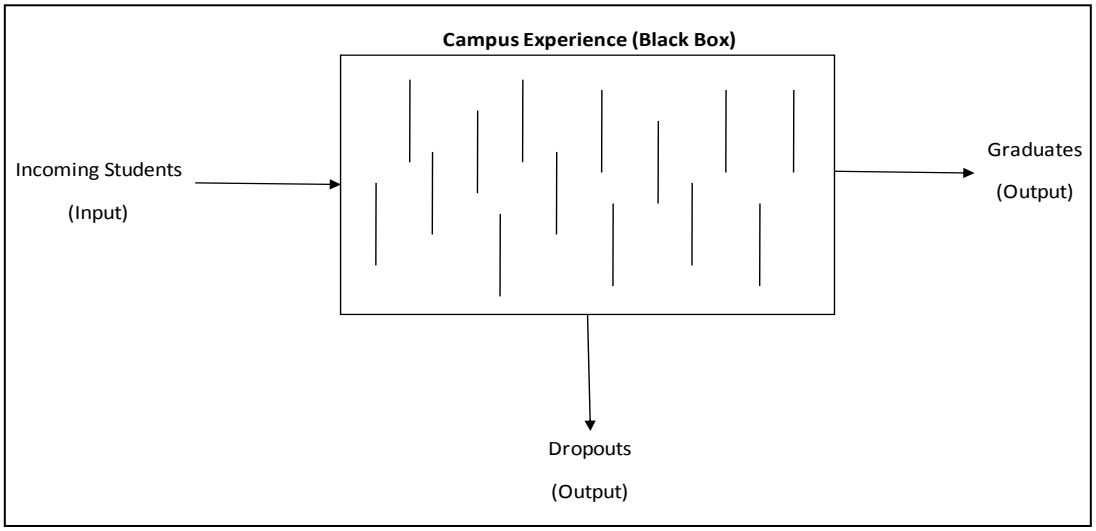

Figure 4. Black Box Conceptualization of the Student Experience Adapted from Padilla (2001)

Padilla (2001) argued that because very little is known about what happens in the "Black Box" there is an opportunity to develop a greater understanding of the campus experience. He further proposed that much is known about how students enter and leave the college. Padilla (2001) suggested, "What we do not know is how students arriving at a particular campus are transformed over time into either successful or unsuccessful students in terms of degree attainment" (pp. 3-4). In the literature, we find that researchers have a greater understanding of the 'input' and 'output' component, however, Padilla (1991) argued:

> What is likely to be more effective is to develop a procedure that (1) assesses the heuristic knowledge that is relevant to a particular *campus* (as opposed to an individual), and that (2) provides an experience to students that helps them acquire the relevant heuristic knowledge. This way would define a bounded knowledge domain. Also, it would consider the student as an agent that must acquire heuristic knowledge experientially in order to be successful. (p. 86)

Padilla (1991) argued that much can be learned by conducting an assessment of successful students' heuristic knowledge by understanding the barriers and how they overcome these barriers early in their college campus experience. He introduced the use of modified dialogical research procedures to assess heuristic knowledge. In the following section, I include a description of the research procedures recommended by Padilla (1991) for assessing heuristic knowledge, which is critical to developing a local model for student success.

Assessing Heuristic Knowledge

Padilla (1991) first introduced research procedures for assessing heuristic knowledge in support of his Student Success Model. Padilla (1991), Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, and Treviño (1996), and Padilla (2001) proposed research procedures to assess the heuristic knowledge utilized by students to successfully overcome barriers encountered during their campus experience. These authors have since identified these procedures as the "Unfolding Matrix Technique" (Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, and Treviño, 1996, p. 8). Padilla first introduced the use of the matrix to assess heuristic knowledge of successful college students in 1991. This author discussed the use of a matrix to facilitate the goal of developing a local model of student success by understanding the barriers that students faced during the campus experience and the knowledge that successful students draw from to overcome the barrier in addition to the specific actions undertaken by the students. In the matrix, he also includes an opportunity to identify changes that these 'expert' students suggest for the college to remove and/or minimize barriers faced by students during their campus experience.

Figure 5 represents the components of the matrix recommended by Padilla (1991), Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, and Treviño (1996), and Padilla (2001) for assessing heuristic knowledge of successful college students.

Barriers	Freq.	Knowledge	Actions	Changes

Figure 5. Unfolded Matrix for Assessing Heuristic Knowledge of Successful College Students Adapted from Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, and Treviño (1996)

Padilla (1991), Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, and Treviño (1996), and Padilla (2001) suggested that the matrix should be utilized in conjunction with the dialogical method for collecting data from successful college students in a particular college. We must remember that Padilla's (1991) Student Success Model is offered as a campus specific model, which is contextual in nature to include the college/university under review. These authors proposed beginning with a brainstorming session where the participants (successful college students) identify the barriers they encountered while attending the college. "The matrix was expanded to include data about the incidence of each barrier overcome by successful students, the knowledge that successful students possess, and the specific actions that they take" (Padilla, 1991, p. 88).

Research on Persistence of Hispanic and Other Students in Community Colleges

Researchers traditionally conduct studies related to persistence of minority students in relation to the environment provided by institutions of higher education with

predominately white enrollment. Quigley and Bailey (2003) argued, "… researchers have neglected the [community] colleges despite the institutions' importance" (p. 88) in postsecondary education, especially for minorities. They pointed out that existing research on community colleges is very limited and concentrates heavily on mission expansion and transfer of students to four-year institutions.

The authors of other similarly focused studies echo these findings, including that very little research is dedicated to persistence of students in community colleges (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Zamani, 2000; McCabe, 2003; Kinser & Thomas, 2004), and that these studies have primarily been focused on community colleges as entry to postsecondary education and transfer to four year institutions of higher education (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Some authors have, therefore, turned their focus and attention to the development of local models of persistence of minority students in community colleges.

Two Kinds of Models of Student Persistence in Colleges and Universities

In reviewing the literature, I found that researchers focused on student persistence propose two major types of models: deficit models and asset models. The authors of deficit models on student persistence focus on attrition with an emphasis on why students leave or depart without fulfilling their educational goals. Authors of these models include Tinto (1975), Pascarella, Duby and Iverson (1983), Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004), and Bean and Metzner (1985). In the analysis of the literature, I found that Tinto developed what is seen as the seminal model on student persistence

(Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). Tinto (1975) developed a model for student integration to facilitate an understanding of student departure (dropout) from college. Other authors followed suit by expanding on Tinto's model to include non-traditional four year colleges, universities, and students. Researchers continue to offer models that focus on student's decisions to leave. Hurtado and Carter (1997) asserted that revisions to the models in existing research continue to "lack theoretical clarity" (p. 326) in defining persistence, which has led researchers to develop alternative methods for explaining persistence.

Asset models on student persistence represent one such alternative. Authors of asset models define student persistence with a focus on why and how students persist to meet their educational goals. Although the need to develop asset models has been addressed by several authors, Bailey and Alfonso (2005) argued that researchers continue to utilize Tinto's (1975) model to explain student persistence and attrition. Asset models on student persistence are not as prevalent as deficit models in the literature (Hernandez, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Padilla, 1991; Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez and Treviño, 1996; Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez and Treviño, 1997). Padilla (1991), however, offered an asset model, which focused on how successful minority students succeed in persisting to meet their educational goals. This model was discussed at length in the previous sections.

In the preceding sections and subsections, I provided a brief synthesis of the literature review to demonstrate the forming and informing theoretical framework to the study and the highlights of the gap in the literature. I addressed gap in the purpose of this

study and described the need to focus attention to the increased dependency by the United States on increasing the educational attainment level of its population to respond to the demands and challenges created by the skills and knowledge requirements for the jobs of the 21st century global environment. Additionally, I highlighted the increased reliance on the Hispanic population to fulfill the job requirements as the Hispanic population continues to grow at a higher rate than other ethnic groups in the United States. As attention is focused on the educational attainment of the Hispanic population, I established that the educational attainment gap could be attributed to the low persistence rates of Hispanics once they enter the higher education system. I further proposed that the problem of non-persistence is exasperated by the fact that over half of the Hispanics in higher education begin at community colleges and do not persist to degree attainment.

In further review of the literature, I concluded that researchers articulate a substantial educational attainment gap for Hispanic and other students in community colleges. Although more Hispanics are enrolling in higher education, specifically community colleges, less than half persist to meet their educational goals of completing a certificate or degree. The role of persistence in educational degree attainment has led to the development of several models of persistence. These models can clearly be situated in two major categories: deficit models and asset models. The authors of deficit models focus on attrition, which consider why students leave or depart without fulfilling their educational goals. On the other hand, authors of asset models focus on persistence, which reflect why students persist to meet their educational goals. One author proposes

an asset model focusing on why and how successful minority students succeed in persisting to meet their educational goals (Padilla, 1991). Although research has been conducted in persistence of minority students, the literature demonstrates a gap in understanding the experiences of Hispanics enrolled in community colleges. Furthermore, the authors of recent studies supported the need to deeply understand the first year experience of Hispanics because over half of Hispanics who enter college for the first time during any fall semester do not return the following fall semester.

I utilized the framework from the synthesis of the core literature to inform the topic of inquiry, which is the first year fall to fall persistence of successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students at a predominately Hispanic student community college on the South Texas/Mexico border region, to focus the problem and inform the problem statement of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998) each of which are presented in the next section.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

In Chapter III, I describe the methodology used in this study, the purpose for which was to understand 1) the barriers experienced by successful first year (fall to fall) first-time-in-college Hispanic students at a predominately Hispanic student community college on the South Texas/Mexico Border Region, 2) the expertise/knowledge required to successfully overcome these barriers during the first year (fall to fall) in college, and 3) based on these findings, offer suggestions and recommendations for addressing the barriers experienced by Hispanic students enrolled in such community colleges.

With this purpose in mind, I proposed the following research questions to guide the research and other design procedures (which are presented and discussed in the next sections) for the study.

1. What were the experiences of successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas during their first year (fall to fall)?
2. What barriers had to be faced and overcome by successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?
3. What knowledge did successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas have to have in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?

4. What actions must successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas take in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?

Merriam (1998) argued, "Linking research and philosophical traditions or schools of thought helps to illuminate the special characteristics of different research orientations or paradigms" (p. 3). Ruona and Lynham (2004) argued that research orientation or paradigm informs the methodology and methods utilized to carry out a study, which is described in the following six subsections. First, I provide an overview of inquiry paradigms available to conduct a study including a brief description of the positivistic, interpretive, and critical research paradigms. Second, I provide a description of naturalistic inquiry and which is the best fit for the purpose of this study. Third, I further describe the rationale for the proposed research methodology. Fourth, I describe the research procedures including site selection, participant selection, data collection, instrumentation, and data analysis. Fifth, I outline the ethical considerations for the study. Finally, I describe how trustworthiness was built into the study in the sixth and final subsection.

Overview of Inquiry Paradigms

In the methodology chapter for this study, I also describe the paradigm that is most appropriate for the research design and that most effectively answers the research questions for this study as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Patton (1990) stated:

> A paradigm is a worldview, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world. As such, paradigms are deeply embedded in the socialization of adherents and practitioners: Paradigms tell them what is important, legitimate, and reasonable. Paradigms are also normative, telling the practitioner what to do without the necessity of long existential or epistemological consideration. But it is this aspect of paradigms that constitutes both their strength and their weakness–their strength in that it makes action possible, their weakness in that the very reason for action is hidden in the unquestioned assumptions of the paradigm. (p. 37)

Patton (1990) argued that understanding "the methodological paradigms debate" (p. 37) is critical in designing studies. Merriam (1998) proposed that understanding the research paradigms allows the researcher to move along the "research journey" (p. 3). Merriam (1998) further stated, "there are things to think about before you begin a research project. A fundamental consideration is your philosophical orientation. What do you believe about the nature of reality, about knowledge, and about the production of knowledge?" (p. 3). Lincoln and Guba (2000) and Merriam (1998) presented these as three orientations (paradigms) to research: positivist, interpretive, and critical research. I present a comparative overview of the three orientations and the contrasting features for each in Table 7.

Table 7. Comparative Overview of Three Orientations and Contrasting Features Adapted from Lincoln & Guba (2000), Merriam (1998), and Ruona & Lynham (2004)

Contrasting Features	*Positivistic (Quantitative, Empirical-Analytic)*	*Interpretative (Qualitative, Naturalistic)*	*Critical Research (e.g., Action Research)*
Forms of research	Education or schooling is considered the object, phenomenon, or delivery system to be studied	Education is considered to be a process and school is a lived experience	Education is considered to be a social institution designed for social and cultural reproduction and transformation.
Nature of Reality	Stable, observable, and measureable; knowledge can be generalized to other situations	Multiple realities are constructed socially by individuals; knowledge cannot be generalized beyond the situation under study;	Reality is shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, gender and other value systems; knowledge cannot be generalized beyond the situation under study;
General purposes	To describe, predict and control; to increase efficiency and effectiveness of some practice/phenomenon	To understand and interpret; to provide insights that improve practice;	To define and critique; to establish ends; to revise policy and power relationships (emancipatory)
Focus of typical research questions	To improve ways for achieving established goals/ends;	To understand the meaning of experience; how people experience their world;	To examine values and understand the relationships among values, interests and actions
Process	Study of isolated sets of variables	Study of holistic behavior	Exposing and resolving conflicts in values, actions and assumptions
Relationship between researcher and researched	Objective; Neutral and as value-free as possible;	Very subjective and inevitably involved with each other; researcher takes on roles of group studied	Relationship influenced directly by examination of values; both researched and researcher change; researcher is guiding participant;
Criteria of Validity	Data and results confirmable/verifiable by others	Subjects and researcher share the same meanings	Changed (emancipated) behavior
Significant Outcomes	Theory, laws and generalizations/principles	Shared conceptual meanings	New human possibilities and structures; empowerment and changed practice;
Some applicable research methods	Survey, relational, experimental, quasi-experimental	Case studies, ethnographic, historical, phenomenology	All methods, including philosophical analysis, plus method of critical science (psychoanalysis);

Note: Table compiled using Lincoln and Guba (2000), Merriam (1998), Ruona and Lynham (2004).

Ruona and Lynham (2004) described three core components that form a philosophical framework: ontology (how we see the world); epistemology (how we know/think about the world); and axiology (ethics; how we act in the world). In the following subsections, I provide an overview of core tenets of naturalistic inquiry and the 'fit' between this methodological paradigm and the nature of this study, together with the rationale for selecting qualitative methods and procedures within this paradigm. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that conducting naturalistic inquiry requires a very specific research design, which includes specifying the research methods and procedures for participant selection, data collection, instrumentation, and data analysis. This specification is provided in the next section of this chapter.

Overview of Methodological Paradigm and 'Fit' with Study

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that naturalistic inquiry should be utilized when the phenomenon concerned meets the following axioms and corollaries that describe this paradigm of inquiry:

> *Axiom 1: The nature of reality (ontology)* – there are multiple constructed realities that can be studied only holistically; inquiry into these multiple realities will inevitably diverge (each inquiry raises more questions than it answers) so that prediction and control are unlikely outcomes although some level of understanding (*verstehen*) can be achieved.

Axiom 2: The relationship of knower to know (epistemology) – the inquirer and the "object" of inquiry interact to influence one another; knower and known are inseparable.

Axiom 3: The possibility of generalization – the aim of inquiry is to develop an idiographic body of knowledge in the form of 'working hypotheses' that describe the individual case.

Axiom 4: *The possibility of causal linkages* – all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects.

Axiom 5: The role of values in inquiry (axiology) – inquiry is value-bound in at least five ways captured in the corollaries that follow:

Corollary 1: Inquiries are influenced by *inquirer* values as expressed in the choice of a problem, evaluand, or policy option, and in the framing, bounding, and focusing of that problem, evaluand, or policy option.

Corollary 2: Inquiry is influenced by the choice of the *paradigm* that guides the investigation into the problem.

Corollary 3: Inquiry is influenced by the choice of the *substantive theory* utilized to guide the collection and analysis of data and in the interpretation of findings.

Corollary 4: Inquiry is influenced by the values that inhere in the *context*.

Corollary 5: With respect to corollaries 1 through 4 above, inquiry is either *value-resonant* (reinforcing or congruent) or *value-dissonant*

> (conflicting). Problem, evaluand, or policy option, paradigm, theory, *and* context must exhibit congruence (value-resonance) if inquiry is to produce meaningful results. (pp. 37-38)

I utilized the "fourteen characteristics of operational naturalistic inquiry" (p. 39) outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to support the rational for selecting naturalistic inquiry for this study. In Table 8, I provide a summary of the rational utilized to select naturalistic inquiry.

Table 8. Summary of Rational for Selecting Naturalistic Inquiry Using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) Fourteen Characteristics

Characteristic	Rational for Selecting Naturalistic Inquiry
1. Natural setting	The study is conducted at South Texas College, which is the natural setting that provides the context for the study.
2. Human instrument	Conducting a study in a natural setting demands use of a human instrument. The researcher, therefore, served as the primary instrument for data collection for the study. The characteristics that qualify the researcher as the human instrument for this study is provided in the subsection *Primary Instrument for Data Collection and Analysis*.
3. Utilization of tacit knowledge	Naturalistic inquiry allows the researcher to make use of tactic knowledge, which is the knowledge that includes subjective insights and intuitions.
4. Qualitative methods	Qualitative methods lend themselves better to understanding the multiple realities that are part of the phenomenon under study. Qualitative methods are also more appropriate when the primary instrument for data collection is the human instrument.
5. Purposive sampling	The contextual nature of the study provides a good fit for using purposive sampling, which has its own unique characteristics: emergent sampling design; serial selection of sample units; continuous adjustment or "focusing" of the sample; and selection to the point of redundancy. (pp. 201- 202)

Table 8. Continued

Characteristic	Rational for Selecting Naturalistic Inquiry
6. Inductive data analysis	Inductive data analysis allows for deeper understanding by digging deeper into the data through the involved process of unitizing and categorizing.
7. Grounded theory	Theory emerges from the data, which is also critical in studies with an emergent design.
8. Emergent design	Naturalistic inquiry allows and emergent design that unfolds as the study progresses.
9. Negotiated outcomes	The procedures used to conduct naturalistic inquiry provide opportunities for respondents to confirm the results/outcomes of the study.
10. Case study reporting mode	Case study reporting provides thick description, includes description of the multiple realities, and allows reader to experience a sense of greater understanding.
11. Idiographic interpretation	Interpretation of naturalistic inquiry is from a contextual basis and is not intended to draw generalizations.
12. Tentative application	It is through thick description provided by naturalist inquiry that the reader may be able to draw some applicability to the results of the study.
13. Focus-determined boundaries	The problem of the study facilitates the boundaries for the study.
14. Special criteria for trustworthiness	Naturalistic inquiry draws from specific procedures to build trustworthiness in the study. Some of the procedures include member checking, auditing, and debriefing to name a few.

I made use of the axioms and corollaries to qualify the rationale for the research methods/procedures selected for this study. I also used the fourteen characteristics included in Table 8 as further rational for selecting naturalistic inquiry to conduct this study. In the subsection below, I provide additional

rationale for selecting naturalistic inquiry as the paradigm of inquiry for this study.

Rationale for Selecting Research Methodology

This study was most suited to the naturalistic inquiry paradigm because the study met all of the corresponding axioms, corollaries, and characteristics proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). For example, from the ontological (nature of reality) perspective, the phenomenon central to the problem (student persistence in a particular setting and of particular type/kind) 'fits' the naturalistic paradigm because of its multiple constructed nature which needs to be studied holistically within the local setting in order to develop a deep understanding thereof, and in turn to use this understanding to inform improved practice and thus outcome.

Because I sought to investigate the phenomenon of persistence of first year (fall to fall) first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominantly Hispanic student community college in South Texas, an important goal was to understand this phenomenon through 'thick' description of experiences offered by the selected study participants. This approach resonated closely with, for example, axiom five of the naturalistic paradigm and its corresponding corollaries, which were presented in the previous section.

Having provided a brief clarification of the nature of the naturalistic inquiry paradigm and rationale for locating the study within it, the following subsections include

a description of the research procedures and methods for participant selection, data collection, instrumentation, and data analysis utilized for this study.

Research Procedures

I utilized qualitative methods to conduct this naturalistic inquiry, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). I began with a tentative plan to carry out the research. Maxwell (2005) supported the need for such a plan by reminding us of the emergent nature of naturalistic inquiry, which includes the flexibility to make adjustments as the study progresses. In the following subsections, I provide a description of the specific procedures utilized for executing the study.

