

**Making their way: An interpretive case study of male first-generation students
attending a highly selective liberal arts college**

by

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DEDICATION

To my children:

Jackson and Andrew.

May your curiosities bring each of you

a life that is rich with wonder

and discovery.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study focused on the experiences of eight male first-generation college students attending Kenmont College (pseudonym), a highly selective, residential liberal arts college located in the Midwestern United States. While first-generation college students have been studied in various contexts, very little is known about what attracts these students to highly selective institutions, particularly liberal arts colleges, and what environmental attributes influence their curricular and co-curricular experiences through college. Using a collective case study as the methodological roadmap (Case, 1995), the students, each viewed as a distinct case, were purposively selected from a sample of 28 male first-generation students who matriculated at Kenmont College in the fall of 2009 and persisted to their final year of undergraduate study.

To better understand how this small cohort of first-generation college students came to know, chose to attend, and, ultimately, experienced the academic and campus environments at Kenmont College, this study drew upon human ecology and social capital theories to frame the research. Applying cross-case analytic techniques enabled several themes to emerge from the case participants' experiences and environments. Within their pre-college environments, parental influences, siblings, friendship groups, and schooling experiences—from elementary through secondary—emerged as salient themes. In terms of the participants' college selection process, institutional reputation, academic prestige, financial aid, and enrollment and class size emerged as the primary attractors to Kenmont College. While attending Kenmont, themes emerged from both the curricular and co-curricular environments. Within the curricular environment, the case participants referenced

the college's academic expectations, interactions with faculty, classroom environment, and structure and content of the liberal arts curriculum as distinctive features. Within the co-curricular environment, the case participants cited the intellectual student body, supportive campus atmosphere, campus diversity, and abundant learning opportunities as influential features of their college experience. The collective narrative from these eight participants reveals that dynamic and complex environmental features—both before and at college—influenced their decisions to attend and persist through Kenmont College.

Of import to several stakeholders, the findings from this study are particularly germane to the work of faculty, staff, and administrators at residential liberal arts colleges akin to Kenmont College. In the absence of a formal, visible support program for first-generation students (e.g., TRIO Student Support Services), the findings from this study may compel these institutions to reconsider the ways they identify, engage with, and unveil the first-generation student community on their campuses. Additionally, how these educational pioneers are welcomed, oriented, and advised on their respective campuses may also warrant additional consideration. Despite this study's contributions, additional research focused on the role of first-generation student birth order, friendship groups, and race and gender is needed. Furthermore, a longitudinal study following first-generation students before, during, and after college would contribute significantly to our collective understanding of this important population of college students.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Background

A college education has long been considered a necessity for enhancing one's career opportunities, earning potential, and social mobility over a lifetime. However, the personal, professional, and financial benefits of attending college often go unrealized unless a degree—a bachelor's degree in this case—is actually earned. In light of President Barack Obama's charge to increase our nation's degree attainment rate along with the challenges of the Great Recession, which began in 2008 and its effects still lingering at the time of this study, there is even greater interest and concern among higher education stakeholders and policy makers to better understand what conditions lead to degree attainment.

While the U.S. higher education system has become increasingly diverse in almost every way—by race, ethnicity, gender, income level, and academic ability—institutions continue to struggle to help certain populations of students to persist and ultimately graduate with a four-year degree, including students who are the first in their families to attend college (i.e., first-generation college students). For example, in 2005, 15.9% of first-time, full-time students enrolled in a four-year college or university were first-generation college students (Sáenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Of the first-generation students who matriculated in 2004, only 27.4% graduated in four years, 44.8% in five years, and 50.2% in six years (DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011). These degree attainment rates were notably lower than those of their peers with college educated parents, who graduated at a higher rate at the same four-, five-, and six-year intervals (42.1%, 59.7%, and 64.2%, respectively).

Despite the increased access to higher education over the past 30 years, the percentage of first-generation college students enrolled in four-year colleges and universities steadily declined between 1971 and 2005 (Sáenz et al., 2007). Interestingly, however, Sáenz et al. (2007) discovered that public colleges and universities experienced a greater decrease in their enrollment of first-generation college students (from 42.2% in 1971 to 17.5% in 2005) than private institutions (from 30.4% in 1971 to 12.8% in 2005). These differences in percentage points—from an 11.8% difference in 1971 to a 4.7% difference in 2005—has captured the interest of several scholars and provided further rationale for the current study, which focused on first-generation students' experiences at a particular kind of private institution: a liberal arts college.

Sáenz et al. (2007) and colleagues at the Higher Education Research Institute based at the University of California, Los Angeles disaggregated data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, focusing exclusively on first-generation college students. Whether it is due to the small class sizes, the residential nature of the campus, the greater opportunity for engagement in activities on campus, or the enhanced financial aid offerings, these scholars posited that certain dimensions of first-generation students' experiences at private colleges are worth additional investigation (Sáenz et al.).

It is this researcher's hope to contribute to the growing body of knowledge about the experiences of first-generation college students who attend our nation's private colleges. My interest, in particular, is the experiences of male first-generation college students who attend a highly selective, residential liberal arts college.

Problem

Within the extant literature focusing on first-generation college students, there is a notable gap in what we know about these students' experiences at highly selective liberal arts colleges (Sáenz et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 1994, 1996). This gap may, in part, be due to the notion that first-generation college students are more likely to gravitate toward pre-professional and technical academic programs which are typically available at community colleges and universities, not liberal arts institutions (Chen, 2005). Furthermore, the overall population of students attending liberal arts colleges is small. According to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, only 2.2% of students enrolled in the U.S. higher education system attend a liberal arts college (2010 Carnegie Classification; National Center for Educational Statistics, IPEDS Fall 2009 Enrollment). Thus, the population of first-generation students attending liberal arts colleges is arguably small. Finally, "highly selective"¹ liberal arts colleges, like other "highly selective" institutions, typically have the highest retention and graduation rates in the U.S.A., prompting little concern on the part of administrators at these institutions and policy makers at the state and Federal levels that a problem may exist. However, Sáenz et al. (2007) discovered that, regardless of institution type, all first-generation college students graduate at a lower rate than their peers who are the children of at least one college graduate.

At Kenmont College, a highly selective, residential liberal arts college in the Midwest, and the institution where this study took place, first-generation college students have graduated at a lower rate than their peers who have at least one college-educated parent.

¹ This study used the criteria outlined by ACT to define highly selective. The criteria identify highly selective institutions by their admission profile, including an interquartile range of 25 to 30 for the ACT, an interquartile range of 1710 to 2000 for the SAT, and more than 50% of admitted students having graduated in the top 10% of their high school class (ACT, 2010).

For example, the average four-year graduation rate at Kenmont from 2005 through 2007 was 83% for all students, and 78% for first-generation college students.

Additionally, there have been challenges with retaining these students, leaving little chance to assist them in persisting to graduation. For example, of the 378 first-year students who matriculated at Kenmont in the fall of 2009, 19% (72/378) were first-generation college students. Among these 72 students, 37 were male and 35 were female. As reflected in Table 1, by the beginning of their fourth year of college, regrettably, only 75.7% of the men and 82.9% of the women were still enrolled as students. Thus, after three years of college, more than one fifth of the first-generation students had left the college and collectively they accounted for nearly one-third of all students who withdrew or were dismissed from their class: the Class of 2013.

Table 1. First- and non-first-generation 4th-year persistence rate comparisons by sex

Sex	Persistence to 4th year	
	First-generation	Non-first-generation
Male	75.7%	85.6%
Female	82.9%	92.2%
Total	79.2%	89.2%

The problem undergirding this study was twofold. The challenges of first-generation student persistence and degree completion, coupled with the gap in the broader literature on this population of students attending liberal arts colleges, were two problems this study aspired to address. Practitioners and policy makers cannot hope to resolve the former (persistence and degree completion) without a deeper understanding of the latter (first-generation college students). This study endeavored to deepen that understanding.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to document and understand the experiences of eight male first-generation college students at Kenmont College, a highly selective liberal arts college in the Midwestern United States. For this study, first-generation college students were defined as individuals for whom neither parent (or guardian) had earned a four-year bachelor's degree. All of the participants successfully persisted to the fourth year of college and planned to graduate at the conclusion of the spring 2013 semester. By developing a richer understanding of the college-going experiences of these students, this study may give voice to a largely invisible and silent group of students by discovering and examining the affective, social, and educational conditions that impact these students' experiences.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How did a small cohort of first-generation college students come to know, choose to attend, and ultimately experience the academic and campus environments at a highly selective, residential liberal arts college?
2. What features of the case participants' pre-college environments influenced their readiness for and decision to attend this type of institution?
3. How do the case participants characterize their curricular and co-curricular experiences at this type of institution?
4. Taken together, what features of the case participants' pre-college and residential liberal arts environments do they attribute to their successful persistence to graduation?

Role of Theory

As a qualitative, interpretive case study, theory influenced both the perspectives and framework guiding this study, both of which are described as follows. Social capital and human ecological systems theories are introduced in this section, and will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Perspective

Crotty (1998) defined a theoretical framework as “the philosophical stance that lies behind [one’s chosen] methodology” (p. 7). Interpretive, collective case study methodology was selected due to its compatibility and alignment with the research questions driving this study. Prasad & Prasad (2002a) characterized an interpretive study as one “where the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon” (p. 7). Interpretivism lends itself to capturing the stories of others, paying attention to the ordinary and particular, and producing thick, descriptive accounts of the phenomenon. Each participant in this study is considered an individual “case,” acknowledging the individual realities and nuanced experiences unique to each person. However, as a group of participants in a discernible and identifiable environment (i.e., a residential liberal arts college), a collective case study enables common themes across the cases to emerge.

Framework

Two distinct but complementary theories provided the theoretical scaffolding for this study. The work and contributions of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005) to the field of human development through an ecological lens enabled me to understand the myriad experiences taking place in the lives of the case participants as they made their way through Kenmont College. In particular, Bronfenbrenner's process-person-context-time (PPCT) model and nested model of environmental systems (micro, meso, exo, and macro-systems) provided the primary framework to interpret and understand the interplay between the case participants and the environmental contexts, or systems, in which they live, learn, study, and socialize.

Additionally, social and cultural capital theories (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 1995, 2000) served as a secondary lens to interpret how the case participants' experiences were influenced by their access to (and/or lack of) knowledge, relationships, and other forms of social capital as they moved through and were impacted by the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems in which they live.

Methodology

Creswell (2009) defined qualitative research as "a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). This study utilized case study methodology to better understand the experiences of first-generation college students who attend a highly selective liberal arts college. Stake (1995) defines case study research as "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi). As such, utilizing a case study methodology enabled a deep and rich understanding of both the

case participants' pre-college and college environments as well as the unique institutional features and context where this study took place.

Significance

This study is of import to a number of stakeholders, not the least of which are those with a vested interest in the experiences of first-generation students who attend a highly selective, residential liberal arts college. These include, but are not limited to, faculty members, college administrators, student affairs professionals, college presidents, policy makers, and families. By developing a more sophisticated understanding of the experiences lived by first-generation college students who attend these distinct colleges, these stakeholders may be in a better position to extend support, craft policy, develop programs and services, and help to cultivate the necessary conditions that encourage persistence and degree completion by first-generation college students.

As a case study, this research endeavor may help to close some of the existing gaps in the literature on first-generation student experiences at private institutions in general and at liberal arts colleges in particular. Furthermore, this study may also shed light on and give voice to these students lived experiences, which are frequently absent from the informative and robust quantitative studies focusing on first-generation college students.

Dissertation Overview

Six chapters comprise this interpretive, collective case study. Chapter 1 has provided a brief introduction to the topic, the problem and significance of this study, and a brief introduction to the questions and theories guiding this analysis of first-generation college students. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the extant literature on first-generation college

students. In particular, the literature review provides a comprehensive understanding of what has been studied and documented with respect to first-generation student retention, persistence, and degree attainment. Additionally, a range of comparison studies that have focused on distinct student and institutional characteristics are discussed along with studies that have focused on the myriad of transitional issues first-generation students face both before and throughout their college experience.

Chapter 3 provides a thorough explanation of the research methodology used in this study—constructionism, interpretive case studies, and cross-case analysis. Additionally, Chapter 3 outlines participant selection processes, the various data collection methods, and the limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter 4 provides a more in-depth description of the site of this study as well as the first-generation college population from which the participants were selected. It concludes with detailed case participant profiles of the eight students whose experiences informed this study. A thorough discussion of the findings of the cross-case analysis, organized thematically, is provided in Chapter 5. The final chapter, Chapter 6, provides a discussion of the implications of the study as well as recommendations for further and continued research.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

For the past three decades, a body of literature has accumulated that is focused on first-generation college students. This chapter covers a range of topics to provide a better understanding of the characteristics of first-generation college students and the challenges they face with enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment. Even though the literature is expansive and covers a broad range of issues, there is still much to learn and understand.

Numerous empirical studies have analyzed pre-college characteristics (Bui & Van, 2002; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), enrollment patterns (Chen, 2005), persistence (Ishitani, 2003; Stieha, 2010; Tinto, 1993), degree attainment (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001), transitional issues (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Terenzini et al., 1994), cultural adjustment (Cushman, 2007), communication patterns (Orbe, 2004), family dynamics (Gofen, 2009; London, 1989), engagement in educational activities (Pike & Kuh, 2005), and a multitude of other variables affecting student retention and graduation rates. Many of these studies have been instrumental in shaping services and practices found across college campuses today to support this unique and often invisible subset of college students (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). Despite both the scope and depth of the existing scholarship, it is clear that additional research is necessary if colleges and universities are truly sincere in their desires to open access to and support first-generation college students.

Terenzini et al. (2004) categorized the existing literature into three broad groupings. First, there are studies that focus on the persistence, attrition, and degree attainment of first-

generation college students. Second, there are the comparison studies, which analyze various characteristics, many of which are pre-college characteristics, common to both first-generation and continuing-generation students (e.g., demographics, secondary school preparation, college expectations). Third, there are studies that focus on the transitional issues first-generation students encounter as they enter and progress through college. In addition to these three categories, this researcher would include a fourth category of studies focused on the uncommon achievements of first-generation students. While this last category is certainly the smallest (in terms of the number of studies), it may offer keen insight into some of the behaviors, patterns, and experiences of those first-generation students who experience uncommon success in and beyond higher education. These broad categories are used to present the literature on first-generation college students.

Enrollment, Persistence, and Degree Attainment

Studies have revealed that, following their high school graduation, first-generation students enroll in college at a lower rate (56%) than their peers who have at least one parent who has a college degree (85%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Even when these students are found to be prepared, compared to their non-first-generation peers, they opted not to enroll (Horn & Nuñez, 2000). Beyond their parents' education level, other factors, such as family income, parental involvement, peer influence, academic preparation, and educational expectations, have been found to significantly influence the likelihood that a first-generation student will enroll in college (Horn & Nuñez, 2000). As one might assume, the parents or guardians of first-generation students, who may or may not be supportive, offer little assistance to their students during the application process simply because they lack the

knowledge and experience to be helpful. Strikingly, these students reported they receive no more assistance than other students from high school officials (Choy, 2001). One of the most significant variables that predict high school enrollment and success during the first year in college for all students, including first-generation, is the rigor of their high school coursework, particularly in the area of mathematics (Choy, 2001; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). For those students who completed advanced math courses in high school, 76% enrolled in a four-year institution. This number declined to 44% for those who did not go beyond algebra II, 16% for those who completed only geometry and algebra, and 6% for those who completed only lower level or no mathematics courses (Choy, 2001).

Once students decide they would like to attend college, they must complete the application process. For many, this is a daunting task that too often goes uncompleted. For example, 46% of high school graduates in 1992 indicated in 10th grade they had aspirations to earn a bachelor's degree. Of that same cohort, only 29% took the SAT or ACT (typically a requirement for admission), and only 25% actually applied to a four-year institution. Ultimately, only 21% actually enrolled in a four-year institution by 1994 (Choy, 2001). Based on these findings, middle and high schools are intentionally having conversations earlier pertaining to educational expectations (Bui & Van, 2005; Choy, 2001) and efforts have been made to create "academic pathways" to alter this trajectory (Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006).

Among those who matriculate into college, there is some variation in the types of institutions first-generation students attend, the majors they choose, and their enrollment status (full-time versus part-time). For those who enrolled in a four-year institution, first-generation students were more likely to attend a regional comprehensive university than a

large research university (Warburton et al., 2001). Furthermore, first-generation students were more likely to attend part-time (27%) and, as addressed previously, work more hours (Warburton et al., 2001). In terms of fields of study, first-generation students were more inclined to major in business (25%) than their peers whose parents attended college (17%). Evidence was not provided to explain why these students gravitated toward this particular discipline over others.

While deciding to apply and actually being accepted are victories unto themselves for first-generation students, the full benefits of going to college are not realized unless a degree is actually obtained. In order to realize this goal, students must be retained and encouraged to persist to graduation, whether they are attending a two-year or a four-year institution. Ishitani (2003) conducted a longitudinal study of first-generation students in an attempt to identify their patterns of attrition (i.e., dropping, stopping, or transferring out of college) at a four-year institution. Controlling for a wide number of variables (including race, income, gender, and high school GPA), he found “the risk of attrition during the first year among first-generation students was 71 percent higher than that of students with two college-educated parents” (p. 433). Similar to the variables that influence post-secondary enrollment patterns, family income, lower educational expectations, completing fewer rigorous courses in high school, and class rank are also significantly associated with first-generation students departing from their institutions prior to graduation (Ishitani, 2006; Warburton et al., 2001). Ishitani’s (2003) usage of an event history model, as opposed to a structural equation model, helped to identify the risk of attrition among students throughout their four-years in college as well as the aforementioned student characteristics and time periods at which students were at the most risk. Findings revealed first-generation students are at a higher risk of attrition

during all four years of their college experience as compared to their peers whose parents are college-educated, although their level of risk changes depending on their year in school (the risk typically waning beyond the second year in college) and the type of institution they attended. Similar patterns were found in other studies of attrition and degree completion (Choy, 2001). Even so, an event history model can be useful as colleges and universities strive to use student-characteristic data to predict which students on their respective campuses will persist and graduate and those who will not.

Although student characteristics can be helpful in identifying students who are at risk of departing and when they might do so, retention studies clearly support that risk factors can be mitigated and students who might otherwise stop- or drop-out can be retained. The seminal works of Tinto (1993, 2012) demonstrated that quality educational programs and a strong sense of community can help retain students at risk of leaving college. By socially and academically integrating students into the campus life, student attrition can be minimized (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Tinto, 1993, 2012). Additional strategies for integrating students into college life and cultivating a supportive environment are discussed in subsequent sections.

Ultimately, for those first-generation students who actually completed their degree (either a two- or four-year degree), are they on equal footing with their non-first-generation alumni peers? While the number of studies examining this question is limited, the findings that do exist are positive. In terms of broad occupational categories and salaries, differences were found depending on degree level, major, sex, and GPA, but not on parental education level (Choy, 2001; Horn & Zahn, 2001). Thus, until new studies suggest alternative

interpretations, first-generation students who apply, persist, and ultimately graduate obtain the same social mobility as their non-first-generation peers.

Characteristics, Experiences, and Engagement

Much like the general United States population, colleges and universities across the country have become increasingly diverse. Between 1976 and 1995, minority enrollments in U.S. institutions of higher education increased from 17% to 26% (The Condition of Education 2000, Section 1). By 2008, that percentage had grown to 34% (Aud et al., 2010). The trend is clear: Once reserved for the white, wealthy, and privileged, attending college has become significantly more accessible to people from a wide range of backgrounds. This trend has held true for first-generation students as well. In the 1995–1996 academic year, 47% of all postsecondary students were the first in their families enroll in college (Choy, 2001). With such significant shifts in the student population in higher education in the United States, the stage was set for researchers to begin comparing and contrasting these different groups of students to identify the characteristics, behaviors, and conditions that enable some to succeed while others struggle.

Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1996) conducted one of the first studies comparing the precollege characteristics and college experiences of first-generation college students to those of their traditional peers to determine if and how these differences impact first-year gains in students' reading, math, and critical thinking abilities. Their study sample included 2,685 students attending 23 institutions nationwide, 825 (31%) of whom were first-generation students. All of the study participants had completed one year of college, and the results of their study were quite compelling. Based on their analyses, first-

generation students were more likely to have dependent children, come from low income families, be Hispanic, possess weaker cognitive skills, and work more hours during college. They also had lower expectations in terms of earning a degree (and expect it to take longer). Furthermore, they were less likely to perceive their professors are concerned with their development as students, and they were also less likely to receive support and encouragement from friends to continue their enrollment. Overall, this study clearly outlined how many of the precollege characteristics and college experiences of first-generation students are different from those of their traditional peers and, in many ways, impede their success.

Terenzini et al. asserted:

In both precollege characteristics and their experiences during their first year in college, first-generation students differ in many educationally important ways from the students higher education has traditionally served. Because of these different characteristics and experiences, they are also a group at risk. They are a group clearly in need of greater research and administrative attention if they are to survive and succeed in college. (p. 20)

In 2004, Pascarella and Terenzini collaborated with Pierson and Wolniak to gather additional evidence on the college experiences and outcomes of first-generation college students. This particular study was comprised of students who participated in the National Study of Student Learning, which was a federally funded longitudinal study that took place from the fall of 1992 to the spring of 1995. Consistent with the findings of Terenzini et al. (1996), this study indicated that, during the second and third years of college, first-generation students completed significantly fewer credit hours, worked significantly more hours, and typically earned lower grades when compared to their peers whose parents had earned at least a bachelor's degree (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Working more hours often correlated to a student's limited family resources and concerns for paying for school

(Bui & Van, 2002). Furthermore, as a result of their family and work commitments, first-generation students were less likely to live on-campus, be involved with student groups, volunteer, and have non-course-related interactions with their peers. It is of concern because the study concluded that many of these activities (e.g., living on campus, interacting with peers) actually foster the conditions and experiences that positively affect the growth and development of first-generation students.

Despite identifying and affirming many of the challenges first-generation students face, the study conducted by Terenzini et al. (1996) did yield some promising findings. While less likely to enroll in courses within the humanities and fine arts, first-generation students “derived greater developmental benefits from coursework taken in the arts and humanities, mathematics, the social sciences, and the natural sciences and engineering than did other students” (p. 274). Additionally, first-generation students who attended selective institutions “derived greater growth in openness to diversity and learning for self-understanding” (p. 275). While these particular findings are, indeed, positive and help college administrators and faculty understand the types of college experiences that are beneficial to first-generation students, the study still affirmed the overwhelming challenges that face this population of college students. According to Pascarella et al. (2004), “One clear implication of these findings is the need for more sharply focused and sustained efforts and campus and public policies...designed to increase first-generation students’ involvement in the academic and nonacademic systems of the institutions they attend” (p. 279). While college and university officials can do little to address the precollege characteristics of incoming first-generations students, they can (and perhaps should) review and alter campus

policy and services to intentionally engage first-generation students in activities that have a positive impact on their college experience.

This idea of student engagement was addressed further when Pike and Kuh (2005) executed a study comparing the engagement and intellectual development of first-generation students to that of second-generation students. While their findings were overall consistent with those of Terenzini et al. (1996), Pike and Kuh posited that colleges and universities can increase the success of their first-generation students by strategically allocating resources and developing programs and policies to increase these students' overall engagement with campus life. By modifying admissions practices and orientation programs and requiring students to live on campus during their first year of college (for those without families or full-time jobs), much can be done to increase students' intellectual and social engagement with their respective institutions.

