2020

Home Away from Home: The Experience of First-generation Students Living on Integrated Floors in Residence Halls

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HOME AWAY FROM HOME: THE EXPERIENCE OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS LIVING ON INTEGRATED FLOORS IN RESIDENCE HALLS

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

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May 2020

Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Carey Douglas Collins

entitled

Home Away from Home: The Experience of First-generation Students Living on Integrated Floors in Residence Halls

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree
in Higher Education and Student Development

May 2020

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Abstract

First-generation college students, individuals seeking to earn a bachelor's degree and whose parents or guardians do not have post-secondary degrees, are attending college at ever-increasing rates. These students regularly encounter obstacles they must overcome in order to persist and graduate. The purpose of this study was to discover if a relationship exists between retention of first-generation students and living on an integrated residence hall floor. The research occurred as a qualitative phenomenological approach with focus groups, and, after coding and theming the data, three themes—finances, involvement with the floor, and relationships—emerged. During the focus groups, mental health surfaced as a theme of magnitude. Much of the data pointed to relationships as a key component to retention of students. Participants noted misunderstandings with floor mates about finances and over-involvement with the floor as challenges, but deep, meaningful relationships encouraged participants during difficult times. The implications from the research indicate that intentional relationship building may prove a significant aspect to the retention of first-generation students.

Acknowledgements

First, I want to thank God for His unfailing love and guidance through my major life change. He put many people and events together to push me through a difficult decision to leave secondary teaching and pursue a second Master's degree on a full-time basis.

To my wife, Julie. You have been the encouragement and "backstage crew" to my "on-stage performance." Words do not express how much I value your love, respect and encouragement. Your servant heart challenges me to be better every day.

To my children, Tyler and Samantha, who "allowed" me to follow them to Taylor. Thank you for accepting the changes in our lives with grace and kindness. It is an honor and privilege to be your dad.

To Dr. Todd Ream, my thesis supervisor, thank you for your encouragement through this writing process. Little did you know what it would be like to take on a math teacher to write a thesis. You were gracious with your advice and help, along with patient with my many questions. Thank you for believing in me.

To Cohort XII, I am grateful for our eclectic collection of people. You have been an encouragement to this "grandpa," and doing school together has been exceptional. It has been a privilege to grow alongside you. I wish you all God's blessings on your futures.

To the MAHE program, thank you for taking a chance on old guy and allowing me to enroll. I have learned much about higher education, college students, and myself. I hope to keep the proud MAHE tradition alive and well with my career.

To the Education Department, thank you for bringing me into your fold. I am grateful for the encouragement and opportunities I received and indebted to the department for willingly adapting the goals for the graduate assistantship to incorporate my previous experiences. Those changes gave my life's work value.

To my friends in the Northwest Community School District in Jackson, MI, I am the educator and person I am today because of the years spent working, laughing, crying and learning with you. Thank you for the encouragement from afar.

To my extended family, thank you for all of the support with moving, decision making and even finances. The support of loved ones goes a long way with a major life change.

Finally, in memory of my parents, David and Lola Collins. They were excellent educators and parents, and the guidance they provided along with the modeling of parenting, teaching and living still impacts me today. I am truly blessed to be their son.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Defining the Problem

First-generation college students, individuals seeking to earn a bachelor's degree and whose parents or guardians do not have post-secondary degrees (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017), are attending college at ever-increasing rates. Universities need to address the unique challenges these students face in relation to persistence to graduation (Davis, 2010). First-generation students come to college campuses in the United States with little or no background knowledge about college and face challenges to succeed and graduate. Their challenges include but are not limited to: little or no family support; financial struggles; academic unpreparedness; and little knowledge of the higher education culture (Checkoway, 2018; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Petty, 2014; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Schultz, 2004).

Expenses for college creates one challenge for first-generation students. The expense can result in first-generation students missing opportunities for social engagement due to the need to work or live off campus (Checkoway, 2018; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Pascarella et al., 2004; Petty, 2014). Furthermore, not living in a residence hall impairs first-generation students' ability to develop relationships with other students, and spending time with classmates happens less since first-generation students typically have to work while in school.

Besides expense, the campus culture may also prove difficult to navigate because these students' parents or guardians cannot provide empathetic guidance (Checkoway, 2018; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; Schultz, 2004). Additionally, first-generation students regularly enter college unprepared to face the academic expectations of the university (Checkoway, 2018; Froggé & Woods, 2018).

In response to academically unprepared first-generation students, multiple methods exist for assisting with academic struggles, and assisting first-generation students with academics improves retention. Programs such as first-year experience classes (Sidle & McReynolds, 2009) and academic advising programs (Capaldi, Lombardi, & Yellen, 2006) aim to help academically struggling first-generation students. Through first-year experience classes and academic advising, first-generation students receive support along with opportunities to engage the university's culture (Capaldi et al., 2006; Sidel & McReynolds, 2009).

Other strategies for aiding retention—defined as "continued enrollment (or degree completion) within the same higher education institution in the fall semesters of a student's first and second year" (National Student Clearing House Research Center, 2015, p. 7)—include faculty mentoring programs (Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich, & Powell, 2017; Yeh, 2010), student engagement advising (Peck, 2011) and residential learning (Hall & O'Neal, 2016; Thayer, 2000). Pike and Kuh (2005) asserted that residential living creates opportunities for involvement in the college and establishing relationships.

However, research has indicated obstacles for first-generation students lead to students leaving school and not completing a degree (Froggé & Woods, 2018; Petty,

2014; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). As universities attempt to attract more diverse students to campus, numbers of first-generation students will multiply. Increasing retention among first-generation students is crucial as universities seek to care for their student body.

Purpose

Retention is addressed in a variety of ways through living arrangements. Living on campus in residential halls, especially living learning communities or faculty-in-residence communities increases retention and success of students, particularly first-generation college students (Davenport & Pasque, 2014; Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012; National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE], 2007; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Rocconi, 2011; Shushok, Scales, Sriram, & Kidd, 2011; Sriram & McLevain, 2016; Wode, 2018; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Understanding the characteristics of first-generation college students and the unique challenges they face is imperative. Doing so leads one to appreciate the opportunities they can encounter through on-campus living arrangements.