Site Selection

I conducted the study at South Texas College during the Fall 2007 and Spring 2008. Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) argued, "The selection of a suitable site is a critical decision in naturalistic research, because the inquirer will conduct his or her study in a particular native setting to observe and record the day-to-day operations of the environment" (p. 53). The decision to select South Texas College as the site for the study was heavily influenced by the considerations offered by Marshall and Rossman (as cited in Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 53). In Table 9, I present Marshall and Rossman's considerations for selecting the ideal site for a study and my response for each consideration as it applies to this study.

Table 9. Considerations for Site Selection for Study

Condition	Response
Entry is possible	Permission to conduct the study on site was granted by President Shirley A. Reed (personal communication, September 12, 2007). The site of the study is the researcher's place of employment.
There is a high probability that a rich mix of many of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and/or structures that may be a part of the research question will be present	South Texas College has a strong and documented record of engaging students in discussions of barriers and recommendations for improving student success. Throughout the eleven years as a member of the administrative team, the researcher has been intimately involved in reviewing data and discussing issues related to student success. The processes, people, programs, interactions, and structures of the College are very much part of the research question.
The researcher can devise an appropriate role to maintain continuity of presence for as long as necessary	The researcher has been a member of the administrative staff at South Texas College for over twelve years. As the Director of Grant Development, Accountability and Management Services, the researcher also serves as the lead on the *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count* initiative, which requires community colleges to engage in the development and implementation of a culture of evidence including use of qualitative research to 'listen to the voices' of students, faculty, and staff to improve student success outcomes. In both capacities the research has access to fully executing the study at the site.
Data quality and credibility of the study are reasonably assured by avoiding poor sampling decisions	As a member of the administrative team and member of the Planning and Development Council at South Texas College, the researcher routinely reviews the College's data for quality and credibility. The researcher was given the opportunity to design and execute all sampling decisions, as described in the following section.

I provide a brief history of South Texas College to further establish the context for the study. Beyond the history of the college, I include insights into the college's challenges with increasing its fall-to-fall persistence rates which have a direct impact on the college's graduation rates, which further translates to a skilled workforce and the ability

for the region to establish a competitive niche to compete in attracting international employers.

History of South Texas College

The journey to provide access to a community college education to the residents from deep South Texas along the Texas/Mexico border began in January 1992 when the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) hired two consultants to study operations of the main campuses of the Texas State Technical College (TSTC) System in accordance to House Bill 1 of the 72nd Texas Legislature. The consultants met with business and industry leaders in the McAllen, Texas area during March 1992 and by June 9, 1992 the media reported that consultants were recommending the closure of the TSTC McAllen branch campus in favor of the creation of local junior college. On June 11, 1992, the consultants released their report of recommendations, which included a recommendation to create a separate community college and to close the McAllen TSTC branch campus. After several months of local and state meetings, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board appointed an advisory committee to study the recommendations made by the consultants. The original intent of the THECB with pressure from the TSTC System was to have the Advisory Committee study the option of a merger option with a community college/TSTC partnership. However, the representatives from a McAllen group convened by the Advisory Committee was not pleased with the discussions and opted to study the matter on their own. By January 1993, the mayor of the City of McAllen along with a group of business/industry,

education, manufacturing, legislative, and allied health leaders met to discuss the options. A Steering Committee was appointed to further study the option of a self-standing community college for Hidalgo and Starr Counties. After visiting the Maricopa Community College District, the Steering Committee commissioned a study to determine the feasibility of a community college. Dr. Alfredo G. de los Santos Jr., Vice Chancellor of the Maricopa Community College District, was commissioned to conduct the feasibility study. On April 13, 1993, Dr. de los Santos issued a proposal for the creation of South Texas Community College. This was followed by a meeting of the Steering Committee on April 21, 1993 to discuss the proposal. In early May 1993, the Steering Committee moved forward with recommendations to create South Texas Community College, which the late Governor Ann Richards signed into legislation with Senate Bill 251 on June 1, 1993. The new legislation included provisions to officially transition the TSTC McAllen branch campus to South Texas Community College, which was officially in operation on September 1, 1993 under the supervision of a transition team. The newly created South Texas Community College held a confirmation election in compliance with Senate Bill 251 on August 12, 1995 at which time the residents of Hidalgo and Starr Counties approved a taxing district for the college. The college underwent a name change in April 1994 to South Texas College to more clearly represent its new mission to offer select applied baccalaureate degrees. South Texas College is now one of three community colleges in Texas authorized by the THECB and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) to offer applied baccalaureate degrees.

Prior to the creation of South Texas College almost 450,000 residents in Starr and Hidalgo Counties did not have access to a community college. Since its inception, the college defined itself through *access, equity, opportunity, and success*. In its short sixteen years, the college grew from approximately 1,000 to over 27,000 students, from one to five campuses, and from ten certificate programs to over 100 certificate and degree programs. Figure 6 represents the college's enrollment from Fall 1993 to Fall 2009.

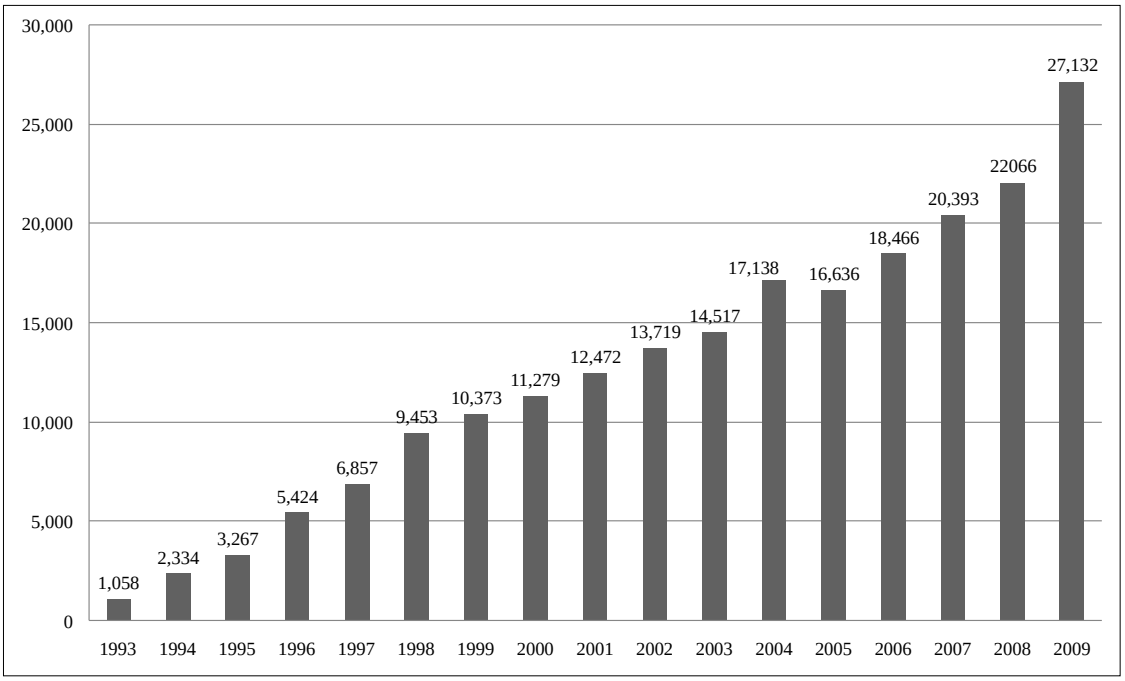

Figure 6. Fall 1993 to Fall 2009 Enrollment at South Texas College

During this same period, the college attained Level II Status with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, which allowed the college to offer baccalaureate degrees. The college is currently one of three community colleges in Texas authorized to

offer baccalaureate degrees. The college now offers two baccalaureate degrees: Bachelor of Applied Technology in Technology Management and Bachelor of Applied Technology in Computer and Information Technologies. The overwhelming need for a community college in deep South Texas can be seen in its continued enrollment growth.

The college's commitment to student success continues to be a priority. Success indictors were identified by the college and approved by the STC Board of Trustees in June 1999 with revisions approved in May 2004 (South Texas Community College, 2002; South Texas College, 2004). The college modified the composition of its annual factbook to reflect the college's performance on all of the board approved performance indicators. The college's Planning and Development Council was given the primary responsibility of monitoring the college's progress in meeting its goal to positively impact the board adopted performance indicators. A major focus of continued discussion for the Planning and Development Council is the fall-to-fall persistence rate. For years, the fall-to-fall persistence rate has not had significant changes. The fall-to-fall persistence rates at South Texas College have hovered between fifty to fifty-three percent over the last five years.

Even as the college continued to focus on access, equity, opportunity, and success with the positive indicators of growth, the college continues to be challenged with increasing its fall-to-fall persistence and graduate rates. In the following section, I described the participant selection procedures for this study.

Participant Selection

As I was attempting to understand the experience of first year (fall to fall) first-time-in-college Hispanic student persistence at South Texas College, and to do so through the 'lens' (reconstructed experience) of these students, I utilized purposive sampling to identify the study participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). I took great care to follow the suggested characteristics for purposeful sampling offered by these authors. These characteristics included: emergent sampling design, serial selection of sample units, continuous adjustment or 'focusing' of the sample, and selection to the point of redundancy.

I made use of participants in focus groups and individual personal interviews. All participants in this study were classified as first year (fall to fall) first-time-in-college Hispanic students enrolled in South Texas College during the Fall 2006 semester and reenrolling in the Fall 2007 semester and were making progress towards their academic goal of obtaining a certificate, associate degree, or baccalaureate degree. The progress was determined by evidence that the purposefully selected student participants successfully completed coursework during the Fall 2006 and Spring 2007 in addition to reenrolling in for the Fall 2007 semester. Participants were identified at the three comprehensive campuses (Pecan, Mid-Valley, and Starr County) of South Texas College (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005). In Table 10, I provide a summary of the focus groups conducted for the study.

Table 10. Focus Groups for Study

			Gender		
Date	Campus	Code	Female	Male	Total
12-10-07	Pecan	FG1	4	3	7
12-10-07	Mid-Valley	FG2	6	1	7
12-11-07	Starr County	FG3	3	3	6
	Total Participants		13	7	20

The individual personal interviews included one male and two female students. The participants for the individual personal interviews were purposefully selected after the transcription and initial themes were identified from the focus group interviews. The personal interviews provided support for member checking and probing deeper into barriers identified by students in the focus groups. The individual personal interviews also contributed to better and more enriched description of the barriers. Table 11 includes a summary of the personal interviews conducted for this study.

Table 11. Individual Personal Interviews for Study

			Gender		
Date	Campus	Code	Female	Male	Total
03-06-08	Starr County	PI1		1	1
03-12-08	Pecan	PI2	1		1
03-12-08	Pecan	PI3	1		1
	Total Participants		2	1	3

After the participant selection, great consideration was given to the data collection procedures. The following section includes a description of the data collection procedures utilized for this study.

Data Collection

In order to build trustworthiness of the data collected for the study, I included three data sources as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The data sources included focus groups, personal interviews, and preexisting focus group data sets. From the naturalistic perspective, focus groups are a commonly accepted method for collecting qualitative data. Patton (1990) suggested that focus groups could be used when a researcher has the need to study a homogeneous subgroup of a population. "Focus group interviews involve conducting open-ended interviews with groups of five to eight people on specially targeted or focused issues" (Patton, 1990, p. 173). The use of focus groups for collecting qualitative data has advantages and disadvantages. According to Patton, advantages to focus groups include: an efficient method for collecting qualitative data, increases sample size of interview groups, a method of checks and balances, and is an enjoyable process for participants. However, they also have weaknesses--such as when responding to a set of questions within the suggested time limit (i.e. one hour), the number of questions that can be asked is more limited to allow participants time to respond. As a result Patton suggested that "no more than ten major questions" (p. 336) should be asked by the researcher.

I developed a general interview guide, which was informed by the unfolding matrix taxonomies outlined by Padilla (1991), and which provided some structure to the interview process and at the same time enough flexibility to make adjustments as the interviews progressed. I also utilized the interview guide and the results of the preliminary data from the focus groups to conduct the individual personal interviews.

Doing so not only allowed for triangulation of the findings from the data sets but ensured that questions used for collection of these various data sets were continuously refined and refocused by the emergent findings from initial analysis of these data sets. This procedure also served to enhance trustworthiness in the data as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), triangulation is a method of building trustworthiness in a naturalistic study. These authors suggested that triangulation could be accomplished through secondary interviews or validation against a second source. In the same vein, Patton (1987, 1990) suggested that in-depth interviews also provide the rich descriptions needed to more clearly explain and thus understand the phenomenon under review in a study. The personal interviews to this end were utilized to provide a much deeper understanding of the barriers, knowledge, actions and other insights that emerged from this inquiry. As such, these individual personal interviews also served as debriefings, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), and so used to further extend the trustworthiness of the study.

Finally, I made use of preexisting focus group data sets—the result of related data collection conducted by South Texas College's Office of Institutional Research and Effectives on the same topic using the same population profile, but from years prior to that of this study. As a secondary source, the preexisting focus group data sets further enhanced the trustworthiness of the study. In the following subsections, I provide a description of the respective data collection procedures for each data source.

Focus Groups

Each focus group was assigned a code–Pecan Campus (FG1), Mid-Valley Campus (FG2), and Starr County Campus (FG3)–during the planning process. The focus group lasted an average of 80 minutes. The first two focus groups included seven participants while the third focus group included six participants. A total of twenty students participated in the three focus groups. Sixty-five percent of the participants were female and thirty-five percent were male, which was reflective of the college's enrollment during the Fall 2006 with a sixty percent female enrollment. A summary of the demographics for the three focus groups can be found in Table 12.

Table 12. Summary of Focus Groups for Study

				Gender		Length of
Date	Time	Campus	Code	Female	Male	Interview
12-10-07	11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.	Pecan	FG1	4	3	80 minutes
12-10-07	4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.	Mid-Valley	FG2	6	1	83 minutes
12-11-07	11:30 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.	Starr County	FG3	3	3	79 minutes

The data collection process included a trained assistant, whose primary responsibility was to record student responses on the matrix, as recommended by Padilla (1991). The assistant received training on Padilla's (1991) methodology for recording focus group responses utilizing a matrix. The focus group interviews were also recorded with a Sony IC Recorder (ICD-P520), which included a Digital Voice Editor 3 software. A folder was set up in the digital recorder for each focus group as follows:

- Pecan Campus (FG1) – Folder A
- Mid-Valley Campus (FG2) – Folder B

- Starr County Campus (FG3) – Folder C

The use of distinct folders for each focus group facilitated an organized storage and retrieval process for the focus group recordings. This system also transitioned to a parallel electronic filing system when the recordings were transferred to the computer for transcription. The Digital Voice Editor 3 software was installed on the computer and used during the transcription process. The Digital Voice Editor 3 software provided the flexibility to play back the electronic copy of the recording on the computer using slower speeds (35% to 50% speed) while typing the transcript. Using the slower speeds to listen to the recording facilitated a much faster transcription process and allowed me to listen more clearly to some of the words and/or statements that were not as clear at a normal speed. It enhanced statements made by students, which may not have been as obvious during the interview. The slower speed also gave me the opportunity to capture statements, which were not originally captured because more than one person was speaking at the same time. The transcribing process entailed the following phases.

- Phase I: Listen to the focus group interview in a quiet environment
- Phase II: Utilize Microsoft Word to create a transcript of the focus group interviews almost verbatim with the exception of filler words (i.e. um or uh)
- Phase III: Convert the transcript to a Research Memo to facilitate initial coding
- Phase IV: Utilize transcript to create unit cards

The transcription process for each focus group took between seven to ten hours. The transcription process was somewhat involved because many of the statements made

by the participants were in English and Spanish. It was not uncommon for a participant to begin a sentence in English and transition to Spanish in the middle of the statement. Great care was taken to transcribe the interviews in the language the participants used during the interview. I am fluent in both languages and was able to transcribe the statements made in both languages. Additionally, local slang was recorded verbatim in the transcript. A description of the data collection process for each focus group follows.

Pecan Campus Focus Group. The South Texas College Valley Scholars Coordinator assisted with the recruitment of the participants for the Pecan Campus focus group (FG1). After visiting with her in person, the request for assistance was documented in an email. The email request included the criteria for the students to be invited to the focus group. I informed the Valley Scholars Coordinator that pizza and drinks would be provided for the participants. I contacted the President's Office to reserve the Pecan Campus Board Room for the focus group interview. The Valley Scholars Coordinator advised me via email that nine students were interested in participating in the study; however, she believed that five to seven students would show up on the day of the focus group interview. On the day of the interview, I arrived an hour prior to the start time for the focus group interview to set up the Board Room to accommodate seven students. The layout of the room was intended to facilitate good interaction among and between the participants. Figure 7 represents a visual of the room's layout for the Pecan Campus focus group interview.

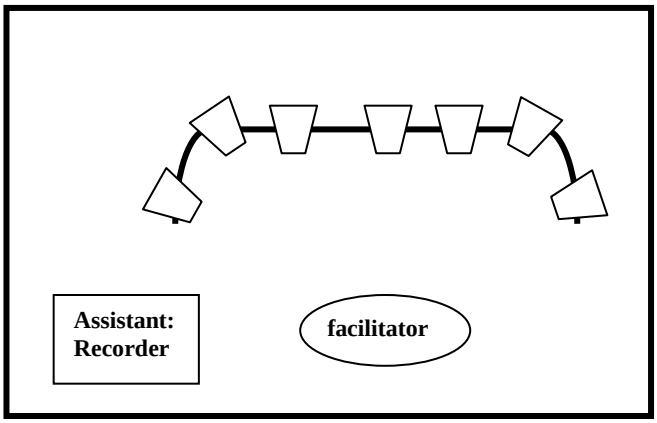

Figure 7. Pecan Campus Focus Group Layout

I greeted the participants as they arrived for the focus group interview. Providing pizza and drinks before the focus group session allowed the students to get comfortable as they were settling into the group. The focus group at the Pecan Campus was comprised of Valley Scholar students who graduated from high school in May 2006 and started at STC in the Fall 2006. These students graduated in the top ten percent of their high school class and were admitted as a cohort into the college. As a result, these students were familiar with each other. Although these students would be accepted into any Texas public college or university, the Valley Scholars program offers students a scholarship covering all tuition and fees in addition to providing on-campus jobs, which are many times cited by students as the primary reason for selecting South Texas College over other institutions.

Mid-Valley Campus Focus Group. The Mid-Valley Campus Coordinator assisted with the recruitment of the participants for the Mid-Valley Campus focus group (FG2).

After a brief conversation on the phone, I forwarded a formal request for assistance via email. When I followed up with the Coordinator over the phone, he indicated that ten students expressed willingness to participate in the focus group. I made arrangements with the Coordinator to reserve a room for the focus group interview.

On the day of the focus group interview, I reported to the Coordinator's office for directions to the room that was reserved for the interview. I arrived one hour prior to the designated time to give me time to prepare the room. The focus group was held in the faculty meeting room on the second floor of the academic building at the Mid Valley Campus. The furniture in the room dictated the layout, which included sitting around a table. Figure 8 is a diagram of the layout utilized for this focus group.

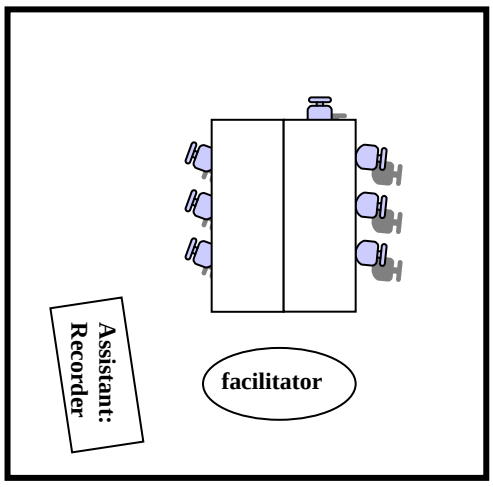

Figure 8. Mid-Valley Campus Room Focus Group Layout

As with the focus group interview at the Pecan Campus, I greeted students as they arrived for the focus group and directed to the pizza and drinks.

Starr County Campus Focus Group. The Starr County Counselor, who also serves as the lead Student Services employee for the Starr County Campus, assisted with the recruitment of participants for the Starr County focus group interview. I initially contacted the Counselor over the phone and followed-up with a formal request via email. The Counselor identified and reserved a room for the focus group interview. The Counselor followed up via voicemail and email that everything was set for focus group interview and that the Quiet Room in the Student Activities Building was reserved for the day. The Quiet Room is furnished with chairs and sofas. Figure 9 is a diagram of the layout of the furniture for the Starr County focus group interview.