The aforementioned comparison studies have focused primarily on those first-generation students who attended four-year colleges and universities. To exclude studies on community colleges would be an egregious oversight, considering 40.8% of students who attend these particular institutions are the first in their families to attend college (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Inman and Mayes (1999) sought to identify what differences (if any) exist when comparing first-generation community college students to other community college students, and the ways in which these differences influenced their initial success in college. The research sample was comprised of 5,057 entering students in the University of Kentucky Community College System, which accounted for 70% of all first-year students who initially enrolled at 12 of the 14 campuses in the fall of 1996. Among the participants, nearly 42% were classified as first-generation, which were defined as neither parent having attended

college (either a two- or a four-year institution). According to Inman and Mayes (1999), “These firsts were truly the first in their immediate families to be exposed to the college experience” (p. 6).

Overall, a number of the findings by Inman and Mayes (1999) were consistent with other studies of first-generation college students. Demographically, the participants in this study were more likely than other community college students to be female, have families of their own, work slightly more hours, and have a smaller household income (Pascarella, et al., 2004; Terenzini, et al., 1996). In terms of their goals and motivation, the geographic location and cost of the institution was key. Compared to other community college students, these first-generation students indicated that attending a college close to home and one that offered night classes so they could continue to work was critical in their decision to attend their respective community college. In addition, compared to their community college peers, these students indicated a stronger interest in having certain courses available and placed greater emphasis on the college’s reputation for good teaching. Academically, the participants enrolled in and completed fewer credit hours by the end of their first year in college. Despite the difference in completed credit hours, the study did not yield any difference in their cumulative GPAs by the end of their first year. There were some differences, however, in terms of degree goals. Twice as many first-generation students reported that their goal was to complete the two-year degree and no more. However, the same percent (35.1%) indicated that they would indeed transfer to a four-year institution at the conclusion of their community college education.

These comparison studies, most of which deployed quantitative methods, help to identify and explain the characteristics, experiences, and educational conditions that enable

some first-generation students to thrive in college whereas others struggle. A closely connected but distinct body of literature has emerged to enable college and university officials to better understand the “in college” experience of first-generation students, focusing on transitioning into college and navigating this strange land once they arrive.

Cultural Adjustment, Self Efficacy, and Support Systems

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Anzaldúa stated that “Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (p. [i]). For many first-generation college students, transitioning into and persisting through college may indeed feel like they are straddling two or more worlds (London, 1989; Orbe, 2004; Williams, Karahalios, & Ferrari, 2013). For many first-generation students, their understanding of college, their family support system, and their relationships with their peers and professors vary widely compared to their peers whose parents attended college. Furthermore, there is no visual indicator that a student is or is not the first in his or her family to attend college. Therefore, unless such students are participants in a formalized support program (e.g., TRIO Student Support Services), first-generation students are largely unknown to one another (Orbe, 2004). Acknowledging these unique circumstances, multiple studies have been conducted to better understand how first-generation students handle the transition and adjustment to college socially, emotionally, and academically.

Despite overcoming the overwhelming odds against their entering college, first-generation students arrive on campus behind, not only in terms of their overall readiness and

resources (academically, financially, socially, or otherwise), but also in terms of their “cultural capital” (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Oldfield, 2007). Oldfield (2007) defined cultural capital in the college context as “the knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the education system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she [the student] can succeed easily” (p. 2). As a result of this deficiency, many first-generation students encounter this sense of being an “outsider” in isolation.

Cushman’s (2006, 2007) research on the cultural adjustment of first-generation students certainly affirms this notion of cultural capital deficiency. From 2005 to 2007, Cushman conducted a longitudinal study following 16 first-generation college students. The broad intent of the study was to capture the students’ experiences in their terms. In very blatant and direct language, these students addressed being academically underprepared, their worries about money, having less self-confidence, and the challenge of remaining true to themselves. Cushman’s action-research orientation was clear in her target readership. Cushman’s web site (www.firstinthefamily.org) and book, *First in the Family: Advice about College from First-Generation Students*, are not exclusively for college officials but are also for current and aspiring students who are, or will be, the first in their families to attend college.

Cushman was not the first to use a qualitative approach to understand the transition to college for first-generation college students. Terenzini et al. (1994) conducted focus group interviews with 132 diverse first-year students entering one of four different kinds of institutions of higher education: (1) a community college; (2) a liberal arts college; (3) an urban, commuter, comprehensive university; and (4) a large research university. Ultimately, the researchers attempted to identify the processes, mechanisms, and people that either

facilitate or impede the transitional process for students, and how this process varies, if at all, by student and institution type.

Many of the participants in this study, specifically those who were the first in their families to go to college, encountered significant academic, social, and cultural transitions. Not surprised by the academic rigor they encountered, several students reported they minimized their involvement in nonacademic activities until their studies were under control. While facilitating their academic transition, such a decision may have impeded their social and cultural adjustment. High school friendships could also either facilitate the transition to college or serve as an impediment. In either case, this study clearly indicated that relationships on campus, particularly those with faculty, were critical in helping first-generation students successfully transition into college. As faculty members extended the time and energy to work with these students, many students reported an increase in their self-confidence and desire to continue to work hard. These acts of caring and validation helped to build a new attitude, or sense of self, for the students. As Terenzini et al. (1994) assert, “Some students spoke of instructors who, through the time, energy, and interest they invested in their students, had instilled a sense of obligation to succeed. These students felt they could not let these instructors down” (p. 67). This study affirmed that many of the attributes characteristics of a “successful” transition to college may be influenced by college officials. By knowing their students, building orientation programs for both students and parents, validating students as learners, and connecting them with people who genuinely care about their growth and development, colleges and universities can have a profound impact on the transitional process for first-generation students.

External to the college environment is the support that is (or is not) extended to first-generation students at home. The vast majority of literature posits that the first-generation students who succeed in college do so despite their family background (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Westbrook & Scott, 2012). It is not uncommon for some first-generation students to experience resentment upon returning home during breaks (Davis, 2010; Orbe, 2004; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004). Whether it is a parent who does not attribute much value to a college education or a sibling who views the first-generation student as receiving an opportunity that was denied to her or him, it is not hard to envision how many first-generation college students feel and experience various levels of stress as they try to lead these seemingly disparate lives (Phinney & Haas, 2003). In home settings where students do not feel supported, studies have documented that first-generation students will make a concerted effort to actually minimize how much they mention or talk about their college experiences out of fear that they may further distance themselves from their family members (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004).

On the other end of the continuum are the families that invest their life savings and make other sacrifices to enable their children to experience and realize the benefits of a college education. For these families, the success of their children in college is a proxy that parents use to measure themselves (Gofen, 2009). From purchasing books to working with high school teachers to ensuring the students are well fed during breaks, some families, through their behavior, make it very clear how supportive they are of their first-generation college students (Cushman, 2007; Gofen, 2009; Wang, 2012). Students from supportive families also remark how their parents are curious about their experiences and readily “show them off” during social gatherings with friends and family (Cushman, 2007; Orbe, 2004). It

is clear that many families view a college education for their children as the conduit to a better life, communicating a “do better than I/we did” message (Byrd & MacDonald; 2005; Gofen, 2009). Serving as family “delegates,” students from these contexts report how their families have a very strong sense of pride in their achievements and, in turn, feel a degree of pressure to not let their families down (Davis, 2010; Hand & Payne, 2008; London, 1989).

Whether or not a student comes from a supportive family, the pressure to do well in college is also linked to his or her overall sense of readiness as well as his or her belief that he or she indeed possesses the skills, intelligence, and abilities to do college-level work (i.e., self-efficacy). Bryd and MacDonald (2005) asserted that college readiness for first-generation students is not only simply defined by the acquisition and demonstration of certain academic skills (as measured, for example, on a standardized test), but also by skills acquired through life experience. Nevertheless, previous studies have clearly indicated that the more rigorous the coursework completed in high school, the better prepared first-generation students are for college-level work (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). In addition to a foundation in mathematics, science, writing, and reading (an area where participants reported feeling particularly underprepared), the authors identified skills such as time management, goal focus, and the ability to self-advocate as equally important in terms of college readiness.

College officials should not treat the notion of college readiness lightly, particularly as it relates to first-generation students. In fact, a recent study revealed that, despite a high level of self-efficacy, first-generation students still performed lower than their peers (Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007). The authors suggested that a higher level of self-efficacy may

prompt some students to simply work harder when faced with academic obstacles, but the finding was not supported empirically in their study.

As a result of being the first in their families to attend college, first-generation students are less likely to turn to family members for support regarding their college experience (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009). As a result, colleges and universities bear the responsibility of cultivating a campus environment and developing resources and programs that are responsive to the needs of first-generation college students.

Guided by the goal of orienting, retaining, and ultimately graduating first-generation students, there are a number of pragmatic steps college officials can take to support this population. In *The First Generation Student Experience* (2010), Davis identified several needs presented by first-generation students for which college and university officials can take measurable action. From increased remediation to providing instruction on how to study to formally organizing study groups and providing specialized academic advising, Davis provided several pragmatic recommendations to support students' academic adjustment to college. Other studies affirm the impact of using small groups to support first-generation students (Folger, Carter, & Chase, 2004). Additionally, through preregistration orientation and by connecting first-generation students with mentors, role models, and support services, college officials can begin to help these students develop a healthy college-student identity and minimize notions of what Davis defined as the "imposter phenomenon," a self-esteem challenge leading some first-generation students to believe they are neither smart enough nor worthy of the opportunity to attend college that has been afforded to them (p. 48). For some students, this phenomenon is so strong they believe, quite literally, they were admitted accidentally to the college they were attending. In other cases, some first-generation students

still believed, whether they were admitted accidentally or not, they took the opportunity from a more deserving person. Essentially, they did not view themselves as worthy of a college education. As was previously addressed, in the event a student is from a non-supportive or disengaged family, it is not hard to imagine how these feelings may be exacerbated in such a context.

Extending support to first-generation students is not exclusively in the hands of the college and university administrators and support personnel. As previously noted, faculty members play a key role in the success of these students. Understanding how colleges and universities approach the teaching and learning process is a cultural phenomenon with which many first-generation students are unfamiliar (Davis, 2010; McMurray & Sorrells, 2009; Oldfield, 2007). For example, to many first-generation students, the notion of disagreeing with your instructor or engaging in open debate with peers is perceived as inappropriate and confrontational (Davis, 2010; Oldfield, 2007). Furthermore, faculty members who openly set ground rules for class discussion, provide syllabi with clear expectations and assignment details, and outline instructions on where to reach them for support are key (including suggestions on how to prepare for a meeting during office hours) (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Davis, 2010; McMurray & Sorrells, 2009; Wang, 2012).

If institutions coupled these efforts with deliberate initiatives to integrate first-generation students more fully into campus life, through students groups and residence life programs (see Lenning & Ebberts, 1999; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Zhao & Kuh, 2004, for more on the impact of living/learning communities), college and university officials may experience gains in the retention, persistence, and degree completion of first-generation college students.

Achievements of First-Generation Students

As illustrated clearly in the literature, first-generation college students face numerous obstacles both before and throughout their college experience. They are less likely to enroll in college and more likely to depart before graduation. They work more hours during college, take fewer credits, earn lower grades, and typically take longer to graduate (if they graduate at all). Some of these students are supported by their families while others are rejected, and they often feel torn between their lives at college and their lives at home. Despite these challenges, there are, indeed, first-generation students who enroll, persist, and graduate from both two-year and four-year institutions. Many of these first-generation college graduates contribute in significant ways to their respective communities, including the current First Lady, Michelle Obama.

In conclusion, it may be appropriate to highlight two studies that focus exclusively on the accomplishments of first-generation college students. Rodriguez (2001) conducted a qualitative study focusing on first-generation college graduates who found themselves (some intentionally, others by happenstance) leading their lives as activists. Published in *Giants Among Us: First-Generation College Graduates Who Lead Activist Lives* (2002), Rodriguez identified several academic-success-promoting influences, including *special status*, which she described as the singling out of a child who receives support and encouragement from a particular family member, bolstering her or his confidence and unveiling to her or him possibilities outside her or his uneducated family. Another concept, *positive naming*, describes how individuals within a first-generation student's life positively name and forecast what the future holds for these special young people. This positive affirmation encouraged the participants to overcome many personal, emotional, and academic challenges. Lastly,

ascending cross-class identification describes the process by which a member of the lower class experiences what life is like for the upper class and develops an understanding of how one might attain such status. What is most compelling about the participants is their interest in helping others to realize their potential. The powerful mentoring relationships they received from others instilled in them the notion of “paying it forward” to others. This is an interesting concept that could be more fully developed on college campuses by enlisting at mentors staff members, academic advisers, and faculty members who were also first-generation college students.

Additional evidence on the role and import of mentoring was revealed in Eaton’s (2006) qualitative study of first-generation college graduates who became members of the professoriate at U.S. colleges or universities. Eaton identified intrinsic and relational factors that led to their academic and professional success. While passion, eagerness to advance, endurance, persistence, and the value of education intrinsically motivated the participants, they also mentioned key individuals who helped them grow and develop as scholars, helping them traverse the undergraduate and graduate education landscape. As college and university officials develop programs and services for this unique population, both of these studies clearly illustrate the tremendous impact mentors can have on the persistence and ultimate graduation of first-generation college students.

Conclusion

As colleges and universities continue to recruit and enroll first-generation college students, there is a clear message that unique interventions, programs, and services are needed to ensure students persist and graduate. While the literature on first-generation

college students is abundant, there are still opportunities for further study. By focusing on the experiences of male first-generation college students attending a highly selective, residential liberal arts college, the current researcher hopes to address one of those gaps. While these types of colleges may have been included in large samples, no study focused exclusively on such a population of students attending this particular type of institution.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The challenges and obstacles facing first-generation college students are numerous and complex: choosing to attend college; traversing the complex world of college applications and financial aid; transitioning into an academic world with which they have little understanding and familial resources from which to draw; and, once there, quickly figuring out what it takes to be successful. Throughout this process, first-generation college students are faced with numerous questions, including: Who am I? Should I be here? What shall I study? Who will I become? Will I succeed? What will I do after graduation? Will I be okay?

In light of these challenges, the purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of the male first-generation college students who have persisted to their final year at Kenmont College. Therefore, the following research questions framed the study:

1. How did a small cohort of first-generation college students come to know, choose to attend, and ultimately experience the academic and campus environments at a highly selective, residential liberal arts college?
2. What features of the case participants' pre-college environments influenced their readiness for and decision to attend this type of institution?
3. How do the case participants characterize their curricular and co-curricular experiences at this type of institution?

4. Taken together, what features of the case participants' pre-college and residential liberal arts environments do they attribute to their successful persistence to graduation?

The remainder of this chapter addresses the study design, site selection, participant selection, data collection methods, ethical considerations, issues of goodness and trustworthiness, limitations and delimitations of the study, and the positionality of the researcher.

Study Design

Research endeavors begin with one or more questions, and those questions serve as the foundation from which other decisions are made, including the design of the study. Based on the aforementioned questions, an interpretive, case study methodology was adopted as it was best suited to capture the important, nuanced elements of the case participants' experiences as well as the institutional environment in which these experiences took place. As Merriam (2002) described, "The case study is an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution, or community" (p. 8). By "intensive description," Merriam referenced the depth of focus, which is characterized by the researcher paying careful attention to the ordinary features and particularities of any case: "By concentrating upon a single phenomenon or entity (the case), this approach seeks to describe the phenomenon in depth" (p. 8).

As a collective case study, the unit of analysis is each participant, also considered an individual "case." This procedure was intentional, by design, and informed by the research questions driving this study. Studying the experiences of a single, male first-generation college student would not provide the necessary depth to respond to the research questions,

and it would also run counter to this study's constructionist epistemology. As Crotty (1998) stated, "meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed" (pp. 8–9). Thus, even though the participants share elements of their individual identities in that they are men and first-generation college students, their realities are different, and the various ways in which they have made and continue to make meaning of their experiences would inform this study.

Theoretical Framework

The heart of this study is its aim to develop a better understanding of the college-going experiences of a select group of male first-generation college students who chose to attend Kenmont [pseudonym] College, a highly selective, residential liberal arts college. Social capital and human ecology theories provide exceptional lenses through which to interpret and make sense of their experiences. As the case participants choose to attend and ultimately make their way through college, they engage—and are engaged by—the environments around them. Social capital theories enable researchers to understand how the participants draw upon, compensate for, or acquire the necessary capital (e.g., knowledge, relationships, skills) to successfully persist through college. Human ecology theory helps researchers to understand how the environmental contexts, including the pre-college environments (e.g., home and school) and the residential liberal arts college environment, have impacted the participants' experiences as first-generation college students.

Social Capital Theory

As a concept, social capital theory has become increasingly visible in various disciplines, particularly in the field of sociology. However, the release of *Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America* by Putnam (1995) resulted in an explosion in the number of articles that were published on the topic (Halpern, 2005). This dramatic wave of literature has brought about more attention to not only social capital theory itself, but also to the important studies by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), Halpern (2005), and Putnam (1995, 2000). While these researchers may not agree entirely with one another's claims and assertions about social capital theory, each of their contributions to the literature is helpful in seeking to understand how social capital can help us better understand the experiences of first-generation college students.

French scholar Bourdieu has been frequently cited as one of the first authors to garner attention regarding social capital theory. Bourdieu (1986) introduced the ideal of social capital in the seminal piece, *The Forms of Capital*, and offered the following definition:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to members in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing and collectivity-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit in various senses of the word. (p. 51)

Bourdieu continued that one's volume of social capital is impacted by what he coined as the *multiplier effect*. That is, an individual's social capital is influenced not only by the size of one's network but also by that individual's ability to mobilize and leverage the social capital possessed by those to whom one is connected. Current technologies, such as LinkedIn, illustrate this concept. Users of this online networking community not only have an ability to

virtually connect with colleagues and professionals whom they know and with whom they have worked but also, by “connecting” with these individuals, can see the vast network of connections held by those in their network. Thus, it is not just who you know, but also who your connections know.

Bourdieu (1986) concluded that one’s network of connections is not simply a given. Rather, one’s network is produced and reproduced through continuous social acts—requiring considerable time and energy (labor)—with the hope of establishing deep, lasting relationships. This cultivation process is often overlooked and undervalued. Nevertheless, as Bourdieu asserted, “They [potential connections] are sought after for their social capital and, because they are well known, or worthy of being known (‘I know him well’); they do not need to ‘make the acquaintance’ of all their ‘acquaintances’” (p. 52). Thus, one’s network does not simply exist; it is developed and cultivated over time.

In his frequently cited publication, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital,” Coleman (1988) outlined three different forms of social capital: obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms. Coleman also addressed what he referred to as *closure* with respect to social structures.

Each of these forms is intended to make certain goals and/or objectives achievable that would otherwise not be possible. The first form, obligations and expectations, is principally based upon the notion that people within a given social structure will do things for one another (referred as the norm of reciprocity), but such behavior is contingent upon a high degree of trustworthiness. Thus, within any social structure (a neighborhood, a company, a legislature, or a residence hall), the extent to which obligations are extended and

repaid (or not repaid) has a direct impact on the actor's expectations and the presence (or absence) of social capital (Coleman, 1988).

As is generally understood, knowledge and information can be very powerful. Coleman (1988) certainly agreed, and he posited information channels as an important form of social capital. Coleman asserted that individuals may utilize their social relations—which are maintained for other reasons—to acquire information for a range of self-interested purposes. From fashion to current events to emerging trends in an academic discipline, individuals can pursue these knowledge arenas independently, or depending on their connections (e.g., friends, spouse/partner, or colleagues), they can inquire and learn from the knowledge of those within their networks.

Coleman's (1988) final type of social capital is in reference to norms and sanctions. Within any social structure, norms both facilitate and constrain certain kinds of behaviors and actions. Whether it is a norm that promotes high academic achievement in school or instills a sense of selflessness among its community members, norms can serve as palpable social capital as individuals and communities strive to accomplish ends that would be difficult to realize without such social capital. However, the extent to which closure (evidenced by the presence of relationships among community actors) is present within a social structure will impact the development of shared norms and their enforcement by the collectivity. If a social structure is more open, allowing actors to come and go without establishing relationships with the group, it becomes difficult to enforce sanctions as a group. In such a setting, norms and sanctions erode, as does the presence of any social capital.

Bowling Alone (Putnam, 2000) brought the ideas of social capital into mainstream culture more than any other publication. Focusing the discussion on the decay of civic

engagement in the United States, Putnam used the demise of bowling clubs as a metaphor to describe the decline in voting, volunteerism, and people's overall engagement with their communities. As a result of this disengagement, as a country, we are beginning to "bowl alone," which, Putnam claimed, is signaling the erosion of our nation's social capital.

Similar to the definitions offered by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988), Putnam (2000) asserted that, "social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19). Acknowledging that social capital can take various forms, Putnam paid particular attention to two different kinds of capital: bonding capital and bridging capital (p. 22).

As an inwardly focused form of social capital, Putnam (2000) described bonding capital as "undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity" within inclusive groups and communities, such as fraternal organizations, ethnic groups, and families (p. 22). In many ways, bonding capital serves as a unifying force within groups. Equally important and valuable is Putnam's idea of bridging social capital. Counter to the inward focus of bonding social capital, bridging social capital brings individuals together across a variety of networks (e.g., age, gender, geography, profession, religion). Using again the art of metaphor, Putnam asserted that "Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40" (p. 23).

Halpern's (2005) *Social Capital* is significant because it analyzes, synthesizes, and extends much of the existing literature on social capital theory, including the contributions of Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), Putnam (1995, 2000) and others. Above all, Halpern endeavored to reconcile some of the issues on which these scholars have disagreed, mainly the argument concerning whether social capital is most applicable at the micro level (i.e., at

the individual level), the meso level (i.e., the community level) or the macro level (i.e., at the nation state or country level). Halpern constructed a very strong case that social capital is applicable at all of these levels, but the network, norms, and sanctions (the central features of social capital from his perspective, mirroring the assertions of Coleman) change depending on the level. Unique to Halpern, social capital is a multi-level concept.

While perhaps more open and broad, Halpern's (2000) definition of social capital is very similar to those addressed earlier. Interestingly, Halpern used the term "social fabric" interchangeably with "social capital." To Halpern, the notion of fabric captures the interwoven complexity of our various networks—and the customs and bonds that define them—within our homes, workplaces, and communities:

People are connected with one another through intermediate social structures—webs of association and shared understandings of how to behave. This social fabric greatly affects with whom, and how, we interact and co-operate. It is this everyday fabric of connection and tacit co-operation that the concept of social capital is intended to capture. (p. 3)

While it would be impossible to condense all the contributions of Halpern's *Social Capital* in the current study, it is important to note that Halpern affirmed Putnam's notions of bonding and bridging social capital as two functional sub-types of social capital. They are unique in their foci (inward versus outward), and each possesses its own empirical qualities.

With this brief summary as a reference, it is perhaps unsurprising that social capital theory has found its way beyond the academy and into the vernacular and practices of educators, government officials, and policy makers. As such, this theoretical framework may help higher education officials—faculty, staff, and administrators—better understand the social capital deficiencies many first-generation students have upon entry into college, and this understanding may shape these officials' behavior, the policies they create, and the

practices they bring to their work as advisers and mentors to this relatively invisible contingency of college students.