Research Question

The study explored the retention of first-generation students living on an integrated floor, defined as a communal living space for first-year through fourth-year students. Living in intentional communities within a residence hall may increase retention of first-generation college students (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; NSSE, 2007; Rocconi, 2011; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). This study sought to answer the following question: Does living on an integrated floor impact retention of first-generation students?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

First-Generation Students

Definition. Multiple opinions exist concerning how to define first-generation college students. Peralta and Klonowski (2017) reviewed 24 studies published between 2005 and 2015 in the United States in an attempt to identify a conceptual definition of first-generation students. The findings indicated that half of the studies did not have a conceptual definition and the remaining twelve studies defined first-generation college students in nine different ways (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). Although many conceptual definitions exist, two main definitions emerged. The two main definitions focus on the parents' or guardians' involvement in post-secondary education.

One definition expressed that first-generation students' parents or guardians never attended a post-secondary institution (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018; Checkoway, 2018; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Pascarella et al., 2004; Redford & Hoyer, 2017), and the second common definition identified first-generation students as having parents or guardians who never completed a bachelor's degree (Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Glaessgen, MacGregor, Cornelius-White, Hornberger, & Baumann, 2018; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). Since no single definition exists, Peralta and Klonowski (2017) suggested defining first-generation college students as "an individual who is pursuing a higher

education degree and whose parents or guardians do not have a post-secondary degree" (p. 635). This study used the definition suggested by Peralta and Klonowski (2017).

Characteristics and obstacles. Unlike the definition, the literature does agree on the characteristics of first-generation students. Redford and Hoyer (2017) reported fewer white students were first-generation students than continuing-generation students, defined as students with at least one parent who earned a bachelor's degree (Cataldi et al., 2018), whereas black and Hispanic students comprised a larger percent of first-generation students. First-generation students are often academically unprepared (Checkoway, 2018; Froggé & Woods, 2018) and often come from lower-income families (Petty, 2014; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Schultz, 2004). Additionally, Checkoway (2018) explained first-generation students find it difficult to choose courses and meet professors. Researchers also noted first-generation students are more likely to be married, older, and parenting children while attending college part-time, which often puts first-generation students at a disadvantage compared with continuing-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Petty, 2014).

Financial difficulty in paying for college expenses creates a need for first-generation students to work extra hours off campus to earn income (Checkoway, 2018; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Pascarella et al., 2004; Petty, 2014). Extra time spent working leaves less time for studying, participating in co-curricular activities, socializing, and sleeping (Checkoway, 2018; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Petty, 2104). Another obstacle for first-generation students results from family inexperience with college.

Families of first-generation students have limited knowledge of the higher education system, and, therefore, first-generation students lack family support for

obstacles encountered on campus (Froggé & Woods, 2018; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; Schultz, 2004). Additionally, time spent working off campus inhibits connections with peers, thus reducing opportunities for peers to help with on-campus obstacles (Froggé & Woods, 2018; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; Schultz, 2004). First-generation students face a lack of social support, financial struggles, and academic unpreparedness.

First-generation students who desire to graduate with a bachelor's degree face difficulties, not but impossibilities. Difficulties for first-generation students impact their college experience and may lead to attrition, but positive starts to college are imperative for first-generation students. As Checkoway (2018) stated, "a student can only start for the first time, once, and if the start is horrifying, it can easily affect the entire experience" (p. 72).

Success for first-generation students. First-generation students face obstacles and difficulties with college attendance and completion. However, given an opportunity and strategies for success, these students succeed during and after graduation. In fact, Cataldi et al. (2018) found first-generation students who earn bachelor's degrees fare as well in the labor market as continuing-generation students. The research acknowledges the value of helping first-generation students adapt to college life and academics. Private foundations like the Lumina Foundation (2018) in Indianapolis, IN, and the First Generation Foundation (2018) in Brecksville, OH, along with the Federal TRIO programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2018), aid first-generation students in a number of ways with financial aid and applications. The number of first-generation students coming to campus continues to increase, and these students will continue to encounter difficulties with the campus experience without proper support (Davis, 2010).

Retention

Definition and data. Universities need to contemplate how best to support first-generation students since persistence to gradation proves to be difficult (Capaldi et al., 2006; DeBaun, Melnick, & Morgan, 2016; Demetriou et al., 2017; Thayer, 2000; Tinto, 2004). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2015) defined retention as "continued enrollment (or degree completion) within the same higher education institution in the fall semesters of a student's first and second year" (p. 7); similarly, persistence is defined as "continued enrollment (or degree completion) at any higher education institution — including one different from the institution of initial enrollment — in the fall semesters of a student's first and second year" (p. 7).

In 1999, completion rates for all students reached 37.5 % for two-year colleges (three-year completion) and 51.6 % for four-year colleges (five-year completion) (Thayer, 2000). Similar to the 1999 statistics, DeBaun et al. (2016) reported a completion rate for all students under the age of twenty-one when they enrolled in a four-year college (private or public) in the fall of 2007 as 59.7%. Comparatively, completion rates for first-generation college students are less than half that, with only 24.3% graduating in four years (DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011).

Finances may contribute to low completion rates since first-generation students typically come from families with lower income, and affordability creates difficulty in finishing (Petty, 2014; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Schultz, 2004). Berkner, He, and Cataldi (2002) with the National Center for Educational Statistics reported approximately 50% of students with annual family incomes of less than $25,000 earned college degrees within six years (26% bachelor's, 14% associate and 10% a less than two-year degree).

Furthermore, students from families in the lowest income quartile have a 5% completion rate (Thayer, 2000).

Degree completion needs attention. Berkner et al. (2002) reported only 10% of students (from approximately 70%) who begin attending a two-year college with the intention of earning a bachelor's degree actually complete a bachelor's degree. Earning a bachelor's degree by attending a two-year institution first appears to deter degree completion. Additionally, public institutions struggle more than private institutions with graduating students. For comparison, Capaldi et al. (2006) reported a 20% four-year completion rate (45% for six-year completion) in public institutions, and Tinto (2004) stated, ". . . attending a private institution led to greater completion rates than did attending a public one" (p.5).