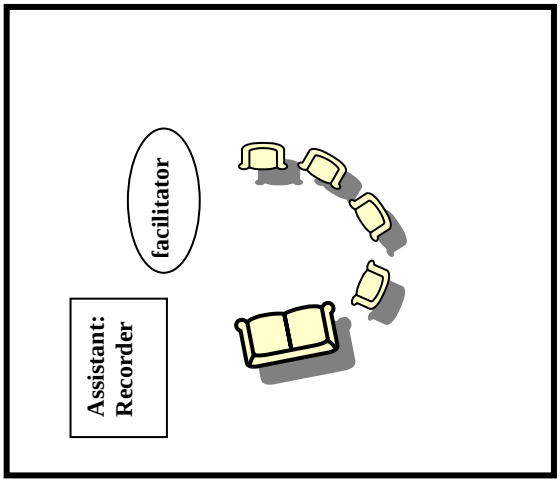

Figure 9. Starr County Campus Focus Group Room Layout

During the focus group interview, two students sat on the sofa while the rest sat on individual chairs. As with the prior focus group interviews, students were greeted at the door and offered pizza and drinks. The following section includes a description of the procedures utilized for selecting participants for the individual personal interviews.

Individual Personal Interviews

Individual personal interviews were utilized as a secondary source of data collection. As with the focus groups, each personal interview was assigned a code. The codes facilitated the document storage and retrieval during the study. I conducted three face-to-face individual personal interviews. The participants included one male and two female students. The interviews ranged from 44 to 53 minutes. One personal interview took place at the Starr County Campus, while the last two were conducted at the Pecan Campus. Table 13 includes a summary of the personal interviews conducted for this study.

Table 13. Summary of Individual Personal Interviews for Study

				Gender		Length of
Date	Time	Campus	Code	Female	Male	Interview
03-06-08	11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.	Starr County	PI1		1	53 minutes
03-12-08	3:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.	Pecan Campus	PI2	1		44 minutes
03-12-08	6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.	Pecan Campus	PI3	1		45 minutes
		Total Participants		2	1	

As with the focus groups, the personal interviews were recorded with a Sony IC Recorder (ICD-P520) with Digital Voice Editor 3. Each interview was recorded on a separate folder for storage and retrieval purposes. The Digital Voice Editor 3 was utilized to play back the recording at slower speeds of 35% to 50% to facilitate the transcription process, which was the same process utilized for the focus group interviews and was thoroughly described in the preceding section. In addition to the focus groups

and the personal interviews, I utilized preexisting focus group data sets. The following subsection includes a description of these data sets.

Preexisting Focus Group Data Sets

The South Texas College Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness conducted a study, *The Achieving the Dream Student Barrier Study*, between February 1, 2007 and May 11, 2007. The researcher used Padilla's (1991) Student Success Model to better understand barriers experienced by South Texas College students. The study was led by Royal Loresco a Sociology Instructor at South Texas College and was presented to the Achieving the Dream Core Team at the College. The preexisting data from the Pecan, Starr County, and the Mid-Valley Campuses were utilized as a third source of data for this study. Table 14 includes a description of the number of focus groups and participants for the preexisting data sets.

Table 14. Summary of Preexisting Data Sets for Study

Campus	Number of Focus Groups	Total Number of Participants
Pecan	3	15
Mid-Valley	6	59
Starr County	6	67
Total	15	141

As recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the preexisting data sets were used to further build trustworthiness for the study. These authors also recommended a thorough

consideration of the instrumentation for a naturalistic study. The following section describes the instrument for the study.

Instrumentation

As the researcher of a naturalistic study, I served as the primary instrument in this naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed seven characteristics, which "…uniquely qualify the human as the instrument of choice of naturalistic inquiry" (p. 193). These characteristics include: responsiveness (ability to observe and respond to environmental signals); adaptability (ability to adjust to changes); holistic emphasis (ability to understand entire context); knowledge base expansion (ability to make use of multiple domains of knowledge); processual immediacy (ability to process data immediately); opportunity for clarification and summation (ability to provide summary and feedback instantly); and opportunity to explore atypical or idiosyncratic responses (ability to test validity for greater understanding). As the primary research instrument, I have been trained in the use of the appropriate research methods so that the study is conducted in such a way as to demonstrate these instrumentation characteristics.

As the Director of Grant Development, Accountability, and Management Services and the Interim Associate Dean for Community Engagement and Workforce Development at South Texas College, I served as the lead administrator for the *Achieving the Dream: Community College's Count* (*Achieving the Dream)* initiative. The initiative required the institution to incorporate qualitative research to gain a deeper

understanding of the College's student success indicators including fall to fall persistence. As the lead for the initiative, I received extensive training and gained additional experience on conducting focus groups and in-depth personal interviews. The training included applications for using the Padilla (1991) Student Success Model at South Texas College to facilitate a greater understanding of the achievement gaps among and between groups of students at the College. After successfully leading the *Achieving the Dream* initiative for South Texas College, I was invited to serve as a Data Facilitator (consultant) for the 2009 Cohort of *Achieving the Dream* colleges. As a Data Facilitator, one of my responsibilities includes providing training to faculty and staff on conducting focus groups.

As a long-standing member of the administrative staff at the research site, I have an emic/insider perspective on the phenomenon of persistence for first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominantly Hispanic community college in South Texas. By virtue of this experience and knowledge of the field site, I met the requirements of the three recommended activities delineated by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These requirements include: 1) obtain an understanding of the "culture and language of the field site" (p. 238); 2) carry out the proposed procedures under the supervision of experts; and 3) conduct a run through with similar participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also suggested, "The instrument in naturalistic inquiry is not an operational definition of anything, but a sensitive homing device that sorts out salient elements and targets in on them. The instrument becomes more refined and knowledgeable in the process" (p. 224) of conducting the study. As the researcher, I also ensured the integrity of the data

analysis procedure as recommended by Merriam (1998) who suggested the following five key characteristics of qualitative research.

1. Researcher has an "*emic*, or insider's perspective" (p. 6) on the phenomenon;
2. Researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis;
3. It usually involves fieldwork;
4. Primarily employs an inductive research strategy; and
5. The product of qualitative study is richly descriptive. (pp. 6-8)

The following two subsections further address Merriam's (1998) first two characteristics for this study: the emic view and researcher as the primary instrument.

The Emic View

Prior to progressing with this study, I thought it was necessary to reflect on my professional experience in higher education. Three and a half years after the College was created, I was hired as the Assistant for Accountability to the President on January 1997. During my over thirteen years at STC, I have transitioned to administrative positions. Prior to STC, I spent over seven years at the University of Texas – Pan American and almost three years at COSTEP (Council for South Texas Economic Progress). Since my graduation from college in 1987 with my baccalaureate degree, I have dedicated my professional life to higher education. Although COSTEP is not an institution of higher education, the organization's mission was to facilitate access to college through access to low interest student loans for a predominately Hispanic population in south Texas.

As I reflected on the mission, purpose, and goals of the three organizations, the core of their mission included providing access to Hispanics in the Rio Grande Valley to higher education. My journey in trying to understand the achievement gap between Hispanics and their white counterparts in higher education began over 20 years ago with my first job at the local university. However, a greater understanding of this issue came when I joined the South Texas College's administrative team over thirteen years ago.

In these thirteen years, I have been actively engaged as a member of the administrative staff on the topic of student success. The College has continuously monitored key student success performance indicators including access, completion, transfer, and other success rates. These success rates include fall-to-fall persistence rates, which are the focus of this study. For as many years as I have been at the College, much attention and resources have been dedicated to increase fall-to-fall retention. Even with all of its commitment of resources, the College has only seen incremental positive increases in persistence rates. For years, the College has implemented strategies and interventions to increase persistence, graduation, and other indicators of student success. However, many of these indicators have remained stable and/or had very little improvement.

Primary Instrument for Data Collection and Analysis

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested,

> The use of humans as instruments is not a new concept. Indeed, classical anthropology utilized virtually no other instrumentation, and much of the

> tradition has been maintained in modern sociology, at least the branch that continues to rely heavily on field studies. But even some of the giants of conventional inquiry have recognized that humans can provide data very nearly as reliable as that produced by "more objective" means. (p. 192)

Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined "characteristics that uniquely qualify the human as the instrument of choice for naturalistic inquiry" (p. 193). These characteristics include: responsiveness, adaptability, holistic emphasis, knowledge base expansion, processual immediacy, opportunities for clarification and summarization, and opportunity to explore atypical or idiosyncratic responses. Table 15 includes the description provided by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for each characteristic (pp. 193-194).

Table 15. Characteristics that Uniquely Qualify the Human as the Instrument of Choice for Naturalistic Inquiry

Characteristic	Description
Responsiveness	The human-as-instrument can sense and respond to all personal and environmental cues that exist. By virtue of that responsiveness he or she can interact with the situation to sense its dimensions and make them explicit.
Adaptability	The human, imperfect as humans are, is virtually infinitely adaptable. The multipurpose human can collect information about multiple factors—and at multiple levels—simultaneously.
Holistic emphasis	The world of any phenomenon and its surrounding context are "all of a piece," and the human instrument is the only one available capable of grasping all this buzzing confusion in one view.
Knowledge base expansion	The human instrument is competent to function simultaneously in the domains of propositional and tactic knowledge.
Processual immediacy	The ability of the human instrument (and only the human instrument) to process data just as soon as they become available, to generate hypotheses on the spot, and to test those hypotheses with respondents in the very situation in which they are created.

Table 15. Continued

Characteristic	Description
Opportunities for clarification and summation	The human instrument has the unique capability of summarizing data on the spot and feeding them back to a respondent for clarification, correction and amplification.
Opportunity to explore atypical or idiosyncratic responses	The atypical response has no utility on an ordinary instrument; it may even have to be discarded because it cannot be coded or otherwise aggregated. The human instrument can explore such responses not only to test their validity but achieve a higher level of understanding than might otherwise be possible.

I served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis for this study. Throughout the execution of this study, I reflected on the alignment of my experience with the characteristics described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Having completed the description of the instrumentation for the study, it was imperative to ensure an appropriate data analysis process, which is discussed in more detail in the following section, for naturalistic studies.

Data Analysis

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that data analysis from the naturalistic paradigm be "open-ended and inductive" (p. 224). These authors further stated, "Data are, so to speak, the *constructions* offered by or in the sources; data analysis leads to a *reconstruction* of those constructions" (p. 332). As a result, this study utilized the constant comparative method, which includes several stages, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Stage one: Comparing incidents applicable to each category (p. 340)

Stage two: Integrating categories and their properties (p. 342)

Stage three: Delimiting the construction (p. 343)

Stage four: Writing the theory/construction (p. 344)

More specifically, I made use of "unitizing, categorizing, filling in patterns, and member checks" (p. 344) as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Unitizing is the task in data analysis that leads to establishing categories. Categories emerge from the analysis of the focus group transcripts, interview transcripts, field notes, and other documents and records created during the data collection process. Categorizing on the other hand includes the task of taking the categories found through the unitizing task and determining if the categories can be collapsed and/or form new categories being mindful that new categories may emerge during this process, which includes collecting additional data to ensure that questions are addressed as questions surface. The process leads to the task of filling in patterns. The process concludes with the task that "provides a useful opportunity to apply a major trustworthiness technique: the member check" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 351). A member check includes the task of testing the results of the data analysis with representative members of the population in the study. In this study, the in-depth interviews and pre-existing data served as a member check for the focus group data sets. As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking occurred continuously throughout the study.

I conducted the data analysis process in several stages as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The following includes a more detailed description of the data analysis procedures utilized for this study.

Stage 1: A transcript was prepared for each interview resulting in six transcripts. Each transcript was printed in a different colored cardstock paper. A color scheme and code was assigned to each interview. Table 16 includes the color and code assigned to each focus group and individual personal interview. These codes and color scheme were also used to produce the unit cards described in Stage 2.

Table 16. Interview Codes and Color Scheme for Transcripts and Unit Cards

Interview	Code	Color
Focus Group 1	FG1	Pink
Focus Group 2	FG2	Golden Rod Yellow
Focus Group 3	FG3	Blue
Personal Interview 1	PI1	Beige
Personal Interview 2	PI2	White
Personal Interview 3	PI3	Light Yellow

Stage 2: Transcripts were converted to unit cards using a format recommended by Dr. Susan Lynham who was an original member of my committee. The process required converting a word document into an index card by selecting the landscape orientation and setting the top and bottom margin to one inch and the left and right margins to .7 inch to create 8 X 5 unit cards. A sample of a unit card for the transcript from Focus Group 1 is included as Appendix E.

Each unit card included a unit number in the header for reference purposes. The unit number was added using the page number function to automatically assign a number to each unit card. The footer included the code for the interview, the date of the interview, the researcher's initials, and the unit number over the total number of units. In

Table 17, I included the number of unit cards generated for each transcript during the conversion of the transcripts to unit cards during Stage 2 of the data analysis process.

Table 17. Stage 2: Number of Unit Cards

Interview Transcript	Number of Unit Cards
Focus Group 1	62
Focus Group 2	47
Focus Group 3	33
Personal Interview 1	23
Personal Interview 2	19
Personal Interview 3	11

Stage 3: I utilized electronic copies of the transcript and the Stage 2 unit cards to undergo the first level of data analysis for the focus groups and the individual personal interviews. The electronic copy of the transcript was modified to include a two inch right margin, which gave me the opportunity to electronically enter initial categories that emerged from the first analysis of the transcript. These initial categories were used to identify the units to be separated using section breaks to create the unit cards for Stage 3 of the data analysis process. Appendix F is a copy of Unit Card 3 from Focus Group 1 that resulted from Stage 3 of the data analysis process. Table 18 includes the number of unit cards produced by each transcript during Stage 3 of the data analysis.

Table 18. Stage 3: Number of Unit Cards

Interview Transcript	Number of Unit Cards
Focus Group 1	161
Focus Group 2	175
Focus Group 3	133

Table 18. Continued

Interview Transcript	Number of Unit Cards
Personal Interview 1	47
Personal Interview 2	55
Personal Interview 3	30

I reviewed the unit cards for initial "chunks of meaning" (p. 345) as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Stage 4: Once these units were identified, the transcript page number was added to each unit card in the top right corner. The transcript page number is comprised of two numbers. The first is the page where the information can be found and the second is the total number of pages in the transcript. The category assigned to each unit of data can be found in the lower right corner of the unit card. Appendix G is an example of the unit cards produced during Stage 4 of the data analysis process. The sample unit card in Appendix G reflects *Time Management* as the initial category assigned to this unit of data. The initial sort of the cards was based solely on the initial category assigned to the unit card, such as time management.

Stage 5: The *Constant Comparative Method* was used to conduct the analysis of the unit cards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). I started with the unit cards from Focus Group 1 and began to compare the unit cards to each other as I placed them into major clusters of categories. For example, unit cards that included data about instructors or events occurring in the classroom were initially placed in one pile. As the process continued, I was mindful of comparing the unit cards to previously reviewed cards. I used what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call "look-alikeness or feel-alikeness judgment" (p.

342) in combining some of the categories. The color scheme utilized to create the unit cards made for a great visual exercise, too. It allowed me to at a glance determine if categories were common among the three focus groups. The unit cards from the personal interviews provided an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding about some of the categories, which was a major reason for conducting the individual personal interviews after the focus group interviews were transcribed. The pre-existing data was then utilized as a means to further triangulate the results of the categories that emerged from the data analysis process.

Stage 6: Throughout Stage 1-5, I continuously compared, arranged, and rearranged the unit cards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). This process allowed me to transition into finalizing the categories that led to the Data Analysis and Findings described in Chapter IV of this dissertation.

Conducting qualitative research requires high levels of personal ethical commitment by the researcher. In the following section, I outline the ethical considerations for this study.

Ethical Considerations

"In qualitative studies, ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge with regard to the collection of data and in the dissemination of findings" (Merriam, 1998, p. 213). Participants in any study have the right to be informed and to decline participation in the study. I took ethical issues into account in designing the study. The Texas A&M's Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines were utilized to protect the identity of the

participants by assuring confidentiality. The study also included compliance with the IRB guidelines of the site for the study.

The previous section includes a detailed description of the coding system that was used to provide anonymity to the participants in the focus groups and the in-depth personal interviews. The transcripts did not include references to any participant data that might lead to identification of the participants. Consistent with Patton (1987, 1990) informed consent was explained and obtained from all participants. The informed consent included a description of the general intentions of the study. All participants were advised of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Qualitative research also requires that the researcher establish high levels of trustworthiness for the data. As such, the following section includes the criteria utilized to establish the trustworthiness for this study. Additionally, these criteria offer additional support for the ethical considerations of this study.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) provided criteria that a naturalistic inquiry should include to establish trustworthiness for a study. These criteria include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility can be established using:

> … five major techniques: activities that make it more likely that credible findings and interpretations will be produced (prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation); an activity that provides an external check on the inquiry process (peer debriefing); an activity aimed at refining working

> hypotheses as more and more information becomes available (negative case analysis); an activity that makes possible checking preliminary findings and interpretations against archived "raw data" (referential adequacy); and an activity providing for the direct test of findings and interpretations with the human sources from which they have come – the constructors of the multiple realities being studied (member checking). (p.301)

Establishing transferability can be accomplished through the use of "thick description" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316), which allows the reader to draw conclusions on whether the results could be "a possibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316) for themselves. Establishing credibility has a direct impact on the ability to demonstrate dependability. Furthermore, the researcher can also demonstrate dependability through an overlapping method that includes triangulation and through the use of an auditor "to examine the *process* of the inquiry, and in determining its acceptability the auditor attests to the *dependability* of the inquiry" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 318). Finally, establishing confirmability includes a rigorous conformability audit in addition to triangulation and use of reflexive journals.

Maintaining a reflexive journal is also suggested by these authors as a method to provide increased trustworthiness for the overall study. This technique requires the researcher to maintain a reflexive journal where the researcher "records a variety of information about the *self* … and *method*" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 327). This technique provides a record of how the researcher dealt with any biases that might have influenced the outcomes of the study.

The methodology described in the previous sections sets the stage for reporting the results of the data analysis and the findings for the study, which are included in the Chapter IV of the dissertation. The thick description included with the findings greatly supports the attention given to the methodology of the study.

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this naturalistic inquiry was to understand 1) the barriers experienced by successful first year (fall to fall) first-time-in-college Hispanic students at a predominately Hispanic student community college on the South Texas/Mexico Border Region, 2) the expertise/knowledge required to successfully overcome these barriers during the first year (fall to fall) in college, and 3) based on these findings, offer suggestions and recommendations for addressing the barriers experienced by Hispanic students enrolled in such community colleges. The research was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas during their first year (fall to fall) as a student at this institution of higher education?
2. What barriers had to be faced and overcome by successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?
3. What knowledge did successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas have to have in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?

4. What actions must successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas take in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?

Three focus groups, three in-depth personal interviews, and a preexisting data set were utilized to address the research questions. In this chapter, I presented the results of the data analysis, which resulted from the focus groups, in-depth interviews, and preexisting data. In the words of Lincoln and Guba (1985), the data analysis was "open-ended and inductive" (p. 224). The data analysis, therefore, led to the "*reconstruction*" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 332) of the constructs that emerged from the data analysis. The research questions were utilized as sections to present the data analysis and findings for the study. The first section, ***The Student Experience***, provides a brief summary of the overall student experience.

The Student Experience

What are the experiences of successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas during their first year (fall to fall)?

The process of trying to understand the student experience through focus groups and individual personal interviews was both challenging and rewarding. The challenging part of this engaging experience was ensuring that I captured the essence of the experience as described in the focus groups and further informed by the in-depth personal interviews and preexisting data sets. Perhaps the most rewarding experience

was the trust that the participants demonstrated as they shared their stories of struggle and success at South Texas College during their first year at the college.

As indicated in Chapter III, I made use of the data analysis procedures outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for naturalistic inquiry. The experiences of the participants were documented using the framework recommended by Padilla (1991, 2001). The study included three focus groups as the main source of data collection and three in-depth personal interviews utilized to probe deeper into the experiences of the students in the focus groups. Preexisting data sets were utilized to further triangulate the results of the data. Staying true to Padilla's framework, the student experience was reflected in the results of the data analysis for research questions two (barriers), three (knowledge), and four (actions). In the following section, I provided a detailed overview of the **Barriers Faced by Students** as described by the students.