Human Ecology Theory

Ecological systems theory was introduced and championed by the late developmental psychologist, Bronfenbrenner (1917–2005). In *The Ecology of Human Development* (1979), Bronfenbrenner advanced his ecological systems theory, which is focused on the person-environment interactions that promote human development. The anchor of his theory is the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model, which captures the complex interactions between and among the developing person, the processes that prompt growth and development, the contexts where these processes take place, and the time when they occur (from immediate to over the life span). The remainder of this section provides an overview of the salient features of Bronfenbrenner’s PPCT model, drawing upon his testimony as well as that of other scholars who have applied this theory in their studies of college students.

Process

In the early 1970s, Bronfenbrenner (2005) coined the term *proximal processes*, which he described as the interactions between humans and the objects, people, and environments around them. Over time, these sustained interactions become increasingly complex and function as “the primary engines of development” (p. 6). By actively engaging in such processes, individuals grow in their capacity, motivation, knowledge, and ability to communicate with others, assess their surroundings, resolve complex problems, and generally function as more developed persons. While proximal processes are a central feature to Bronfenbrenner’s theory, such processes do not occur in a similar fashion for every

person, nor do they occur in a vacuum. As such, proximal processes are influenced by and directly linked to the developing person, the contexts where the processes take place, and the timing when they occur.

Person

The *person* element of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory acknowledges that an individual's cognitive abilities, temperament, and other characteristics will influence her or his development. As Bronfenbrenner (2005) asserted:

Most developmental research treats the cognitive and socioemotional characteristics of the person solely as dependent variables: that is, as measures of outcome. Much less often are such characteristics examined as precursors of later development, and even more rarely as moderating factors affecting the power or direction of developmental processes. In the later respects, not all personal attributes have equal potential for influencing subsequent development; some are more likely to be more consequential than others. (p. 139)

However, as Bronfenbrenner suggested, some personal attributes, those he labeled *developmentally instigative characteristics*, have an impact on one's development. Renn and Arnold (2003) summarized Bronfenbrenner's four different types of developmentally instigative characteristics in their study focusing on how peer cultures influence student development. While lacking a specific name, the first type is best understood as the extent to which an individual acts to invite or inhibit particular interactions with and responses from the environment. As Renn and Arnold described, "Different students elicit particular responses from peers and faculty, administrators, and coaches" (p. 268).

The second developmentally instigative characteristic is referred to as *selective responsivity*, which pertains to how individuals react to and explore the environments around them. Renn and Arnold (2003) used student group involvement to illustrate this

characteristic: “Some students throw themselves into student organizations, while others prefer more solitary activities” (p. 269).

Structuring proclivities, the third developmentally instigative characteristic, relates to the extent to which individuals engage in and persist during increasingly complex activities (see previous commentary on proximal processes) and actively seek opportunities to reconceptualize and introduce new features into the environment. For example, “Some students consciously seek out intellectual, social, and work-related activities that require increasing levels of critical thinking, leadership, and problem solving” (Renn & Arnold, 2003, p. 269).

Directive beliefs, the fourth and final type of developmentally instigative characteristic, pertain to how individuals view and understand their agency within their given environments. For example, Renn and Arnold (2003) noted that high-achieving valedictorians believe that their accomplishments are a direct result of knowing what is expected of them to succeed academically and their ability to meet those expectations.

Context

The context domain of Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) PPCT model is comprised of four environmental systems: microsystem, macrosystem, exosystem, and mesosystem. While the descriptions below are directly from Bronfenbrenner (2005), the examples have been adapted to help situate this model for this study.

1. The *microsystem* involves the structures and processes taking place in an immediate setting containing the developing person (e.g., home, residence hall, classroom, internship, part-time job).
2. The *mesosystem* comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person (e.g., the

relations between home and college, college and part-time job). In other words, a mesosystem is a system of microsystems.

3. The *exosystem* encompasses the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not ordinarily contain the developing person, but in which events occur that influence processes within the immediate setting that does contain that person (e.g., modifications to Federal financial aid policies, a change in a parent's employment status, a reduction in the recruitment of college graduates by employers).
4. The *macrosystem* is defined as an overarching pattern of ideology and organization of the social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture. In other words, the macrosystem comprises the pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems characteristic of a given society or segment thereof. It may be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular culture of subculture. (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 80)

While presented here as distinct systems, it is important to note that these four systems are inherently complex and inextricably connected. “What happens in one affects the others as well as the developing individual” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 165). As a developmental context, Evans et al. asserted that nested systems “provide stressors and buffers, creating opportunities for increasingly complex activities in which the student can participate, while supporting and rewarding sustained commitment to those increasingly complex endeavors” (p. 165). Figure 1 illustrates how these different systems might be structured in higher education (Renn & Arnold, 2003).

Time

Time is the final dimension of this ecological systems theory, which is of critical importance in using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model to understand human development. As stated previously, for proximal processes to serve as the “engines of human development,” they must be enduring and become increasingly complex over *time*. To capture the

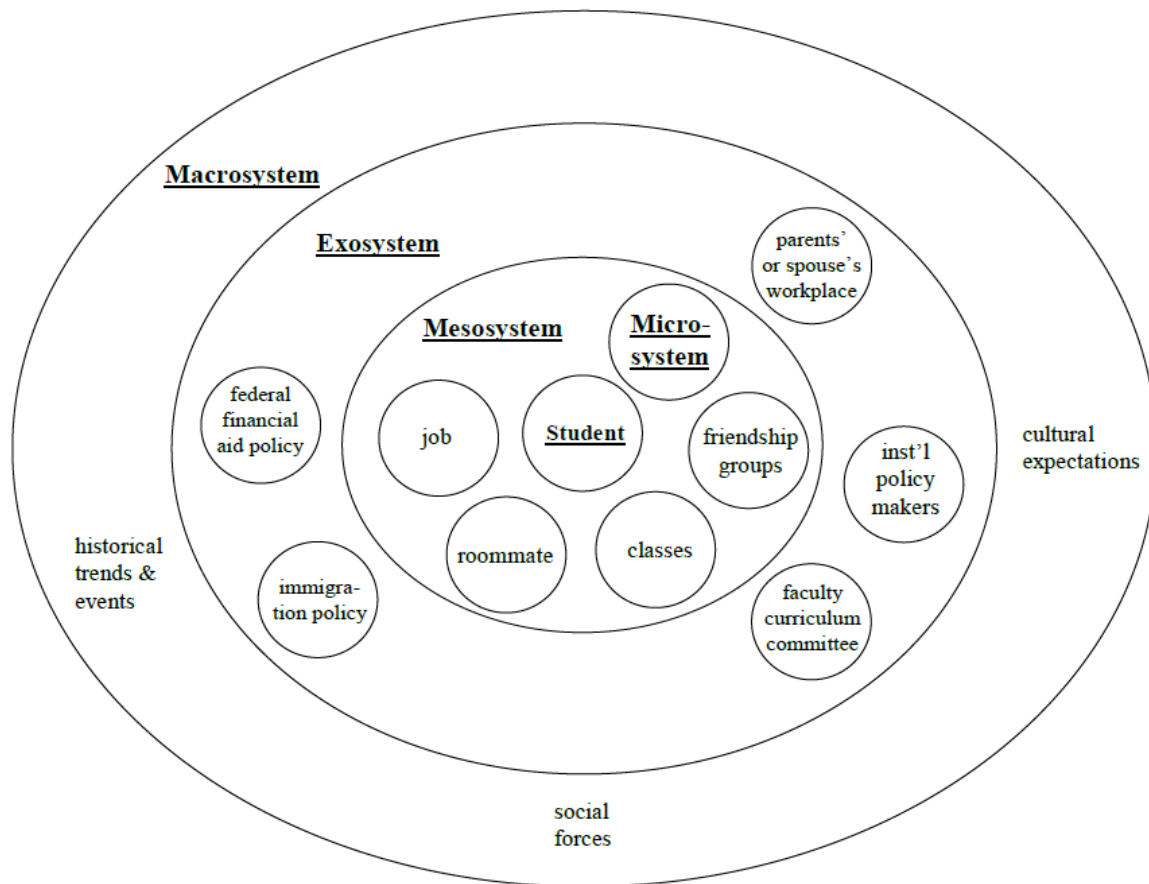


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's model as applied to a postsecondary environment (Renn & Arnold, 2003)

complexity of time as it applies to human development, Bronfenbrenner described three different levels: microtime, mesotime, and macrotime. As Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) explained:

Microtime refers to continuity versus discontinuity within ongoing episodes of proximal process. Mesotime is the periodicity of these episodes across broader time intervals, such as days and weeks. Finally, Macrotime focuses on the changing expectations and events in the larger society, both within and across generations, as they affect, and are affected by, processes and outcomes of human development over the life course. (p. 995)

In their research on peer cultures, Renn and Arnold (2003) cited multiple examples of how the timing of certain events and decisions can impact a student's development. They identified the timing of changing family circumstance (e.g., the birth of a sibling) as well as the timing of college decisions (e.g., choosing when to attend college, and which college to attend) as examples of how time can play a role in a college student's development.

Together, Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model (1979) along with the social capital theories advanced by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), Halpern (2005), and Putnam (1995, 2000) served as the theoretical scaffolding for this study. As distinct yet complementary theories, together they served as the lenses through which to understand how the case participants successfully navigated and traversed their varied environments and thus persisted to graduation.

Site Selection

Kenmont College was selected as the site for this study for three primary reasons. First, as a residential liberal arts college, Kenmont offers a site that has received little attention in the broader literature on first-generation college students. Given first-generation students' propensity to enroll in community colleges and regional public universities, and to major in pre-professional disciplines (e.g., education, business, criminal justice), the bulk of existing literature has followed these trends.

Second, Kenmont College is considered a highly selective institution. The college denies admission to more applicants than it accepts, and the majority of admitted students are in the top quartile of their graduating high school class and report high achievement scores on the SAT and/or the ACT. Even though first-generation college students matriculate into

all types of higher education institutions, from community colleges to Ivy League institutions, little attention has been paid to the experiences of these students at the most selective colleges and universities.

Finally, Kenmont College was selected for what it does *not* offer—a formal support program explicitly for first-generation college students. While certainly not ubiquitous, several of the qualitative studies cited in Chapter 2 garnered their participants from a college’s or university’s TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) program. While informative in many ways, these studies do not capture the unique challenges faced by first-generation college students who do not have access to a formal support program such as SSS.

Participant Selection

A “criterion-based selection” technique was used to identify potential participants for this study (Merriam, 1998, p. 51). As a case study, it was critical that each prospective participant, or case, met certain criteria. Specifically, the participants needed to be male, meet the definition of a first-generation college student defined by this study, and be entering their fourth year of study at Kenmont College. Fourth-year students were of particular interest due to: (a) their extended time at Kenmont; (b) their nearing graduation from college; and (c) the fact that nearly 25% of the first-generation men in this class have since departed the college.

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), contact was made with the Office of Institutional Research at Kenmont College to obtain a demographic breakdown of and contact information for the male first-generation college students who were members of the Class of 2013 (see Appendix A). This request yielded a total of 28 possible participants,

all of whom received an email invitation to participate, which outlined the purpose of the study as well as the expectations for participants. For those who did not reply to the email invitation, a phone call was made to each prospective participant to solicit his interest in joining the study. Copies of the invitation to participate, follow-up phone script, and informed consent documents for those who agreed to participate are provided in Appendix B. As an incentive to participate in the study, each participant received a \$10 gift card to the college's bookstore after the questionnaire and interview were completed. In the end, extensive, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight male first-generation college students. The survey questionnaire, interview guide, dates, and duration of the interviews are exhibited in Appendix C.

Data Collection Methods

Case study research is distinct from other methodologies in its depth of focus on a particular phenomenon, in a particular place, at a particular time. As Creswell (2013) described:

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case themes. (p. 97)

While collecting different types of data is common across other forms of qualitative inquiry (e.g., ethnography and phenomenology), it is a key and critical feature of case study research. The rich detail that is frequently characteristic of exemplar case studies would be difficult to achieve without collecting and consulting an array of information sources. For this study, data were gathered from several sources, including: in-depth interviews with the case

participants and members of the administration and faculty; a brief questionnaire completed by the case participants; historical enrollment, retention, and graduation data for first-generation and non-first-generation students; and admission documents and educational records of the case participants. The remainder of this section provides a brief description of each data source.

Questionnaire

All student participants completed a web-based demographic questionnaire (see Appendix C-1). The questionnaire was comprised of selected questions from three different surveys administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA): the CIRP Freshman Survey, Your First College Year, and the College Senior Survey. The questionnaire provided important background information from each participant.

Interviews

To develop a deep and rich understanding of each student's experiences, the researcher asked each participant to participate in a semi-structured, in-depth interview (Appendix C-2). In light of the questions driving this study, in-depth interviews were the best-suited method for learning from the participants by providing them an opportunity to share their stories. "At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and were transcribed verbatim. Interview transcriptions were distributed to all case participants to

provide them an opportunity to review, clarify, expound upon, and/or redact any comments they made during their interviews.

As a necessary supplement to the data gathered from the student participants, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with four members of the college's administration and faculty (see Appendix C-3). To best situate the implications of this study, having a better understanding of how specific stakeholders of Kenmont College perceive the challenges of male first-generation college students was necessary, and interviews with the Dean of Students and three members of the faculty provided that context. All of these individuals were male and also first-generation college students.

Enrollment, retention, and graduation data

To supplement and situate the experiences captured from the case participants, historical enrollment, retention, and graduation data were gathered with assistance from the Kenmont College Office of Institutional Research. The enrollment data illuminated the percentage of first-generation college students in the entering classes. First-year to second-year and second-year to third-year retention statistics revealed the year-to-year progression differences comparing students by generational status (i.e., first-generation or non-first-generation) and sex (i.e., male or female). Lastly, graduation-rate data were compiled and disaggregated to provide comparisons by generational status and sex. As a collective case study, it is important to remember the experiences of the case participants occurred at a particular place at a particular time. Understanding the historical context through the use of descriptive statistics provides the level of detail requisite of case study research.

Admission documents and educational records

In piecing together the journey that led the case participants to and through Kenmont College, important details were captured by analyzing what each participant presented the college as an admission applicant as well as his academic performance over the past six semesters. Therefore, a copy of each participant's admission file was obtained from the Admission Office along with copies of his undergraduate transcript(s) from the Registrar's Office. All admission files contained a standard admission application, high school transcripts, and the participant's admission essay.

Data Analysis

In *The Art of Case Study Research*, Stake (1995) asserted, "There is no particular moment when data analysis begins. Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations" (p. 71). Implicit in this commentary is the notion that data analysis commences the moment data are collected and continues until the study is complete. Analysis informs impressions, and those impressions inform what additional data are gathered. Many forms of qualitative inquiry, including case study research, use an iterative, cyclical process when gathering, organizing, and interpreting data (Merriam, 2002, p. 8). As a result, the data collection and data analysis processes inform one another, helping to reveal emerging themes. Although the following commentary is presented in a linear fashion, it is important to note that Stake's and Merriam's ideals informed and were reflected in the strategies used to organize and analyze the volume of data collected through this study.

Organizing

As mentioned in the previous section, all case participant interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and then transcribed verbatim by an independent professional. The researcher reviewed each transcription, comparing it to the original digital recording to check for completeness and accuracy. Interview transcripts were uploaded to NVivo, a qualitative data management software application, for review and analysis along with the documents collected as part of the study (i.e., admission applications, essays, high school transcripts, and college transcripts).

The data collected through the online questionnaire were analyzed using Microsoft Excel, a standard spreadsheet software application. Both the raw data from the questionnaire as well as the individual responses from the case participants were added to the repository of data in NVivo. By centralizing and situating the data within this virtual warehouse, the researcher was better positioned to code the different types of data, identify themes and categories, and draw comparisons and linkages across the cases.

Analyzing

As shared at the outset of this section, the data collection and data analysis processes occurred simultaneously, one informing the other. As the data collection process came to a close, the researcher found it beneficial to review the wholeness of the data he had collected. As Creswell (2009) suggested, “A first step is to obtain a *general* sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning” (p. 185). Grasping the entirety of what was gathered, while at times befuddling, was a helpful and reflective exercise for the researcher. It not only

helped with the drafting of the individual case summaries but also informed the coding process.

To begin to distill the most salient themes from the data gathered, the researcher utilized a two-stage coding technique to identify distinct and shared themes from each of the case participants. *Open coding*, the first stage, involved the identification of initial themes from the data. As Esterberg (2002) described, open coding is the time, “you [the researcher] work intensively with your data, line by line, identifying themes and categories that seem of interest” (p. 158). As such, codes are not identified in advance and then applied to the data. Rather, open coding is a time for the researcher to allow the data to speak for itself, allowing initial themes to emerge. The second stage, *focused coding* (also referred to as *axial coding*), is the process of grouping and drawing relationships among the many themes generated during open coding and to the theoretical underpinnings of the study (Creswell, 2009; Esterberg, 2002).

Case summaries

Following a thorough review of the interview transcripts, documents, and questionnaire responses, the researcher drafted a detailed summary on each case participant to capture and present the ordinary and distinct features of his individual experiences. These summaries, presented in Chapter 4, provide the critical context, detailed background, and historical information for each case participant.

Memoing

Memoing is an effective strategy for researchers to document their impressions, emerging ideas, and reactions to the data throughout a study. Esterberg (2002) encouraged

researchers to think of memos as “letters or notes to yourself to help you understand your data” (p. 164). Therefore, memos were drafted after each interview and throughout the data collection and analysis processes. As a key element to making sense of the data, all memos were uploaded to NVivo for coding and analysis.

Ethical Issues

The ability to execute a meaningful qualitative study is informed by the researcher’s commitment to ethical procedures and guidelines as well as his or her ability to establish trust with the participants. It is important to ensure the latter is partially determined by the former. Several steps were taken to encourage full participation from the participants and to ensure their rights as participants were fully understood.

All participants, who were given pseudonyms at the outset of the study, were presented with an informed consent document prior to their participation in any element of the study. The case participants were presented with an electronic informed consent form prior to their completion to the on-line questionnaire and an additional informed consent form prior to the in-depth interview. The faculty and administrators who participated in this study were also presented with an informed consent form prior to each interview. All participants received a copy of the informed consent document they signed, and all signed copies were stored in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office.

All data gathered as part of this study were stored or kept in a secure location. All electronic files were stored on a password-protected laptop accessible only by the principal investigator. All physical artifacts (i.e., admission files, transcripts) were stored in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office. The original online questionnaire data were stored in a

secure, web-based database. After they were exported for analysis in Microsoft Excel, the files were stored on a password-protected laptop.

The final ethical measure included the use of member checks. Stake (1995) defined member checking as the process whereby “the actor is requested to examine rough drafts of writing where the actions or words of the actor are featured” (p. 115). This technique provides the case participants an opportunity to provide feedback to the researcher directly, clarify any misperceptions of what was presented, and even suggest the use of alternative phrasing or language (Stake). This is not only an ethical strategy to ensure the participants’ experiences were presented fairly and accurately, but is also a method to ensure the study is both valid and trustworthy.

Issues of Goodness

The criteria used to judge the goodness of a quantitative study are applied oftentimes inadvertently to judge the goodness of a qualitative study. By doing so, one may overlook the distinct differences and purposes of quantitative and qualitative studies. For this study, several measures were taken to ensure the study was valid, trustworthy, and dependable.

First, as previously mentioned, the use of member checks provided the participants an opportunity to review their interview transcripts during which time they were invited to elaborate on their comments, redact statements, and respond to any additional follow-up questions the researcher might have posed. Their involvement in the review and revision of their contributions to the study improved the overall quality of the study.

Second, the use of multiple data sources not only enhanced the rigor of the study, but also provided multiple points for triangulation to occur. As Creswell (2013) described, “this

process [triangulation] involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (p. 251). The robust data gathered from each case participant’s interview transcripts, admission essays, academic transcripts, and questionnaire responses provided deep, rich information from which to identify individual and shared themes across the cases.

Third, two colleagues were recruited to serve as peer reviewers to “keep the researcher honest” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Both individuals were practitioners in higher education with advanced degrees who were familiar with some of the challenges faced by first-generation college students. They lived up to Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) notions of a peer reviewer by providing good feedback, asking tough questions, and playing the role of devil’s advocate. This helped to enhance the quality of this study.

Finally, an audit trail was created and maintained to document the study’s data collection methods, noting specifically when data were obtained and when and how they were analyzed. As Merriam (2002) described, “An audit trail in a qualitative study describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (p. 27).

Limitations

The primary limitations of this study were threefold. First, although the study was a collective case study of multiple participants (cases), it was conducted at a single institution. Therefore, analysis of institutional differences was not a possibility. Second, this study focused exclusively on the experiences of male students; thus the perspective of female first-generation college students was not considered. Finally, race was not a delimiting factor in

this study. As a result, due to the small participant pool, a deep analysis on the distinct experiences of Black, Hispanic, White, and/or Asian students was not possible.

Delimitations

This research was a collective case study. Therefore, the scope of this study focused on the experiences of fourth-year male first-generation college students attending a single, highly selective liberal arts college.

Positionality

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher functions as the primary instrument for data collection, data analysis, and the reporting of findings (Creswell, 2013). However, rather than try to strip away the subjectivity one brings to the study, it is important for the researcher to share his or her positionality with the readers. As Stake (1995) asserts, “Research is not helped by making it appear value free. It is better to give the reader a good look at the researcher” (p. 95). I have decided to take Stake’s advice, and share with you a bit about my story and interest in this study.

My interest in studying the experiences of first-generation college students was largely informed by who I am as a person, scholar, and practitioner. My elder sister and I were the first in our family to each earn a bachelor’s degree. After high school, I attended and graduated from the Des Moines Area Community College and then transferred to the University of Northern Iowa where I earned my bachelor’s degree. During my undergraduate years I developed a keen interest in higher education and student development, and decided to continue my studies at Miami University where I earned my master’s degree. For the past 13 years, I have worked in the field of career development and

student affairs at a range of institutions, from large land-grant institutions to small, residential liberal arts colleges.

When I began working at a small, private liberal arts college, I became perplexed by the number of first-generation college students who opted to attend this sort of school, a path very different from my own. Personally, attending a private college as an undergraduate never occurred to me, largely because I thought private schools were for two kinds of people: (a) wealthy students, and (b) smart students. I was not wealthy and did not consider myself to be smart. However, after working in such an environment as a mentor, counselor, and administrator, I became quite curious about the pathways that brought these students to this type of institution, and I wanted to learn more about the ways in which the residential liberal arts college environment fostered their development, informed their choices, and influenced their post-college plans. As a doctoral student, I was presented with the opportunity to study the phenomenon that resonates with who I am as a person and with the work I do as a professional.

CHAPTER 4. CASE STUDY SITE AND PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Overview

A distinct characteristic of case study research design is the emphasis placed on the depth of detail and richness of the data collected. As Merriam (1998) stated, “A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (p. 19). As this research was conducted to better understand the experiences of male first-generation college students, the participants’ backgrounds and the context in which this study took place warrant introduction.

This chapter contributes to the richness and depth of this study in the following ways. First, a detailed institutional overview will be provided to give some depth of understanding of the context in which the case participants lived, studied, and socialized for a period of four years. Second, first-generation student data for the Kenmont College Class of 2013 are provided, including aggregate data on the first-generation students who persisted and those who departed the institution. Finally, the chapter concludes with an introduction of the eight student case participants of this study as well as the four staff/faculty members who were also interviewed as part of this study. As a collective case study, each of the participants is viewed as a distinct case (Stake, 1995). While there are common themes to their experiences, which are explored and discussed in the next chapter, it is important to understand the backgrounds, circumstances, and choices that led these students to Kenmont College during the time this study took place.