Suggestions for improving retention. In order to address the retention of first-generation students, many ideas and programs have emerged. For example, programs such as first-year experience provide students with opportunities to assimilate into the university (Sidle & McReynolds, 2009). Academic advising programs specifically focused on first-generation students provide help navigating the complex world of class credits and degree requirements (Capaldi et al., 2006). Mentoring programs provide both faculty and peer help with wading through college life (Demetriou et al., 2017), and Zevallos and Washburn (2014) reported mentoring enhanced students' emotional health and social relationships, improved their academic skills, and helped them developed positive identity. Another suggestion for retention involves residential learning communities that provide academic support as well as encouraging relationships among students (Hall & O'Neal, 2016; Thayer, 2000). Finally, Advancement Via Individual

Determination (AVID) provides specific systematic, whole-person, sustained, and customized support for first-generation students enrolled in college (Watt, Butcher, & Ramirez, 2013).

Involvement in the university emerges as a common theme throughout programs aimed to help retention of first-generation students (Yeh, 2010). Pascarella et all. (2004) noted involvement in extracurricular and co-curricular activities builds the sense of community between the university and the student. One example, student-engagement advising, reported a 97.1% retention rate with students receiving advising since student-engagement advising helps students budget free time wisely and discover ways to engage in the university (Peck, 2011). Specifically, first-generation students benefit from student-engagement advising since many do not understand how to appropriately involve themselves in college (Pascarella et al., 2004). In addition, Tinto (2004) suggested providing academic support, clear guidelines for success in college, relationships with peers and faculty, and financial support as means for retention improvement.

Another program designed for increasing retention is a "student-initiated retention project" (SIRP). SIRPs promote programing to encourage students from diverse cultures to build relationships and make school a home (Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005). Since many first-generation students come from different ethnic backgrounds, SIRPs encourage relationship building (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Pascarella et al. (2004) noted volunteering and intercollegiate sports create difficulties for first-generation students assimilating to college life; however, Demetriou et al. (2017) reported community service learning as a characteristic of first-generation students who persisted. Yeh (2010) stated the importance of relationship building: "Students who fail to adapt to

their new situation, academically or socially, feel disconnected from the college and thus leave early" (p. 51).

Living on campus allows first-generation students opportunities to develop relationships with fellow students and staff as well as focus on academics. Soria and Stebleton (2012) reported relationships between faculty and first-generation students increase retention because meaningful connections reduce feelings of alienation. Pike and Kuh (2005) stated, "If an institution is serious about improving first-generation student success rates, then it should require them to live on campus at least for the first year of college" (p. 291). However, universities should be cautious placing first-generation students in a pre-determined living location since it may lead to more seclusion from the remainder of the student population (Tinto, 2004). Overall, involvement and relationships play an active role helping first-generation students stay in college. Involvement in classes, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities encourages relationship building, and the relationships with faculty, staff and classmates provide a network of support for first-generation students.

Integrated Residence Hall

Definition. Evidence suggests colleges may increase retention when students live in campus housing (Harwood et al., 2012; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Wode, 2018). While Millea, Wills, Elder, and Molina (2018) discovered living on campus did not impact retention significantly, the type of campus housing may influence retention. Three philosophies of residence halls exist: (a) solely provide a place of rest from learning; (b) provide many amenities but fail to enable co-curricular opportunities for faculty and staff involvement with students; and (c) provide communities led by faculty and staff with the

goal of assisting student learning (Shushok et al., 2011; Sriram & McLevain, 2016). For the purpose of this study, an integrated residence hall is defined as a living space with a live-in faculty called a residence hall director and first-year through fourth-year students living on the same floor. However, little research exists specifically about integrated residence halls.

Literature indicates benefits from living in a residence hall include learning interpersonal communication skills, tolerance, diversified thinking, empathy, academic engagement, problem solving, independence from parents, and sense of belonging (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Harwood et al., 2012; Wallace, 2012). While residence halls have many benefits, difficulties also arise from living in a residence hall. For example, Harwood et al. (2012) reported minority students perceived the residence hall more negatively than white students due to microaggressions creating much of the negative environment. However, first-generation students, many from minority groups, have an opportunity to share personal stories and learn from fellow students while living in residence halls. Even though residence halls create tensions between students living in close proximity, opportunities occur for learning empathy and diverse thinking through interaction with others.

Residential living designs. Intentional residential living arrangements, residential learning communities, or living learning communities, provide benefits for students. In fact, living learning communities are identified as one of ten "high impact best practices" through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2007), and many definitions exist for residential and living learning communities. Hall and O'Neal (2016) defined learning communities as follows:

> Employing only block scheduling, with or without curricular collaboration, in which a cohort of students is registered for two or more courses together, or it can contain a variety of other features such as supplemental instruction, first-year seminar, common experience curricula, and extra-curricular and co-curricular activities. (p. 43)

Hall and O'Neal (2016) additionally defined residential learning communities as learning communities in which students live on campus together. In comparison, Arensdorf and Naylor-Tincknell (2016) defined living learning communities as "a group of freshmen college students who live on the same floor of a residential hall and who share an interest in a common theme or major" (p 3). Often faculty members or residence hall directors govern the living community (Sriram & McLevain, 2016) and provide mentoring for students (Glanzer, 2013).

Zhao and Kuh (2004) found that learning communities fall into four general categories: (a) curricular communities where students are enrolled in two or more classes together; (b) the classroom holds the focus and group activities reinforce classroom learning; (c) residential focus in which students live together while taking two or more common courses in an effort to increase interactions out of the classroom environment; and (d) communities targeting specific groups such as first-generation students, academically underprepared students, honors students, athletes, etc. Living in the same residence hall allows for academic collaboration and increased socialization between students. Students involved in residential learning communities show academic success, more engagement in the college community and higher satisfaction with the college experience (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; NSSE, 2007; Rocconi, 2011; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

One form of residential living, faculty-in-residence (FIR) programs, provides opportunities for interaction between faculty and students since faculty live in the residence hall with the students (Davenport & Pasque, 2014). FIR programs differ from living learning communities in that faculty do not interact with students solely for academic purposes or from themed living arrangements (Davenport & Pasque, 2014). FIR programs impact students since research indicates benefits for students occur with interaction with faculty (Astin, 1993; Sax, Bryant, & Harper, 2005; Vito, 2007). Davenport and Pasque (2014) reported three themes from students involved in FIRs: (a) feeling safe with the faculty-in-residence and their families through regular and open communication; (b) faculty-in-residence provide a mentor relationship; and (c) respect and admiration for the faculty-in-residence develops through shared activities.