Barriers Faced by Students

What barriers had to be faced and overcome by successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?

Padilla (1991, 2001) and Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez and Treviño (1996) suggested that all students face barriers as they progress through the Black Box (a specific college campus as described in Chapter II). Using the framework suggested by Padilla's Student Success Model (1991, 2001), successful first-time-in-college students at South Texas College were asked to participate in focus groups and individual personal interviews. The study began with the three focus groups. Participants from the focus

groups were asked to reflect on their first year (fall to fall) of college and to discuss barriers that they faced during their first year at South Texas College. The transcripts from the focus groups were then analyzed using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as described in Chapter III of this dissertation. The data analysis phase of this study revealed some overlaps between the initial categories. As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the overlap facilitated the collapsing of some of these categories into themes and subthemes that could be used to tell the story of the barriers faced by students during their first year (fall to fall) at South Texas College. The data analysis process led to six major barrier categories, which were developed using the recommended constant comparative method. The six major barrier categories are followed by the subcategories that emerged from the data analysis and were collapsed to create the six major categories. Table 19 represents the six major barrier categories and subcategories that emerged from the data analysis of the focus groups, in-depth personal interviews, and preexisting data.

Table 19. Barrier Categories and Subcategories

Barrier Category	*Barrier Subcategory*
1. Transition from High School to College	Not preparing students for academic rigor
	Difference between college and high school
	Graduates not college ready
	Alignment of summer calendar
	Parents don't understand true cost of attendance
	Competing demands for time
	Time commitment for college
	College not easy
	High expectations in college
	College seen as unattainable
	High schools focus on TAKS
	No options for high school drops
	High school teachers and counselors perceptions

Table 19. Continued

Barrier Category	*Barrier Subcategory*
2. Personal & Family Commitments	Single parent
	Childcare – unexpected illnesses
	Living at home
	Family support
	Lack of financial support
	Student motivation
	Wanting immediate/current gratification
	Low educational attainment of parents
	Work versus school
	Juggling family, school, and work
	Burning out
	One car families
	No access to Internet from home
	Cost of gas to commute
3. Institutional Support	Customer service Insufficient services
	Inconsistent procedures
	Limited access to financial resources
	Financial Aid Paperwork
	Financial Aid Disbursements
	Parking
	Parking Tickets are given at beginning of semester
	New/prospective students getting tickets
	Not enough computers
	Lack of student discounts for software
	Lack of student activities/life
	Additional options for older students
	Perceptions that everyone qualifies for financial aid
4. Student Accountability	Time management
	Procrastination
	Laziness
	Utilizing study guides
	Peer networks
	Struggling
	Using college resources
	Asking questions
	Dealing with shyness
	Understanding college resources
	Making connections
	Jobs on campus
	Celebrating success
	Designating study areas
	Communications with faculty
	Need for immediacy
	Use of labs for non-school related activities
	Managing Internet distractions

Table 19. Continued

Barrier Category	*Barrier Subcategory*
5. Instructor Issues	Language spoken and accents
	Teaching technique/Andragogy
	How faculty teach vs how students learn
	Requiring textbook and not using it
	Long timelines for submitting work and receiving feedback
	Not wanting to offend or question faculty
	Not working with faculty outside of classroom
	Limited access at Starr and Mid-Valley to instructors
	Student versus instructor technology preferences
6. Developmental Studies/College Readiness	Too many levels required
	Student gives up and does not see the end
	Time to complete sequence
	Not Preparing for the THEA/ACCUPLACER
	Understanding the role of developmental
	Transfer issues with other colleges
	Restrictions to excessive
	Forcing students to stay after passing test

The following subsections include a summary of the six barrier categories that emerged from the data analysis: 1) transition from high school to college, 2) personal and family commitments, 3) institutional support, 4) student accountability, 5) instructor issues, and 6) developmental studies/college readiness. The subcategories outlined in Table 19 are described in more detail in the following subsections. The data from the in-depth personal interviews and preexisting data sets were used to provide thick description for the barrier categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The description provided for each barrier category includes quotes from the transcripts. The statements made by students in Spanish were included verbatim in the description. All quotes were included in *italics* with Spanish quotes being *underlined* in addition to being *italicized*. The findings from the data analysis begins with the description of the first barrier category—***transition from high school to college***. Each barrier category begins with a quote that captured the

essence of the students' experiences as first-time-in-college (fall to fall) students at South Texas College.

Barrier Category 1: Transition from High School to College

"Welcome to the real world" (FG2, Unit 88, Tp 21-35) is perhaps the most powerful statement made by a participant in focus group two in describing his experience as a first-time-in-college student at South Texas College. Students recognized early in the first year at STC that they were not fully prepared for the expectations and rigor of college. Like the majority of the students at South Texas College, the students participating in the study were first generation college students with many of them being the first in their family to graduate from high school. As recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the constant comparative method gave me the opportunity to continuously assess and reassess the categories to determine if the categories that were compatible and could be combined to form a new category. The categories that were collapsed to form the new category were captured as subcategories. In Table 20, I present the categories that were collapsed during the data analysis process to form the ***Transition from High School to College Barrier Category***.

Table 20. Barrier Subcategories for Transition from High School to College

Barrier Category	*Barrier Subcategories*
1. Transition from High School to College	Not preparing students for academic rigor
	Difference between college and high school
	Graduates not college ready
	Alignment of summer calendar
	Parents don't understand true cost of attendance
	Competing demands for time
	Time commitment for college

Table 20. Continued

Barrier Category	*Barrier Subcategories*
	College not easy
	High expectations in college
	College seen as unattainable
	High schools focus on TAKS
	No options for high school drops
	High school teachers and counselors perceptions

The students participating in all three focus groups overwhelmingly agreed that they did not believe that their respective high schools prepared them for the academic rigor of college. One participant stated, "*I felt like some of the first things I learned my first year [at STC] I had not been taught in high school*" (FG2, Unit 4, Tp 1-35). Another participant offered, "*I think it [college] is really different from high school*" (FG2, Unit 2, Tp 1-35). In discussing time commitment and preparedness for college, other participants added, "*college takes a lot of time … it's not easy*" (FG3, Unit 27, Tp 5-27). In probing deeper during personal interview one, the participant added the following:

> *In high school they were like babysitting you and like you have to do your homework … and here you … you do them [homework] and if not it is your grade. The hours that sometimes you have to come from 10:00 to 11:20 then from 3:00 to 5:00. Sometimes you get them [the classes] later and in high school you go [to school] only from 8 to 4 and that is a routine that you go every day. In college it is different. You have class on Monday [or] Mondays and Wednesdays.* (PI1, Unit 11, Tp 5-20)

A participant in focus group two stated, "*I think it was more like ... time ... like it's kind of fast paced cuz you know how in high school you have a whole year of the same class and this one [college class] is like you [have] to learn all that stuff for a certain amount of time and then you have a test*" (FG2, Unit 77, Tp 19-35). In continuing the discussion on the difference between high school and college, the participants from focus group three added the following comments:

- *Actually here in college you are expected to do your work. And you realize – y te pones a pensar para tras – and you realize if college is like this – como estaria high school – it would be more easier. Pero lo que pensamos es – cuando falta para que lluege el weekend para dar la vuelta. Lla que estas aqui you realize de que it is not that hard here because you do your work and you study. (FG3, Unit 31, Tp 5-27, Tp 6-27)*
- *Over there [high school] they did not care. (FG3, Unit 31, Tp 6-27)*
- *They [high school teachers] still pass you. (FG3, Unit 31, Tp 6-27)*

Many of the participants expressed concern that numerous high school students may not consider college as an option while still in high school. Their concern is evident in the following conversation thread from focus group three:

- *By not knowing, como esta la onda en colegio, they [high school students] are already saying their opinion that it is hard. (FG3, Unit 33, Tp 6-27)*
- *They drop out of high school. (FG3, Unit 70, Tp 14-27)*
- *They don't even start. (FG3, Unit 70, Tp 14-27)*
- *They have anxiety to attend college. (FG3, Unit 70, Tp 14-27)*

- *There are still those who do not want to take a risk—they just get a job. (FG3, Unit 70, Tp 14-27).*

Only one student, who graduated as valedictorian of his high school class, indicated that he was offered guidance about college by his high school counselor. The rest of the participants expressed that the high school counselors never encouraged them to take a more rigors curriculum while still in high school nor did the counselors provide information on the options the students had for applying to colleges. One participant summarized, "*I just didn't know where to go*" (PI2, Unit 2, Tp 1-17). The sense of being lost and not knowing where to begin was prevalent during the interviews. The following comment was offered by a participant during personal interview one, "*They think it is like a big high school. Honestly, my teacher … one of my teachers was like don't go to STC it's a big high school, it's nothin*g" (PI2, Unit 9, Tp 3-17). When asked the perception fellow high school students had about STC, the participant added, "*That it [STC] is a bad school and you are not going to get a good education or you are just not leaving the Valley … that is something everyone wants. Everyone thinks STC is an easy school*" (PI2, Unit 9, Tp 4-17). The participant added, "*it [STC] is a place for a lot of opportunities. If I would have gone to Pan Am I don't think I would have been given any opportunities like Valley Scholars, PTK, the leadership academy, everything*" (PI2, Unit 10, Tp 4-17).

As students found themselves dealing with their transition from high school to college, they also struggled with balancing school with their respective personal and

family commitments. The following subsection provides details about the second barrier category: ***Personal and Family Commitments***.

Barrier Category 2: Personal and Family Commitments

"Family problems are affecting me right now" (PI1, Unit 5, Tp 2-20) is a statement made by a male participant during personal interview one. During the probing process of his interview, the student shared his concerns about the issues that he was facing at home. The student was conflicted by his parents' decision to pursue a divorce. He felt it necessary to mediate the problems between his parents as the male son. As the data analysis process progressed, I began to notice patterns of categories that could easily be combined to form the ***Personal and Family Commitments Barrier Category***. I present the subcategories that were collapsed to form this barrier category in Table 21.

Table 21. Barrier Subcategories for Personal and Family Issues

Barrier Category	*Barrier Subcategory*
2. Personal & Family Commitments	Single parent
	Childcare – unexpected illnesses
	Living at home
	Family support
	Lack of financial support
	Student motivation
	Wanting immediate/current gratification
	Low educational attainment of parents
	Work versus school
	Juggling family, school, and work
	Burning out
	One car families
	No access to Internet from home
	Cost of gas to commute

The participants in the focus groups and personal interviews expressed a great commitment to family. The power of the conflict of juggling family and school was clearly articulated by a participant in personal interview three, "*I think the, the hardest thing is the time I take away from my daughter because my husband is a truck driver he is never home. So it's very hard for me to give up time with her to come to school. But I tell her it is a sacrifice that once I graduate it will be better*" (PI3, Unit 7, Tp 4-11). A female participant in focus group two described it as "*juggling family time and school time with work time*" (FG2, Unit 8, Tp 2-35). Another female participant in focus group three explains how students who are also parents have to make arrangements for childcare services, "*like there are parents que tienen niños and they come to college y los ponen a los niños como where I work [daycare facility] and they come to school*" (FG3, Unit 130, Tp 26-27). Another participant who has siblings explains that she has to deal with constant interruptions, "*I need to finish something and they are there … I want to be with you … I want to watch TV in that room*" (FG1, Unit 18, Tp 4-45). The participant expressed concern because she wants to spend time with her siblings but she has to place a greater priority on completing her school work.

The participants in focus group two added that it is important not to "*burn yourself out*" (FG2, Unit 92, Tp 21-35), which is a sign of the pressure that these students feel to continue to be successful in all of their competing roles. A male participant in focus group three explains the stress of having to deal with expectations from his family to contribute more at home, "*Porque pos a poco a mi me dicen no estellas de guevon ponte a trabajar … and I'm like estoy yendo al colegio full time … no*

me queda tiempo. I need to do my work and I need free time. No puedo estar todo stressed out" (FG3, Unit 26, Tp5-27). In his statement, he addressed his frustration that his parents referred to him as being lazy because he did not have a job. He clearly articulated the lack of understanding by his parents of the time commitment required to be successful in college. During the probing process, he explained that he was the first in his family to enroll in college.

Another major conflict that resonated during the focus groups that was further described in the personal interviews is the relationship between the subcategories under *family support* and *low educational attainment of parents*. The discussion in the focus groups on parents and family members being a great source of motivation and encouragement to pursue and complete a college degree led me to probe deeper during the personal interviews. Some of the comments made in the focus groups and personal interviews were provided:

- *Here [the region] parents are the ones that motivate you. They did not have that opportunity and they are giving us the opportunity to come [to college] and be better persons* (FG3, Unit 111, Tp 22-27).
- *My parents have always told us to go to college because they don't want their life style for us. My parents come home tired and they say we don't want you to be our age and do the same thing. You have an opportunity to go to school* (PI2, Unit 21, Tp 7-17).
- *They really support me all the way, they give me advice, not to be working like them that to go get a associates and bachelors, so I can be somebody in*

life and not be like them with the shovel and my mom a custodian (PI1, Unit 6, Tp 3-20).

- *It is almost like you need your own cheering committee to keep you going you know or that is how I see it. Like right now, I feel burned out I feel tired but I go home and I tell my husband I'm tired and he says you are almost done you can do it you have come this far and if he were the type of person that would say 'ya no vallas' what would I do I would quit. You need somebody to push you. You need somebody to cheer you on and keep you going when you are feeling that.* (PI3, Unit 15, Tp 7-11)

It was rewarding to find a contradiction to what is a common myth in higher education that Hispanic families do not support or motivate their children to go to college. Another compelling and common subtheme was the discussion on the ***One Car Families***. Many of the participants are totally dependent on their parents/family for transportaiton to and from the College. One participant described it as follows, "*I am a low-income family. We're ten in the family. My mom is the only one with a car. She's the one that has to come drop me off*" (FG2, Unit 22, Tp 5-35). During personal interview one, the participant added, *"Families mainly only have one or two cars and their parents have to go to their work and they're left without a car and that is a big barrier that they face, that I faced"* (PI1, Unit2, TP 1-20). For students who had access to a car, the cost of gasoline and time to communte was becoming a serious issue. The ***Time to Commute*** subcategory emerged from the discussion of having to commute not only to school but also to work in addition to having to transport children to and from daycare.

- *Sometimes students don't have enough money to buy a car to come over here. [to*(FG3, Unit 15, Tp 3-27 & 4-27)
- *Cost of transportation … like the gas … gas is expensive … I come from San Benito and I have to come all the way over here.* (FG2, Unit 23, Tp 5-35)
- *Like for me I have to come – I had a car but I don't know what happened to it [car broke down] so I'm coming every day with my dad so I have to wait here for him … I see a lot of people whose parents drop them off.* (FG1, Unit 90, Tp 23-45 & 24-45)
- *Coming from Minnesota my parents already had three cars. I didn't drive back then but coming here I started taking my mom's car and slowly it just became my car but they had – my dad has a really old car. He bought it for like a thousand dollars but it takes him to work and that's how I transport everywhere.* (PI2, Unit 22, Tp 7-17)

Being a better person was a common statement made by many of the participants as they discussed why they were so committed to succeeding in college. Probing deeper into what participants actually meant revealed a great connection between degree attainment, potential careers, and the ability to give back to the family. The following statements provided some insight into their thoughts.

- *The ones telling you not to go to school–[you] just [have to] keep in mind–I have to go I have to be a better person.* (FG3, Unit 95, Tp 19-27)
- *You know that one day you will have a better future.* (FG3, Unit 100, Tp 21-27)

- *Having a degree and being a better person–I can work wherever I want. I can have the money and time to just work–you can be a better person by forming another family and helping your parents out.* (PI1, Unit 29, Tp 13-20)
- *A better person is someone who is educated and has a good career.* (PI3, Unit 17, Tp 7-11)

These students communicated a great responsibility to their families. They spoke of education as a pathway to being a ***better person*** and having the ability to provide for their family. Many of these students still lived at home with their parents and/or their extended family members.

Living at home was expressed as both a blessing and a hindrance by these students. Many of them articulated a great appreciation for still living at home and not having to worry about paying major bills. The majority of the students who participated in the focus groups, however, worked to contribute to the household income and/or paying for their personal expenses. The following are some of the problems that burden students while living at home.

- *I think because school is more important when I go home I just study do my things and then start talking to my parents–why are they getting a divorce–I think that family problems are affecting me right now–because here you live with them and if you are an out of town student you come over here [to college] alone–you are alone and the problems are over there in your house–but here I live in Roma and it is closer to the college–then you have to*

live in their house and you are going to be facing those problems. (PI1, Unit5, Tp 2-20)

- *I think staying here at school 24/7 works. I did go through a family crisis with my brother and it was hard for me. I just wanted to stay at school and I think that I, I found reasons to stay here at school because I did not want to go home.* (PI2, Unit 50, Tp 15-17)

As I spent time listening and comprehending the very personal problems many of these students are facing, I felt a responsibility to tell their story of commitment to fulfilling their goal of attaining a college degree. Their stories reminded me of my own struggles as a first generation undergraduate student. When I enrolled for the first time at the regional university, I was expected to drive home during the week and on weekends to deal with family responsibilities. Their stories brought back memories of not wanting to go back home because I knew I would have to get involved in the family issue of the time. However, I also found my trips home very rewarding. These trips served as a reminder of why I wanted to complete my degree and my promise to my father that I would complete my degree as repayment to him for always pushing me to exceed my own expectations.

Aside from dealing with personal and family commitments, the participants in this study also faced institutional issues. The subcategories related to policies, procedures, and practices of South Texas College were collapsed under the ***Institutional Support Barrier Category***, which is discussed in the following subsection.

Barrier Category 3: Institutional Support

"The school is growing so should everything else –you can't stay behind with staff" (FG2, Unit 162, Tp 33-35) was a statement made by a participant from focus group two and was reflective of the subcategories that were merged into the ***Institutional Support Barrier Category***, which emerged after several rounds of reviewing the unit cards during the data analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After careful consideration, I decided to collapse the subcategories to include all institutional related barriers identified by the students. In Table 22, I present the subcategories that were collapsed under the ***Institutional Support Category***.

Table 22. Barrier Subcategories for Institutional Support

Barrier Category	*Barrier Subcategories*
3. Institutional Support	Customer service
	Insufficient services
	Inconsistent procedures
	Limited access to financial resources
	Financial Aid Paperwork
	Financial Aid Disbursements
	Parking
	Parking Tickets are given at beginning of semester
	New/prospective students getting tickets
	Not enough computers
	Lack of student discounts for software
	Lack of student activities/life
	Additional options for older students
	Perceptions that everyone qualifies for financial aid

Each of the subcategories were formed by further collapsing categories that emerged during the early rounds of using the constant comparative method of data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants in the study made references to issues with customer service, which included statemetns of rude/mean staff, staff attitudes,

advising limited to degree plan, advisors lack knowledge on program options, lack of communication of deadlines, lack of communication on student clubs, and information not posted on campus. Much of the discussion about ***rude/mean staff***, which was related to staff attitudes, was focused on staff from financial aid, admissions, and other service departments. The following are some of the comments made by participants:

- *The staff here on campus–they are rude–some of the admissions staff are freaking mean–admissions and financial aid–the lady that works for financial aid, she's mean.* (FG2, Unit 25, Tp 5-35)
- *He [financial aid staff] just wants to help you and that's it, like get out of here. He doesn't want to inform you of other stuff to help you out.* (FG2, Unit 157, Tp 32-35)
- *Not to put down the advisors but advising is pretty bad too, like, all they do is like here's your degree plan, bye.* (FG2, Unit 160, Tp 33-35)
- *Also like the advisors, when you go to them and you ask them like about the different degree plans they don't have that much knowledge about it.* (FG2, Unit 161, Tp 161-175)

Students in focus group three expressed a lack of knowledge about student clubs on their campus. They expressed a belief that student clubs would give them opportunities to stay on campus before and after classes. The following discussion thread between the students clearly demonstrated the lack of information about student clubs/activities:

- *My opinion is that there is not that much activities like en otro colegios. (FG3, Unit 14, Tp 3-27)*
- *Actually, nada mas hay un programa de criminal justice program. Right? (FG3, Unit 14, Tp 3-27)*
- *I remember last fall there was a science club. I haven't heard about it this semester. (FG3, Unit 14, Tp 3-27)*

The participants also expressed frustration with the lack of information about deadlines. Participants in focus group two indicated that they are forced to ask about deadlines because the Testing Center does not have information posted anywhere on campus. A participant stated, "*there is no flyer to tell you this is the deadline. You have to go and ask*" (FG2, Unit 38, Tp 9-35). A participant in focus group two stated, "*if you are not active in the college you don't know*" (FG2, Unit 69, Tp 17-35) to explain the lack of information about several services and programs at the college.