Institutional Profile

Kenmont College is situated within a rural community in the Midwest with a population of approximately 10,000 residents. As an institution of higher learning, Kenmont College is considered a residential liberal arts college conferring a single degree—the Bachelor of Arts. In the fall of 2009, the year in which the participants of this study matriculated as first-year students, the College employed approximately 170 faculty members, 91% of whom held a doctorate or other terminal degree within their respective fields of study. With an enrollment between 1,500 and 2,000 students, the student-to-faculty ratio was nine to one.

Academic structure

Typical of many liberal arts colleges, the academic departments and majors of the College are divided into three divisions: humanities, social sciences, and sciences. From 2005 to 2009, the top five most popular majors were economics, biology, history, English, and political science. In addition to the 40 fields of study from which to choose, students are able to assemble a course schedule that is driven more by their intellectual interests than by structured, pre-determined degree requirements. In fact, beyond a common first-year course and the individual classes required for their major(s), students are able to pursue any range of courses responsive to their interests with the consent of their academic adviser, who is a member of the faculty.

In addition to the curricular offerings available on the Kenmont campus, many students pursue the opportunity to study abroad. By graduation, approximately 60% of the students in a respective class will have participated in an off-campus study program. While

some of these students participate in domestic study away programs, more than half of Kenmont students engage in an off-campus program that takes them to a country outside the United States.

Student body

Each year, more than 4,000 high school students submit admission applications in hopes they will secure one of the approximately 350–450 seats available at Kenmont College. The admission process is highly selective with an overall acceptance rate that ranges from 28% to 35%, depending on the given admission cycle. The admitted student profile reflects the selectivity the College enjoys, particularly when considering the academic achievement of the incoming class. For example, for those students who matriculated in the fall of 2009, the interquartile range for the ACT was 28 to 32 (out of a possible 36); for the critical reading and math sections of the SAT, it was 1220 to 1460 (out of a possible 1600). For this same cohort of new students, 65% graduated in the top 10% of their high school class, and 93% in the top quarter.

Demographically, the fall 2009 incoming student profile was quite diverse. Despite the college's rural, Midwestern location, only 10% of the students were residents of the state in which Kenmont is located. The remainder of the student population was from one of 41 other states or 28 countries beyond the United States. The fall 2009 incoming class was comprised of slightly more females than males (53% and 47%, respectively), which was consistent with previous years. While the population of the state in which Kenmont is located is fairly homogenous racially, 26% of the Class of 2013 was comprised of U.S.

students of color. Combined with the approximately 11% of the class who are international students, one can quickly envision the rich diversity found at Kenmont College.

Campus life

As previously stated, Kenmont is considered a residential college. All incoming first-year students are required to live on campus, and the vast majority (more than 85%) of students live on campus in one of 20 residence halls during all four years at Kenmont. The residence halls are situated on the periphery of campus but are within close proximity to the academic buildings, recreational facilities, and dining halls. Nothing on campus is more than a short walk or bike ride away.

In terms of student support, a broad array of programs helps students navigate the social and academic demands of college life. For more general health matters, in addition to the local hospital, students have access to an on-campus health center where they can also schedule time to meet with a psychologist or mental health counselor. The College also has a comprehensive career development program available to the students throughout their time at Kenmont. In terms of academic support, students can work with professional staff and upper-level students at the math lab, reading lab, or writing lab. Additionally, students have access to both individual and group tutoring services. Like many residential colleges, there is a sense that anything a student might need is within close physical proximity to where she or he studies, works, and sleeps.

Outside the classroom, students have a seemingly endless list of opportunities in which to be involved, including: student groups, intramural sports, and/or one of the 20 varsity sports that compete at the NCAA Division III level. When coupling these activities

with distinguished guest speakers, an active performing arts schedule, and an award-winning art gallery on campus, it seems clear that students' greatest challenge is not finding something to do; rather, it is choosing what to do.

First-Generation Student Profile

Before delving into the backgrounds, stories, and experiences of the eight participants, a review of additional data about the first-generation college students who matriculated in the fall of 2009 will help to further situate this study. While some of these data were presented in Chapter 1, they are revisited here with the specific intent of providing additional context into the first-generation college students who matriculated at Kenmont College as members of the Class of 2013.

Of the 378 students who entered Kenmont College in the fall of 2009, 72 (19%) of the students were considered first-generation college students. From a gender perspective, the first-generation college students consisted of 37 men and 35 women. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the first-generation college students by race and ethnicity. Additionally, as a point of comparison, the table also provides the racial/ethnic distributions for the entire fall 2009 entering cohort. As the data illustrate, students who identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, and Nonresident Alien were more representative of the distribution of first-generation college students than the broader fall 2009 entering cohort.

Regrettably, as indicated in Chapter 1, some of these first-generation college students were unable to persist to their final year of study. The data in Table 3 illustrate the changes in enrollment of both male and female first-generation college students as well as the rate at which these different groups persisted to the fourth year of college.

As Table 3 illustrates, nearly one-fourth of the male first-generation college students who entered Kenmont College in the fall of 2009 departed the college before reaching their

Table 2. First-generation college students by race and ethnicity, fall 2009

Race/Ethnicity	Enrollment and distribution of first-generation college students		Distribution of entire cohort
	Enrollment	%	%
Asian or Pacific Islander	8	11.1	6.3
Black, non-Hispanic	6	8.3	6.3
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	0	0.8
Hispanic	18	25.0	7.9
Multiracial	4	5.6	4.3
Nonresident Alien	10	13.8	12.7
White	22	30.6	53.4
Race/ethnicity unknown	4	5.6	8.3
Total	72	100	100

Table 3. Male and female first-generation college student enrollment and persistence rates

Sex	Enrollment		Persistence to fourth year (%)
	Fall 2009	Fall 2012	
Male	37	28	75.7%
Female	35	29	82.9%
Total	72	57	79.2%

final year of study. Furthermore, more than one in five of the first-generation college students who joined the campus community in fall 2009 were no longer enrolled at the College. Comparatively, of their non-first-generation peers, 89.2% had successfully persisted to their final year at Kenmont.

Taking a closer look at the male first-generation college students, Table 4 provides some insight regarding the students who persisted to their fourth year of study at Kenmont and those who did not. While there are some differences, the mean scores of those who

Table 4. Comparison of male first-generation college students by SAT and ACT scores

	<i>N</i>	SAT ^a		ACT ^b	
		Mean	High and Low	Mean	High and Low
Persisted	28	1271	910–1550	30.6	26–35
Departed	9	1130	810–1500	27.3	21–33

^a Based only on performance on the critical reading and math sections of the SAT (out of a possible 1600 points). ^b Based on a possible 36 that can be earned on the ACT.

departed campus were within the range of those who persisted. Furthermore, some of those students who have successfully persisted to the fourth year at Kenmont had lower test scores than some of those who withdrew or were dismissed.

In summary, the data are presented with the sole intent of providing sufficient context for this collective case study. The Class of 2013 was comprised of 378 students, 19% of whom were first-generation college students. Of those who were first-generation, slightly more than half (51.2%) were male. Of the 37 male first-generation college students, one fourth either withdrew or were dismissed from Kenmont College prior to their senior year. Profiles of the eight case participants will be presented in the next section. These individuals reflect nearly 30% (8/28) of the male first-generation college students who remained as members of the Class of 2013.

Case Participant Profiles

This study was based upon the experiences of eight male first-generation college students enrolled at Kenmont College. These men matriculated in the fall of 2009, and will be eligible to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree in the spring of 2013. As an initial introduction, Table 5 provides an overview of each participant's race, age at the time of the interview, number of siblings, respective place in the birth order, type of high school attended, and class rank (if available). As shown in Table 5, the participants represented three distinct racial groups, had different places in familial birth order, and attended different types of secondary schools, including public, private, and magnet high schools.

Table 5. Participant profiles by race, age, siblings, birth order, and high school background

Name ^a	Race	Age	Siblings	Birth order	Type of H.S. attended	H.S. class rank
Evan	White	22	2	middle	Public	28/110
James	White	22	2	youngest	Public	11/249
Juan	Hispanic	21	2	oldest	Magnet	18/1047
Kyle	Asian American	21	1	oldest	Public	top 10%
Logan	White	22	1	youngest	Private	N/A
Michael	White	21	1	oldest	Private	N/A
Noah	White	22	3	youngest	Public	16/384
Sean	White	21	2	youngest	Public	1/128

^a Pseudonym

In addition to the aforementioned aspects of the participants' backgrounds, Table 6 provides an overview of the students' fields of study, college GPA through six semesters, and their standardized test scores for the ACT and SAT (if available). The table also illustrates to

how many colleges the participants applied and what choice Kenmont College was in their college search (e.g., first choice, second choice). It is interesting to note the varying

Table 6. Participant profile by major, GPA, standardized test scores, college applications, and choice

Name ^a	Major(s)	College GPA	ACT score	SAT score	College applications	Choice of this college
Evan	Art and German	3.63	26	1160	1	1st
James	Physics	3.38	34	N/A	2	1st
Juan	Spanish	3.07	N/A	1280	1	1st
Kyle	History	3.24	30	1290	>11	3rd
Logan	History & Theatre/Dance	3.04	31	N/A	4	1st
Michael	Economics & Mathematics	2.88	33	1360	>11	2nd
Noah	English & Classics	3.81	34	1430	4	1st
Sean	Mathematics & Economics	3.63	35	1550	4	4th

^a Pseudonym

intellectual interests of the participants as evinced by their selection of 10 different academic majors offered at Kenmont.

While the data in Table 5 and Table 6 provide an efficient overview of certain attributes, they are insufficient in representing the diverse backgrounds and journeys these individuals traveled to and through Kenmont College. The remainder of this chapter provides an introduction to each of the participants. Each case participant profile is comprised of three parts. The first part provides an overview of the student's personal and family background. The second part addresses each student's high school experiences and how he executed his college search process. The third part summarizes each case

participant's academic, social, and co-curricular experiences in college and outlines his post-college plans, if known.

Evan

My mother always said if she is to inherit money from my grandmother, and we're all okay, then her dream would be to establish a scholarship for a working-class student to go to Kenmont College. That's my mom's dream. I'm sure one day that will be a reality and [it] will be the happiest day of my mom's life. (Evan, Interview)

Evan was born and reared in a small rural community in Iowa. Growing up with an older brother and younger sister, Evan and his siblings are the progeny of two factory workers. Now divorced, their mother works on an assembly line at a large window and door manufacturer in the local community, while their father, the son of German immigrants, works on the production floor of a large agricultural equipment manufacturer.

While Evan's father did not complete secondary school, his mother had aspirations to attend college after her high school graduation. Regrettably, this was a short-lived vision that was ultimately thwarted by her father, who asserted "*women don't go to college*" (Evan, Interview). His mom valued education, and dreamt of one day becoming a school teacher. Although her father did approve of her taking some courses in accounting, it was only as a precautionary move in the event her husband was, "*God forbid, unable to work*" (Evan, Interview). She moved to Omaha to enroll in an accounting certificate program. While in Omaha, she met Evan's father. Later in life, as an adult student, she eventually earned her associate of arts degree at the local community college.

Evan's father was born into an immigrant working-class family. Assisting his father, who was a mechanic, in the garage was perhaps his first exposure to the world of work. At

the age of 15, Evan's father applied for a job at Taco John's and indicated on his application that he was, in fact, 16 years old, the required age to work. No one questioned this at the time, but several of his co-workers found it quite curious that he only began driving himself to work after his 17th birthday.

After living in Nebraska for a short time, Evan's mother and father returned to central Iowa. Upon their arrival, Evan's father began pursuing employment at the local window and door manufacturer. A skilled tradesman in carpentry, Evan's father aspired to work in the wood shop of the plant. However, without a high school degree, his father was informed that he would not be considered for a position. Disheartened but motivated, Evan's father took the necessary steps and secured his General Educational Development (GED) diploma. After submitting a seemingly endless number of employment applications, he was eventually offered a job in the wood shop, a position he held for more than 20 years before getting laid off and securing the position he holds today.

Evan and his siblings all attended the local community high school, and all were actively supported to pursue a college degree by their parents. Evan graduated in the top quarter of his high school class, which was comprised of 110 students. Academically, Evan was a solid student. While AP and Honors courses were not offered at his high school, Evan took and performed well in the most rigorous courses his school offered. He graduated with an unweighted cumulative GPA of 3.56. To supplement his learning, Evan opted to take a few courses the local community college offered at his high school. These included college-level courses in government, psychology, composition, and speech. Additionally, the summer before his senior year of high school, Evan applied and was selected to participate in Stanford University's High School Summer College Program. As a summer school student

at Stanford, Evan completed two courses, one on bilingualism and the other on American foreign policy. However, his participation came at a price. With tuition, room, and board in excess of \$10,000, Evan's parents took out a loan so he could participate. Even though Evan's parents never attended college, they placed considerable value on their children's education.

In addition to his academic pursuits, Evan's high school career included an array of co-curricular and leadership activities. He was an active member of student government all four years, concluding his service as student body vice president his senior year. Beyond this, Evan was an active participant in large group speech and Future Problem Solving. He also served as part of the technical crew for the high school's theatre productions, serving as the technical director his junior and senior years.

Evan's interests in politics were, perhaps, sparked by his involvement in student government and reinforced when he interned for a local political candidate as a senior in high school. However, Evan's political experience grew substantively when he, his brother, and one of his brother's friends decided to take on the superintendent and school board for banning a book in a Literature to Film class offered at the high school without following the district's protocols. Evan and these two other students challenged the process and the school board's decision to ban the book. They organized a petition and signature campaign, and, when the superintendent did not take them seriously, they called upon the American Library Association and the local news media; and ultimately even the book's author became involved. Ultimately, at the encouragement of the school district's attorney, the school board reversed its decision, and the book was reintroduced into the curriculum. While certainly a point of pride for Evan and the other students involved, he felt it was simply the right thing to

do. Someone needed to stand up and speak out, and that ability Evan attributed to his mother:

The one thing that my mom always says is people from [our town] think that a good student does what he's told. Sits and obeys. And we were raised that you think for yourself and say what you think. I think my mom always thought growing up that she never stood up for herself enough so she always taught us to stand up. (Evan, Interview)

Evan's college search began earlier than that of some, solely due to the fact that his older brother—who was two years ahead of Evan in school—was the first to go to college. As his brother was researching schools and visiting different colleges, Evan was right there every step of the way. After attending an academic summer camp at Kenmont, Evan's brother decided that Kenmont was his dream school. He applied Early Decision, even though his parents had serious concerns about the cost of the college. Ultimately he was accepted and received a very generous financial aid package, which not only mitigated the parent's concerns but also opened up all kinds of opportunities for Evan and his younger sister. As Evan shared:

My parents were, like, "Hell no! That's more money than we make in a year! There's no way you're going to that school!" But my brother was, like, "Trust me. I did the research." Basically, if my brother didn't do those things, our entire path would have been completely different. (Evan, Interview)

Evan made several visits to Kenmont to visit his brother during his first two years on campus. He came on a separate campus visit and ultimately decided, like his brother, to apply Early Decision to Kenmont. Evan learned of his acceptance in December of his senior year. Thus, Evan applied to only one college as part of his search process. Had he been denied or waitlisted at Kenmont, he was prepared to submit applications to a host of other schools, including Reed College, Goucher College, Luther College, and Stanford University.

As a student at Kenmont, Evan has performed very well academically. In fact, he is the only participant in the study whose college GPA is higher than his high school GPA. After six semesters of college coursework, Evan has attained a 3.63 cumulative GPA (compared to his 3.56 GPA from high school). In his first semester of college, which was his weakest term, Evan earned a 3.21 GPA. Each subsequent term Evan has markedly improved, including earning a 4.0 in the fall of 2011 before studying abroad in Germany in the spring of 2012. Therefore, it is no surprise to find that Evan has found it to be somewhat easy to understand his professors' expectations, develop effective study habits, adjust to the academic demands of college, and manage his time effectively (Evan, Questionnaire). Furthermore, he has also found it to be somewhat easy to develop close relationships with students (Evan, Questionnaire). While Evan did not cite this as a reason for his easy adjustment to Kenmont, there is no question that his frequent visits to campus to stay with his brother helped facilitate his transition to college life. He may have even been a bit more acquainted with college life than even he thought. When asked about the day *he* moved into Kenmont, he confessed, *"I kind of felt like I built the moment up so much that moving in was not as exciting as I thought it was going to be"* (Evan, Interview).

Outside the classroom, Evan has been involved in a number of activities. He has worked for residence life as a member of their student staff. He also works for the admissions office as one of their senior interviewers, which is a highly selective leadership role on campus. During the summer following his sophomore year, he participated in an intense career discovery program at Harvard University for students who are exploring the field of architecture. When glancing over his résumé and his transcript, it becomes clear that

Evan has taken full advantage of the opportunities available to him at a residential liberal arts college like Kenmont.

As his senior year comes to a close, Evan hopes to work full-time. While he has not ruled out architecture, he is interested in bringing his creative talents to the private sector. Graduate school is also of interest to Evan, but not immediately following his graduation from Kenmont.

James

I've come to realize that people come from very different backgrounds. And that's helped me to appreciate my background a lot more. (James, Interview)

James and his two older siblings grew up on a farm in rural Illinois, northwest of Chicago. Both of his parents grew up in the area, and several of his extended family members still live in the region. As James shared, *"I had five grandparents within ten miles from my house, and not many kids have that experience"* (James, Interview). Both of James' parents graduated from high school, and his mother took approximately one semester of coursework at a community college. The daughter of an IBM sales representative, she works for the county government as a computer programmer. The son of a butcher, James' father manages the family farm, does seasonal carpentry work, and plows snow in the winter.

Even though James is a first-generation college student, he is not the first in his family to pursue a college degree. James' sister, his eldest sibling, earned a bachelor's degree in accounting at Northern Illinois University (NIU). Unlike James, she did not reside on her university's campus; she commuted since NIU was within a reasonable distance from their home. After graduating, she worked for a medical device manufacturing company before deciding to go pursue a graduate degree at the Garrett-Evangelical Theological

Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. She is now married and has two children, one of whom is James' godson.

James' brother had a different educational trajectory. After being expelled from high school for a drug-related incident his sophomore year, James' brother completed his high school degree at an alternative school while continuing to work at a nearby nursery. Having grown up and worked on a farm, James' brother enjoyed the work at the nursery. Thus, after completing his high school degree, he chose to continue his studies at Kishwaukee Community College where he earned an associate's degree in horticulture and nursery management.

Common in rural settings, the elementary, middle, and high schools James attended served several small area communities. However, unlike similar students in other rural districts, James graduated with a sizable class numbering nearly 250 students. The school was large enough to offer a plethora of AP and Honors courses, while still small enough for students to be involved and feel connected as a community of students. As James described:

My school had AP classes, had a wide range of classes for those who need a little bit of help or those who want to get ahead. Good sports programs. My senior class was really tight. We would always get compliments from the grades above or below us for having parties with a wide range of people.
(James, Interview)

In high school, James was an exceptional student and was involved in a number of activities. For example, he was a member of the soccer team all four years. As a sophomore, he captained the junior varsity team, and then, as a senior, he captained the varsity squad. He remained active in his home church throughout high school and also began attending services at the local Buddhist temple his senior year. During his junior and senior years of high school, he was nominated by a teacher to partake in a Saturday morning physics program

hosted at Fermilab, a distinguished U.S. Department of Energy facility engaged in high-velocity particle physics research.

While James enjoyed learning about particle collision and other research projects at Fermilab, it was a personal collision, ironically, that deepened his interest in physics. In the spring of his junior year, James was in a serious car accident during which he suffered a collapsed lung, a damaged spleen and kidney, temporary paralysis, and significant head trauma. He does not recall the accident itself; memory loss left him relying on others' accounts of what actually happened. Severe migraine headaches are his most vivid reminder of the accident. At the time, he was enrolled in an AP Physics course that his teacher subsequently recommended he drop. James had missed several classes due to the accident, but he instead immersed himself deeply into the course. As James explained, *"I really dove into my physics as a place to get away from everything else, to start to get my life back on track. It took so much cognitive energy that I felt secure inside of it"* (James, Interview).

To say this accident changed James' life is an understatement. While not clear to him at the time, he began to re-evaluate his values, his behaviors, his relationships, and how he was living the life he nearly lost. When applying to college, he opened his admission essay with a quote from Ramana Maharshi:

The shock of fear and death drove my mind inwards and I said to myself mentally, without actually framing the words: Now death has come; what does it mean? What is it that is dying? This body dies. (James, Undergraduate Admissions Essay)

James continued, *"Before my accident, I always thought of church and school as activities I was involved in to make my parents happy, not because I really wanted to be"* (James, Undergraduate Admissions Essay). James' search for meaning led him to focus more

intently on his studies, recalibrate the ways he engaged and interacted with his friend groups, and examine the motives of his behaviors. As James asserted:

[Before the accident] I was a good student because my parents wanted me to be. I went to church because that was what I was told to do. Then, after my car accident, more or less a near-death experience, life became much more self-guided and something I had a more personal interest in. (James, Interview)

With this newfound interest in his own life, James concluded his high school career on a promising note. His grades, which he worked hard for, were stellar. His friendships were also on solid footing. In many ways, James was ready and eager for the next phase of his life, which was not college.

Even though the topic of college was not discussed much at home, like many seniors in high school, James applied to a handful of colleges and universities. At the same time, however, he submitted an application to a national volunteer program through which, if accepted, he would engage in a year of service before college. Through discussions with friends and his counselor at school, James ultimately submitted applications and was accepted to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a couple liberal arts colleges, including Kenmont College. He was also accepted to the national volunteer program, and opted to take a “gap year” by volunteering at a retreat center in Oregon.

Although James was accepted at Kenmont and could have matriculated in the fall of 2008, he deferred his enrollment and entered in the fall of 2009. He arrived on campus with the intention of majoring in physics, and he retained that goal throughout his time at Kenmont. During college, James has performed well academically, attaining a 3.38 cumulative GPA through his first six semesters. Even though James graduated in the top 5% of his high school class and has remained a good student at Kenmont, he did find adjusting to

the academic demands of college, including developing effective study habits and managing his time effectively, to be somewhat of a challenge (James, Questionnaire).

James took full advantage of the learning environment at Kenmont. In addition to his courses in physics, his transcript fully illustrates the myriad of courses he has taken across the college. From literary analysis to economics to neurophilosophy, James' adviser has praised him for the blend of courses he has taken. James' interests outside the classroom have been equally diverse. From playing for the varsity soccer team to serving on student government to working on campus, James has been an engaged member of the broader campus community. He did take a brief hiatus from his undergraduate studies to pursue a semester-long internship at NASA.

While his post-college plans have yet to be finalized, James is hoping to participate in another year of service before joining the workforce or returning to school to earn an advanced degree.

Juan

There is added pressure for us, as first-generation students. Because our families are looking at what we can accomplish. It can feel like we hold in our hands the honor of our family, which can make things that much more stressful, especially in times when you think you can't do it. You feel like quitting isn't an option. (Juan, Interview)

Juan is not only a first-generation college student, he is also the first in his family to be born in the United States. He and his two younger brothers grew up in a poor, immigrant enclave in a suburb outside Los Angeles. Both of his parents immigrated to the United States as teenagers, his father from El Salvador and his mother from Mexico. Neither of them completed high school.