Benefits of residential living. Residential hall living provides opportunities for relationship building. Sriram and McLevain (2016) stated, ". . . students simply need to have deeper life interaction with someone. If an institution is to offer a truly transformative experience for its students, it is imperative that students engage in conversation about relationships, family, spirituality, and life's big questions" (p. 80). Devlin, Donovan, Nicolov, Nold, and Zandan (2007) reported a higher sense of community living in a smaller residence hall than a large residence hall; however, Stoner and Zhang (2017) noted no consistency in research defining a large or small community.

In contrast, consistency exists in identifying attributes of the live-in faculty member and members of the residence hall floor. Faculty-in-residence perform parental-like duties for at-risk students, which enables the students to succeed (Johnson, Flynn, & Monroe, 2016). Ellett and Schmidt (2011) reported faculty efforts of community

building outside the classroom with students, especially in residential living, provide positive benefits for the student.

Besides faculty-in-residence, the configuration of the students living on the floor together matters. Sriram and McLevain (2016) stated, "There is no research that demonstrates any positive benefits to segregating students residentially based upon classification" (p. 81). Encouraging students of all ages and classifications to live together in campus residential settings provides important mentoring opportunities for the first-year students with more experienced students (Sriram & McLevain, 2016).

Conclusion

The obstacles first-generation students encounter make it difficult to persist (Froggé & Woods, 2018; Petty, 2014; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). The research indicates many strategies exist for improving the retention of first-generation students, including academic, programmatic, and personal interventions. Research also suggests that first-generation students experience college differently and need extra help adapting in order to graduate. Demetriou et al. (2017) identified seven processes for successful first-generation college students. "These processes include (a) forming attachments to people and places, (b) developing academic skills, (c) setting goals, (d) coping with change and challenges, (e) finding purpose and meaning in learning, (f) developing autonomy, and (g) forming and solidifying social and occupational identities" (p. 32). This study explored how living on an integrated floor assists first-generation students with the processes identified by Demetriou et al. (2017). Unfortunately, Pascarella et al. (2004) noted first-generation students were less likely to live on campus while attending college than other students.

DeAngelo et al. (2011) stated, **"**As the numbers of FGCS [first-generation college students] attending colleges and universities in the United States increase, there is an urgent need for research on the retention of these students" (p. 19). Chen (2005) reported that 28% of twelfth-grade students, in 1992, planning to attend college were first-generation students, and Redford and Hoyer (2017) identified that, of high school sophomores in 2002 who later attended college, first-generation students represented 24%. In a 2010 study by the Department of Education, first-generation students comprised 50% of the student populations in college (First Generation Foundation, 2018), and in 2012, 62% of undergraduates declared that neither parent had a bachelor's degree (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2016). Finally, the Center for First-Generation Student Success (2018) reported that during the 2015-16 school year, first-generation students whose parents did not have a bachelor's degree represented 56% of the undergraduate population.

Froggé and Woods (2018) sum up the lack of research: ". . . first-generation college students are less likely to persist and graduate, surprisingly little is known about their college experiences and the ways those experiences compare to the experiences of students who have college-educated parents" (p. 276). A large gap in the literature exists between first-generation students living on campus and the impact of integrated residential life on their retention.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Research Approach

Little research exists discussing first-generation students living on an integrated floor in a residence hall. As a result, this study interviewed current students about their experiences of living on such a floor. The research question explored the experiences of first-generation college students living on an integrated floor with other students. In order to understand the shared experiences of first-generation students living on an integrated floor, the study employed a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological study method (Creswell, 2013). The research attempts to understand the perspective of first-generation students who live on an integrated floor. A transcendental phenomenological study supported the research since a phenomenological study "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences . . ." (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). The researcher removed personal ideas and experiences from the research (Creswell, 2013).

Context and Participants

This study was conducted at a small, faith-based liberal arts university in the Midwest that emphasizes building community, academic excellence, and developing a personal faith. The six participants in the study, two males and four females, represent first-generation students with a third- or fourth-year classification who had lived or lived

at the time of this study in an integrated residence hall. Two focus groups of three students each convened since focus groups as a method "[i]s particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences and . . . how they think and why they think that way" (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299). Additionally, as opposed to individual interviews, focus groups allow deeper thinking into a subject as participants converse with each other (Kitzinger, 1995).

Procedures

Permission was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board to conduct the study. Once permission from the Institutional Review Board was granted, an email requested first-generation students with a third-year or fourth-year classification to participate in a discussion group. The email was sent to students living in integrated residence halls and campus apartments. One difficulty with finding participants is that the institution where the study was conducted does not identify first-generation students. Nine students responded. Two respondents did not meet the third-year or fourth year requirement. One respondent failed to appear for the focus group. Therefore, two focus groups convened with students about personal experiences and involvement with the integrated floor. After the focus group sessions, data was coded, themed, and reported.

Data Collection and Analysis

Research was conducted with a peer review method by using an advisor in order to keep the research unbiased (Creswell, 2013). Focus group discussions were recorded digitally and through note taking (Creswell, 2012), and the thesis advisor was provided with the opportunity to hear the focus group discussions. Participants received an opportunity to examine the results as a member checking strategy (Creswell, 2013).

Negative case analysis was used as information gathered from the focus group fell outside identified themes (Creswell, 2013). Coding was completed through listening and reading through focus group discussions and finding words or phrases to identify concepts in the text (Creswell, 2012) with the aid of a digital coding program. Overarching themes were ascribed to groups of codes (Creswell, 2012).

Benefits

Hearing stories and discovering the phenomenon of the first-generation students' experiences and understanding the impact of those experiences on the retention of students gives college administrators information to make decisions for the university. Results provide residence life professionals information about student involvement with floormates. Knowing the results of this study also provides first-generation students information about the style of housing that may benefit them the most as they choose universities to attend. Hearing and understanding the experiences of first-generation students helps mold decisions about housing to benefit current and future students.