Although proud of the growth of the college, participants expressed concerns about insufficient services. The need for additional staff and services was articulated by a participant in focus group two with the following statement:

> *I mean, the school is growing so should everything else you know like–you can't stay behind with staff. You can't stay behind with student life. They like to say they're the fastest growing college in the nation but you're staying behind with students and stuff like that.* (FG2, Unit 162, Tp 33-35)

Another participant in focus group two adds, "*I think we should get the same treatment as the other [campuses]*" (FG2, Unit 163, Tp 33-35). Continuing the discussion another

student contributed, "*and I think we should also have the same options that other students have in the other local universities–as the software. I don't think it's fair that we have to like find somebody to buy the same software, you know what I mean*" (FG2, Unit 164, Tp 33-35). The student was making reference to the opportunity students at the local regional university have to purchase Microsoft products at a very reasonable student price.

Participants from the Starr County and Mid-Valley Campuses expressed concerns about lack of access to services due to hours of operation for critical services, such as, the student success center, bookstore, cafeteria, and library. They were also very vocal about their strong belief that the students from the Starr County and Mid-Valley Campuses did not have access to the same academic programs as students attending McAllen campuses.

In discussing the impact of not having enough staff, a participant from focus group two commented, "*We're in the Valley, like 80% of students get financial aid and usually there's one person at the [financial aid] window and there's huge … lines*" (FG2, Unit 158, Tp. 32-35). Another student added, "*like the bookstore, they're open like nine or ten and then sometimes some people are taking exams and they don't have scantrons*" (FG2, Unit 47, Tp 11-35).

In speaking to the issues of equity of campuses, two participants from focus group two concluded with, "*I think STC overall focuses more on the Pecan Campus, not to be mean, they should have everything equal. They should have equal opportunities available to all campuses. That's true. The Pecan Campus is really big. I mean if they*

wanted three separate campuses instead of one then focus on all three or four that they have. Not just one" (FG2, Unit 174, Tp 35-35). Students also expressed frustration with inconsistent procedures between departments especially in the following areas:

- Printing at library and student success center
- Hours at Mid-Valley and Starr County Campuses
- Lack of access to evening classes in Mid-Valley and Starr County Campuses
- Limited course and program offerings at Mid-Valley and Starr County Campuses
- Number of math sections offered Starr County Campuses

Although fewer issues were raised about inconsistent procedures, I found it important to report on them because it speaks to some of the cross-divisional issues that impact student success. At South Texas College, the library and the student success center are under the leadership of two different divisions. The library is a unit of the Division of Information Services and Planning, while the student success center is a unit of the Division of Academic Affairs. In speaking of the inconsistent procedures on printing at the library and at the student success center, the participants engaged in the following discussion, "*why do they limit [printing] if the library does not limit nothing … I know the lab does because I used to be a workstudy there … you can only do fifteen pages also*" (FG2, Unit 154, Tp 32-35). Participants also discussed the need for additional course offerings, especially in the evenings, "*Offer different types of classes … like evening classes … More academic evening classes*" (FG3, Unit126, Tp 25-27).

These participants add, "*there are classes that they don't offer here [Starr County Campus] like medical*" (FG3, Unit 128, Tp 25-27).

Participants in all three focus groups made reference to issues about limited access to financial resources, such as, minimal book loan programs, lack of loans, lack of Texas grant, testing fees, and cost of books. The participants in the focus groups expressed concerns that many students cannot attend college because they do not have the funding for it. One participant in focus group three stated, "*they think cuando tenga mas dinero ni modo school is not for us* (FG3, Unit 91, Tp 19-27). He added, "*si no hubiera financial aid no vinieran muchos*" (FG3, Unit 109, Tp 22-27) to college. The cost of books was mentioned in every focus group as a major barrier facing students. The students in focus group one made it clear that they had to identify alternative sources of funding to pay for books because their scholarship only covered tuition and fees. They stated, "*they [Valley Scholars Program] don't pay for books*" (FG1, Unit 7, Tp 2-45). In discussing financial support, a participant makes reference to the fact that the financial aid office "*doesn't offer like emergency loans [and] Texas grants*" (FG2, Unit 156, Tp 32-35). The focus groups and later the personal interviews revealed a myriad of financial aid related issues. The following is a representation of some of the financial aid related issues identified by the students.

- Not enough scholarships
- Not qualifying for financial aid
- Financial aid disbursements and timelines
- Understanding financial aid paperwork

- Lack of knowledge on workstudy program
- Lack of communication on financial aid options
- Book money disbursed too late
- Incomplete documentation
- Complex financial aid process
- Communication on financial aid errors

When the numerous financial aid related issues emerged during the interviews, I understood the importance of trying to more clearly understand these issues. As an insider at South Texas college, I continuously heard that if students would just apply for financial aid a greater percentage of students' tuition and fees would be covered by the Federal Pell Grant, state, or local aid. To my surprise, however, many of the participants in the focus groups and the three personal interviews indicated that they did not qualify for financial aid or they qualified and were awarded minimal amounts. The issues with financial aid were clearly articulated in the following statement, "*Yes, I am a fulltime student … financial aid only helps me with $320 per semester because of what my mother and dad makes*" (PI1, Unit 14, Tp 6-20). Another participant added, "*My situation … my parents make money, my parents work overtime that is why … I guess another reason why I don't qualify. But the thing is that moving to Texas my parents had to take out money from their IRA*" (PI2, Unit 18, Tp5-17). She goes on to explain that her parents had to report the funds from the IRA as income even though the funds were used as a down payment on their house in Texas. This transaction continues to prevent her from qualifying for financial aid.

Another common category related to financial aid was the belief that scholarships are not made available to students. The participants engaged in a dialogue about this issue from three different perspectives. The first perspective was that scholarships were available but students did not apply because it was time consuming. The second perspective was that students were not aware that scholarships were available because the college did not promote the availability of scholarships. The third perspective was that students simply believed that they were not competitive for these scholarships.

In support of the first and second perspective, the following exchange occurred between students in focus group one: "*they should really make people apply for scholarships … no one here does … they should have more scholarships … no they have a bunch of scholarships online … it's just that no one knows about them*" (FG1,Unit 145, Tp 40-45). Further support for all three perspectives is reflected in the following statement shared during personal interview three.

> *Nobody ever sent me anything through the mail or my advisor never told me hey there are scholarships available. And a lot of times a lot of the scholarships are only available to students just graduating from high school. I don't know about a lot of programs or scholarships or grants for someone in my situation. I've been out of high school for 20 years.* (PI3, Unit 12, Tp 16-11)

The other categories were reflective of the frustration that students experienced as a result of the complexities of completing the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), which is the application required by the Department of Education to

determine eligibility for not only federal financial aid but also eligibility for many other state and local funds.

Setting aside the complexities of the FAFSA, participants expressed many concerns about the process utilized by the South Texas College Financial Aid Office in processing the required paperwork. Participants spoke of inefficiencies in the process including the lack of communication with students when additional documentation is required to complete the required financial aid process. They also spoke to the timelines for disbursing funds for textbooks. According to the participants, the book money was disbursed after classes had already begun, which prevented many of them from buying their textbooks before the first day of class. Although participants had much to say about the inefficiencies of the process, they also assumed responsibility for poor behavior on their part. They understand that applying late for financial aid does not provide the turnaround time necessary to ensure that their financial aid funds was received prior to the first day of classes. Applying late for financial aid was only one of the many student accountability issues raised by students during the interviews. The data analysis process led to the development of the ***Student Accountability***, which is described in the following section.

Barrier Category 4: Student Accountability

"It is just a matter of applying yourself" (PI3, Unit 24,Tp 9-11) was a statement made by a participant during personal interview three. The statement captures the essence of the ownership and responsibility students accepted for their respective

success in college. I was more than pleasantly surprised to hear the participants clearly articulate their personal responsibility and commitment to being successful in college. More often than not, I heard in administrative meetings: if only students took responsibility, if only students would apply on time, if only students would attend classes, and if only students were motivated. The analysis of the data for this study revealed that successful students take personal accountability and responsibility for their success in college; however, these students were also keenly aware of the actions or lack of actions that can become barriers to student success. In Table 23, I outline the subthemes that were collapsed under ***Student Accountability***.

Table 23. Barrier Subcategories for Student Accountability

Barrier Category	*Barrier Subcategories*
4. Student Accountability & Commitment	Time management
	Procrastination
	Laziness
	Utilizing study guides
	Peer networks
	Struggling
	Using college resources
	Asking questions
	Dealing with shyness
	Understanding college resources
	Making connections
	Jobs on campus
	Celebrating success
	Designating study areas
	Communications with faculty
	Internet distractions
	Need for immediacy
	Use of labs for non-school related activities
	Managing Internet distractions

The participants of this study expressed responsibility for meeting their respective personal and academic goals. When asked how much of student success was driven by a sense of personal accountability, the participant from personal interview two responded, "*I think it has a lot [to do] with you*" (PI2, Unit 41, Tp 13-17). The majority of the participants in the focus groups and personal interviews identified dealing with procrastination, establishing timelines, taking advantage of college resources, and working with instructors as key areas of personal accountability. The following comments were made by participants as issues that they faced during the first year at South Texas College.

- Managing time (FG1, Unit 3, TP 1-45; FG2, Unit 7, Tp 2-35; FG3, Unit 21, Tp 4-27)
- Waiting too long to register (FG1, Unit 4, Tp 2-45)
- Procrastination (FG1, Unit 17, Tp 4-45, FG2, Unit 5, Tp 2-35; FG3, Unit 8, Tp 2-27)

"We usually just get on the Internet and stay on there for a long time. You don't get any work done" (FG1, Unit 20, Tp5-45) captures the essence of the battle that students were facing with technology. The influence of technology on student success, therefore, emerged as another barrier subcategory that students identified during the focus groups and the personal interviews.

When we think about technology, our thoughts usually turn to access to computers and fast-speed Internet connectivity in the households of our students. The subcategories related to technology, however, offered insights to additional issues that

students face. Managing Internet distractions was mentioned by every participant in the focus groups and personal interviews. Although some of the students did not have access to personal computers, they utilized the College's resources for both class related and non-class related Internet use. The influence of technology and the need for immediacy was also obvious. An example the need for immediacy and the disconnect by faculty and students on use of technology for communication was the fact that instructors wanted to communicate with students utilizing email, however, the students in the study indicated their preference for instant messaging and/or phone texts as their preferred means for communication.

Participants in the focus groups shared their frustration with the computer labs being used by students for nonschool related activities, such as surfing the Internet. Participants from focus group one stated, "*at Mid-Valley there is just like one little computer lab and we don't have a lot. We just have one computer lab and then you see everyone on My Space and you are like I need to type something … that is why I don't do work at school. I just go home* (FG1, Unit 71, Tp 17-45 & 18-45).

Additionally, students identified challenges in taking advantage of resources and/or asking questions in class. A student in focus group two offered the following example: "*I had a math class where everyone was quiet. Nobody would talk and the professor would ask, do you guys understand? And even if we didn't, everybody was really shy.*" (FG2, Unit 8, Tp 2-35). Another participant in focus group three offered, "*there are a lot of people that don't take advantage of the professors. They teach very good … there is a lot of help here*" (FG3; Unit 40, Tp 7-27).

As the interviews progressed, however, I discovered a common belief expressed by the majority of the participants. The participants in this study expressed a belief that they needed to struggle to be successful in college and to meet their goal of attaining the illusive college degree. A participant in focus group three communicated this thought in the following statement, "***struggle****–the action is to struggle … just finish the work*" (FG3, Unit 99, Tp 20-27). More is included in the Knowledge and Actions section about how students describe struggle as an action for being successful in college. During the data analysis process, ***Instructor Issues*** also emerged as a category. The subcategories collapsed under this category are described in the following section.

Barrier Category 5: Instructor Issues

"Trying to understand your teachers, they are not from the U.S. so it is very hard to understand them" (FG2, Unit 5, Tp 1-35) was a common statement made throughout the interview process. The students who participated in the study were almost apologetic in discussing the instructor related issues. They expressed a great deal of respect for their instructors. In Table 24, I present the subcategories that were collapsed into the ***Instructor Issues*** category in Table 24.

Table 24. Barrier Subcategories for Instructor Issues

Barrier Category	*Barrier Subcategories*
5. Instructor Issues	Language spoken and accents
	Teaching technique/Andragogy
	How faculty teach vs how students learn
	Requiring textbook and not using it
	Long timelines for submitting work and receiving feedback
	Not wanting to offend or question faculty

Table 24. Continued

Barrier Category	*Barrier Subcategories*
	Not working with faculty outside of classroom
	Limited access at Starr and Mid-Valley to instructors
	Student versus instructor technology preferences

The heavy accents of many of the faculty in the math and sciences were identified in every focus group and personal interview as a barrier to student success. The following statements were reflective of the comments made during the interviews:

- *Sometimes we don't understand how our professors speak; their language; their accent.* (FG3, Unit 10, Tp 2-27)
- *You have to get used to your teachers. Some have heavy accents … especially in math. Yes, especially in math.* (FG1, Unit 13, Tp 3-45)
- *I had a math instructor who I didn't understand – well he–I understood him–I understood what he was trying to say but he did not understand our questions. We would ask him how did you do this–and he would tell us something completely different. But I guess–I just kind of would look at the book and I'm pretty good at math. So I was able to ask my friends, how do you this? Do you remember how to do this? … or just look at the book and try to remember from high school.* (PI2, Unit 26, Tp 9-17)
- *There are a couple of professors whose accents are very strong but I – what I did – I moved up to the very front and I listened very carefully. It wasn't something that I wasn't able to overcome. I, I pretty much understood what they were telling me and they were excellent professors quite honestly. It is*

> *just a matter of, you know, giving them your undivided attention and you can get through it.* (PI3, Unit 23, Tp 9-11)

The participants also shared that they believe that the instructional techniques used by the College's instructors does not match the preferred learning styles of the students. The participants' concerns about instructional techniques was clearly articulated in the following statement, "*or even their teaching habits – how they teach opposed to how we learn – teachers who don't teach – they just like to read*" (FG1, Unit 14, Tp 3-45). Participants also indicated that instructors do not provide feedback in a prompt manner on their progress in class. They expressed concern about the time between when assignments and exams are submitted to instructors and when feedback is provided back to them about their performance on these assignments and exams. One participant explained, "*a lot of times we will take tests or whatever or you know we'll do our assignments and you don't even know what grade you have. And a lot of times I've had to ask my professors, am I doing well because if not I need to drop this course? I don't want to have a failing grade on my exam. So it just varies, like I said, every professor has their own teaching method, every professor has a different strategy* (PI3, Unit 29, Tp 11-11).

Faced with increasing cost for books, participants in every focus group and personal interview also expressed concerns over instructors requiring a textbook for the class and never using the textbook in their lectures and/or for exams. During personal interview two, one participant stated, "*He used it [textbook] once at the beginning of the semester and then he just started using his notes*" (PI2, Unit 32, Tp 10-17). Participants

from Starr County expressed concerns about the lack of access to different instructors. The size and location of the campus limits the number of classes that are offered in math and science. Students may, therefore, have access to only one math and one science instructor, which does not provide them with choices of instructor assigned to Starr County. Although closely related to transition from high school to college, the ***Developmental Studies/College Readiness*** category emerged as a separate category. The following section includes the subcategories that were collapsed to form this category.

Barrier Category 6: Developmental Studies/College Readiness

"I know that it's just a waste of time the developmental classes" (PI1, Unit 27, Tp 12-20) was used to describe how one participant felt about having to take developmental studies courses. Although students clearly articulated not being ready for the rigors of college, they had much to say about the assessment process and the developmental education program at the College. Table 25 represents the subcategories that were collapsed into the ***Developmental Studies/College Readiness*** category.

Table 25. Barrier Subcategories for Developmental Studies/College Readiness

Barrier Category	*Barrier Subcategories*
6. Developmental Studies/College Readiness	Too many levels required
	Student gives up and does not see the end
	Time to complete sequence
	Not Preparing for the THEA/ACCUPLACER
	Understanding the role of developmental
	Transfer issues with other colleges
	Restrictions to excessive
	Forcing students to stay after passing test

Students argued that the College has too many levels of developmental education classes: three levels for math; three levels for English; and three levels for reading. The participants expressed that the lowest level math should not be required as part of developmental studies. One participant stated, "*They start you at a real basic math like adding and dividing*" (FG2, Unit 14, Tp 3-35) in an effort to explain the reason for her resentment towards developmental math. The following is the conversation thread between the participants in focus group two.

- *If you are taking remedial two you can't take more than like 12 hours. That's not fair.* (FG2, Unit 152, Tp 31-35)
- *That just limits, it takes you longer to finish school.* (FG2, Unit 152, Tp 31-35)
- *Three hours for your developmental class, three hours for your student success [class].* (FG2, Unit 152, Tp 31-35)
- *Yeah that's already six and then you need two classes of your own. It's like you are never gonna get the hell out of here. (FG2, Unit 152, Tp 31-35)*
- *Yea and then if you pass a certain part you still can't get out of it until the professors ok's it.* (FG2, Unit 152, Tp 31-35)
- *If you do start at Math 80 [lowest level] that's like four semesters trying to get to College Algebr*a. (FG2, Unit 15, Tp 3-35)
- *That's like two years if you don't come in the Summer extra that you have to like….or, you know what I mean?* (FG2, Unit 15, Tp 3-35)
- *If you fail one you have to go again.* (FG2, Unit 15, Tp 3-35)

- *Then you get dropped from all your class[es] not just the that one.* (FG2, Unit 15, Tp 3-35)

As described in Barrier Category One (Transition from High School to College), students were aware that they were not prepared for the academic rigors of college. The participants appeared to understand the need for developmental studies. However, they expressed frustration with the college's developmental studies policies and procedures. A student in focus group two acknowledged the confusion and frustration in the assessment process in following statement.

> *I mean usually the assessment, like the testing, usually takes place during your junior high school years to make sure you're like you are current, ready for college. So I believe once you get out of high school, you should be, like, if you already passed all those exams you should be ready to take college courses. Like there shouldn't be so much tests, do you have to pass this to take this class.* (FG2, Unit 67, Tp 16-35)

The statement speaks to the requirements for students to successfully complete the requirements to exit high school by passing the TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) and the requirements to take an additional assessment to take college level courses. The students suggested that all students should be college ready before they graduate from high school.

In summary, applying Padilla's (1991, 2003) Student Success Model allowed me to document the barriers that successful first year (fall to fall) first-time-in-college Hispanic students experienced at South Texas College. In summary, the data analysis

process led to the identification of six major barrier categories: 1) transition from high school to college; 2) personal and family commitments; 3) institutional support; 4) student accountability; 5) instructor issues; and 6) developmental studies/college readiness.

As indicated in the introduction section of Chapter IV, ***The Student Experience*** section includes two subsections: *Barriers Faced by Students* and *Knowledge and Actions*. The following subsection includes a description of the knowledge and actions identified by the participants to overcome the barriers they encountered during their first year at South Texas College.

Knowledge and Actions

What knowledge did successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas have to have in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?

What actions must successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas take in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?

Padilla's Student Success Model (1991, 2001) required that the brain storming session to identify barriers be followed by a discussion about the knowledge students possess and the actions taken to overcome such barriers. During the data analysis process, I noted early in the process that the participants had a more difficult time identifying concrete knowledge and actions. The knowledge and action statements made by the students were in the form of advice. The following subsections include the

knowledge and actions identified by the participants for each barrier category beginning with the ***Transition from High School to College***.

Knowledge and Actions for Transition from High School to College

"Man take this as serious as you can cuz this [is] the first semester. GPA counts a lot for financial aid especially" (FG2, Unit 27, Tp 20-35) was a statement made by a participant in focus group two in describing the knowledge/action required to successfully transition from high school to college during the first year. Although some overlap exist in the knowledge and actions for addressing the transition to high school to college and developmental studies/college readiness, the subcategories were provided for both categories. Table 26 is a summary of the knowledge and actions that were collapsed under ***Transition from High School to College Barrier*** category.