Juan's father has worked at the local salvage yard for the past 20 years. He began as a laborer and now holds a supervisory role. While a "junk yard" may not seem glamorous, Juan has fond memories of the random toys and other "finds" his father would occasionally bring home. A second-hand toy served as a sufficient distraction from the poor circumstances in which Juan and his brothers were reared. Juan's mother was primarily a stay-at-home mom, working part-time jobs between the births of her three sons.

Although Juan's parents did not finish high school, education was something they both valued. To them, education meant opportunity, and they wanted their children to have access to opportunities that seemed inaccessible to them. At the recommendation of Juan's second grade teacher, his parents completed the paperwork and went through the process to have Juan enrolled in an elementary magnet school. In hindsight, this was a pivotal moment in Juan's education. He began attending a magnet school in the third grade and continued attending magnet schools through elementary and middle school. This trajectory ultimately led to his enrollment at an academically rigorous magnet high school.

In high school, where 90% of the students were Latino/a, Juan was a solid student earning mostly As and Bs in his subjects. He took several advanced courses, including numerous Honors courses (e.g., physics, statistics, algebra, and research lab) and Advanced Placement courses (e.g., physics, calculus, chemistry, Spanish, European history, world history). With a desire to explore topics not offered within his high school curriculum, Juan completed five courses at the local community college. Ultimately, Juan finished high school with a weighted GPA of 4.096 and ranked eighteenth in his class of more than 1,000 students, placing him in the top 2% of his high school class.

Outside the classroom, Juan volunteered at a local hospital and was an active member of various student groups, including one particular multicultural group focused on bringing people of different races together to promote education and cultural understanding. Additionally, he would occasionally work part-time at the salvage yard where his father was employed.

When it came to college, Juan had always dreamt of attending UCLA. As a top national university with which he was familiar, this particular institution seemed very natural to him. However, Juan's college search process did not result in him attending UCLA; in fact, he did not even apply there. Compared to those of the other participants in this study, Juan's college search was quite distinct. Rather than researching different universities, making campus visits when possible, and preparing essays and applications, Juan became involved in a highly selective early admission program focused on helping high-achieving, under-represented students gain admission to various partner colleges and universities across the country, which included Kenmont. As a result, Juan applied early admission to Kenmont and, therefore, did not submit any applications to other colleges. If he had, and had been accepted to UCLA or University of California schools (UCs), he worried that he might have denied another student an opportunity to go to college. As he shared in his interview:

Ultimately I had the application ready for the UCs, but the application to Kenmont was an early application. And once I found out I made it in, I decided not to send my application to the UC schools. A big part of that was I heard that if you do send your applications and you do get a spot there, I might take someone else's spot and I didn't want to impede anyone else's opportunity. (Juan, Interview)

Juan was excited by the opportunity to attend college in the Midwest, but he had some reservations because he was not able to visit the school in advance. His first exposure to Kenmont's physical campus would be on move-in day.

In college, Juan has been a steady performer academically. After six semesters of coursework, Juan has attained a 3.07 cumulative GPA. Even though he pursued the most rigorous slate of coursework his high school offered, he still found it somewhat difficult to understand professors' expectations, develop effective study skills, and adjust to the academic demands of college (Juan, Questionnaire). Class participation, in particular, has been a challenge for Juan. As he described:

I think the toughest part for me has been the idea of participation in class, because [in high school] when you're in class with thirty or more people, participation meant just showing up to class and not disturbing the class by talking too much or misbehaving or anything like that. And then, coming here, in every class it seems like participation was a huge part of the grade. And it was active participation, actually engaging in discussions, which is something I had not seen before. (Juan, Interview)

By selecting a modern language as a major, classroom participation was perhaps even more heavily weighted compared to other courses. Juan needed to demonstrate not only his reading and writing abilities with the Spanish language but also his ability to speak the language.

Outside the classroom, Juan has adjusted well to college life at Kenmont. He has been involved with various student groups and intramural sports. Even though Kenmont has a fairly diverse student body, with more than one-third of the student body comprised of U.S. multicultural students and international students, it is still quite different from Juan's high school. Even so, Juan has found the community to be welcoming and open. As he shared in his interview:

A lot of my friends are White, which I wasn't expecting coming here. And that's one thing that was surprising to me; you don't have to hang out with people that are from your same background. You make connections with people who are completely different and that you never expected to be with. But that took me a while to adjust to see that. (Juan, Interview)

While the small community at a place like Kenmont reduces the anonymity one enjoys in a place like Los Angeles, it has been something Juan has grown to appreciate. As he described, “*What I've found here is to be a close-knit community*” (Juan, Interview).

Encountering familiar faces in the class, while walking across campus, or even shopping at the local Walmart, Juan has found comfort in the familiar. As he alluded, he had to leave a city of 16 million people to find community.

Even though Juan has entered his final year at Kenmont, he is still undecided about his plans after college. He has considered graduate school as well as entering the work force, but no definitive plans were in place at the time of his interview.

Kyle

I look at my parents in a different perspective now—not seeing them as meddling barriers to my immature teenage sensibilities, but as hardworking people who have placed themselves in a strange land for my sake. Matters of assimilation and culture conflicts mean hardly anything because now I understand that the language of hope is a universal constant. (Kyle, Undergraduate Admissions Essay)

Like Juan, Kyle is not only a first-generation college student but also the first person in his family born in the United States. Both his mother and father emigrated from Myanmar (also known as Burma) to the United States, his mother in 1976 and his father followed years later in 1989. Ultimately, Kyle's parents settled in Chicago, where they would rear him and his younger brother.

As a teenager, Kyle's father earned national distinction in mathematics that ultimately led him to begin work toward a degree in engineering. However, due to political unrest in Burma at the time, then Burmese dictator Ne Win issued a policy making all persons of Chinese lineage ineligible to pursue an education. This derailment left Kyle's father with his goals in shambles and an uncertain future. It was at this time that he decided to move to the United States.

Upon their arrivals in Chicago, both of Kyle's parents were able to secure full-time employment and have worked for the same companies for more than 20 years now. Kyle's father works at a factory, and his mother works for a bank in downtown Chicago. Despite the roadblocks that infringed on their ability to pursue higher education, Kyle's parents placed a high value on education.

As residents of the city of Chicago, Kyle's parents had two educational options for their children. They could enroll Kyle and his brother in the Chicago Public School system, or they could send them to a private school. Despite their limited resources and their agnostic religious orientation, Kyle's parents decided to send him to a Catholic elementary school.

When Kyle was 11 years old, his parents decided to move from the city to a Chicago suburb. Doing so would allow Kyle and his younger brother to enroll directly into a strong public high school. The transition from private to public school was a bit challenging for Kyle. As he shared, *"The kids were meaner. There were different expectations at the high school. The close attention paid at the private school...I didn't find that at the public school"* (Kyle, Interview). Acclimating to the physical size of the school and the size of his graduating class also required an adjustment. At the Catholic school, the typical grade level

enrolled 25 students. His graduating class from high school was 25 times that size, with an enrollment of more than 600.

In high school, Kyle was an exceptionally strong student. By the end of his high school career, he had attained a 4.395 weighted cumulative GPA. Of the 46 courses Kyle took in high school, 30% were either an Honors course (e.g., Honors English) or an Advanced Placement course (e.g., AP Biology). In addition to his academic pursuits, Kyle was also an executive board member on Student Council, a member of the Scholastic Bowl team, co-captain of the Chess Club, and a participant in his high school's chapter of the Model United Nations. To stretch himself, Kyle decided to join the varsity cross-country team his junior and senior year. As he shared in his admission application:

I joined cross-country to correct my lifelong aversion to sports. I struggled the first couple weeks, only grudgingly accepting the demanding physical limits of the sport. By the end of the season, I ran cross-country not just to make it to the end of practice, but to give every ounce of effort in my body and run the best time. (Kyle, Undergraduate Admission Application)

By the end of the season, Kyle was voted “most improved” by his teammates.

When it came to investigating colleges, Kyle did most of his research independently, but he had conversations with his high school counselor, his parents, as well as his friends. Actually making the decision to go to college is not something Kyle can pinpoint; it never occurred to him that he would *not* go to college. As he explained, “*That was always the expectation in my family—you are definitely going to college. It was a non-issue. It was a matter of where I would end up*” (Kyle, Interview). Ultimately, Kyle submitted applications to several schools, including the University of Notre Dame, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, DePaul University, St. Bonaventure University, and Kenmont College.

While it was Kenmont's strong academics, national rank, and the notion that graduates get good jobs and gain entrance into competitive graduate programs that prompted Kyle to apply, ultimately it was the college's generous financial aid package that helped secure his acceptance and deposit (Kyle, Questionnaire). Even so, Kenmont was Kyle's third-choice college. He did not receive an offer of admission from either his first-choice college, the University of Notre Dame, or his second-choice, Brown University.

Kyle's parents had different thoughts about where he should go to college. To appease his parents' tireless requests, Kyle applied to St. Bonaventure University's BS/MD dual-admit program in collaboration with George Washington University's School of Medicine. To say they had a preference for where he would go to college is an understatement. As Kyle described:

By the time senior year rolled around, they had already locked onto St. Bonaventure as a dream school they wanted me to go to. The other schools weren't in discussion at all. It was like, "You could go to Notre Dame. You could go to Brown. But they're all inferior to the choice you could be making at St. Bonaventure." (Kyle, Interview)

Kyle was accepted to St. Bonaventure's BS/MD program, but there was a problem: he had no interest in becoming a doctor. Thus, with an offer of admission to Kenmont, his parents finally succumbed to his requests to actually visit the campus in May of his senior year. While his visit to campus was brief, it was sufficient to affirm his interest in attending this small rural liberal arts college. He decided to send deposits to both Kenmont and St. Bonaventure, and his parents ultimately acquiesced to his desire to attend Kenmont. Kyle would not say his parents were supportive of his decision; it was more of a "*resigned acceptance*" (Kyle, Interview).

Like many college students, Kyle entered Kenmont with the hope that his college education will help him get a better job, make more money, prepare for a career, learn more about his interests, and gain a general education (Kyle, Questionnaire). The linear, lock-step, structured process that he envisioned would take place in college was not realized. He was challenged academically; the notion of career development became more obtuse and blurry; and he began to question the value of his courses, the teaching methods of his professors, and this lofty thing called “the liberal arts.” To find purpose, Kyle decided to consult the college’s mission statement:

I read the mission statement in the college catalog. It stressed things like Kenmont students being able to think critically, problem solve, etc. My skepticism of that, at first—well, does that mean that everyone who doesn’t go to an elite liberal arts school is just a mindless drone that’s not autonomous in any way? (Kyle, Interview)

As time passed and Kyle progressed through his coursework, he developed a greater appreciation for the work, the assignments, the class discussion, and the liberal arts. He embraced the notion that one’s career path is not dictated by her or his field of study, and thus he remained true to his intellectual interests and continued with his pursuit of a history major.

Kyle has been challenged by the academics at Kenmont, but, overall, he has done well. At the end of his third year, he had attained a 3.24 cumulative GPA. Similar to some of the other participants, Kyle has found it very difficult to understand his professors’ expectations, develop effective study skills, adjust to the academic demands of college, and manage his time effectively (Kyle, Questionnaire). Even so, of the six semesters he’s completed, he has not earned lower than a B average. His weakest term yielded a 3.04 GPA, and his strongest term produced a 3.67 GPA.

Outside the classroom, Kyle has participated in intramural sports and been a member of assorted student groups. During his third year, however, he became more deeply involved with the college's student government association. Beginning as a senator, he ultimately earned a leadership role as a cabinet member his senior year. In many ways, student government provided Kyle with an environment for him to apply his skills and develop new ones. As he shared:

I was always trying to find those things in my Kenmont experience because I was afraid I was going to grow up and become an academic who could not transfer his skills at all. So I just really appreciated the fact that student government was a very natural way of using skills and developing skills that I could use in the real world. (Kyle, Interview)

Kyle has enjoyed working with members of the administration, including vice presidents, deans, and program directors. As a result of these interactions, he has a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the challenges faced by the faculty and administration. As an example, he explained:

When you have discussions with them [staff and administrators in Student Affairs], you realize there's a whole different set of considerations and logistics that they have to think of. It's so different from the outside rather than being inside in those meeting rooms and figuring everything out. (Kyle, Interview)

It was both impressive and fascinating to hear Kyle, as a first-generation college student, comment on his own development within this student-leadership context. His involvement with student government has clearly played a significant role in his experience at Kenmont.

After his spring graduation, Kyle will venture off to China on a competitive fellowship to teach English for one year. He has an interest in returning to school for a master's degree one day, but graduate school is not in his immediate plans.

Logan

Honestly, for me, going to college wasn't even a question. And this is something for which I'll forever be grateful to my parents. (Logan, Interview)

Logan was born and reared in a middle-class, northwest suburb of Chicago. Logan's father has worked at UPS for the past 20 years, and his mother stayed at home to rear him and his older sister until he was approximately 12 years old. Then, to increase their household income, his mother accepted a position as a preschool teacher.

While Logan and his elder sister of three years are both first-generation college students, there is some college-going history in their family. Logan's father was the fourteenth child in a family of seventeen children. Born into a rural, agricultural farm family, Logan's father and his siblings were expected to contribute to running the family farm. The two eldest males in the family were sent off to college, but none of the other siblings had the opportunity to pursue a college degree immediately after high school, including Logan's father. He attempted to take courses while working full-time, but that ultimately did not work out. Logan's mother, on the other hand, actually completed a bachelor's degree while Logan has been enrolled at Kenmont.

Although Logan's father never completed a college degree, and his mother did so only recently, education has always been a core value in the family. In the community where Logan and his sister were reared, there are two high schools: the local public high school and a private Catholic high school. Despite their limited means, Logan's parents made the decision that their children would receive a better education and have improved prospects for the future if they were able to attend the local private high school. It was considered the college-prep high school and therefore had a much better academic reputation.

In high school, Logan was actively involved in a number of activities. While he does not consider himself to be a “good” athlete, Logan captained the junior varsity tennis team and was a member of the varsity cross-country team. Additionally, he was a four-year member of the bowling club and a three-year member of the Spanish club. During his summers, Logan volunteered at a Catholic Heart Work Camp in various locations throughout the Midwest.

Academically, Logan began his high school career by taking a standard slate of classes. That is, he was not enrolled in any higher-level, accelerated, or advanced courses where academically high-achieving students are frequently found. However, as Logan progressed through secondary school, he took increasingly difficult courses that challenged him intellectually. Rather than slipping due to the increased difficulty, Logan’s GPA actually increased. By his senior year, Logan was enrolled and performing well in an array of Honors and Advanced Placement classes. In hindsight, Logan recognizes that he successfully changed the academic track he was on, impacting his readiness and eagerness for college.

When the time arrived to begin applying to college, Logan was fortunate to be attending a high school where going to college was a frequent topic of discussion. In referencing the discussions he had with his high school friends and peers, Logan shared, *“there was definitely a lot of talk about college”* (Logan, Interview). Admittedly, Logan was not sure what he was looking for. Logan considered large public institutions, private universities, and liberal arts colleges. Geographically, he looked at universities located in urban environments, as well as at schools like Kenmont that are located in rural settings. These many considerations, coupled with his perusal of the *U.S. News & World Report*

rankings, produced a lengthy list of schools to which he applied, including the University of Notre Dame, Iowa State University, Marquette University, Washington University in St. Louis, and two liberal arts colleges, including Kenmont. Ultimately, the college's academic reputation and financial aid package weighed heavily on Logan's decision to attend Kenmont (Logan, Questionnaire).

In college, Logan faced obstacles with his academics as well as in the social domain of college life. In high school, Logan earned mostly A's, graduating with a 4.12 weighted GPA. During his first semester of college, Logan's highest grade was a B+, and he also earned his first grade lower than a B (i.e., a C+). Overall, Logan finished his third year of college with a B average (i.e., 3.04 cumulative GPA); the increased expectations and the volume of work to manage has forced Logan to find different ways to get his school work done. What worked in high school was not sufficient in managing the academic demands at Kenmont.

Beyond the academic challenges, adjusting socially to college also took some time. As a friendly, outgoing person, Logan did not have a difficult time making new friends at Kenmont. However, learning to manage and navigate the party scene was an adjustment. As Logan explained:

I'm a partier, but it's funny, I'm also not really that much of a drinker. I don't know if that makes sense. But it kind of took me a while to find out there was a difference between those two; that having fun in college doesn't mean that you're an alcoholic or anything. (Logan, Interview)

Logan admittedly did not have a sense of what the party scene would be like at Kenmont. Since he chose Kenmont because of its academic reputation and financial aid offer, he did

not give much consideration to the parties, drinking, and drug use that might take place on campus.

Upon his arrival at Kenmont, Logan declared and has retained his major in history. While he certainly explored different fields of study, he has not deviated from history as his primary field of study. However, before completing his student teaching requirements, Logan will join Kyle in China the year following his graduation to serve as an English teaching fellow. Upon the completion of this year of service, Logan will return to Kenmont for one semester to complete his student teaching requirements in order to become a licensed secondary education history teacher.

Michael

My parents always placed a really big emphasis on me going to college. That was always kind of what I looked forward to. (Michael, Interview)

Born and reared in the central valley of California, Michael grew up in a Catholic household with his mother, father, and younger brother. The son of a West Point professor, Michael's father enlisted in the Navy after graduating from high school. After he concluded his service and was honorably discharged, Michael's father applied the technical skills he acquired in the Navy by working in various technology roles. Michael's mother, who was born and reared in Italy, works in the financial services industry.

While neither of Michael's parents completed a college degree, his paternal grandfather was highly educated. After earning a bachelor's degree in engineering from West Point, Michael's grandfather continued his studies at the graduate level at the University of Southern California before returning to West Point to join the faculty. Additionally, on his mother's side, he has one uncle who was able to pursue higher education

in Italy. As a Monseigneur, Michael's uncle was able to pursue a university education with the support of his church.

Like some of the other participants' parents, Michael's mother and father made explicit their value of education. Because of their family's faith tradition and the strength of the Catholic schools in the community, Michael's parents invested in a private elementary and secondary education for both him and his brother. According to Michael, well over 90% of his high school class pursued some sort of college education after graduating from high school, including attending public and private four-year institutions as well as community colleges.

By all accounts, Michael was a strong student in high school. During his eight semesters of high school, Michael took 16 Honors or Advanced Placement courses including English, geometry, earth science, chemistry, calculus, physics, and economics. By the conclusion of his secondary education, Michael had attained an impressive 4.25 weighted cumulative GPA. In critiquing his preparation for college, Michael thought his high school had a good "*institutionalized system*" for preparing its students (Michael, Interview). As he described:

My high school had a very good system. They had a very good AP system. They had very good college prep. A lot of times it was like, "[For] this next assignment in English, instead of just writing an essay, I want you to write your college admissions essay." So everybody had [a college essay] by their first month of senior year. It was just very, very highly geared toward getting people to college. (Michael, Interview)

It was clear from Michael's commentary that his high school reinforced his goals and aspirations of attending college.

In addition to performing well in the classroom, Michael was actively involved in an array of activities in high school and within the community. Whether on the soccer field or as a member of the Academic Decathlon team, Michael found outlets to channel his competitive spirit. Michael remained active in the Catholic faith community as a member of the senior ministry team in high school and as a volunteer server and lector during mass. Away from the soccer field, church, and classroom, Michael also volunteered each winter at a local shelter for the homeless.

In addition to his school, athletic, and church-related activities, the Boy Scouts of America have also played a key role in Michael's growth and development. Joining the scouts in the first grade, Michael eventually progressed to and earned the esteemed rank of Eagle Scout. As he described in his college application:

This involvement has bestowed upon me many skills and has taught me to be a more mature and responsible citizen. I have learned through my many leadership roles how to deal with a variety of issues and how to work in a team environment, both as a member and leader of a team. (Michael, Undergraduate Admission Application)

At present, Michael has remained involved with the Boy Scouts. For the past six years, Michael has worked at Boy Scout camps in California each summer.

Michael's college search process began in earnest once he took the PSAT during his junior year in high school. After taking this standardized test, letters, view books, and other glossy color brochures from various colleges and universities began to arrive in his mailbox. He discarded most of these materials, but Michael did recall the information he received from Kenmont. It was neither the scenic views of campus nor the photographs of happy students that caught his attention. Simply put, it was the first piece of college mail he

received. After reading a bit about the school and then learning that there was no application fee, Michael decided to apply.

In addition to Kenmont, Michael also submitted applications to an eclectic mix of more than 11 colleges and universities, including Claremont McKenna College, Gonzaga University, Stanford University, the University of the Pacific, Washington University in St. Louis, Brown University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvey Mudd College, and Carnegie Mellon University. It was an unsurprising list, given Michael's penchant for math and science. Even though Kenmont was Michael's second choice, his visit to campus—coupled with the college's academic reputation, social activities, and competitive financial aid package—were the factors that weighed most heavily in his decision to accept the college's offer of admission (Michael, Questionnaire).

Even though Michael's high school helped prepare him to navigate the college application process, he had some difficulty adjusting to the academic rigor of the courses at Kenmont. The amount of time he devoted to homework and studying in high school was not reflective of the time he would need to invest at Kenmont to earn similar grades. As Michael explained:

It was just easier to get A's in high school and not try as hard. It was easier to just go to class and pick up what I learned and not study for the test and still get an A on it. I can't do that here. (Michael, Interview)

As an economics and mathematics double-major, Michael has attained a cumulative GPA of 2.88 over the course of six semesters. During the spring semester of his third year, he had considerable difficulty with a 300-level mathematics course that he ultimately failed. In that particular term, Michael earned a 2.26 GPA, which had a significant impact on his overall GPA. When asked to characterize his challenges, Michael indicated that he has found it

somewhat difficult to understand his professors' expectations, develop effective study habits, adjust to the demands of college, and manage his time effectively (Michael, Questionnaire). Although he feels comfortable approaching his professors, it is not something he does very often, visiting them an average of one to two times per term (Michael, Questionnaire).

During his interview, Michael's difficulty with managing his time became clear. In addition to his academic studies, Michael also worked the third shift (11:30 p.m. to 7:30 a.m.) one night per week for campus security, and has consistently worked 6 to 10 hours per week throughout college. Additionally, Michael is an active and devoted member to the college's Ultimate Frisbee team. As a team, they practice 6 hours per week and lift/work out 10 hours per week. On average, Michael dedicates about as much time to the Ultimate Frisbee team as he spends in class each week. When asked to imagine what his college experience would have been like without the Ultimate Frisbee team, Michael instantly responded, "*It'd be a shell. It'd be empty*" (Michael, Interview).

As graduation nears, Michael is unclear about his plans for after Kenmont. His father has encouraged him to consider graduate school, but Michael is really not interested in continuing his studies. In fact, Michael shared, "*The more I think about [graduate school], the more I realize I don't really want to [go]*" (Michael, Interview). As such, at this point, Michael is inclined to enter the workforce.

Noah

My dreams and my goals have never been modest. At eight, my dream was to walk on the moon; now my dreams are closer to home but no less astronomical. (Noah, Undergraduate Admissions Essay)

Born and reared in rural Southeast Missouri, Noah is the youngest of four children and the first in his nuclear family to pursue a college education. With both parents originally from this region of Missouri, Noah's mother works in the local manufacturing plant owned and operated by Procter and Gamble. His father, who formerly drove a semi for a living, is unemployed and draws disability due to chronic back and shoulder problems.