Chapter 4

Results

This study sought to discover the effects on retention of first-generation students from living on an integrated floor. The chapter presents information gathered through two focus groups involving third-year and fourth-year first-generation students. The researcher digitally recorded and thematically coded the discussions of the students from the hour-long sessions. The answers to the questions presented during the group discussions resulted in three prominent themes: (a) finances, (b) involvement, and (c) relationships. Academic and social concerns emerged as subthemes under finances. Within the relationship theme, socially challenging and essential for flourishing appeared as subthemes. Mental health surfaced as an important theme with half of the participants. In an effort to ensure anonymity, the researcher changed the student names.

Finances

Financial concerns and struggles created an obstacle for first-generation participants since their parents often provided minimal to nonexistent funds for college. Student C recalled, "First of all, I had no idea what college life was going to be like. I had no idea that I needed a notebook. Mostly I didn't know anything besides needing a pencil." Not knowing what was needed for college created unexpected expenses for supplies. Student D encountered similar financial surprises: "I remember getting there first semester and there were unexpected fees that I never knew, like textbooks and little

things they added here and there. I didn't prepare money wise. It was really stressful." However, Students A and B experienced preparation for college differently. The students' moms purchased many items for the first year of college. Student B said, "because they [the university] sent us the list of suggested packing items and stuff like that. My mom literally went through Walmart and got every single thing on the list." Student A remembered, "My mom also went all out, got me everything. Mainly things that decorate my room to make it homey."

Students then worked all year, even during school, to pay for college expenses since finances are tight. From the conversations, two main sub-themes, educational concerns and social difficulties, arose concerning finances.

Educational concern. Living in the residence hall at the Mid-western, private, faith-based school where the study occurred costs approximately $10,000 per year in addition to tuition. Living in a residence hall is the only option at the school since the students from the focus groups do not live close enough to campus to commute and permission to live off campus is difficult to obtain. Five of the six students agreed that attendance at the university was in danger at some moment during their school career due to lack of funds. One participant received a full tuition scholarship, reducing worry and stress about finances needed for school. The same student also expressed genuine gratitude and relief, because attendance at the university would have been doubtful if not for the scholarship:

> I got it. I was like, no way. I was like, wait a minute, you gotta be kidding me right now. This is like, crazy. So, at that moment, I'm like, this is where I'm supposed to be at. And that was just kind of like a sign.

The other students in the focus group acknowledged the impact of the scholarship and understood Student E's excitement about the scholarship.

Social difficulties. Beyond paying for tuition and housing, all six participants related financial difficulties associated with socializing. They relayed that floormates, roommates, and other friends often wanted to make late-night drives to convenience stores, fast food restaurants, and coffee shops. The desire to socialize and commune created a tension with finances for the students. Student B stated, "It's like, I have a certain amount of money that I can spend per week and that's for gas." Student F discussed the social difficulties by saying,

> I was working two jobs on campus. I was financially dependent on the jobs and a lot of these girls, I just felt they were just spending their parents' money on this and that and traveling all weekend. I was always coming from catering exhausted and a lot of them didn't understand why I was always tired and why I couldn't have the lifestyle that they had, going out for dinner and buying things online.

All of the focus group students agreed that activities costing money caused stress with relationships.

Involvement

The second theme that emerged from the discussion was involvement. All of the six students agreed that involvement with fellow floormates impacted school life. Student C mentioned the value of activities: ". . . those [activities] honestly make the biggest difference for me. Just like the little things people do: 'Hey, we're just gonna have wing church for an hour every Wednesday'." In discussing a floor activity from early in the fall, Student C reminisced,

> We, [the freshmen], didn't know anything. So, we just put on these like funky outfits and ran across the bridge. So that was a fun time. It was a good time. It was surprising. And everything was just kind of new, which was good.

Even though involvement was important, the path taken to involvement differed within members of the focus groups.

The desire to engage in official and unofficial floor activities resulted in over-participation for four of the six students. For example, Student E said,

> I think in the beginning . . . I was participating in like, every single thing. And then sophomore year hits, and I think I gotta do more because I'm not taking like a lot of leadership position and all that. Then sophomore year was hectic. I didn't have time, and it was crazy.

As previously mentioned, over-involvement created financial issues, but it also created other problems. Homework completion, studying, and sleeping suffered from over-involvement.

Student D remembered visiting the university before attending: "All the girls left their doors open, and there was a lot of community and a lot of closeness. I guess I could really feel it . . . and I really wanted that." In retrospect, Student D reported that the open-door behavior, although appreciated, became somewhat overwhelming. The culture of open doors Student D experienced at the current university contrasted with living on a floor at a public university the previous semester.

Academics and finances concerned Student F enough that the amount of time studying or working created a barrier to social engagement. Social activities on the floor

held low priority early on, but over time, the student learned to balance studying, working, and socializing. Student F said,

> I feel at first I kind of excluded myself just because I looked at the activities that my floor would do. And I'd think these are stupid. I didn't come to college to jump in the mud. And I also felt people had too much extra time. But, my RAs were really intentional by making sure that I was involved. I still wanted to know who I lived with even though I have a really strong group of friends outside of my floor. I still want to bond with them. Even though there's always those people that you don't click with, that's the beauty of diversity, I guess, from living on campus.

While discussing the challenges faced with involvement with floormates, Student B said, “It was different with [my teammates], I would go do stuff with them. I would hang out with them. But the floor guys, for some reason. I was just, no, I don't really want to hang out with them”. Student A said, “I think once I opened up, after the beginning of my freshman year, I've just been wanting to do all the activities.” Giving themselves permission to say “no” to floor activities was integral for learning balance. Student E reported, “This year I've been focusing a lot on myself and trying to figure out the next step in the future in terms of jobs, internship and all that.” All students agreed that learning to balance private, academic, and social time is crucial.

All of the participants agreed that progressing through school changed their social lives. Upon reflection about expectations of floor involvement before arriving to school, Student C said,

> My cousin, she went to [a public school]. She was always in her room or off campus with a very select group of people. And so that's what I thought. But when we got on campus, we [people on the floor] were like, "We're going on a [convenience store] run."

The amount of possibilities for involvement surprised the students. All reported less involvement in floor activities currently than during the first year of school. The reasons for less involvement included academic stress from challenging upper-level classes and involvement with friends from other groups across campus.