Table 26. Knowledge and Actions for Transition from High School to College

Barrier Category	*Knowledge Subcategories*	*Actions Subcategories*
1. Transition from High School to College	Understand the importance of THEA or ACCUPLACER	Take the THEA or ACCUPLACER in high school
	Know about free resources for the tests	Study before taking the THEA or ACCUPLACER
	Know deadlines for THEA or ACCUPLACER	Take a pre-test
	Know about college resources	Take serious the first time
	Understand the importance of AP high school curriculum	Don't miss the scheduled date
	Know services available	Be prepared with cash or money order
	Prioritize education	Take advantage when it is free in high school
	Know about college readiness	Take a college tour
	Learn about dual enrollment requirements	Get tutoring
		Turn assignments in
		Note taking
		Additional readings

Table 26. Continued

Barrier Category	*Knowledge Subcategories*	*Actions Subcategories*
		Supplement learning with outside readings
		Talk to professor
		Take college courses in high school
		More writing in high school
		Respect for teachers

Students spoke to the importance of understanding the impact of the results of the assessment scores prior to sitting for the exam. One participant offered, "*Maybe to study before you take the THEA, maybe you'll get a high score not to even go through developmental*" (FG2, Unit 103, Tp 23-35). Another participant added, "*If you take advantage of it [THEA assessment] during like your high school course year cuz my high school paid for it [THEA Assessment]. I didn't have to worry about it. So that's why I don't have to worry about that*" (FG2, Unit 65, Tp 16-35). The following were additional comments made by participants about knowledge and actions related to the transition from high school to college barrier theme:

- *Take the THEA. Take it early; like when I was in high school, I didn't even know what THEA was –they don't even tell us or ACCUPLACER … because remedial is just a waste of time. (FG3, Unit 118, Tp 23-27)*
- *I was seeing that it [developmental] was just a waste of time. So I decided to go to the student success center to help me do a better essay, how to do English better where the commas are and everything, and I passed my THEA. (PI1, Unit 27, Tp 12-20)*
- *Just do what the teachers tell you. (FG3, Unit 120, Tp 23-27)*

- *Just keep on. (FG3, Unit 120, Tp 24-27)*

A participant in focus group two added, "*I know for my English class the instructor recommended me a book so I can learn writing, like writing essays and stuff and I studied that book*" (FG2, Unit 79, Tp 19-35) when describing the additional resources that she utilized to supplement the learning required for her to successfully complete her English course assignments. Although the student placed into college English, she recognized a gap between what she learned in high school and specific knowledge she needed to successfully complete her college course. In describing the difference between high school and college, one student in focus group three stated, "*have respect*" (FG3, Unit 123, Tp 24-27). After additional probing on what he meant, the student stated, "*when you speak to the teacher don't act smart porque en high school everyone acts smart with the teachers y los mandan a la oficina*" (FG3, Unit 123, Tp 24-27). His description addressed his perspective on the behavioral differences expected in college courses. In the following subsection I present the knowledge and action statements students offered during the interviews for how they balanced personal and family issues.

Knowledge and Actions for Personal and Family Commitments

"School is first" (FG3, Unit 130, Tp. 26-27) was a statement offered by a participant in focus group three in response to a question on how students balance personal, family, and work issues. For the students in the study, the struggle of balancing their personal and family responsibilities weighs heavily on them. In Table 27, I provide

a summary of the knowledge and actions that were collapsed under ***Personal and Family Issues Barrier***.

Table 27. Knowledge and Actions for Personal and Family Issues

Barrier Category	*Knowledge Subthemes*	*Actions Subthemes*
2. Personal & Family Commitments	Knowledge alternative daycare	Reliable daycare
	Negotiation of time commitments	Work with teacher
	Knowledge of on-campus jobs	Advance notice
	Find job that accommodates school schedule	Send email to teacher
	Inform people of schedule	Talk to parents about college
	Designate a quite space for homework at home	Explain and apply for financial aid
	Financial aid assistance	Attend college colloquium
	Importance of education	Parents motivate students because they did not go to school

Further support for placing 'school first' as a priority is demonstrated in the following statements made by participants in focus group two.

- *Find a job that works with your schedule.* (FG2, Unit 97, Tp. 22-35)
- *It's good to have a job at school cuz they do work around your schedule that's the only difference.* (FG2, Unit 98, Tp. 22-35)
- *Get a job where you know that they'll work with school.* (FG1, Unit 114, Tp 29-45)

From the statements above, it became clear that students believed that having knowledge of jobs on campus and applying for a job on campus was critical for them to continue to contribute to the household income while they attend college. Students also spoke about communicating with faculty about some of the personal issues that arise in their lives during the semester. A student in focus group one stated, "*send an email [to instructor],*"

(FG1, Unit 117, Tp 30-45) in response to how she dealt with unexpected issues that arise during the semester. Demonstrating the continuous dilemma, the same student, a young single mother, made it clear that if her daughter became ill during the semester her responsibility was to her daughter. When asked by another student, "*what if it [an illness] happens during class*" (FG1, Unit 117, Tp 30-45) the young mother responded, "*well you have to leave*" (FG1, Unit 117, Tp 30-45) but she made it clear that she would communicate her situation to her instructors. The student from the third personal interview provided insight to her choice of online courses as a means to balance her competing commitment to be at home with her daughter and commitment to complete a college degree.

> *It is very hard. It's very hard but a lot of times I think that's why I like the convenience of online courses because I'm able to do that from home or during my lunch hour and so I don't feel like I take as much time away from my daughter as if I was coming to class every evening. Most of the time, I wait until she is in bed and then I'll work on my homework or I wait until the weekends and … separate time or I manage my time so that I can catch up on my work. And other times, honestly, I wait until we have a holiday like spring break to play catch up on my school work* (PI3, Unit 9, Tp. 4-11 & 5-11).

The student from the second personal interview shared the following about balancing family and school.

> *When my dad works nights I don't see him until Saturday night – no actually Saturday morning or Sunday, but my dad understands he doesn't tell me*

> *anything. Other than that my friends go to school with me they know my schedule if not we work our schedule around each other we will try to put lunch together so that we can at least see each other then. I haven't found anyone who doesn't understand my schedule yet.* (PI2, Unit 3, TP. 10-17)

A student in focus group one offered common sense actions, such as, "*lock yourself in another room [and] go to the library*" (FG1, Unit 128, Tp. 34-45). A student in focus group two added, "*I think for those that have like kids and stuff like that you need to have a certain designated area where they know it's going to be quiet. Understanding that they need that little time to do their homework, essays, reports, research and all that kind of stuff [and] that takes time*" (FG2, Unit 99, Tp 22-35 and 23-35). Since many of the students are responsible for sustaining or contributing to the family income, the students in the study discussed the importance of finding jobs that are flexible and can accommodate school schedules. Many of the students indicated that they have obtained on campus jobs because the college's supervisors are willing to provide flexible work schedules to accommodate students' academic responsibilities. The following subsection describes the knowledge and actions statements that students presented for overcoming ***Institutional Support*** barriers.

Knowledge and Actions for Institutional Support

"Get help if you don't understand something [about financial aid]" **(FG1, Unit 136, Tp 36-45 and 37-45)** was a statement made by a student in focus group one when discussing the knowledge and actions required to overcome financial aid related issues.

Table 28 is a summary of the knowledge and actions that were collapsed under ***Institutional Support*** category.

Table 28. Knowledge and Actions for Institutional Support

Barrier Theme	*Knowledge Subthemes*	*Actions Subthemes*
3. Institutional Support	Understand deadline and required documents for financial aid	Apply early to meet deadlines
	Knowledge of financial aid process	Verify paperwork needed
	Knowledge of timelines	Bring all paperwork
	Learn about workstudy program	Ask questions and get assistance
	Know job opportunities on campus	Find work on campus
	Know parking flow	Ask worksudy who is hiring on campus
	Know parking regulations	Find job that will work with schedule
		Talk to security
		Use appeals process
		Job close to school
		Don't over work
		Park early
		Park across the street
		Know somebody who leaves at the time needed
		Make arrangements
		Give people a ride to car

In the Barriers section of this chapter, I discussed students' dissatisfaction with the customer service provided in some of the student affairs offices. Students offered some very common sense knowledge and actions statements in avoiding some of these issues by complying with established procedures and deadlines. Students demonstrated an understanding of their role in asking questions and following up to resolve and/or prevent financial aid related issues. The following statements made by students in focus groups one and two were reflective of the very basic knowledge and actions statements made by students.

- *Do it [financial aid] early*. (FG2, Unit 106, Tp 24-35)
- *Make call and get forms.* (FG2, Unit 107, Tp 24-35)
- *[Find out] what you need and what you are missing from like your file.* (FG2, Unit 107, Tp 24-35)
- *It's all about communication. (FG2, Unit 108, Tp 24-35)*
- *Make sure it [financial aid paperwork] is the right one*. (FG1, Unit 136, Tp 36-45 and 37-45)
- *Ask someone who has done it*. (FG1, Unit 136, Tp 36-45 and 37-45)

Students did not identify concrete knowledge and actions for tackling the problem of computer labs being used for nonschool activities. When asked what they did when they needed to use a computer and they saw someone using it for nonschool work, most students responded "*nothing … just wait"* (FG1, Unit 139, Tp 37-45 and 38-45). Students offered some very resourceful knowledge and actions statements for navigating the parking problems.

- *You just get here earlier*. (FG1, Unit 118, Tp 30-45 and 31-45)
- *Know the schedule.* (FG1, Unit 118, Tp 30-45 and 31-45)
- *Early or if not just park like way out there.* (FG1, Unit 118, Tp 30-45 and 31-45)
- *Know somebody. I just pick them up and give them a ride.* (FG1, Unit 118, Tp 30-45 and 31-45)
- *You ask them do you need a ride.* (FG1, Unit 118, Tp 30-45 and 31-45)

Many of these students become familiar with the schedule of other students and make arrangements to pick them up at the academic building, so that they can drive the student to their parking space therefore giving them an opportunity to take the space being vacated by the student leaving campus. However, the most troubling statement made by a student when asked how she overcame the attitude of the STC staff who were 'rude' the student responded, "*deal with them"* (FG2, Unit 113, TP 25-35). A second student added, "*We just have to [deal with them]. Once or twice I really actually went to their bosses and they did something about it cuz it was just bad*" (FG2, Unit 113, TP 25-35). It was unsettling to hear that most students do not believe that they can voice their concerns about how they are treated on campus. Students have also learned to accept the inconsistency between the services provided by different offices or areas of the college. Students in focus group one, however, discussed the need for getting involved in existing college activities. The following is a conversation thread by students in focus group one.

- *Get involved. (FG1, Unit 93, Tp 21-35)*
- *Like get into clubs. (FG1, Unit 93, Tp 21-35)*
- *Come to the events that happen they always have like little events going on over here in the F Building. (FG1, Unit 93, Tp 21-35)*
- *I used to love it [attending activities], I still do. (FG1, Unit 93, Tp 21-35)*

The students in focus group one clearly articulated the importance of participating in college sponsored events and activities while attending college. The following subsection includes the knowledge and action statements students discussed to overcome S***tudent Accountability*** related barriers.

Knowledge and Actions for Student Accountability

"You have to know that there's going to be a lot of things going on in your life now [and] that you have to prioritize" (FG2, Unit 101, Tp 23-35) was a statement made by a student in focus group two in describing his approach to managing his time. Two additional students from focus group two added, "*have like a schedule, like a planner and stick to your planner*" (FG2, Unit 101, Tp 23-35). Without exception, all of the students in the focus groups and personal interviews use a planner and/or schedule to manage their time. Table 29 is a summary of the knowledge and action that were collapsed under ***Student Accountability*** category.

Table 29. Knowledge and Actions for Student Accountability

Barrier Category	*Knowledge Subcategories*	*Actions Subcategories*
4. Student Accountability & Commitment	Understanding how to plan time	Get a planner
	Understanding registration	Use organizer on cell phone
	Learn how to take notes	Create a calendar
	Know how to manage time	Use online registration
	Learn to prioritize assignments	Work with advisor
	Know job opportunities on campus	Register before deadlines
	Seeing the 'big picture'	Early registration
	Prioritize - Education first	Take notes from lectures
	Understand future	Study with groups
	Understand demands	Don't burn yourself out
	Importance of education	Design study guides
	Knowing pay in the future	Go to Success Centers
	Learn to celebrate success	Take college success class
	Remember tomorrow new day	Put pressure on your self
	Ignore peer pressure just prioritize	Plan ahead
	Knowing to take breaks	Write a little at a time
	Learn how you learn	Don't party too much
		Designate time for partying
		Get involved in college social life
		Take classes with people you know
		Get involved in activities
		Come to college events
		Join student clubs

Table 29. Continued

Barrier Category	*Knowledge Subcategories*	*Actions Subcategories*
		Follow recommended timeline
		Start when assigned
		Commit to scheduled plan
		Find work on campus
		Ask worksudy [program] who is hiring on campus
		Remind self on importance of class
		Do assignments early
		Keep up with struggling to complete homework
		Be accountable
		Know that three absences get you out of class

As evidenced from the focus groups and personal interviews, these students understood their respective roles in being successful college students. As indicated earlier, the students included in the study were very clear in their use time management and study skills to maintain successful grades. In addition to using planners to keep them organized, the majority of the student in the study indicated that they take strong notes and use flash cards to prepare for exams. Students spoke to several self-taught techniques for note taking and creating flashcards. A student in focus group one stated, "*we can make flashcards*" (FG1, Unit 126, Tp 33-45 & 34-45) another student added "*study guides*" (FG1, Unit 126, Tp 33-45 & 34-45) as another tool for learning. Students also described how they kept themselves motivated when they faced challenge. One student in focus group three shared, "*You know that one day you will have a better future*" (FG3, Unit 100, Tp 20-27 and 21-27). Other students added, "*I guess that looking for a better future [and] thinking where you will be one day [and] that I have to*

continue" (FG3, Unit 102, Tp 21-27). The students in this study clearly articulated the vision of a better future as a personal motivator to succeed in college.

Students also spoke of the need to communicate and ask questions. A student in focus group two suggested that students should be proactive in seeking assistance. The student stated, "*there is a lot of help here*" (FG3, Unit 40, 7-27). Celebrating milestones was also identified as a source for motivation. One student stated that was important to celebrate "*when you finish class after finals*" (FG2, Unit 101, Tp 21-27). The following section describes the knowledge and actions that were identified for ***Instructor Issues*** category.

Knowledge and Actions for Instructor Issues

"You just study on your own" (FG1, Unit 121, Tp32-45) was a statement made by a student in focus group one as an action for overcoming the language or heavy accent of foreign born instructors. Similar statements were made about many of the instructor related issues identified earlier in the chapter. Table 30 represents a summary of the knowledge and actions that were collapsed under the ***Instructor Issues*** category.

Table 30. Knowledge and Actions for Instructor Issues

Barrier Category	*Knowledge Subcategories*	*Actions Subcategories*
5. Instructor Issues	Knowledge of instructors where language barriers are prominent	Ask others about teacher
	Learn how to study on own to supplement	Study on own
	Knowledge of alternative ways to learn	Get tutoring
	Identify other areas to study	Study with friend
	Knowledge of instructor's intentions to use book	Use flash cards

Table 30. Continued

Barrier Category	*Knowledge Subcategories*	*Actions Subcategories*
	Learn to ask question	Develop a study guide
		Study with group
		Designate spot for study
		Use library
		Sell book back if not used
		Use copy of book at library
		Ask teacher if they will use book
		Ask questions
		Ask professor to repeat
		Read book
		Self-learning
		Use study guide

The use of study guides, flashcards, and other individual study techniques were offered as knowledge and action statements for addressing instructor related issues. The students in the study clearly articulated that they call upon other students support their need to work around some of these issues. The following are some examples of additional statements made by students in response to addressing instructor related issues.

- *Don't be afraid to pick up your hand. Don't be afraid to ask. You are paying for it. Take advantage.* (FG3, Unit 98, Tp 20-27)
- *Stay after class or ask somebody else who is there in class; if they have power point presentation use that*. (FG3, Unit 98, Tp 20-27)
- *You can go to tutors and they sometimes explain it better or your friends sometimes explain it better.* (FG1, Unit 125, Tp 33-45)
- *I know a lot of people go to tutoring if they don't understand what the teacher is trying to teach them they go to tutors and they will say I understood the tutor more than the teacher.* (PI2, Unit 28, Tp 9-17)

After completing the data analysis, it became obvious that students accept that they will encounter very diverse faculty as they progress through their college career. Additionally, the students who participated in this study clearly articulated ownership for overcoming instructor related issues. Once again, these students expressed a strong sense of responsibility for being successful in college. Finally, the following section provides insights into the responses students provided for overcoming the ***Developmental Studies/College Readiness*** barriers.

Knowledge and Actions for Developmental Studies/College Readiness

"Study before you take the THEA maybe you'll get a high score not to even go through developmental" (FG2, Unit 103, Tp 23-35) was a statement made by a student in focus group two when discussing knowledge and actions that would address the requirements for taking developmental studies. Although these students indicated knowing very little about the requirements for becoming college ready, all of the students communicated that after a year in college they now understood that they were not fully prepared academically when they graduated from high school. Table 31 represents a summary of the knowledge and actions that were collapsed under ***Developmental Studies/College Readiness*** category.

Table 31. Knowledge and Actions for Developmental Studies/College Readiness

Barrier Category	*Knowledge Subthemes*	*Actions Subthemes*
6. Developmental Studies/College Readiness	Awareness of importance of test	Study before assessment
	Prioritize education	Take serious
	Dual enrollment college preparatory	Study using free pre-test
		Take test in high school
		Retake test

Table 31. Continued

Barrier Category	*Knowledge Subthemes*	*Actions Subthemes*
		Go through developmental education
		Pass Accuplacer
		Take THEA in high school and early
		Take college courses in high school
		More writing in high school
		Do what teachers tell you
		Respect for teachers

In summary, it was evident from the knowledge and actions that students offered during the interviews that they could not point to very specific knowledge and actions to address some of the barrier categories, however, these successful students assume full responsibility for succeeding in college. Many of the statements offered by the students were in the form of advice to the school districts and the college for supporting students as they transition to college. The following section presents a summary of the finds described in the previous sections.

Summary of Findings

Padilla's (1991, 2001) Student Success Model provided the framework by which the study sought to understand the experiences of successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas during their first year (fall to fall) through a naturalistic study. I made use of focus groups, personal interviews, and preexisting data sets to ensure reliability and validity for the study. In Chapter IV, I provided a detailed account of the data analysis and findings for this study, which was guided by the research questions. As described in detail in the previous sections, six major barrier categories emerged from the data analysis. These

categories included: 1) transition from high school to college; 2) personal and family commitments; 3) institutional support; 4) student accountability; 5) instructor related issues; and 6) developmental studies/college readiness.

After a thorough review of the knowledge and actions statements made by the participants, I noted that a great majority of the statements were in the form of advice that would be given to other students. The knowledge and actions that students identified as facilitating their ability to persist from fall to fall as first-time-in-college students at South Texas College provide additional insights into the students' experience during their first year in college. In the fifth and final chapter, I summarize the conclusions and recommendations for the study.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this naturalistic inquiry was to understand 1) the barriers experienced by successful first year (fall to fall) first-time-in-college Hispanic students at a predominately Hispanic student community college on the South Texas/Mexico Border Region, 2) the expertise/knowledge required to successfully overcome these barriers during the first year (fall to fall) in college, and 3) based on these findings, offer suggestions and recommendations for addressing the barriers experienced by Hispanic students enrolled in such community colleges. The research was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas during their first year (fall to fall) as a student at this institution of higher education?
2. What barriers had to be faced and overcome by successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?
3. What knowledge did successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas have to have in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?

4. What actions must successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas take in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?

The first four chapters of this dissertation included the *Introduction, Review of Literature, Methodology, and Data Analysis and Findings*. Chapter I, *Introduction*, included 1) the problem statement, 2) purpose of the study, 3) research questions, operational definitions, 4) assumptions, 5) delimitations and limitations, and 6) significance of the study and applicability to HRD. Chapter II, *Review of Literature*, outlined 1) research on student persistence; 2) research on community colleges and student persistence; 3) models of persistence of minority students in community colleges; 4) research on persistence of Hispanic and other students in community colleges; and 5) two kinds of models of student persistence in colleges and universities.. Chapter III, *Methodology*, provided an outline for the study including: 1) the theoretical paradigms, 2) rationale for selecting research methodology, 3) research procedures, 4) ethical considerations, and 5) trustworthiness. Chapter IV, *Data Analysis and Findings*, described the results of the data analysis process. More specifically, Chapter IV included a section on the student experience; sections describing the barriers faced by students and knowledge and actions to overcome the barriers; and the Summary of Findings section. Finally, Chapter V, *Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations*, includes the following: 1) summary of study, 2) conclusions for research question, 3) implications of findings for theory, research, and practice, and 4) recommendations for future research. The chapter begins with a summary of the study.