Unlike some of the other participants in this study, Noah's older siblings did not groom a path to higher education for him to follow. Noah's eldest brother graduated from high school and then enlisted in the Navy. He was honorably discharged after four years, married, and then recently divorced. He has struggled with finding employment but is presently working and living at home with Noah's parents. Noah's other brother did not graduate from high school. He has struggled with drug use and is presently employed and also living with Noah's parents. Noah's older sister did not graduate from high school either. She gave birth to her first child at age 16 and has since mothered four additional children. Like Noah's middle brother, she, too, has battled with drug addiction. She is presently employed and, again, living at home with Noah's parents. Rather than serving as role models to follow, as he stated in his admissions essay, his siblings became "*anti-archetype[s] by which to live my life and effectively learn from their lessons*" (Noah, Undergraduate Admissions Essay).

Quiet, reserved, and overweight as a child, Noah discovered literature as a place of solace and refuge. In fact, Noah mentioned J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series as instrumental in helping him discover his love of reading and writing. From Lois Lowry's *The Giver* to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Noah has developed a sincere passion and appreciation for literature, which has directly shaped his desire and ambition not only to

attend and graduate from college but also to ultimately become an English professor and published author.

Noah's love of reading and writing served him well throughout this education, especially during his four years of high school. Having graduated in the top 5% of his class, Noah's high school transcript predictably consists of mostly A's and a few B's. Despite the limited value his siblings placed on education, Noah's performance in all his classes, including eight Advanced Placement courses, is clear evidence of the value he placed on his education.

In high school, Noah was very fortunate to have a peer group with which he connected and who broadened his perspectives on where he might attend college. As he shared during his interview:

I was fortunate enough to have a really good friend group. I had a lot of friends who were going to college. I had a friend who is now at Princeton, another at Stanford. We were all pretty close, so college would come up as a topic for conversation. (Noah, Interview)

The colleges most frequented by the graduates of his high school included the University of Missouri-Columbia, Southeast Missouri State University, and Truman State University.

While Noah admits these were the colleges he initially considered, through his conversations and interactions with his friends, Noah aspired to attend a more reputable, more selective school.

When the time came to actually submit applications, Noah applied to Washington University in St. Louis, Vanderbilt University, Amherst College, Truman State University, Dickinson College, the University of Rochester, and Kenmont College. Noah was accepted to every school to which he applied, except the one closest to his home: Washington

University in St. Louis. He made visits to Vanderbilt, Rochester, and Kenmont, but was unable to visit Amherst and Dickinson due to the distance, travel costs, and his mother's inability to get time off from work. Ultimately Noah decided to attend Kenmont, citing the combination of solid academics, abundant social opportunities, and the notion that graduates of Kenmont get accepted into top graduate programs as his reasons for doing so (Noah, Questionnaire).

Noah's habits of academic success in high school continued in college. Through three years of coursework, Noah has attained a cumulative GPA of 3.81. If he maintains this performance, Noah will graduate with honors. While his grades provide one measure of Noah's academic aptitude, he did have to adjust his study habits as well as his time management skills in college. Like some of the other participants, Noah had to make adjustments in how he was going to manage and prioritize his time in order to meet the volume of work his courses demanded. As he explained:

Academically, Kenmont was maybe more than I expected. I wasn't really a great student my first couple semesters, sort of getting behind on readings, which is something I refuse to do now. I suppose that was probably a little overwhelming as well. (Noah, Interview)

It is important to note that Noah earned a 3.75 GPA his first semester and a 3.84 GPA his second semester. Even though Noah earned good grades, he clearly felt he could have performed better.

While Noah's adjustment to the academic demands of college went relatively smoothly, his adjustment to the social environment of college was more of a challenge. In fact, he indicated that developing close relationships with other students has been somewhat difficult. This has also held true with developing personal relationships with members of the

faculty. While Noah is articulate, polite, and reflective, he is also quite shy and introverted. As such, it was not surprising to find that the relationship-building processes in college have been challenging to him. His girlfriend lured him into joining a few activities, but Noah continues to focus on and find primary enjoyment in his academic studies.

After Kenmont, Noah intends to enroll in a graduate program with the ultimate goal of earning a Ph.D. and becoming a college or university professor. As he eloquently expressed in his admission essay:

From the moment I realized the beauty inherent in literature, I knew my life would be spent marauding through the greatest minds earth has seen while serving to guide others through the labyrinth of lilting rhythms and rolling rhymes. My career goal is to be an English professor while writing myself—hoping one day to inspire another who may be in my situation. (Noah, Undergraduate Admissions Essay)

Based on the journey that Noah has traveled to this point in his life, it is not difficult to imagine how his life experiences will shape his work as a teacher, mentor, and adviser to future students.

Sean

“I am strongly independent and highly motivated, but I don’t take myself too seriously. My parents have treated my education with a hands-off approach; as a result, I feel a strong sense of responsibility in my successes and failures.” (Sean, Undergraduate Admissions Application)

Sean grew up in a modest sized community in Western Illinois (pop. 20,000) with his mother, father, and two older siblings: a brother and a sister. Sean’s mother is a front-line supervisor at Walmart, having worked there since graduating from high school. Sean’s father spent the majority of his career working in a factory. After the manufacturing plant

closed, his father experienced a brief stint of unemployment before accepting a position as a delivery driver for a local medical equipment supply company.

Even though Sean is a first-generation college student, both of his older siblings pursued college before him. His brother, who is four years older than Sean, earned a bachelor's degree in computer science from nearby Western Illinois University. Sean's older sister, who is two years older than Sean, attended Spoon River College, a two-year college, where she completed sufficient coursework to become a registered nurse. She has ambitions to eventually become a medical doctor. Despite their experiences, Sean did not consult with or consider his brother or sister to be information resources about college.

Sean attended the local public high school, graduating first in a class of 128 students. As a high school student, Sean was exemplary. Presented as a semester-by-course scatter plot graph, Sean's transcript is peppered with nothing but straight A's (not even a single A-minus is present). He enrolled in numerous Honors courses and took six of the seven Advanced Placement courses his high school offered. (He had to bypass AP French because it did not work to take two languages.) In the end, Sean finished high school with a 4.132 GPA.

Beyond his high school academics, Sean was also involved in a mix of co-curricular activities. As a percussionist, Sean performed in the marching band, jazz band, and wind symphony. Given Sean's academic abilities, it was unsurprising to learn that he was a four-year member of his high school's Scholastic Bowl Team. With interests in math, science, and engineering, Sean was also a four-year member of the Science Club, for which he served as vice president and president. As an officer, Sean made a deliberate attempt to mentor the

younger members of the Science Club as they selected their research topics. This was in direct response to his own experience of feeling detached from the club as a freshman.

At the risk of converting a cherished pastime with friends into something he envisioned he might grow to detest, Sean joined the tennis team his freshman year. As he cynically, and humorously, wrote in his admission essay:

My adolescent life was engulfed by baseball, football, and basketball—and I wasn't good at any of it. In the spring of my freshman year I joined the tennis team after a long and unimpressive community sports career. I began to accumulate all sorts of rackets in the back of my car; some were borrowed from friends, some were bought at yard sales, and some were brought down from my attic, rescued from their cold, static retirement. By some cruel twist of fate, hoarding of rackets did nothing to hone my skills. (Sean, Undergraduate Admissions Essay)

Despite Sean's lack of athletic prowess, and his growing disdain for competitive sports in general, he remained a four-year member of the tennis team.

When it came time to begin the college search process, Sean relied on himself and a group of close friends for information and support. As he shared in his college admission application, *"My family is not overly concerned with education; as a result, my friends are the source of most of my knowledge about colleges"* (Sean, Undergraduate Admissions Application). As a high-achieving high school student, Sean was primarily focused on attending a college or university that attracted accomplished students and would offer the fields of study of most interest to him, which at the time included engineering, physics, philosophy, and mathematics. In short, he evaluated schools based almost exclusively on their academic prestige.

Ultimately, Sean prepared and submitted applications to Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the University of Illinois at Urbana-

Champaign, and Kenmont College. In the end, Sean was not accepted to Harvard and he was waitlisted at MIT. Regrettably, his application to the University of Illinois was never fully reviewed. Due to a mix-up at Sean's high school, his transcript was never sent to the university. Therefore, Kenmont, his third choice, was the only institution to which Sean applied where he was offered admission. When asked if it was a difficult decision to make, Sean stated soberly, *"There wasn't much of a decision there left for me to make. At that point, it was go to Kenmont or wait"* (Sean, Interview).

As a college student, Sean has continued to perform well academically. While he is not the straight-A student he was in high school, Sean has attained a 3.63 cumulative GPA over six semesters of college courses. As a first-year student, Sean was initially disappointed in the performance of his peers. In a course designed exclusively for first-year students, Sean and his classmates were given one week to complete a two-page paper. On the day it was due, two students showed up empty-handed. This infuriated Sean. As he shared:

You think that you've chosen this place based on its prestigious reputation. You think academics are serious around here. And then you see someone who just takes those expectations and then completely up-ends them. If the learning community is comprised of people like that, then how much does it mean to have an education from this place? (Sean, Interview)

Sean admitted that this first impression of these two students was not ubiquitous among his peers. Since this experience, Sean has had courses and developed relationships with peers who are bright, motivated, and hard working. This is important to Sean, as he shared, *"[Being impressed by my peers] gives me some sense of self-worth. Because if the community as a whole is more impressive, and I'm a part of the community, then that says something about me"* (Sean, Interview).

Fortunately, Sean is a strong student and seldom finds himself in circumstances where he is lost or confused and in need of help academically. Even though he considered his faculty members to be accessible, he rarely consulted them for assistance. As Sean put it, *“The extra time that professors or teachers would spend out of class: that was for people who couldn’t do it on their own. And I didn’t identify as that kind of person, so I didn’t bother them”* (Sean, Interview). When Sean describes himself as self-reliant, self-motivated, and independent, these attributes are particularly present in his academic life. Even when he was struggling in a 300-level special topics mathematics course on wavelet transforms and scored a C-minus on the first exam, his solution was to start anew with the course material. He reread all the material that was assigned up to that point in class four separate times. He did not consult with his professor once. By the end of the course, Sean had earned a B. Reflecting on this experience, Sean shared that he might take a different approach, *“working hard isn’t working smart, and I could’ve probably just swallowed my pride and talked to the professor and gotten help in a more efficient way”* (Sean, Interview).

Outside of class, Sean experimented with a couple student activities as a freshman, but nothing in the college’s co-curriculum sustained his interest beyond his first year. During his summers away from campus, he has participated in a National Institute of Health–funded research project in organic chemistry, worked at the county assessor’s office in his hometown, assisted with plant pollination at Pioneer Hi-Bred, and worked as a laborer.

Fortunately, Sean was able to finalize his post-graduation plans before the conclusion of the fall 2012 semester. After interviewing with several companies from September through December, Sean ultimately accepted a consulting position with a leading health care technology company in the Midwest.

Faculty and Staff Participants

In addition to the eight student participants, interviews were also conducted with Kenmont's Dean of Students and three members of the faculty, one from each of the three divisions (humanities, social sciences, and sciences). Like the student participants, these individuals are male and each is also a first-generation college graduate. While their experiences are not the foci of this study, as men, as first-generation college graduates, and as members of the Kenmont learning community, their insights, observations, and perspectives served as an additional data source to triangulate the findings. Following are brief biographical sketches of each faculty and staff participant.

Dean Brown, Dean of Students

Dean Brown has served as Kenmont's Dean of Students since 2008. Originally from Minnesota, Dean Brown earned his bachelor's degree from a private liberal arts college in the Midwest and his master's degree from a Big 12 institution. As Dean of Students, Dean Brown oversees Kenmont's Residential Life Program and Judicial Affairs and Conduct Program.

Professor Jones, Professor of Philosophy

Professor Jones is a senior ranking member of the faculty at Kenmont College, currently holding the rank of full professor. For more than 25 years, Professor Jones has been a member of the philosophy department and is presently serving as its department chair. Originally from New York, he earned his bachelor's degree from an Ivy League institution and his doctoral degree from a Big 10 research institution.

Professor Smith, Assistant Professor of Chemistry

Professor Smith is an assistant professor of chemistry and has recently submitted his materials for tenure. He joined the Kenmont faculty on a temporary basis but ultimately applied for and was offered a tenure-track position seven years ago. Originally from Wisconsin, he earned his bachelor's degree from a Catholic liberal arts college in Iowa and his doctoral degree from a Big 12 research institution.

Professor Clark, Assistant Professor of History

Professor Clark is an assistant professor of history and has been employed at Kenmont since the fall of 2007. Originally from California, Professor Clark completed his bachelor's and doctoral degrees at one of the University of California system schools. Prior to joining the Kenmont faculty, Professor Clark completed a post-doctoral teaching fellowship at a liberal arts college in the Midwest.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a thorough introduction to the site of this study, the first-generation college student population at this particular institution, the individual case participants, and the staff and faculty members who were interviewed as part of this study. While the individual case participants have distinct stories, backgrounds, and experiences, their collective narrative has unveiled some common themes that can help understand what features of a highly selective, residential liberal arts environment—when viewed through human ecology and social capital theoretical lenses—may have contributed to the successful persistence of these young men.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter, as a part of this collective case study (Stake, 1995), includes a detailed discussion of the findings resulting from the questionnaire responses, document analysis, and in-depth interviews with the participants of the study. Each student participant was viewed as a distinct case. The coding techniques presented in Chapter 3 enabled several themes to emerge. This chapter is comprised of three sections. The first section (Preparing for and Applying to College) focuses on the case participants' pre-college environments. It includes a detailed discussion of four emergent themes as microsystems that influenced the case participants' preparation for and application to college: (1) Parents: A Spectrum of Support; (2) Siblings: From Role Model to Anti-archetype; (3) Friendship Groups: Birds of a Feather; and (4) School: Preparation for College.

The second section (Choosing Kenmont) provides an in-depth discussion of the primary reasons the case participants gave for selecting this highly selective, residential liberal arts college. The discussion is framed around four themes: (1) Institutional Reputation; (2) Academic Prestige; (3) Financial Aid; and (4) Enrollment and Class Size.

The final section (Experiencing Kenmont) includes a detailed discussion of the case participants' curricular and co-curricular experiences at Kenmont. Friends and peers, professors, the classroom environment, and the residential campus community emerged as additional microsystems having a distinct influence on the participants' experiences.

Collectively, these three sections provide the structure and framework for this chapter, situating the findings in response to the research questions:

1. How did a small cohort of first-generation college students come to know, choose to attend, and ultimately experience the academic and campus environments at a highly selective, residential liberal arts college?
2. What features of the case participants' pre-college environments influenced their readiness for and decision to attend this type of institution?
3. How do the case participants characterize their curricular and co-curricular experiences at this type of institution?
4. Taken together, what features of the case participants' pre-college and residential liberal arts environments do they attribute to their successful persistence to graduation?

Several features of the case participants' pre-college environments and their experiences at Kenmont played an instrumental role in their journeys toward degree completion. To say these journeys have been without challenge or mishap would be an egregious oversight. Colleges and universities, as well as the parents of first-generation students, can learn from both the successes as well as from the obstacles these students faced and overcame. These and other implications will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 6.

Preparing for and Applying to College

This section presents the findings related to the four distinct microsystems that were prevalent in each case participant's pre-college environment. Bronfenbrenner (1994) described a microsystem as:

a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit or inhibit engagement in

sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment. (p. 1645)

The four microsystems include the case participants': (a) family members, which includes their parents and siblings; (b) friendship groups; and (c) schooling environments. Although these microsystems are distinct from one another, collectively, they provide insight into how the case participants prepared for and ultimately arrived at the decision to apply to and matriculate at Kenmont College.

Parents: A spectrum of support

The literature on first-generation college students most frequently supports the perception that these students are successful *despite* their family background, not *because of* it (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). In many families the roles parents play, and the amount of influence and control they exert on their children's lives, vary greatly. The parents assumed roles in the pre-college environment that were, at best, both positive and instrumental and, at worst, neutral in the lives of the case participants. Three subthemes emerged from the in-depth interviews that capture the various ways in which parents were predominantly a positive influence in the lives of six of the eight case participants: (a) Valuing Education, (b) Investing in Education, and (c) the Applying to College. For two of the participants, the parental influence was mostly neutral (not seeming to have a positive or negative influence).

Valuing education

During the interview, each participant was asked when he began thinking seriously about going to college. The participants were not only unable to point to a general time

period, but they also did not recall the notion of going to college even being a question. The son of a salvage yard employee and a stay-at-home mom, Juan shared that his parents maintained a steadfast focus on his education beginning in elementary school:

I can't recall the moment [I decided I wanted to go to college] but I always remember my parents, both of them, very strongly advocating that I always had to do my schooling, and college was always a part of that. They definitely wanted me to go. It was almost like something that I knew that if I didn't go to college it would be disappointing. And I felt like that's been there since the early years, since elementary already. So I think it really started with my parents, and they were very pervasive about my schooling. That was the number one thing for them: for me to get a good education and an education in general. And college was always a part of that. (Juan, Interview)

From Juan's testimony, it was clear that his parents valued education greatly and instilled that value in him at an early age.

Kyle's experience was quite similar to Juan's. Pursuing a college education was simply an expectation that was instilled in him by his parents. As Kyle shared:

I'm first-generation in the sense that my parents didn't graduate college, but they did start school, so I guess it's a little different because my parents have always placed a pretty high value on education. [Going to college] was always the expectation in my family—you are definitely going to college. It was a non-issue. It was a matter of where I would end up. (Kyle, Interview)

Even though Kyle's parents were unable to finish college, these circumstances did not detract from their ability to effectively impart this value of higher education to Kyle and his younger brother, who is also attending college.

The son of a medical assistant and package carrier, Logan also characterized the decision of going to college as inevitable. It was a decision in which he could not recall playing an active role. Nevertheless, Logan was grateful that his parents have placed such a high priority on his and his older sister's education. As he extolled in his interview,

"Honestly, for me, going to college wasn't even a question. And this is something for which

I'll forever be grateful to my parents" (Logan, Interview). To Logan and his family, education was important not simply for its own sake; rather, it served as the gateway to a better life.

These sentiments were also shared by Michael and his family. Michael's parents, a computer technician and financial specialist, viewed education as a means to a better life. He elaborated on this idea in his interview:

My parents always placed a really big emphasis on me going to college. That was always kind of what I would look forward to. [Going to college] was always a big drive in my childhood. That was always my goal. I knew that's where I was going to end up. I was going to get good grades in school; I was going to go to high school. I was going to get good grades there and then go to a good college. They [my parents] both have this [view off] "we've worked hard to get where we are and we don't have that much. And we want you guys to have better lives than we had." (Michael, Interview)

Michael's parents were very effective at imparting the value of education. This influenced the priority Michael placed on his high school performance, which he inextricably connected to the college education that would be awaiting him after receiving his diploma.

Despite not having obtained a college education themselves, these parents clearly instilled the value of education in their children. This value was expressed not only in the parents' ability to cultivate a college-going mindset in their children but also by their investing directly in the education of their children.

Investing in education

Assessments of organizations' or individuals' values can be partly made based on how they allocate and invest their resources. This is certainly true for many institutions of higher learning, and the logic can also be applied to families and households. In this study,

the families of the case participants made explicit investments in their children's education in various ways.

Juan's parents invested in his education by ensuring he had access to good schools within the greater Los Angeles area. They were aware that he would have access to better schools beyond the local neighborhood, so they made deliberate choices to seek and enroll him in districts with a better network of schools. As Juan recounted:

In second grade, I went through a couple different schools. I went to three different elementary schools just for different reasons. In second grade, my teacher recommended that I apply to go to a magnet school. She told my parents, and my mother filled out the forms, and I was able to go by third grade to a magnet school. And I stayed on that path all the way through to high school. (Juan, Interview)

Rather than making an explicit monetary investment, Juan's parents were cognizant of the varying quality of schools in Los Angeles, and they deliberately chose environments that would create additional opportunities for their children. They have since made similar decisions with Juan's two younger brothers.

Kyle's parents made an arguably more aggressive move. After sending Kyle and his brother to a private elementary school, they relocated into a district in which Kyle and his younger brother would matriculate into a strong middle and high school. As Kyle shared:

So, I attended a Catholic elementary school. Around the time of middle school, [my parents] really thought that I couldn't place into a good magnet school for high school. It was their idea to move to the suburbs where I would directly feed into a decent public high school. (Kyle, Interview)

Similar to Juan's parents, Kyle's parents made deliberate decisions to ensure Kyle and his brother would have access to educational opportunity.

Logan resided in a middle-class community with two high schools: one public and the other private. For both educational and religious reasons, Logan's parents invested in a private education for both Logan and his older sister. As Logan explained:

It was a definite certainty that both me and my sister would go to college. Even upon going into high school, there was the choice of going to a public school or a more expensive, more college-prep private school. And, me, I wanted to go to the private school initially. But for the sake of devil's advocate, I asked my mom, "Well, would I be allowed to go to the public school?" She said, "Well, I respect your opinion, but no. You're going to this school because that's where you'd go to get into a better college." (Logan, Interview)

While Logan's mother entertained his question and curiosity, it was clear in her response that this was a decision made to benefit Logan and his sister. They were going to attend the high school where their parents believed they would receive the best education and preparation for the future.

Michael, who was born and reared in rural California, had a similar experience. Having been reared in a Catholic family, Michael's parents were presented with the opportunity to send their two sons either to the local public school or to a private Catholic school in a neighboring community. They chose the latter, as Michael shared:

I went to a private high school, a Catholic high school, about half an hour out of town—in part because my parents valued a Catholic education for me, and part because 97% of the Catholic high school graduates went on to college, whereas only 30% did at the local public school. So, that was definitely a big factor in their decision. (Michael, Interview)

Coming from a household of modest means, this thousand-dollar investment for Michael and his younger brother is a reflection of the value his parents placed on education.

For Evan's parents, both of whom worked in factories, education was also clearly a core value. After receiving a brochure for Stanford University's High School Summer

College program, Evan was intrigued and interested in applying. The tuition for the program, which was nearly \$10,000, made the experience seem inaccessible to him. Despite this concern, his parents encouraged him to apply. As he recounted the experience:

I remember a week before the application was due, I was, like, I'm not going to do this. It's, like, \$10,000 to go to it, and I'm never going to get accepted to Stanford. And they were, like, "Evan, just do it! You can do it!" So I applied and I got in. So, that was a really exciting day. So my parents took out a loan to put me through. It was definitely worth it. (Evan, Interview)

Evan's family did not have the financial resources on hand to pay the tuition for this program. However, they saw the value in this opportunity and chose to borrow the money so Evan could participate.

For James, the son of a government computer programmer and carpenter, the investment his parents had made in his college education was mentioned throughout his childhood. As James recounted during his interview, *"That's probably another reason why I never questioned college, because I heard at a young age something about James', or the kids', college fund"* (James, Interview). The youngest of three siblings, James had heard throughout his life that money was being set aside to help pay for college. This certainly communicated an expectation to James and his siblings about attending college.

From enrolling their children in a particular school to establishing a college fund and taking out loans to pay for a distinctive summer program, there was a prevailing theme among the case participants that their parents had made intentional, substantive investments in their education leading to college. However, the roles their parents assumed when it came to researching, choosing, and applying to college varied considerably.

Applying to college

When it came time for the case participants to begin the actual college search process, parental involvement covered a wide spectrum. While a few parents assumed more supportive roles and others held strong opinions about where their sons should go to college, some assumed very passive positions throughout the process. Despite their varied levels of involvement, it is important to note that not one of the participants was discouraged by his parents to pursue a college education.