Relationships

The third theme to appear from the focus groups is relationships. Through family relationships, all of the participants felt encouraged to attend college. Even with that encouragement, the students felt pressure to succeed. Half of the students in the study felt pressure directly from family, and all felt personal pressure for success. The students reported that the desire to succeed stemmed from a desire to make family proud and to impact their futures.

The students also agreed that family provided little to no help preparing for college. Three of the six students navigated standardized tests, college admission, and FAFSA without family help. Student E noted, "So for me, my parents didn't know anything about the SAT or anything like that. So, I was doing everything by myself. I was trying to figure it out." Student D mentioned a similar thought: "My friends in high school, their parents signed them up for stuff. And I thought, 'Oh, we have to take the SATs?' I applied by myself. I signed up to go. I paid for my own stuff." Similarly,

Student F recalled, “I had no idea what it looked like to apply because I was just on my own so it was literally just go use the website”.

Socially challenging. Besides lack of help from parents prior to college, diversity caused challenges to interpersonal relationships at college because many different types of students live on a residence floor. All of the participants stated that the diverse group of people made it hard to get to know other students on the floor. In speaking about diversity, Student E reflected, “Yeah, and also talking about different, if you're like the only black person or only Hispanic person. It’s like, ‘Whoa, there are a lot of Caucasian people here.’”

Socioeconomic differences caused tension with fellow floormates. Student D mentioned feeling like an imposter:

> I shouldn't be here. But I got here. And I'm glad I'm here. But I just didn't feel on the level of everybody else. I guess, financially, money wise, that was a big thing for me. And I know, you can’t assume other people are financially better off than you, but I felt like I experienced a lot of that.

Besides feelings of inferiority, financial differences also created other misconceptions. Student F stated,

> I feel like I grew much faster. I became independent. Whereas it was really hard for me to connect with the girls on my floor because I felt like they were so immature. So, it was kind of hard to connect with people because I felt like their lives were just so easy compared to mine.

Misconceptions melted away as relationships with floormates strengthened and deepened.

Diverse backgrounds initially created barriers for participants to develop and sustain intimate relationships. Student A mentioned, "I would say I expected to be best friends with my roommate. So, when we were not getting along very well and just not communicating . . . Yeah, that was hard". However, upon reflection, the participants felt diversity on the floor increased understanding and tolerance. Student C said,

> At first, I didn't really connect with any of these people [on the floor]. Which I also think played into me keeping to myself. But then as the years went on, I kind of learned to appreciate it and see people's different point of views. Like even politically, religiously different things like that and seeing how people's past experiences or where they're from, how that shaped them and who they are. So, it turned into something that I appreciated.

Student E recalled intentionally choosing diversity: "I didn't just want an all guys dorm. So that's why I chose [residence hall]. And so that kind of helped in terms of like seeing different people and getting to know a variety of people instead of just guys." The participants agreed that diverse backgrounds initially presented challenges to building relationships, but with time and effort to know others, the diversity in floormates blessed the participants.

Essential for flourishing. Even with relationship challenges, all six of the students agreed that relationships kept them at the school. "I will honestly say, if it wasn't for the relationships that I built with teammates, and then eventually with people outside of [my sport], if it wasn't for them, I would have left [the university] after my freshman year," revealed Student B. Student A emphasized the importance of

relationships: “[Residence hall] is just like a family. And it's really what I needed when I came to [the university].”

The relationships developed with floormates and roommates contributed to the decision to stay at school. Student C revealed,

> So, finding two people, my roommate and one of my best friends on campus, finding those people here has been really good for me. And I think for them because they, it's not a one-way street for either of us. So, I rely on them.

Relationships developed on the floor provided a family feel and contributed significantly to the participants’ decision to stay at the university.

Three students specifically mentioned residence assistants (RAs) as important for the first year. The RAs, who live on the floor, provided a welcoming atmosphere along with encouragement and support through academic, personal, social, and spiritual struggles. “My freshman year, I lived next door to my RA, and she was the one I went to for like everything,” Student A observed. The RAs also promoted floor involvement, which aided relationship building. Along with relationships on the floor, all six students agreed that relationships with faculty and staff played a key role in staying at school. Administrative staff in particular showed patience and kindness when students asked questions about such things as admission, class registration, and finances. Student D sums up the importance of relationships:

> I think for me, it was really like genuinely the community, even though it's like cheesy, because [the university] is about community. I've had so many wonderful, amazing people who have just been genuine, like good to me, and helped me through everything. And even my advisors and my professors. And

> just even having professors say, "Come to my house," or, "We'll get coffee, I'll pay for you to have coffee, and like, we'll talk about it." . . . I was really glad that I had that open community because I made a lot of really close friends and connections and people that really helped me through my experience.

Campus relationships, whether student-to-student or staff-to-student, provided valuable encouragement and help to the participants.

Mental Health

Mental health emerged as a theme of considerable magnitude. One student regularly mentioned mental health struggles in the first year of college. Student A disclosed, "I was surprised by the amount of homesickness I had." Student A emphasized the importance of the relationships developed with others, especially on the floor, to surviving the first year:

> I was just going through a lot of mental health and some stuff that was going on back home. So, I just wanted to keep to myself. I didn't really want to talk about it with people I didn't know. . . . I ended up getting really close to my RA, and she helped me go to the counseling center. And it was really good.

Intentional relationships developed on the floors provided encouragement and support during mental health struggles.

Mental health emerged as a theme because of the earnestness of one student. The participant indicated major mental health issues often stem from loneliness and knowing about happenings at home. The student struggled most of a school year, and the RA on the floor provided necessary assistance. Floormates also encouraged the student. Two

other students then agreed that mental health challenges are difficult during at least the first year. Student B said,

> Freshman year I never would have talked to anybody about something like [personal struggles]. So, I think part of the just growing up and maturing is part of it. And I think also the culture of [the university] kind of affected me as far as being able to talk to people about different things.

Relationships developed on campus, whether on the floor or elsewhere, created a safe space for personal sharing and communication for students.