Summary of Study

The first decade in the 21st was highly influenced by the emerging technologies, which fundamentally shifted the level of education and skills required for current and future jobs. Thomas L. Friedman (2006) argued that globalization created an environment where people from the United States find themselves competing with people from throughout the world for current and future jobs. He questioned whether the education system in the United States continues to be adequate for the emerging requirements for the knowledge based economy.

The increased role of educational attainment levels for the United States to compete in today's global economy has become the driver for establishing a competitive advantage. The following are some key aspects of the 21st century that informed the purpose of this study. First, the jobs of the 21st century require an increased set of skills and knowledge, which are acquired through attainment of a college degree. Second, the 21st century also increased the workforce available to prospective employers to include individuals from throughout the world. Third, the growth of the Hispanic population in the United States continues to outpace all other ethnic groups. Fourth, the Hispanic population continues to lag in participating in higher education and in educational attainment levels. Fifth, more Hispanics enroll in community colleges than any other racial/ethnic group. Finally, Hispanic students trail other racial/ethnic groups in persisting to degree completion in community colleges.

Furthermore, the role of community college in preparing the current and future workforce for the United States was brought to the forefront by President Obama (2009)

during his July 14, 2009 speech at Macomb Community College in Warren, Michigan. The President announced *The American Graduation Initiative* as one of his primary strategies to meet his goal of having the United States regain its leadership position across the globe in the educational attainment level of the country's population. He challenged community colleges to lead the way in increasing the degree and credential attainment throughout the United States. The Lumina Foundation (2009) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2008) also recognized the need to increase the educational attainment level in the United States with specific attention to ethnic minority groups. Both organizations have invested substantial amounts of funding to meet their goals.

Moreover, the 21st century knowledge based economy continues to transform the skills required for a competitive workforce. Given the size and continued growth of the Hispanic population at the national and state level, the research supports the need to better understand the experiences of Hispanic students enrolling in higher education. Through the literature review, I described the gap in the research on Hispanics in community colleges. Moreover, the research on persistence is predominately presented from a deficit lens of trying to understand why students leave college without meeting their goal of degree attainment. However, Padilla's (1991, 2001) Student Success Model, seeks to understand the barriers successful students faced and how the knowledge and actions undertaken by these students to overcome such barriers. Padilla (1991, 2001) argued that understanding the experiences of successfully students can provide critical information for how an institution can facilitate increased student success. The Student Success Model was utilized to provide a framework for the research questions of this

study. In the following section, I include a synthesis of the conclusions from the findings of the study.

Conclusions for Research Questions

The study was guided by four research questions, which are included in the following subsections. Each subsection includes a description of the findings that emerged from the research conducted to answer these research questions.

The Student Experience

The first research question was, "*What are the experiences of successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas during their first year (fall to fall)?*" I utilized Padilla's (1991, 2001) Student Success Model to inform the research question, which was supported by the following research questions.

a. What barriers had to be faced and overcome by successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?
b. What knowledge did successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas have to have in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?

c. What actions must successful first-time-in-college Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college in South Texas take in order to succeed during their first year (fall to fall)?

Padilla's (1991, 2001) Student Success Model was used as a framework to answer the research questions. The study was designed to gain an understanding of ***The Student Experience*** through focus groups, in-depth personal interviews, and preexisting data sets. The data analysis led to the identification of six barrier categories, which included: 1) transition from high school to college; 2) personal and family commitments; 3) institutional support; 4) student accountability; 5) instructor issues; and 6) developmental studies/college readiness. It became clear early in the process that the majority of these students were the first in their families to attend college. As such, these students did not have access to mentors or role models from which they could develop knowledge about how to prepare and be successful in college. I present a summary of the six barrier categories and the knowledge and actions identified by students to overcome such barriers in Table 32.

Table 32. Barriers Faced by Students and Knowledge& Actions to Overcome the Barriers

Barrier Category	*Knowledge Subcategories*	*Actions Subcategories*
1. Transition from High School to College	Understand the importance of THEA or ACCUPLACER Know about free resources for the tests	Take the THEA or ACCUPLACER in high school Study before taking the THEA or ACCUPLACER
	Know deadlines for THEA or ACCUPLACER	Take a pre-test
	Know about college resources	Take serious the first time
	Understand the importance of Advanced Placement (AP) courses, which are college-level course offered in high schools	Don't miss the scheduled date

Table 32. Continued

Barrier Category	*Knowledge Subcategories*	*Actions Subcategories*
	Know services available	Be prepared with cash or money order
	Prioritize education	Take advantage when it is free in high school
	Know about college readiness	Take a college tour
	Learn about dual enrollment requirements	Get tutoring
		Turn assignments in
		Note taking
		Additional readings
		Supplement learning with outside readings
		Talk to professor
		Take college courses in high school
		More writing in high school
		Respect for teachers
2. Personal & Family Commitments	Knowledge of alternative daycare	Reliable daycare
	Negotiation of time commitments	Work with teacher
	Knowledge of on campus jobs	Advance notice
	Find job that accommodates school schedule	Send email to teacher
	Inform people of schedule	Talk to parents about college
	Designate a quite space for homework at home	Explain and apply for financial aid
	Financial aid assistance	Attend college colloquium
	Importance of education	Parents motivate students because they did not go to school
3. Institutional Support	Understand deadline and required documents for financial aid	Apply early to meet deadlines
	Knowledge of financial aid process	Verify paperwork needed
	Knowledge of timelines	Bring all paperwork
	Learn about workstudy program	Ask questions and get assistance
	Know job opportunities on campus	Find work on campus
	Know parking flow	Ask worksudy who is hiring on campus
	Know parking regulations	Find job that will work with schedule
		Talk to security
		Use appeals process
		Job close to school
		Don’t over work
		Park early
		Park across the street
		Know somebody who leaves at the time needed
		Make arrangements
		Give people a ride to car

Table 32. Continued

Barrier Category	*Knowledge Subcategories*	*Actions Subcategories*
4. Student Accountability	Understanding how to plan time	Get a planner
	Understanding registration	Use organizer on cell phone
	Learn how to take notes	Create a calendar
	Know how to manage time	Use online registration
	Learn to prioritize assignments	Work with advisor
	Know job opportunities on campus	Register before deadlines
	Seeing the 'big picture'	Early registration
	Prioritize - Education first	Take notes from lectures
	Understand future	Study with groups
	Understand demands	Don't burn yourself out
	Importance of education	Design study guides
	Knowing salaries of jobs in the future	Go to Success Centers
	Learn to celebrate success	Take college success class
	Remember tomorrow new day	Put pressure on your self
	Ignore peer pressure just prioritize	Plan ahead
	Knowing to take breaks	Write a little at a time
	Learn how you learn	Don't party too much
		Designate time for partying
		Get involved in college social life
		Take classes with people you know
		Get involved in activities
		Come to college events
		Join student clubs
		Follow recommended timeline
		Start when assigned
		Commit to scheduled plan
		Find work on campus
		Ask worksudy [program] who is hiring on campus
		Remind self on importance of class
		Do assignments early
		Keep up with struggling to complete homework
		Be accountable
		Know that three absences get you out of class
5. Instructor Issues	Knowledge of instructors where language barrier are prominent	Ask others about teacher
	Learn how to study on own to supplement	Study on own
	Knowledge alternative ways to learn	Get tutoring
	Identify other areas to study	Study with friend or group
	Knowledge instructor's intentions to use book	Use flash cards
	Learn to ask question	Develop a study guide

Table 32. Continued

Barrier Category	*Knowledge Subcategories*	*Actions Subcategories*
		Designate spot for study
		Use library
		Sell book back if not used
		Use copy of book at library
		Ask teacher if they will use book
		Ask questions
		Ask professor to repeat
		Read book
		Self-learning
		Use study guide
6. Developmental Studies/College Readiness	Awareness of importance of assessment/test	Study before assessment
	Prioritize education	Take serious
	Dual enrollment college preparatory	Study using free pre-test
		Take test in high school
		Retake test
		Go through developmental education
		Pass ACCUPLACER
		Take THEA in high school and early
		Take college courses in high school
		More writing in high school
		Do what teachers tell you
		Respect for teachers

Although the findings of a naturalistic study cannot be generalized to other popu-latoins the purpose of the study was to understand the experiences of these students through their thick descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Merriam, 1998). As such, the findings provide insights to the experience of successful first year (fall to fall) first-time-in-college Hispanic students at a predominately Hispanic student community college on the South Texas/Mexico Border Region, specifically at South Texas College. The findings support the conclusion that many of these students lacked general college knowledge about enrolling and succeeding in an institution of higher education. This conclusion was further informed by Conley (2007) who argued,

> This lack of understanding of the context of college causes many students to become alienated, frustrated, and even humiliated during their freshman year and decide that college is not for them. Examples of key context skills and awareness include systemic understanding of the postsecondary educational system combined with specific knowledge of the norms, values, and conventions of interactions in the college context, and the human skills necessary to cope with and adapt to this system. (p. 17)

The barriers that students in the study described during the interview were very much in line with Conley's description of students who are entering college without all of the skills necessary to succeed to degree attainment, which he described as college knowledge. Conley (2007) described the concept of college knowledge in the following statement.

> Another important area of contextual awareness is known as *college knowledge*. This is information, formal and informal, stated and unstated, necessary for gaining admission to, and navigating within, the postsecondary college system. College knowledge includes an understanding of the following processes: college admissions, including curricular, testing, and application requirements; college options and choices, including tiered nature of postsecondary education; tuition costs and the financial aid system; placement requirements, testing, and standards; the culture of college; and the challenge level of college courses, including increasing expectations of higher education. (p.17)

The lack of *college knowledge* as defined by Conley (2005, 2007) emerged from the data as barriers faced early in these students experiences at the college. In ***Transitioning from High School to College***, I uncovered during the data analysis process that prior to beginning at South Texas College the participants did not understand the role of the THEA and/or ACCUPLACER (academic college readiness assessment instruments) in determining their ability to take credit bearing courses. The findings also included students expressed knowledge of the importance of understanding the financial aid process and deadlines.

In *The Toolbox Revisited*, Adelman (2006) reported, that the "academic intensity of secondary school curriculum" (p.26) is a strong predictor of success in college and persistence to degree completion. In the ***Developmental Studies/College Readiness*** barrier category, the findings reflected students' frustration and disappointment at having to enroll in developmental education courses because they were not prepared for the academic rigor of college courses. Having persisted through the first year (fall to fall) of college, the participants in the study expressed understanding of the importance of academic rigor while still in high school. They articulated the importance of leveraging Advanced Placement (AP) courses and dual enrollment courses (college courses that are taken by high school students for college and high school credit) while still enrolled in high school. The experiences of these students resonate with the Conley's (2007) description of college readiness.

Conley (2007) proposed four "facets of college readiness" (p. 12) including: contextual skills and awareness (college knowledge); academic behaviors; key content;

and key cognitive strategies. Revisiting the barriers, knowledge and actions statements included in Table 33 gave me an opportunity to conclude an alignment with Conley's (2007) definition of college readiness. Perhaps the most powerful conclusion was the level of accountability that these students expressed for their success in college. The first year of college clearly provided this group of students the knowledge required to develop what Conley (2007) described as "key academic behaviors" (p. 16). According to Conley (2007), these behaviors include "self-monitoring skills and study skills" (p.16). In the data that led to the ***Student Accountability*** category, student reporting high levels of understanding the role of study skills, time management, note taking, and other key behaviors required to be successful in college.

Ortiz (2004) argued that institutions should be aware of the "importance and impact of family" (p. 91) for Hispanic students during their first year of college. Under the ***Personal and Family Commitments*** category, students shared the influence that family had in encouraging them to enroll in college. However, they also discussed their commitment to succeed in college as a desire to improve the lives of their families. In explaining the challenges faced by Hispanic students attending colleges with high percentages of Hispanics, Dayton, Vasquez, Martinez, and Plum (2004) stated, "Because students remain in an environment where the cultural values concerning family responsibility are continually reinforced, academic responsibilities and regular progress may be compromised" (p. 33). These authors along with Ortiz (2004) proposed that institutions have a responsibility to establish support programs and services to facilitate student success, which would address issues expressed by students in the ***Institutional***

Support and ***Instructor Issues*** categories. In these two categories, students spoke directly to the barriers they faced during their first year in college. Gregory (2003) argued,

> In order to address the academic and social needs of the rapidly growing population of Latino college students across this nation, institutions must consistently reevaluate the programs and services they provide. These programs and services fall into five broad categories and can be tailored to provide an institutional framework for retention. The five major components are recruitment and admissions, financial aid, student services, academic services, and curriculum and instruction. (p. 15)

The majority of community college students are the first in their families to attend college. As a result, they do not benefit from the experience of parents who can guide them through the processes necessary for entering and succeeding in college. Harrell and Forney (2003) stated, "One of the most important predictors of postsecondary persistence is the parents' educational level" (p. 151). These authors argued that institutions must build programs and services to provide students the skills needed to navigate the first year of college, which is something that students with parents who have gone to college can provide even before students step on campus.

Cejada and Rhodes (2004) reported, "faculty play an important role in retention" (p. 251) of Hispanic students in community colleges. These authors suggested that interaction between faculty and Hispanic students in and out of the classroom was found to also have an impact on the retention/persistence of Hispanic students in community

colleges. Dayton, Vasquez, Martinez, and Plum (2004) reported that Hispanic students believed that "having a caring and genuine relationship with professors" (p. 35) impacted retention/persistence among these students. The findings led me to conclude that the participants in the study would have benefited from a series of collaborative programs and services between the high schools and the community college to provide students an opportunity to build general college knowledge, which could be contextualized to support the transition from high school to college for recent high school students. The community college also has a responsibility to provide programs and services to adult, non-traditional student population. The following section includes the implications for theory, research, and practice as a result of the finding from the study.

Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice

The findings of the study challenged me too rethink the Student Success Model (Figure 9) and the "black box" (Figure 10) as presented by Padilla (1991, 2001) and Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, and Treviño (1996). In the Student Success Model, these authors proposed that students require both heuristic and theoretical knowledge to be successful in college. They further suggested that heuristic knowledge is contextual and campus dependent. In Figure 10, the model reflects the need to acquire heuristic knowledge early in the students' experience when they begin college. An assumption made by the model is that students will draw on the knowledge to navigate the college

system (the black box) as the students experience barriers. The adaptation of the "black box" in Figure 11 reflects a sample of a successful student's path to degree completion.

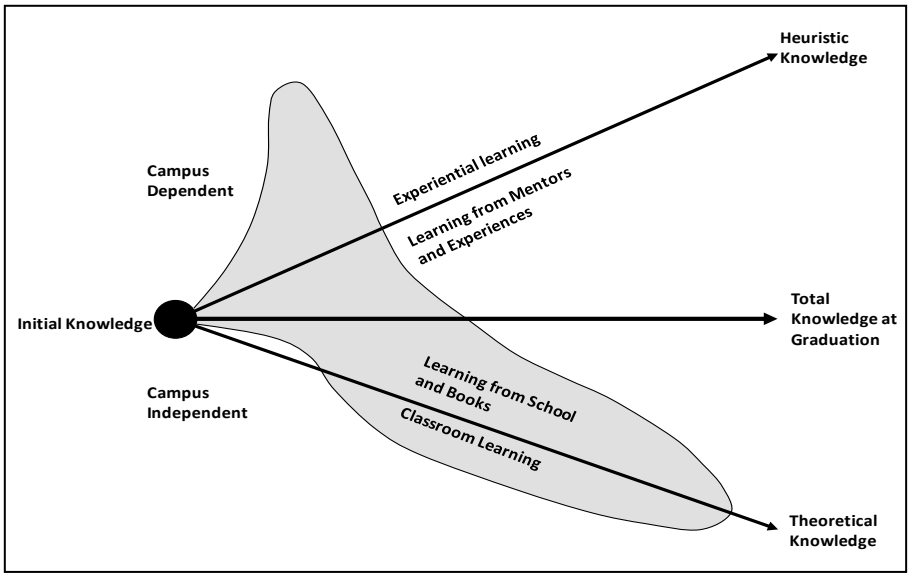

Figure 10. Student Success Model Adapted from Padilla (1991) and Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, and Treviño (1996)

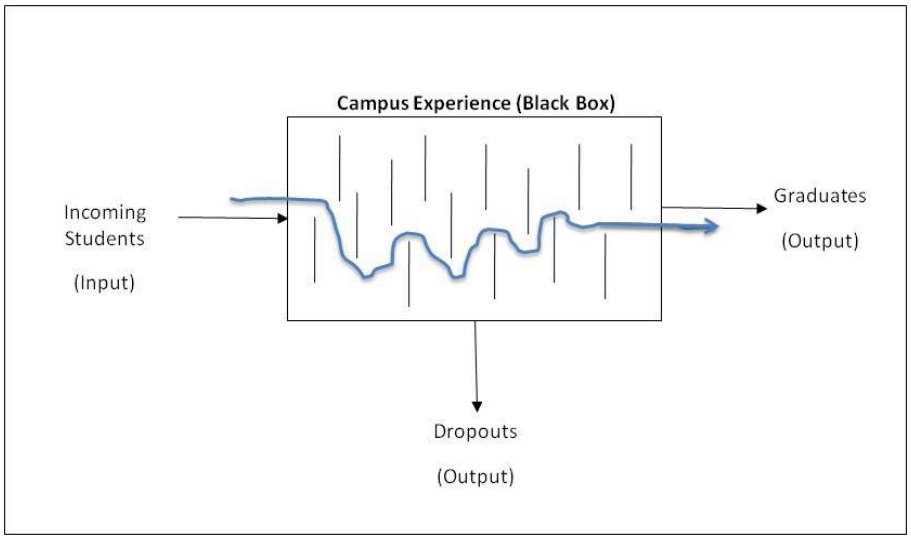

Figure 11. Black Box Conceptualization of the Student Experience Adapted from Padilla (2001)

The looping of the line attempts to demonstrate a student's path as the student navigates barriers faced during his or her enrollment at a college campus. The arrow demonstrates the student's successful pathway on through degree completion. The findings from the study provided new insights into the experiences of Hispanic students enrolled at South Texas College predominately Hispanic student community college in the South Texas/Mexico Border Region and the implications that findings have for theory. As such, I present the following subsection including *Implications for Theory* as a result of the study's findings.

Implications for Theory

As I reflected on the findings from the study, I identified strengths and weakness of utilizing Padilla's (1991, 2001) Student Success Model as the framework for understanding the experiences of students during their first year (fall to fall) Hispanic students in a predominately Hispanic community college. One of the strengths of the Student Success Model was the ability to frame the discussion on barriers within the context of first year (fall to fall) persistence at South Texas College, which gave students the same time point of reference for discussion. The use of the unfolding matrix (Padilla, 1991) to guide the discussion provided structure required to build an extensive list of the barriers. The matrix also provided a constant visual reminder for the researcher and the participants when transitioning the discussion from barriers to knowledge and actions. The participants in the study, however, struggled to differentiate between knowledge and

actions. The participants presented many of the knowledge and action statements as one statement.

The findings of the study led me to conclude that the Student Success Model fails to identify the need for students to enter the college with general college knowledge and academically college ready to succeed in college level courses. As a result, I proposed an adaptation to the Student Success Model that reflects the need for students to enter the college with general college knowledge and academic college readiness. Figure 12 is the ***Community College Student Success Model for First-Time-in-College Students***, which was adapted from Padilla (1991, 2001) and Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, and Treviño (1996) to reflect the findings of the study.