Evan's parents, particularly his mother, played a supportive role throughout his college search process, despite their lack of familiarity with higher education generally. As he described, *"My parents knew nothing. I don't think my parents knew what a master's or a Ph.D. was or any of that until we taught them"* (Evan, Interview). When Evan's college search began, his older brother was already in the midst of his college experience at Kenmont. Consequently, Evan's parents had already been through this process.

Despite their lack of knowledge or experience with higher education, Evan's parents encouraged him to consider a range of colleges and universities. Mimicking his mother, Evan described how she encouraged him to look at different colleges:

Evan, I hear [Kenmont] is a really, really great college. You should look into this as a really, really competitive college. I don't know anything about it, but I keep hearing all this stuff about it. And you should look at Knox if you don't get accepted at Kenmont. It's another school that I've heard things about.
(Evan, Interview)

While claiming his parents *"knew nothing"* was perhaps a bit strong, Evan's mother did not need to be familiar with the particularities of different colleges or the nomenclature of higher education to be supportive.

Logan had a similar experience with his parents. As part of his college search process, he compiled a list of colleges and universities without much consideration of how he and his family might pay the tuition and fees. As he described, costs were not an important consideration in the college search process:

It was one of those things that even when I was applying to schools and looking at schools people did raise, “Well, it is an expensive school, and money is an issue.” In all honesty, I really disregarded it. And I think my parents disregarded it as well. I think they knew that they were going to make it work somehow. It’s really empowering for them at that level. At no point did they tell me that I couldn’t go to Kenmont College because it was too expensive. It was really more of, like, “If this is where you want to go, then we’ll do what we can to make sure you can stay there.” And that I’m truly appreciative of because it’s one of those things that, at the time I was applying to the school, there was no way that I could grasp the gravity of that action. Now it means a lot to me that my parents were willing to make that sacrifice then. (Logan, Interview)

Logan’s account of this support from his parents is compelling. By not focusing on tuition and fees, Logan was liberated to consider schools for several other factors (e.g., academics, location, size, and public vs. private). While he may have missed the importance of this action earlier in his high school career, as a college senior he clearly understood the implications of this action regarding his parents.

Unlike Evan’s and Logan’s parents, Michael’s parents expressed stronger views on where he should be applying to college. While Michael was compiling his own list of colleges and universities, his parents strongly encouraged him to fully consider the universities that comprised the University of California system of higher education. As Michael recounted:

I got in a number of arguments with my parents about what schools I should apply to and shouldn’t apply to. They were like, “You should apply to several UCs because California has the best public university system, and why not

take advantage of it?” And I’m like, but I really don’t want to go to a UC. Well, I ended up applying to four for that reason. (Michael, Interview)

Although he applied to four universities in California, Michael did not mention a single one during his interview—nor did he list them on his admission application (which did include nine colleges and universities other than Kenmont). Beyond this silent protest, it is clear that conversations, albeit robust and controversial ones, concerning where Michael would apply to college transpired in the household. Regardless of the outcome, Michael’s parents were challenging him to consider many options, stressing the schools they perceived to be particularly strong as well as close to home.

For Juan, whose parents both immigrated to the United States, the college search process was notably more independent, at least in terms of his parents’ involvement. As he shared:

I felt like [applying to college] was an independent thing. I felt like my parents weren’t too involved in it. They would ask, “Where do you want to go? Okay, that’s cool. You can make it, you can do it.” But they weren’t ever too involved with anything to be honest. (Juan, Interview)

Neither active participants nor negative influencers, Juan’s parents had a moderately positive, yet mostly neutral, presence in his college search.

Sean, whose mother worked as a retail supervisor and father delivered home medical supplies, shared in his admission application that *“My parents have treated my education with a hands-off approach”* (Sean, Admission Application). During his interview, Sean did not have much to share regarding his parents’ involvement in any of his educational experiences, including his college search process. Similar to Juan’s experiences, there was little discussion about college. As Sean described, *“I think they thought the same way I did. You’re going to go to college. And then you’ll do whatever people who went to college do”*

(Sean, Interview). However, when asked if his parents ever made explicit overtures about their desire for him to go to college, he replied: *“It definitely wasn’t explicit like that. There just wasn’t really a conversation”* (Sean, Interview). While Sean’s parents did not discourage him from pursuing a college education, their role, similar to that of Juan’s parents, was largely neutral. Nevertheless, it is striking that Sean, a high school valedictorian, did not discuss his college-going ambitions or goals with his parents.

James also could not recall any substantive conversations with his parents about attending college or the college search process. As he shared, *“No. Not at all. I mean, I remember my sister talking, because she commuted to school. So I remember talking about it occasionally at the dinner table...about her classes. Usually, struggles with her classes. She’s a fairly high-stress person. That was the extent of it”* (James, Interview).

Like Sean, Noah had developed very independent thoughts when it came to his education and academic interests, which were partly influenced by his parents’ lack of interest and involvement in his schooling experiences in general. Thus, his parents did not have much to do with his college search process. As Noah explained:

One of the things when thinking about applying to college, back when I was in high school: my parents weren’t able to help me with my homework from a pretty early age. They couldn’t help me in applying for college, and in that sense, I guess it was sort of training for this sort of interiority, self-dialogue. (Noah, Interview)

Kyle’s college search process was distinct from that of the other participants in that his parents identified a college and a specific academic program where they thought he should enroll. According to Kyle, his parents felt quite strongly that the singular purpose of a college education was to prepare for a career. As he shared, *“They really do have this strong sense that you go to college to get a job. And once you graduate you take up a career that’s*

related to your degree. It's very linear" (Kyle, Interview). Kyle was not certain he agreed with this position, which affected how he approached his parents about his college search. He stated frankly: *"I didn't feel comfortable talking to my parents about [applying to college]"* (Kyle, Interview).

Despite their limited conversations, his parents made explicit their desire for Kyle to apply to and attend a dual-degree program at St. Bonaventure University. The institution offers a program in which students earn a Bachelor of Science (B.S.) degree, and then immediately enroll in a Medical Doctor (M.D.) program upon graduation. Admitted students are not required to take the Medical College Admissions Test, which is a key metric in determining who is and who is not admitted to medical school through the regular admissions process. Eventually, Kyle agreed to apply to this program, even though he had no desire to become a physician. The following anecdote summarizes Kyle's experience:

At the end of high school I applied to a BS/MD joint program, so St. Bonaventure had a partnership with a medical school, I think Lake Erie is the name of it. I applied to it with not a lot of interest. I just did it so my parents would lay off me. They wanted me to do it. When it turned out that I actually had got in, they insisted I go there, take a plane and interview. I communicated pretty clearly that I didn't want to go to medical school and I didn't want to commit myself to medical school at age eighteen. They didn't understand this for a while. So what ended up actually happening was that on National Candidate Response Day, May 1st for everyone, I actually sent two security deposits: I sent one to Kenmont and one to St. Bonaventure. (Kyle, Interview)

Kyle was in the fortunate position of being able to choose among multiple offers of admission; whereas, to his parents, the decision was clear and obvious:

By the time senior year rolled around, they had already locked onto St. Bonaventure as a dream school they wanted me to go to. The other schools weren't in discussion at all. It was, like, "You could go to Notre Dame. You could go to Brown. But they're all inferior to the choice you could be making at St. Bonaventure." (Kyle, Interview)

After receiving an offer of admission from Kenmont, Kyle and his parents visited the campus. It was a brief visit that affirmed this was the place where Kyle wanted to attend. When asked if his parents were supportive of the decision, Kyle characterized their position as more of a “*resigned acceptance*” (Kyle, Interview). A positive outcome of this experience for Kyle may simply be that he, more than any other participant in the study, was asked to articulate and defend his decision to choose Kenmont. None of the other seven participants faced this pressure to the same degree.

The roles parents assumed, and the amount and type of support they extended to their students prior to entering college, varied considerably. The vast majority of the literature thus oversimplifies by simply stating that the parents of first-generation college students are uninformed and, therefore, not in a position to extend support (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; London, 1989). From carefully choosing the elementary and secondary schools where their students enroll to reserving funds to help pay for college, several of the case participants’ parents took measurable, proactive steps to support their children. The participants whose parents assumed a more passive role in their child’s educational journey were the anomaly in this study. In these circumstances, the parents were not a negative influence per se; their presence was generally neutral.

Siblings: From role model to anti-archetype

Siblings emerged as an additional locus of influence among the case participants’ precollege environment. As described by the participants, some of their relationships were harmonious and supportive, whereas others were more acrimonious and competitive. Regardless, siblings were a source of motivation for several of the case participants.

Evan's older brother attended and graduated from Kenmont College, then enrolled in law school immediately following his graduation. Evan's younger sister also enrolled as a first-year student at Kenmont in fall 2012. Clearly, attending Kenmont had become a family affair for this cluster of first-generation college students. Fortunately for Evan and his younger sister, their elder brother blazed a trail for them to follow, and was a supportive figure in Evan's education and college search. Evan described the critical role his brother played in his life:

When my brother first did that summer program here and said, "This is my dream school; this is where I want to go," my parents were, like, "Hell, no. That's more than we make in a year. There's no way you're going to that school." My brother was, like, "Trust me. I did the research." I would say if my brother didn't do those things our entire path would have been completely different. (Evan, Interview)

Once Evan's brother applied and was admitted to Kenmont, his acceptance changed the way Evan and his sister thought about their own educational trajectory. His brother's acceptance to a highly selective college compelled Evan to reconsider his goals:

I would say once it became the level of school he was going to, I think my sister and I were like, "Okay, that's what we're doing now." Not because we were imitating him, but because we all performed at the same level academically. It became quite apparent that, "That's what we can do! That's the level of school we can go to." It became apparent at that point that we could go almost anywhere. Maybe not Harvard, but almost anywhere. And I think that was what really happened and really opened our eyes to that. (Evan, Interview)

While still in high school, Evan visited his brother at Kenmont on multiple occasions. Each visit enhanced his understanding of the students, culture, and campus environment. As Evan described, *"I stayed the weekend like four times probably. I definitely knew what I was in for. My brother encouraged me to sit in on classes...I definitely did that stuff"* (Evan, Interview). Thus, Evan was well equipped when it came time for him to enroll at Kenmont.

In Logan's case, his older sister attended a liberal arts college in Illinois, which exposed his parents to the college search and application processes. She did apply to Kenmont as part of her college search, but was not accepted. Therefore, Logan saw applying to Kenmont as an opportunity to compete with his big sister:

Thankfully my sister had done the whole college finding and touring process three years ago. So at that point my mom, and my dad—but my dad was working a lot of the time...so my mom was able to help with the applications and tours, and whatnot. I heard about Kenmont College because my sister applied here and was waitlisted and didn't get in. So, then I was going to apply and see if I got in to show that I was smarter than she was. (Logan, Interview)

Despite this friendly competition among siblings, Logan's comment acknowledges that his sister's experience of navigating the college admission process facilitated his own experience.

James is the youngest of three siblings. His sister attended a regional university within commuting distance of their home, and his brother ultimately earned his G.E.D. and associate's degree at the local community college. As the youngest sibling, James aspired to perform better in school and aim higher than his brother and sister. As he shared:

I mean I was always the better student for as long as I can remember than my brother and sister. I just was always pretty good in my classes, and I don't think they were, or maybe that's just how I saw myself. But I always prided myself in that I'm following in their wake, but doing better than they are, in terms of school at least. (James, Interview)

Sean's experience was similar. He is the youngest of three siblings, and it was clear that Sean enjoyed competing with his older brother. In terms of grade point average or the quality of college one would attend, Sean was motivated by his need to achieve more than his brother had done. When asked if his siblings' college experiences impacted him in any way,

he candidly retorted, *“Not my sister’s. I would say out of competition, maybe my brother’s path motivated me to do better than him. To show him up”* (Sean, Interview).

Noah is also the youngest in his family, with two older brothers and an older sister. Like the Sean, James, and Logan, in addition to being the youngest, Noah is also the first member in his family to pursue a college degree. When questions pertaining to his siblings came up during the interview, rather than responding directly, Noah would quickly retort that his admission application would address many of the questions. When considering Noah’s precollege environment, the following commentary illustrates the challenging circumstances and poor modeling he witnessed on a daily basis:

My life hasn’t always been easy. As I watched my brother, who had taught me to play baseball and to ride a bike, succumb to addiction, I avoided a similar fate by learning the lessons he refused to learn. Quietly observing his personal plummet, I read and learned with the passion and the frustration I was unable to express. As I watched my sister’s slide toward drug abuse and failure, I embraced the world inhabited by John Keats and Percy Shelley instead of the one inhabited by drug dealers and heroine junkies. As I watched my siblings horde Xanax from the medicine cabinet, I hungrily devoured life’s lessons learned in literature. (Noah, Admission Essay)

The maturity and insight from a then 18-year-old Noah is striking. Unlike Evan, whose brother’s accomplishments were inspiring, Noah was motivated by the unfortunate circumstances and poor choices he witnessed as a child. He elaborated further, *“I have been molded into the person I am today by the mistakes I have seen others around me make. When my brother and sister didn’t graduate high school because of drug problems, I knew I would be different”* (Noah, Admission Application).

While studies have examined the role of birth order in other contexts (e.g., Belmont & Marolla, 1973; Sulloway, 1996; Zajonc & Markus, 1975), the extant literature has paid little attention to the sibling relationships among first-generation college students. Similar to

the spectrum of support provided by parents, the motivating force provided by siblings certainly served as encouragement to these case participants.

Friendship groups: Birds of a feather

Friendship groups emerged outside the family nucleus as a third locus of influence in the case participants' pre-college environments. In particular, peers and friends in high school played an influential role in the case participants' college search process, more so than family or any other microsystem in which they engaged in their precollege environments.

The school district that James attended was comprised of several small, rural communities in Illinois. Having never moved as a child, James had a very close group of friends with whom he attended elementary, middle, and high school. Like James, they shared his ambition of going to college, *"My closest group of friends since elementary school, kindergarten: they have all gone to college. They've all graduated this past May. And I don't think any of us questioned whether we were going [to college] or not"* (James, Interview). Since James took a gap year following his high school graduation, his graduation from college was delayed accordingly by one year. Nevertheless, implicit in his comment was that his closest friends all graduated from college in four years.

James' friends also expressed their views on where they thought he should go to college or, rather, where he should *not* go to college. Paraphrasing a teammate on the soccer team, James shared:

He said, "James, you're a dumb fuck if you go to ECC, because you're a really, really smart kid. And if you choose to go to a school like ECC or even NIU, Northern Illinois University, you're just making a really bad decision." Which affirmed my feelings that I should be applying to schools like Kenmont and [other] top-notch schools. (James, Interview)

James' closet friends shared his goal of pursuing a college degree, and they offered encouragement about where his abilities and aspirations might take him. They clearly did not want him to settle for lesser institutions when they believed he was able to achieve more.

Logan had considerable discussion about going to college with his peers and friends. From the schools to which his peers were applying to the number of applications they were submitting, "college going" was a frequent and open topic of discussion. Logan elaborated:

There definitely was [a lot of conversation with my peer group about college]. I went to one of those schools... I applied to eight or nine schools. There were people at my school applying to literally over twenty schools. And I don't know how obscure that is. So, there was definitely a lot of talk about colleges, where you're going. A lot of students from my school ended up going to University of Illinois. But we also had at least one go to Harvard. Had a lot go to Notre Dame, actually. There's a lot of smart people there.
(Logan, Interview)

Logan attended a private college-preparatory high school with a high-achieving student body. This vignette provides a glimpse into the culture of his secondary school, the conversations regarding the college search process he was not having at home, and those he was clearly hearing and having at school.

Sean, whose parents had not played a significant role in his educational pursuits, spoke only with friends and their parents regarding the college search process. As he stated, "*I would say [I spoke about college] almost exclusively with my friend group*" (Sean, Interview).

One friend in particular, as Sean described, was a credible source of information regarding the college search process. Sean alluded to the high expectations within this friend's family:

One of my friends who I got information, motivation, and knowledge about potential paths from...well, his parents were stereotypical, overbearing

parents of overachieving children. His older sister is at Harvard now, and he's a nuclear engineering major at the University of Illinois. So, I would just go to his basement and he would talk to me about what you have to do and where are good places to go. (Sean, Interview)

In addition to conversations with friends, Sean was invited by a friend to visit a few colleges as well, including Kenmont. Whether on a campus visit or by “*sitting around and eavesdropping,*” Sean’s friends were perhaps the only source of information about college beyond his own independent research (Sean, Interview).

Kyle also spoke extensively with friends about going to college but, as he shared, “*I don’t think they knew what they wanted as well*” (Kyle, Interview). Unlike Sean, Kyle was suspicious about the value and knowledge his friends might offer regarding the college search and application process. As a high-achieving student himself, Kyle began to compile his list of criteria in consultation with his friends. As he described:

Name brand, prestige, and the academic quality were pretty much the only metrics I was going to pay attention to. Because as far as student life, like I said, I don’t think I really had a concept of that. I didn’t know how student life would differ from a small school to a big school. I didn’t have a very good consciousness of that. Nobody was actually telling me these things, because I didn’t discuss the choice of college with a lot of people. Just with me and my friends. (Kyle, Interview)

As the eldest sibling in his family, Kyle did not have an older brother or sister (like Evan and Logan) to help him navigate and make sense of the information he was gathering about different colleges. Since his parents were so focused on St. Bonaventure, Kyle’s friendship group was the next best resource.

Similar to Sean, some of Kyle’s visits to college and university campuses were a direct result of his friendship group. From small private colleges to large research universities, these visits illuminated the different types of higher education institutions:

[I visited Augustana College] because a friend of mine was looking at it and I just decided to join him. I looked at it and was, like, "This is so cool." It's a small school. But I think the next year, I looked at Urbana-Champaign and was similarly blown away by the vastness of the campus. (Kyle, Interview)

While Kyle found different features of the different campuses appealing, what remained constant was his desire to attend a college with a strong academic reputation. Kyle learned about Kenmont through a friend, and it was through that relationship that he researched the college and ultimately decided to apply:

I have a friend from high school actually here, who is the same age as me. His sister came here two years before us, and she seemed to really like it. And he was thinking about applying too. It turns out many years later that he tells me that, "Yeah, I applied early decision because my mom didn't think I could compete with you, Kyle." So that was kind of funny learning later. It was just really funny that his mother thought that both of us applying would affect our ultimate chance of getting into this school. But I didn't really pay that much thought to it, I was just, like, "Oh this is Kenmont. It has a free application; I'll do it." (Kyle, Interview)

From conversations about college to actual visits to campus, Kyle's friendship group was a critical part of his experience. Similar to Sean and Evan, Kyle was introduced to Kenmont College through association.

Noah's college search process was dramatically impacted by the friends with whom he associated during high school. His penchant for reading books ultimately impacted his approach to his studies, and he became an exceptionally strong student which afforded him the opportunity to take AP courses. While the advanced courses helped ready him for the academic expectations of college, they were also the place where he made several friends:

I was fortunate enough to have a really good friend group [in high school]. It's one of the things that I think my high school does well. Or, I was lucky that there was a group of us who did really well in school, but we weren't socially awkward or social outcasts or anything like that. So, I had a lot of friends who were going to college. I had a friend who is now at Princeton, a woman at Stanford. So, I guess around eleventh or twelfth grade, the people

who I was in classes with consistently—cause if you're in AP English or AP Biology, it's a consistent group of people taking these classes—we were all pretty close, so college would come up as a topic for conversation. (Noah, Interview)

College was a frequent topic of discussion among this group of friends. Similar to Logan's experience, Noah's friends would talk about where they were applying and how many applications they were submitting. In some instances, conversations elevated to college visits with friends as well. As Noah shared:

I think we [my high school friends and I] were pretty ambitious, I guess, in that we sort of just wanted to go to the best place we could. And that sort of encourages research and looking at things, and that's how I found Kenmont. I applied to several other places also. We visited Vanderbilt because I had been admitted there. I also applied to Amherst; of course we couldn't go visit because it was too far away. And in the end I just decided it was too far away. (Noah, Interview)

Noah's interactions not only helped him garner a better understanding of the college search and application process, but also helped his friends strengthen and support each other's expectations for themselves. As Noah characterized it, “[*The college search process with my friends*] can almost be described as an atmosphere of wanting to go someplace and achieve and be different” (Noah, Interview). Having grown up in an environment where education was undervalued and drug addiction was present, it is not surprising to hear Noah characterize college as an opportunity where he could start afresh and excel.

For many of the case participants, peers and friendship groups played an instrumental role in these students' pre-college environments. Through conversations with peers, through interactions with families, or during visits to actual campuses, the case participants were active in conversations and experiences that shaped their views and understandings of the

college search and application process. Some had their views and aspirations validated, while others had their expectations lifted.

School: Preparation for college

In addition to the aforementioned actors in the case participants' lives—parents, siblings, and friends—the school environments in which they studied, learned, and prepared for college also played an instrumental role. From the ethos and culture of the schools they attended to the course offerings provided within their curricula, the schooling experiences of the case participants had an impact on their considerations of and preparation for college. As the following comments reflect, some of the case participants felt well equipped and supported by their pre-college educational experiences while others did not.

Evan's intellectual curiosity and high-achieving nature can be traced back to elementary school. As he shared, he was introduced to programming for gifted and talented students in fourth grade:

Since I was in fourth grade I was placed in gifted programs. On the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, I was scoring as a senior in high school when I was in fifth grade. I just remember when I got all my tests back it said thirteenth grade. From since I was in fifth or sixth grade, I was, like, "What does thirteenth grade mean?" It means you're scoring higher than a senior in high school.
(Evan, Interview)

When he attended high school, Evan pursued the most rigorous series of courses available to him. As he stated affirmatively, *"I definitely took the most challenging curriculum you could take at [my high school]"* (Evan, Interview). Since Evan's high school did not offer AP courses, Evan completed college-level coursework at the local community college as well as at Stanford to supplement what his high school offered. As he explained:

[The local community college] teaches classes at [my high school]. We have teachers who have master's degrees who teach college classes and regular classes. So I took psychology, government, two composition courses, and speech through the local community college. I definitely maxed out. I also did a summer program at Stanford University the summer before my senior year of high school. So I took eight credits at Stanford. I took a 200-level psychology class and a U.S. foreign policy class while I was there. That was definitely when I realized that I was able to really compete with everyone academically when I was getting B's at Stanford when I was eighteen. (Evan, Interview)

Despite Evan's high school not offering a series of AP courses, he completed seven college-level courses prior to matriculating at Kenmont. These experiences, coupled with his high school curriculum, sufficiently prepared Evan for the rigorous coursework he encountered at Kenmont. As a product of a public high school, Evan proudly stated, *"I'd say that [my high school] did a pretty good job, given that some of my [college] peers went to prestigious prep schools"* (Evan, Interview).