Conclusion

The students all agreed on the difficulties and rewards of living on an integrated residence hall floor. Student F simply stated, "I'm so blessed to be here." Student A and Student B interacted briefly about the involvement and relationships with floormates around the dining hall tables:

> Student A: "So just seeing how the tables are circles and we just have that family thing. It was really nice to be like a family."
>
> Student B: "Always room around the table."
>
> Student A: "Yeah, there's always room for one more."

It should be noted that Student A and Student B do not live in the same residence hall.

Finances and relationships caused tension and stress at times for the students. However, the benefits the students could recognize at the time of the focus groups outweighed the initial difficulties experienced during the first and second years of living on an integrated floor. In fact, the students thanked the researcher for investigating the experiences facing the first-generation students living in a residence hall.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Tension and stress accompanied the participants throughout the university experience. While the causes for those challenges changed, the participants persisted. This study explored the potential connection between living on an integrated floor for first-generation students and retention. This final chapter contains a final summary of the research findings, applications for institutions, implications for further research, and a review of the limitations from the study.

Through the process of gathering data, four major themes emerged: finances, involvement, relationships impacting the participants, and mental health. The discussion below addresses the themes identified from the focus groups and connects the themes to broader research on first-generation students.

To begin, research indicates that first-generation students struggle with retention because of multiple obstacles which may include the following: financial struggles (Checkoway, 2018; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Pascarella et al., 2004; Petty, 2014), academic unpreparedness (Checkoway, 2018; Froggé & Woods, 2018), difficulty with building social relationships (Checkoway, 2018; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Petty, 2104), and lack of family support (Petty, 2014; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Schultz, 2004). The participants struggled with the same obstacles while first attending college. However, the participants persevered and continue (at the time of the study) toward graduation.

Finances

The study participants displayed resilience through financial difficulties even though finances proved an obstacle. All six students overcame those difficulties even though, similar to research, they received limited financial help from their parents (Petty, 2014; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Schultz, 2004). To attend the university, one student earned a large scholarship, and others used scholarships, financial aid, and part-time jobs to pay for tuition and housing. Even with financial struggles, the participants managed to stay at the university. However, finances did create a barrier in building relationships.

Floor mates who did not experience financial constraints struggled to understand the financial difficulties of the participants. Regular trips to fast food restaurants, coffee shops, and convenience stores created a barrier for relationship building because floor mates failed to grasp the participants' financial concerns. Since the participants pay for college in large measure on their own, they regularly work part-time jobs during school and summer months.

Similar to research, the focus group participants experienced a desire to socialize with fellow floor mates, but the cost of quick trips to stores and exhaustion from work limited participation (Checkoway, 2018; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Petty, 2104). Overtime, their floor mates recognized the financial difficulties, but it did not negate the financial burden felt by the participants. Living on an integrated floor showed minimal impact on finances, but the research showed finances affected participation with floor mates.

Involvement

As also emerged in this study, involvement proved another major theme for the participants in the focus group (Yeh, 2010). Pascarella et al. (2004) indicated first-

generation students struggle knowing the proper amount of extra-curricular involvement or how to engage in those activities. Similarly, the participants in the study struggled to find balance with floor involvement, the larger campus community, and academics. The participants recalled that excessive involvement early in the college experience cost them financially, academically, and physically.

Academic work, for example, suffered with high levels of participation, or, when students completed schoolwork, sleep was diminished. Some participants avoided involvement early in the college experience because connecting to the people on their floor was difficult due to feeling different. All participants agreed that, over the course of their schooling, they learned to balance involvement with the residence floor, friend groups and organizations, academics, and personal self-care.

Relationships

The most prominent theme from the study, relationships, highly impacted retention for the first-generation participants. The study also confirmed the research that demonstrates how relationships play a major role in retention of first-generation students (Demetriou et al., 2017; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Tinto, 2004). In fact, the relationships developed by the participants was a key reason the students stayed at the university even while struggling to balance their involvement on campus along with their finances. The students agreed that, if not for personal relationships with faculty members, university staff and fellow students, they may have left college.

The participants revealed one or two extremely close relationships provided encouragement and personal growth emotionally, academically, and socially. The close relationships with fellow floor mates and classmates, for example, also encouraged and

supported the participants who experienced mental health challenges. The participants agreed that relationships are the most important factor in helping them stay in college, which matches with the research about first-generation students. (Demetriou et al., 2017; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Tinto, 2004).

Along with other research, this study indicates that relationships, in particular, are vital for first-generation students. Providing ways to incorporate relationship building and meeting new people should thus be a priority for universities. Positive relationship building—along with finances, involvement, and mental experiences—impact the life of a first-generation student attending college. The four facets need to guide practices in higher education.

Implications for Practice in Higher Education

The study revealed that first-generation students value positive personal relationships. Non-faculty staff from offices such as admissions, financial aid, and the registrar improve the quality of the experience for first-generation students with kind and useful answers to the many questions students ask. Staff who patiently responded to multiple questions helped to calm the anxiety of the participants. Faculty who caringly and willingly helped the students navigate academic and personal struggles increase the possibility of retention. Faculty willing to "go the extra mile" improve the experience for first-generation students and make the student feel valued.

Faculty and staff interactions are important, but student relationships are essential for first-generation students. Attending college for first-generation students exposes them to a previously unknown culture. Developing relationships with fellow floor mates and classmates provides support and encouragement. Institutions should consider

encouraging and implementing intentional community building events to foster relationships, especially student-to-student relationships. Specifically, activities and events designed around the residence halls and floor should be encouraged. The planned events provide first-generation students with opportunities to know floor mates more intimately.

Universities should also consider developing organizations on campus for first-generation students, similar to organizations for international and minority students. An organization for first-generation students provides them with an opportunity to share stories, be encouraged by other first-generation students, and see the value they bring to the university. First-generation students experience culture shock in a similar way that international students do.

A university providing an organization for first-generation students can help the adjustment to a new culture. Individualized support and guidance for first-generation students should be considered by universities in an effort to prepare students for college and improving retention. Many first-generation students struggle with the application process, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) preparation, financial aid, and registration. Universities should consider reaching out to first-generation applicants to provide specific financial aid numbers, guidance in filling out the FAFSA, and answers to any questions.