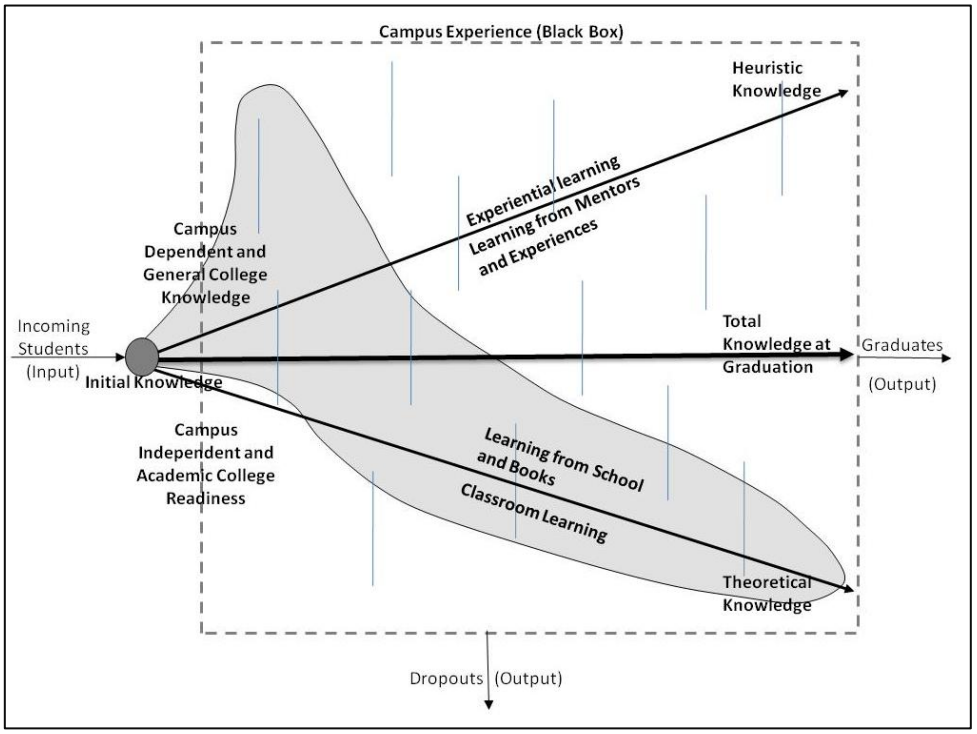

Figure 12. Community College Student Success Model for First-Time-in-College Students

In the ***Community College Student Success Model for First-Time-in-College*** Students. I overlaid the 'black box' and the Student Success Model to demonstrate that general college knowledge and college readiness are critical components for students succeeding to degree completion. Initial knowledge is, therefore, shown as having to begin prior to students entering into the college. The findings in the study clearly demonstrate the impact that general college knowledge and academic college readiness have on first year (fall to fall) persistence. In addition, the findings led me to conclude that students cannot wait until they begin college to build campus specific heuristic knowledge on navigating college processes.

The students in community colleges in particular do not benefit from having mentors, parents, and/or other family members to introduce and guide them through the college experience. Harrell and Forney (2003) argued that students who are first in their families to go to college do not benefit from a mentor who can provide guidance on basic knowledge and skills required to navigate the first year of college. Gregory (2003) argued that many Hispanic community college students arrive to college with little or no knowledge about admissions, financial aid, and other programs and services critical to succeed in the first year of college. These students, therefore, face many challenges early in the process of going to college.

The findings from the study support Conley's (2007) argument that high school students should enter college armed with general college knowledge and academic college readiness to succeed in college level courses without having to participate in remediation or developmental studies. In the ***Community College Student Success***

Model for First-Time-in-College Students, I suggested that students enter the college (black box) with general college knowledge and academic college readiness, so that they can have a successful transition from high school to college. Lynham (2002) proposed a method by which researchers can utilize research to further refine and develop theory. The findings that led to the development of the ***Community College Student Success Model for First-Time-in-College Students*** could be formally taken through Dubin's steps as recommended by Lynham (2002) to further refine and develop Padilla's (1991, 2001) Student Success Model and/or utilize Lynham's (2002) General Method of Theory-Building to move towards the development of a theory for Hispanic student success in predominately Hispanic community colleges. The findings from the study also have implications for future research, which are presented in the following section.

Implications for Future Research

The results of the study have yielded implications for future research. This naturalistic study lends a voice to the experiences of successful first-time-in-college Hispanics at a predominately Hispanic student community college in the South Texas/Mexico border region. Additional research should be conducted utilizing quantitative methods to determine if some of the findings could lead to identifying variables that have stronger impacts on fall to fall persistence. The following are some recommendations resulting from the study.

- Further research should be conducted utilizing high school transcript analysis and survey research to determine if there is a difference in first year (fall to fall)

persistence rates based on education levels of parents, curriculum taken in high school, participation in college knowledge building programs, and other variables identified in the literature review.

- Quantitative methods could be employed to generate a greater understanding of the students' experience. This research would be designed to incorporate the findings of this study to inform the variables that would be used in a quantitative study.
- The participants in this study communicated a strong commitment to family. Community colleges would benefit from understanding the experiences of family members as their child, sibling, or spouse enters college. The results of the study would provide valuable insights into how college's can leverage the commitment to family to build stronger programs to more purposefully build college knowledge in families who may not have experience necessary to support new college students.
- The study should be replicated to identify additional barriers faced by students during the second year of college. With college graduation rates among Hispanics continuing to lag other ethnic groups, community colleges must identify the momentum points for students to persist through degree attainment. Understanding the experiences of students successfully completing the second year of college, would assist colleges in providing additional support for these Hispanic students.
- The study should be replicated to identify barriers faced by students who are not retained in the first year. The results of the study would facilitate a greater understanding of the differences, if any, of the barriers faced by the students who persist and those who do not persist through the first year of college. College

administrators could utilize the results to modify support services for students at risk of dropping out of college.

Along with the implications for theory and research, the findings of the study have tremendous implications for practice. It is through the joint use of theory and research that community colleges can begin to strengthen the ability to build greater support for first-time-in-college students. The following section includes implications for practices as a result of the findings from this study.

Implications for Practice

As an administrator at South Texas College, the most rewarding aspect of this study was having the opportunity to utilize the results to leverage change, which can positively impact student success rates. The following are some implications and recommendations that the college should utilize to improve first year (fall to fall) persistence rates at South Texas College.

- South Texas College currently collaborates with the school districts during the fall and spring semesters to facilitate the admissions and financial aid process for all seniors through the College Bound program. In the fall semester, the Student Affairs division takes over 100 laptop computers and many student affairs staff to ensure that all seniors complete a college application utilizing the Apply Texas (online college application to any public college or university in Texas), which allows students to apply to the college of their choice. The fall event also includes college knowledge workshops for these students. In the spring, the college's staff return to

assist students in completing the financial aid process. The findings of the study, however, provide some indication that the program might not be sufficient support students as they ***Transition from High School to College***. The college should strengthen the College Bound program to include an online companion that students would utilize to reinforce what they learned during the fall and spring activities. The College Bound program should also be enhanced to include structured activities for juniors, sophomores, and freshmen. Conley (2007) argued that all of the high school years should be utilized to facilitate the development of college knowledge.

- The college should further collaborate with the school districts to develop a ***College Knowledge Academy*** for high school teachers and counselors. The academy would include strategies and activities that teachers and counselors can utilize to assist students with the transition to college. Conley (2007) recommended, "Such activities are often most effective when undertaken in partnership with colleagues from postsecondary institutions" (p.27), when he described the professional development activities that should be developed for teachers. The professional development should include an understanding of the assessment instruments required by the colleges to determine academic college readiness; requirements for students to participate in dual enrollment courses; balancing family and school requirements; taking advantage of college resources (tutoring, computer labs, etc.); and engaging with faculty in and out of classroom.
- The college should enhance its community engagement activities to include partnering with community based organizations, such as *Abriendo Puertas* and *VIDA*

(Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement), to transition the discussion with parents from encouraging students to go to college to the role of parents in supporting their children while they attend college. Students who participated in the study articulated the influence their parents had on their decision to go to college, however, student also expressed that they parents and/or family did not understand the time commitment required to succeed in college.

- South Texas College has grown from 1,000 students in 1993 to over 27,000 students in the Fall 2009 semester. The growing pains being experienced by the college were expressed by students in the ***Institutional Support*** category, where students expressed frustration with some of the college's process and staff. The student affairs division should assess its existing student workshops to determine how these workshops can be enhanced to more effectively communicate information about the financial aid process and the paperwork required for the application. Student affairs leaders should collaborate with the faculty in the College Success program to identify opportunities to incorporate information about the financial aid process in the curriculum of the college success course.
- The final recommendation was for South Texas College to formalize the college's efforts to *listen to the voices* of its students, so that students build the skills necessary to articulate their concerns when necessary. A student from focus group two stated, **"*Students should know that they can make a difference. They have a voice and like a lot of them don't know that*" *(FG2, Unit 172, Tp 35-35)*** when ask if anyone had any final thoughts. The statement captures the essence of why this and other

> naturalistic studies are critical to understanding the experiences of students. The statement also suggested that the college must be purposeful in developing programs and services, which engage students early in their experience with the college.

As a community college administrator, I was thrilled when President Obama (2009) spoke to the critical role that community colleges will play in increasing the number of individuals in the United States with certificates and degrees. However, the President's goal to once again lead in the educational attainment level of its population will not be met unless community colleges can increase the first year (fall to fall) persistence rates of Hispanic students. The findings from this naturalistic study provide critical insights into how community colleges can support students through their first year in college, which should translate to increased persistence and graduation rates. I feel privileged to have been given an opportunity to *listen to the voices* of our students. I believe that our students demonstrated great courage to trust me to tell their story in an effort to better understand how the community college can better support future students.

Implications for Human Resource Development

As the HRD community continues to engage in a scholarly debate on the need for regional, international, and national HRD, McLean and McLean (2001) proposed the following definition for national human resource development (NHRD).

> Human resource development is any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop adults' work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity, and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/team gain,

> or for the benefit of an organization, community, nation or, ultimately the whole of humanity. (p. 322)

Cho and McLean (2004) further argued that excellent NHRD leads to "desirable outcomes" (p. 389) including improving "the quality of higher education institutions" (p. 390) along with "the quality of primary and secondary education" (p. 390). Using the NHRD lens, HRD professionals can utilize the results of the study to facilitate a greater understanding of how community colleges can improve the performance outcomes that will lead to increased student success and degree attainment of the Hispanic population.

Ahn and McLean (2006) argued that some countries emphasize the use of regional human resource development (RHRD) "to sustain competitive advantage" (p. 263). HRD professionals have an opportunity to determine how the use of RHRD can be utilized to support the continued development of the South Texas region. Moreover, the community college can serve as a resource to support the development of human capital by leveraging RHRD strategies and policies within the community.

Garavan, McGuire, and O'Donnel (2004) argued that at the individual level , "… the analysis focuses on the examination of constructs such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, motivation to learn, motivation through expectation, personal development, and the need and expectations of learning" (p. 419). The results of the study inform these constructs and can be utilized by practitioners to inform the improvement of both community college and secondary education institutions. As indicated in the previous sections, these institutions have an opportunity to improve student success by providing teachers, faculty, administrators, and staff to build greater understanding on the role of general

college knowledge and academic college readiness on student success and degree attainment. HRD professionals have an opportunity to leverage the attention at the national, state, and local level to increase degree attainment for Hispanic students through purposeful and deliberate involvement in facilitating improvement of processes, programs, and services in community colleges.

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APPENDIX A

STC On-Site Study Approval

South Texas College

Office of the President

P. O. Box 9701
McAllen, Texas 78502-9701

(956) 872-8366
Fax: (956) 872-8368

MEMO

To: Texas A&M University
Doctoral Program

From: Dr. Shirley A. Reed, President

Subject: **IRB PROTOCOL FOR PROPOSED STUDY:**
Community College Student First Year Fall to Fall Persistence: Experiences of Successful First-Time-In-College Hispanics at a Predominantly Hispanic Student Community College in the South Texas/Mexico Border Region

Date: September 12, 2007

Please consider this email my authorization for Luzelma G. Canales to conduct an on-site study, as referenced above, at South Texas College's campuses in McAllen, the Mid Valley, and in Starr County.

If there is anything further you need from me, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Thank you.

Shirley A. Reed, M.B.A., Ed.D.
President

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Interviews Protocol

Qualitative Survey Analysis of Student Barriers, Knowledge of Potential Solutions, and Potential Actions

Facilitator: _____ Date: _____

# of Participants: _____ Campus: _____ Session: _____

Assistant: _____ Gender: M: _____ F: ____

Participants will be asked to arrive 10 minutes early; Room must be set up at least 30 minutes before; Rapport will be established with participants as they arrive; Each participant will be welcomed by the researcher; Each participant will receive a copy of the *Information Sheet*;

Script Stages

Stage One: Greeting and Introduction 5 minutes

- Purpose: Welcome participants and set the stage for the session
- Things to include in welcome:
  - Introduction of researcher
  - The participant's role in research
  - Purpose of focus group
- Things to consider in setting the stage:
  - Information Sheet: Review and discuss information sheet with participants;
  - Anonymity: Highlight definition of anonymity and look for understanding by participants;
  - Recording: Highlight the presence of an audio tape and its purpose in qualitative design (accuracy, data charting, unspoken questions);
    - Sample script: *These sessions are being taped in order to gain the fullest information from the comments you make. The tapes will be transcribed and listened to or read only in a secure environment. Your comments will be transcribed only as information and will be used only as those made by participant 1, participant 2, etc. Again, this information will be used only by the researcher and may be accessible by the researcher.*
  - Assistants: Highlight and introduce the assistant, describe role of the assistant and assure confidentiality by assistant

Stage Two: Theoretical Framework 5 minutes (combined 10 minutes)

- Purpose: introduce framework for data collection
  - Facilitator should have poster board for matrix and paper board for framework ready and empty before each session.
  - Things to include in introduction of framework:
    - Provide brief overview of theoretical and heuristic knowledge;
    - Use Padilla's Black Box Diagram to describe the process experienced by students attending college;
    - Establish students as experts in navigating the college process;
    - Describe context of Barriers ;
    - Define successful students using Black Box Diagram, mention that for this study it is first-time-in-college students during the Fall 2006 who re-enrolled in the Fall 2007;
    - Emphasize importance of the day is to identify the barriers students faced during their first year at the College, what knowledge students have to overcome the barriers, what actions students take to overcome these barriers, and finally what recommendations students have to facilitate student success during the firsts year of College

Stage Three: Establish the Tone 3 minutes (combined 13 minutes)

- Purpose: establishing a safe environment
  - Comfort: students should feel free to speak openly and freely
  - Use of I and Us: students can speak on their own experiences, they can also speak on experiences that they have noticed of students around them
  - Helping the College: emphasize and reinforce that all the students are providing a precious and priceless commodity – their experiences become the data (*Ex: we do not have right or wrong answers.)*

Stage Four: Questions 1 hour (combined 1 hour 13 minutes)

- Purpose: Focus group session using tentative questions
- Introduction: All students face challenges and obstacles while going through the college system. As a student who began college in the fall 2006 who re-enrolled in the fall 2007, you are now considered an expert student who has successfully navigated the challenges and obstacles encountered during your first year in college.
  - Questions:
    1. Think back to your first year at South Texas College. What are the barriers that you encountered during your first year at the College? What challenges and obstacles did you face during this time?
    2. What percentage of first-time-in-college students, like yourselves, do you believe faced these same barriers?
    3. What did you have to know or learn to overcome these barriers?

4. What did you do to overcome these barriers? What actions were necessary?
5. What recommendations would you make to the College on how they can eliminate or reduce these barriers for new and/or future students?

Stage Five: Wrap up 7 minutes (combined 1 hour 20 minutes)

- Purpose: Review results with participants and express appreciation
  - Things to include:
    - Review barriers, knowledge, actions, and recommendations
    - Look for support for results
    - Emphasize the importance of their input
    - Dismiss participants with a big THANK YOU

APPENDIX C

Personal Interview Plan

Tentative Interview Plan

Qualitative Survey Analysis of Student Barriers, Knowledge of Potential Solutions, and Potential Actions

Facilitator: Luzelma G. Canales Date: March 6, 2008

# of Participants: 1 Campus: Starr Session: 11:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

Assistant: None Gender: M: 1 F: _____

Questions:

1. Think back to your first year at South Texas College. What are the barriers that you encountered during your first year at the College? What challenges and obstacles did you face during this time?

2. Can you expand on some of the barriers by providing examples? In specific, your focus group discussed family problems as a barrier.

3. What percentage of first-time-in-college students, like yourselves, do you believe faced these same barriers?

4. What did you have to know or learn to overcome these barriers?

5. What did you do to overcome these barriers? What actions were necessary?

6. What recommendations would you make to the College on how they can eliminate or reduce these barriers for new and/or future students?

APPENDIX D

Participant Consent Form

Version: 11/14/07

CONSENT FORM

Community College Student First Year Fall to Fall Persistence: Experiences of Successful First-Time-In-College Hispanics at a Predominately Hispanic Student Community College in the South Texas/Mexico Border Region

Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent.

You have been asked to participate in a research project studying the experiences of successful Hispanic community college students. The purpose of this study is to better understand the barriers experienced by students during the first year of college, and based on their experience, the expertise required to overcome those barriers. You were selected to be a possible participant because you have successfully completed your first year of college.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a focus group and discuss the barriers that you faced during your first year in college. You will then be asked to further discuss the knowledge you had that allowed you to overcome the barrier and more specifically the actions that you undertook to overcome the barrier. We will conclude with asking you to make recommendations on how this institution could improve to facilitate more students persisting to complete their first year of college.

Your participation will be audio recorded.

What are the risks involved in this study?

The risks associated in this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, your participation in this study will help us better understand the experiences of successful Hispanic community college students.

Do I have to participate?

No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University or South Texas College being affected.

Who will know about my participation in this research study?
This study is confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher, Luzelma G. Canales, and the faculty advisor, Susan A. Lynham, will have access to the records.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only the researcher, Luzelma G. Canales, and the faculty advisor, Susan A. Lynham, will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for twenty four months and then erased.

Whom do I contact with questions about the research?
If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Luzelma G. Canales at 956-872-6760 or luzelma@southtexascollege.edu or Susan A. Lynham at 979-458-0640 or slynham@soe.tamu.edu.

Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?
This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979)458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

Signature
Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date:
_____

Printed Name:
_____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____ Date:
_____

Printed Name:
_____

APPENDIX E

Data Analysis Stage 2 Sample Focus Group Unit Card

Unit 10

yes, they wait to the last minute

so people really don't … [did not complete statement]

So, you all say 70%?

the thing is that sometimes they get financial aid calls like I have had it done, financial aid calls and tells me I don't have this form or I have to check on it and … (stops)

ok; so then aside from applying late there are barriers in the paperwork that has to be done?

yes

put paperwork for financial aid (instructions to assistant)

yes

paperwork is good

yes, they delayed me one time because they said I did not have a transcript from Pan Am

ok so, paperwork required for financial aid for Pell; now, you said something earlier also that even though you are a Valley Scholar … that wasn't enough to pay for your books;

is scholarship is I mean do you all have other scholarships?

we have to apply

they make us apply to STARS but that usually pays for our tuition

it doesn't do anything

so it really doesn't give us for books

FG1/121007/LGC, Units 10-62

APPENDIX F

Data Analysis Stage 3 Sample Focus Group Unit Card

Unit 3

[Tp. 1-45; 2-45]

Managing time basically

Time management ok and right now all we are going to do is list them; is there something specific about time management?

Basically no just

Ok Anyone else want to add

Use it wisely

Using time wisely ok; what are some of the other things that you have experienced? Think about the processes that you have gone through, registration

FG1/121007/LGC Units 3-161

APPENDIX G

Data Analysis Stage 4 Sample Focus Group Unit Card

Unit 3

[Tp. 1-45; 2-45]

Managing time basically

Time management ok and right now all we are going to do is list them; is there something specific about time management?

Basically no just

Ok Any one else want to add

Use it wisely

Using time wisely ok; what are some of the other things that you have experienced? Think about the processes that you have gone through, registration

Time Management

FG1/121007/LGC, Units 3-161

VITA

Luzelma G. Canales
South Texas College
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McAllen, TX 78502-9701

EDUCATION

2010 Doctorate in Philosophy, Educational Human Resource Development
Texas A&M University – College Station, Texas

2000 Master of Business Administration
The University of Texas Pan American - Edinburg, Texas

1987 Bachelor of Business Administration
Pan American University – Edinburg, Texas

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2008 – Present Interim Associate Dean, Community Engagement and Workforce Development

2001 – Present Director of Grant Development, Accountability and Management Services, South Texas College

1997 – 2001 Assistant for Accountability, South Texas College

1992 – 1997 Internal Auditor II, University of Texas – Pan American

1989 – 1992 Accountant, COSTEP (Council for South Texas Economic Progress)

1987-1989 Audit Assistant, Pan American University

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Academy of Human Resource Development
American Association of Community Colleges Voluntary Framework of Accountability
Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE)
Council for Resource Development
Texas Association of Community Colleges Developmental Education State Policy
National Blue Ribbon Panel for CCCIE