Universities also need to continue helping once students are attending the institution. For example, institutions should ensure on campus work opportunities for first-generation students as needed. On-campus jobs provide students with more opportunities to develop relationships with fellow classmates along with earning valuable

income. Instead of providing individualized support, one university made a participant fend for him/herself once admission was granted. The same student transferred after one semester to the small, faith-based university where the study occurred.

Orientation for first-generation students and these students' parents should be considered by institutions. Traditional orientation programs may not answer all questions of first-generation students and their families. As part of the orientation process, the student engagement advising mentioned during the literature review (Peck, 2011) should be considered for first-generation students since students do not know how to engage in the campus (Pascarella et al., 2004). Providing this form of orientation would allow more understanding of the college environment for first-generation students and their families.

Implications for Future Research

Research about community development in residence halls at other institutions is one implication for further research in higher education. The small faith-based Midwestern university in this study emphasizes intentional community and relationship building; other institutions may or may not have the same emphasis. Comparing the experiences of first-generation students from residence halls at different institutions is imperative.

The second implication for future research involves investigating the relationships created by living in first-year-only residence halls. The research occurred at an institution with only integrated floors. Research with students living in first-year-only residence halls would provide an opportunity for comparison. Institutions with first-year-only residence halls and integrated halls could gather valuable data for research because a university with both types of residence halls—first-year-only and integrated—eliminates

the culture of the university from the research, therefore leaving the living environment in the residence halls as a main focus.

A third implication for further research is the type of floor activities occurring in the residence hall. Since the small faith-based university in this study intentionally builds relationships and community through floor activities—such as floors sitting together in the dining hall and chapel, floors gathering once a week to learn more about each other, and floors going on retreats—these results may vary from a residence hall at a university where the floors do not intentionally build activities into the lives of the students living on the floor. The comparison between floors with intentional activities and those without intentional activities would provide insight into relationship development.

Limitations

Many strong themes appeared from the research, but at least four limitations need to be considered. First, the type of institution where the research occurred is a small, faith-based institution in the Midwest in which community building is a significant part of the culture. Consequently, the university does not represent all institutional types, and therefore, the experiences of first-generation students may differ at other institutions.

The second limitation is the number of participants. The voluntary nature of the study resulted in six participants. The percentage of first-generation students represented by the sample population is unknown since the university does not identify first-generation students. The participants were also limited to third-year and fourth-year students, further narrowing the participant pool.

The third limitation is the type of residence hall. Participants lived in either a co-ed residence hall (with floors divided by sex) or single-sex residence halls. One

residence hall has suite-style room arrangements, and the other residence halls are traditional living arrangements with rooms on a main hall. Additionally, all residence halls have community-style bathrooms. Research should include the experiences of students living in suite-style residence halls with adjoining bathrooms and the experiences of students living in residence halls with co-ed floors.

Personal bias of the researcher is the final limitation. Qualitative data interpretation lends itself to bias. Since the results were interpreted through the experience of the researcher who lived on a floor at the same faith-based institution as the participants, bias may be present. To reduce possible bias, the researcher invited the participants to review the themes and subthemes for accuracy.

Conclusion

With the increase of first-generation students attending universities in the United States, institutions must devise and implement ways to assist first-generation students with the transition from high school to college. Positive and encouraging relationships provide one way to help students with the transition. Participants valued the conversations with other first-generation students during the focus groups, which provides reasoning for implementing first-generation programs similar to programs for international and minority students. Even though first-generation students typically speak the same language as classmates, the experience of a completely different culture at college produces stress and anxiety.

Relationships beyond ones shared by students are also valuable for first-generation students. Staff in the financial aid department, admissions office, and registrar can ease the transition from high school to college by helping students in specific, kind,

and patient ways. Faculty willing guide and mentor students reduce frustrations and anxiety caused by the transition from high school to college as well. Experienced students provided a source of information and encouragement to the participants in the focus groups. Living on an integrated floor may have increased the value of the connections built between the experienced floor mates and the inexperienced participants.

It should be noted that the study did not conclusively discover a connection between living on an integrated floor and retention of first-generation students. However, the study did find that relationships and intentional community definitely impacted the retention of the participants in the study. Even when difficulties surfaced, the student participants felt encouraged by the community around them and valued relationships enough to remain at the university.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

First Tier

1) Describe your experience first coming to college.

2) Did you encounter any surprises?

3) Describe your experience living in the residence hall.

4) What activities occur (ed) through the floor?

5) Describe your participation in the floor activities.

6) Who did (do) you seek for advice?

7) Describe why you are still at Taylor.

Second Tier

8) Did you encounter any disappointments?

9) Did anything exceed your expectations?

10) Is (Was) there anything about residence life that seems familiar to you?

11) Is (Was) there anything about residence life that seems unfamiliar to you?

Third Tier

12) Who do you seek for academic advice?

13) Who do you seek for social advice?

14) Who do you seek for spiritual advice?

15) Who do you seek for financial advice?

Appendix B

Informed Consent

INFORMATION SHEET

Involvement in an integrated floor affects first-generation retention.

Principal Investigator: **Carey Collins, MAHE Student, Taylor University**

Co-investigator: **N/A**

Faculty Advisor: **Dr. Todd Ream**

Study Sponsor: **N/A**

You are invited to participate in a research study about the effect of living on an integrated floor on retention of first-generation colleges students. You were selected as a possible subject because you are a first-generation student living (or have lived) on an integrated floor of a residence hall

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in a focus group of four other people to share your experiences of living on an integrated floor.

Benefits of the research that are reasonable to expect are hearing how living on an integrated floor affects first-generation students and sharing your story.

Risks and discomforts: While on the study, the possible side effects are: Reliving negative experiences.

Suppressed emotions and experiences may surface. There also may be other side effects that we cannot predict. You will not be required to share anything you do not want to share.

Compensation: You will not receive payment for taking part in this study

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to continue with the focus group for any reason.

I will protect the confidentiality of your research records by storing information on a Taylor University owned password protected computer, and when work is done on a private computer it will be password protected. Data will be destroyed when the thesis is completed.

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Carey Collins, carey_collins@taylor.edu or (517) 395-5238, or, Todd Ream (faculty advisor) todd.ream@taylor.edu

The Taylor University Institutional Review Board has determined that this study is exempt from IRB oversight.