Evan's high school was less supportive in terms of the college advising it provided. Having grown up in rural Iowa, Evan characterized his high school as encouraging students to attend one of the state's three public universities regardless of their abilities:

I remember the most amazing thing to me is when I ask my college peers, "Where did people in your high school go to college?" And they would be like, "One kid went to Yale." That was just not on the table at my school. You went to Iowa State, UNI, or Iowa if you did really well. And if not, you went to a community college. I remember asking a peer of mine, "Dude, you're valedictorian. Why don't you consider going to..." And he was like, "What? I'm going to UNI. I already talked to the admission counselor." It was not on the table. It was not expected, and guidance counselors had no intention [to advise otherwise] and were not championing [alternative schools] in any way. [My high school] was great at serving the community it was serving. It was great that it was preparing kids to go to Iowa State or Iowa. But it in no way encouraged you to look at anything else. To look at Reed or something. There's no way that my guidance counselor even knows where Reed College is. And then when I meet someone who says, "Oh, yeah, my guidance counselor told me to look at Reed and [other liberal arts colleges]." My guidance counselor doesn't even know what these schools

are. My guidance counselor is just a football coach who needed a job so he could coach football. (Evan, Interview)

This vignette provides some insight into the culture of Evan's high school. The college-going ethos of this particular microsystem was supported (if not directed) by the advice Evan and his peers received from the guidance office. If a student was interested in attending one of the public universities in Iowa, there was ample guidance and support. When students' interests lay beyond this particular cluster of schools, then they were on their own.

Similar to Evan, Juan traced his educational journey back to elementary school. Unlike Evan, Juan grew up in one of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States—Los Angeles. As a child, Juan attended three different elementary schools. In fact, he did not attend a school within the district where he resided until high school. His second grade teacher brought magnet schools to the attention of his parents. As Juan recounted:

In second grade, my teacher recommended that I apply to go to a magnet school. She told my parents, and my mother filled out the forms, and I was able to go by third grade to a magnet school. And I stayed on that path all the way through to high school. (Juan, Interview)

Juan was aware that the magnet schools were generally considered better than schools in the regular public school system. Additionally, he was under the impression that magnet schools would provide a greater opportunity to high-achieving students. The environmental influence of his magnet elementary school was made apparent to him in fifth grade. As he shared:

In fifth grade, my school teacher was already talking about proper essay writing and how this was going to help us for college. I was, like, "Why are you even talking about this right now?" It was just very focused on the importance of education in the magnet classes. (Juan, Interview)

While the magnet school focus on college preparation was introduced in fifth grade, it was also a part of the culture of his high school environment. Unlike Evan, Juan had access to ample Advanced Placement and Honors courses. He also completed 15 credits at the local community college. By graduation, Juan had accumulated a 4.096 weighted GPA, earning him a class rank of 18 out of 1,047 students. When asked to comment on the extent to which his high school prepared him for college, Juan shared:

Definitely academically, I just remember in high school especially everyone was talking about how the classes are of a different level and how much of a greater effort you need to make in each class and the emphasis on writing papers and presenting an argument. Academically, I had a lot of reinforcement and help transitioning into college courses. Also, in my high school we were encouraged to take community college courses. So, I took some of those early and got a feel for college academics. Of course, I took AP courses, and those are supposed to be structured like a college course. [Overall], I feel like academically I was given a lot of preparatory work and help. (Juan, Interview)

From elementary through secondary school, the learning environments in which Juan was immersed provided not only an academic context for him to grow intellectually but also shaped and affirmed his college-going identity. From a very early age, Juan was actively engaged in educational environments that reinforced his aspirations to continue his education.

Unlike Evan and Juan, James did not trace his educational journey back to elementary school. Reflecting on his educational experiences, James attributes his work ethic to his academic success. Similar to Evan and Juan, James pursued a rigorous set of courses in high school. Specifically, James completed four Honors courses and 10 AP courses, ultimately graduating with a 4.092 weighted GPA. These marks secured him a class rank of 11 out of

249 students. He earned a 34 composite score on the ACT and scored in the 82nd percentile on the SAT Physics Subject Test. As he shared:

I always worked hard in school. And I think that's a fear that a lot of people have, for parents especially when they look at their kid, "Well, my kid didn't work really at all in high school. My kid didn't have to work. It came easy to them." It's kind of a fear when they go to college. (James, Interview)

In addition to his work ethic, and distinct from the other case participants, James' car accident in high school had a profound influence on his outlook on life, in general, including how he viewed and approached his high school coursework:

[After the accident] I remember starting to go back to school, and my AP physics teacher was, like, "You should probably drop the class." And I was, like, "No, I really like this." And I really dove into my physics as a place to get away from everything else, to start to get my life back on track. It took so much cognitive energy that I felt secure inside of it. And I became a really good physics student, which was very cool at the time, but I don't know if I should've held onto that until now. Being a physics major, you know? I've held onto that identity as a physicist forever. It was something that I used to climb out of the fragmented rubble of my life...clinging onto physics, that helped me come out and re-establish my identity. (James, Interview)

James noted his high school environment offered him a safe intellectual space to recover from the trauma he experienced from the car accident. In addition to immersing himself in the subject of physics, James found himself devoting more time and energy to his other subjects as well:

I was also taking an English class with a really great teacher: I think a lot of people have this teacher that helps them to realize that you don't just write papers because you have a page quota that you have to make. You write papers because you have something to say; you have ideas; you have unique ideas and you want to communicate them to people. And writing is a good way to do that. So don't just pick this theme for a story that you want to analyze. "What theme do you want to analyze?" was more the question. [After the accident] I took a broader interest in [all] my subjects. I think even though I was delving more deeply into physics, I took a more thorough interest in my English courses. And later, my senior year, I took an art

course, which is one of the most transformative courses I've ever taken.
(James, Interview)

James' high school environment provided him the intellectual space to regain his cognitive and emotional footing to move beyond his accident. In addition to helping him prepare for college, his educational endeavors assumed a new meaning for him personally. As he described in his admission essay:

Before my accident, I always thought of church and school as activities I was involved in to make my parents happy, not because I really wanted to be. But after the accident, I began to realize why these activities were so important, and I now value spirituality and learning as the two highest virtues. (James, Admission Essay)

As a microsystem, James' high school environment provided him ample opportunity to immerse himself intellectually, which yielded a new understanding of his motivations and sense of purpose.

Having attended a private parochial school in rural California, Michael's experience was quite distinct when compared to those of the other participants. Similar to a few of his first-generation peers in this study, Michael completed 11 Honors courses in high school along with five AP courses. At graduation, he had earned a cumulative, weighted GPA of 4.25. Beyond the course offerings provided within his high school curriculum, Michael spoke at length about the college-preparatory ethos and culture of his high school. As he described simply, *"The big difference, really, was that the emphasis at [my] high school was on where you are going to college, not if you were going to college"* (Michael, Interview).

Rather than referring to the college-preparatory focus of his high school as part of its culture, Michael referred to it as a *"system."* From his perspective, his high school had a very effective system through which students were prepared for and coached through the

college selection and application process. The pervasiveness of the college-preparatory system, or culture, shaped not only the content of the curriculum but also, at a more granular level, the actual classroom assignments. Michael provided an example of how this system of preparation worked:

My high school had a very good system. They had a very good AP system. They had very good college prep. A lot of the times it was, like, "Okay, this next homework assignment in English, instead of just writing an essay, I want you to write your college admissions essay." So everybody had one by their first month of senior year. The little things like that across all the programs—it was just very, very highly geared toward getting people to college. So the great teachers helped even more. And the ones who weren't so great were still fitting into that system and were still contributing quite a bit. They really have a great system for that. (Michael, Interview)

By requiring Michael and his peers to draft a college admissions essay as part of a senior-level English course, the high school made its expectations explicit. Students at this high school were expected to go to college, and, to help them achieve that goal, the high school shaped the students' experiences to move them along that pathway.

According to Michael, the institution where students would actually attend college was contingent upon their high school academic performance. While high-achieving students applied to selective schools, those with modest academic records applied to state universities and community colleges. Michael characterized the diverse post-secondary pathways that his peers pursued in the following:

If you're not that serious, then you would go to the junior college. Or, if you don't have the greatest grades then you go to one of the state schools nearby. If you have medium grades or you're not super ambitious, or you know you worked really hard but didn't have the highest GPA, then you could end up at one of the University of California schools. But a lot of the top students...I was in a lot of the Honors classes and AP classes. Everybody's list had either a bunch of top liberal arts colleges or a bunch of Ivies, Stanford, places like that. (Michael, Interview)

There is a post-secondary option for everyone, which affirms Michael's assertion that it is not "if" one will go to college; it is a question of "where."

The college-preparatory culture of Michael's high school was not bound to the school and the classroom. Navigating the college search process—from campus visits to paying for college—included additional areas in which the high school extended considerable support to both students and their families. Michael shared the following with respect to visiting colleges:

My school would organize trips to go visit colleges. I went on bus trips all of my last three years. And each trip was a one- to three-night trip, hitting a bunch of colleges, depending on where it went. On those trips I visited Stanford, Berkeley, St. Mary's, some of the UCs. We visited USC when we visited Southern California, UCLA, and Thomas Aquinas College, a really small 80-person college in the middle of nowhere. We visited a bunch of schools. (Michael, Interview)

As a first-generation student, Michael was exposed to an array of institutions of higher education—from large to small, public to private, research-oriented to teaching-focused. Clearly, Michael was provided a broad and deep glimpse into higher education that began during his sophomore year in high school. This exposure was a direct result of the college-going ethos of his high school.

Coupled with visiting different colleges and universities, Michael's high school assumed an active role in educating both students and parents about college costs and financial aid. As Michael shared:

There were always a lot of talks [about financial aid] in my high school. You had to talk to the guidance counselors about that at some point in the first couple years, and they had meetings about that with our parents. One of the big focuses at [my high school] was on financial aid. And that was one of the things they always stressed: a lot of the state schools have lower price tags than the private schools, but if you have really good grades and you go to a

private school, you're probably going to pay less than you would at a state school because you'll get a lot more financial aid. (Michael, Interview)

Taking an active position on educating parents and students about financing a college education conveys once more the high school's mission of sending its graduates to college. Although Kenmont was his second-choice college, Michael was very pleased with his decision. Unsurprisingly, when asked about the extent to which his high school prepared him for college, Michael responded, *"I was definitely prepared for the next step"* (Michael, Interview).

Sean attended the local public high school and was the valedictorian of his class of 128 students. Completing eight Honors and AP courses, Sean graduated with straight A's and a cumulative weighted GPA of 4.132. Similar to Evan and Juan, Sean recalled being placed on the track for high-achieving students when he was in elementary school. In his elementary school, higher-performing students were placed on the "red" path, whereas lower-performing students were placed on the "blue" path. As Sean recalled, *"Even as far back as fifth grade we'd have math classes divided by paths. Pretty much me and every one of my friends who went anywhere besides the college in town was on the red path"* (Sean, Interview). This educational trajectory continued through middle and high school, shaping those who were categorized as college-bound, versus those who were not. As Sean described, *"It was just the structure of the system. There was a very distinct differentiation between the academic path for people who were expected to go to college and the path for those who weren't expected to do that"* (Sean, Interview).

Sean described the student population of his high school as largely dichotomized. There was a substantive group of students who were the children of professors from the local

university, and another group of students who were the children of farmers. Sean described the students of his high school in the following:

It's maybe 130 people in a class or so. It's kind of like the population dichotomized between the agricultural people, the people whose parents are farmers, Future Farmers of America and things like that. Then there are other people who are the progeny of professors at [the local university]. I guess there's a whole class in the middle that doesn't fit in to those, which constitutes the majority, obviously. (Sean, Interview)

When discussing the extent to which his high school prepared him for college, Sean provided a mixed response. He commented on both the academic preparation as well as the other activities that are expected of college applicants:

Academically, maybe not so much. My capacity for reading and learning, that's kind of internally motivated. But all of the things that were necessary to get my foot in the door at college, like all the extra-curricular activities, and all of the letters of recommendations, all of that, that definitely came from my school. (Sean, Interview)

While Sean cited a couple of courses that offered him an intellectual challenge (e.g., Honors AP European History), generally his high school academic experience did not equip him any further than his own intellectual curiosities. Nevertheless, his high school environment provided him the opportunity to engage in a range of extra-curricular activities, including Scholastic Bowl, the Math Team, and marching band.

Kyle's educational journey began at a small, private parochial elementary school and concluded at a large, suburban public high school. This change was directly attributed to his parents' desire to have Kyle and his younger brother to be able to matriculate at a stronger public high school. To accomplish this, they moved from the city of Chicago to a suburb with a strong school system. The transition from a private-school setting to a public school was difficult for Kyle:

The transition from private school to public school was kind of rough. The kids were meaner. There were different expectations at a public school. At a private school, it was very much “I’m going to hold your hand.” The close attention paid more at the private school—I didn’t find that at the public school. I was kind of struck by the slightly more independence that they gave you. You would have a class period and you were expected to go this classroom or that classroom. Whereas, at my Catholic elementary school, that was all consolidated into one teacher. (Kyle, Interview)

In high school, Kyle had access to a plethora of Honors and Advanced Placement courses. By the time Kyle graduated, he had completed six Honors courses and eight AP courses, yielding a weighted cumulative GPA of 4.395. Despite his very strong academic performance, Kyle did not believe that his high school academic experiences prepared him very well for college:

As far as high school went, it wasn’t rigorous intellectually. Everything was a multiple choice test. You weren’t expected to interpret things very much. You just kind of got a textbook and regurgitated facts. I was very successful at this model. It was very easy for me to get A’s because there wasn’t much thought to it. It was just a matter of how much you could study and tolerate this boring model. (Kyle, Interview)

Kyle’s frustration stemmed, in part, because the main reason he and his family moved to the suburbs was to provide him and his brother access to a strong school district. As Kyle continued:

It’s strange because my high school was not an academically underachieving school. It was a standard suburban school. It didn’t introduce to me the concept of rigor that you would need to actually fight for things—that you would need to challenge ideas and speak to them in a classroom setting. (Kyle, Interview)

Having performed well academically, finishing in the top 10% of his class, Kyle departed high school believing he was ready for the academic demands of college. For Kyle, the structure and delivery of his high school academic coursework did not reflect what he ultimately encountered at Kenmont College, which will be explored further in this chapter.

Parents, siblings, high school friendship groups, and schooling environments served as influential microsystems in the lives of the case participants. From an ecological perspective, each of these pre-college microsystems contributed in different, yet complementary, ways to the case participants' considerations and decisions pertaining to their college preparation and college search processes. Whether these microsystems functioned as supportive influences or represented negative circumstances from which the case participants were wishing to escape, they were all influential and provided valuable insight into how each of these case participants arrived at the decision to pursue a college degree.

Choosing Kenmont

Despite the various ways the case participants' pre-college microsystems influenced their college preparation and search processes, ultimately they all chose to attend Kenmont College. As previously mentioned, Kenmont is a highly selective liberal arts college located in the Midwest. As a residential liberal arts college, Kenmont enrolls between 1,500 and 2,000 students, of which more than 85% live on campus. The college is characterized by its small enrollment, residential atmosphere, intimate class sizes (i.e., a 9:1 student-to-faculty ratio), and its flexible but rigorous liberal arts curriculum. As a small college community, Kenmont provides students with an intellectually challenging academic experience and with ample opportunities to get involved with an array of student groups and activities, including music ensembles, intramural and varsity athletics, and countless interest groups.

In exploring *why* the case participants ultimately chose Kenmont College, four themes emerged as predominant reasons: (1) Institutional reputation, (2) Academic prestige,

(3) Financial aid, and (4) Enrollment and class size. Following a detailed discussion of these four themes, a brief review is provided of some of the reasons individual case participants presented as carrying considerable weight in their decisions to attend Kenmont. The section concludes with a discussion of reasons not presented by the case participants.

Institutional reputation

Attending a prestigious, selective institution was of considerable importance to several of the case participants. This aspiration was made explicitly when reviewing a composite list of the institutions the case participants applied to attend college, which included Harvard, Brown, Cal Tech, MIT, Claremont McKenna, Washington University in St. Louis, Amherst, the University of Notre Dame, as well as highly selective liberal arts colleges in the Midwest (Admission Files). The decision was simple for Kyle: he would attend the most elite school to which he was admitted.

It was a matter of which school I had gotten into that was the most elite, and that was Kenmont at the time. So, I learned more about it, and it just seemed like I might really value this small school atmosphere. (Kyle, Interview)

Noah also shared Kyle's desire to attend "*the best*" school to which he was admitted, even if he was unsure of his goodness criteria. As he stated, "*I wanted to go to the best place, even if I wasn't sure exactly what that meant. I was excited about going somewhere and getting the best education I could*" (Noah, Interview). While *U.S. News & World Report* rankings were mentioned only by a couple participants, when asked about the importance of national rankings on their decision to attend Kenmont, all of the participants stated the national rankings were either somewhat or very important (Questionnaire).

Academic prestige

In addition to Kenmont's general institutional reputation, the case participants were drawn particularly to colleges known for their academics. When asked about the importance of Kenmont's academic reputation, seven of the eight case participants claimed it was very important, whereas the eighth participant indicated it was somewhat important (Questionnaire). Having a prior history of performing well academically, all of the case participants made explicit their desires to attend an institution with a strong academic reputation.

For Sean, a college's academic reputation was the primary criterion upon which his decision was based. As he explained, *"I would look at things like how hard the students rate the school. That was my primary evaluation criterion"* (Sean, Interview). When pressed for other criteria, Sean quipped, *"What is else is there? I just think that the effort that students put in is more telling of the value"* (Sean, Interview).

To Logan, an institution's academic reputation weighed heavily in his college search criteria, especially when he was researching and considering Kenmont. As he explained:

One of the factors was that I knew Kenmont was a premiere academic institution. I knew that I was going to come here and be challenged. And a lot of that was through those standardized college reviews and rankings that don't accurately portray any school. After a while, you [begin to] see the name of the school you're looking at on multiple lists. (Logan, Interview)

After consulting various rankings and multiple web sites, Logan concluded that Kenmont would most likely offer him the type of academic experience that would challenge him.

Kyle initially heard about Kenmont's strong academic programs through a high school friend. As he explained, *"I heard very good things about the academic reputation from a fellow senior whose sister was already a sophomore at Kenmont"* (Kyle, Interview).

He coupled these firsthand accounts of the academic rigor at Kenmont with its *U.S. News & World Report* ranking, both of which affirmed his decision to make a campus visit and ultimately choose to enroll (Kyle, Interview).

Financial aid

In addition to Kenmont's institutional reputation and academic prestige, nearly all of the case participants commented on the importance of their financial aid package for making an otherwise expensive education affordable and, therefore, accessible. In the fall of 2009, when the case participants matriculated as first-year students, Kenmont College had a comprehensive fee (i.e., tuition, fees, room, and board) in excess of \$45,000 per academic year. Not taking into account yearly increases, a four-year degree from Kenmont would cost over \$180,000 without the assistance of scholarships and other forms of financial aid.

Evan, whose elder brother preceded him at Kenmont, was very explicit about his desire and focus to attend this particular college. While he was concerned that his ACT score, at 26, may not be sufficient to get accepted, he was both admitted and offered a generous financial aid award:

When it came down to it, I just wanted to go to Kenmont, so I applied early decision and luckily got it. Knowing that my ACT and stuff wasn't up to par, probably what the average is—so that was a really exciting day at my household. Also, the financial aid at Kenmont was a big reason; I wouldn't be going anywhere for cheaper than this. (Evan, Interview)

Kyle's assessment of his financial aid offer was more colorful. In combination with Kenmont's status as an elite school, the scholarships and financial assistance he received facilitated his decision:

The financial aid package was ridiculous! Ridiculously good. I was, like, wow! I'm going to have to pay so little if I go here. So that was another

attractive part of it. I really didn't know what I wanted out of student life, but I just knew that this place had a good academic reputation and that I was getting great aid. So, those were the two things that pulled me in. (Kyle, Interview)

Logan was cognizant of how his financial aid offer impacted him personally and his ability to attend Kenmont as well as how these dollars would impact his mother and father. He observed, *“Even if money was an issue, being able to be here at Kenmont College that accommodates our financial needs so well, it at least significantly decreased the impact that it was going to have on my parents”* (Logan, Interview).

Michael received his offer of admission and his financial aid award prior to visiting Kenmont. Consequently, his aid package was attractive enough to prompt him to consider Kenmont more fully. As he described:

Kenmont had one of the best financial aid offers, so I flew out and visited. I hadn't really visited any of the other out-of-state colleges I applied to. But when I came out and visited Kenmont, I realized I actually liked this better than any of the other schools I visited. I really love this place. (Michael, Interview)

For Noah, it was the financial aid policies at Kenmont and other elite liberal arts colleges that opened his eyes and mind to the vast opportunities in higher education. In his estimation, private colleges were reserved for those who had the resources to pay their hefty tuition costs. However, his discovery of need-based aid and the practice of meeting 100% of a student's demonstrated need deconstructed his notions of what institutions were within reach in his mind:

One of the things I was actually surprised about—which is strange, if you look at elite, liberal arts colleges—was how generous the need-based financial aid was, and that they'd cover 100% of financial need, however that's determined. That gave me a lot of hope because I actually didn't know it was a resource. I just thought these people went to these places and paid a hundred thousand dollars. Once I found that out, I just felt like the doors

were open cause we're not well off by any means, but I know that my mom could pay the couple thousand dollars a semester, whatever it might be that we have to pay. (Noah, Interview)

These comments clearly illustrated the importance of financial aid on the case participants' decisions to attend Kenmont. For Michael, it prompted him to schedule a visit to campus, which was instrumental in his decision to choose Kenmont. For Noah, his discovery of different financial aid practices (e.g., need-based aid, meeting 100% of students' demonstrated need) elevated the kinds of schools he aspired to attend, including Kenmont. For others, the financial aid award made an otherwise expensive education quite affordable. These accounts by the case participants give insight regarding the various reasons why, as a group, they cited their financial aid offer as either very important or somewhat important in choosing Kenmont over other colleges (Questionnaire).

Enrollment and class size

Kenmont's small enrollment and the impact it was perceived to have on the campus community, especially the classroom environment, were attractive features to a number of the case participants. While visiting his brother at Kenmont, Evan made a point to attend a few classes as a prospective student. These visits both affirmed Evan's desire to attend a smaller school and provided him insight into the classroom experience at an institution such as Kenmont. As he stated, "*After visiting places like Kenmont, I never wanted to go to [a state school] because I had no interest in sitting in a lecture hall with two hundred kids*" (Evan, Interview). When pressed to cite what appealed to him about his classroom visits at Kenmont, Evan stated:

It's like fourteen kids around a table talking. I'm sure it was slightly intimidating. It just seemed so informal. You just grab a seat wherever; you

don't have an assigned spot. I think it was really the dialogue between the students and that it was very much discussion-based. Yeah, that was definitely what I was drawn to. (Evan, Interview)

A native of Los Angeles, Juan graduated from a magnet program that was situated within a large public high school. His graduating class comprised more than 1,000 students. Therefore, attending a college with a smaller enrollment was quite appealing to him. As he explained, *"The idea of going to a smaller institution attracted me because I had always been in big, public schools. It would've been nice to have more attention from the teacher and whatnot"* (Juan, Interview).

With high school friends attending some of the public universities in his home state of California, Michael found Kenmont's enrollment appealing because it would offer a very different learning environment from the environment encountered by some of his peers at large public universities:

I heard horror stories about UCs where you have eight-hundred-person classes. A friend of mine goes to Cal-Poly, one of the state schools in California, and she had an intro to biology class of 850 [students]. And I was just, like, "What!?" Can you even fit that many students in an auditorium? That's not a class; you're just watching a video at that point. (Michael, Interview)

Noah also expressed an interest in enrollment, notably because of its impact on the size of the classes. When pressed about how he went about researching colleges' average class sizes, he stated simply, *"I went to U.S. News & World Report or something and clicked on Kenmont College. They'll have the faculty-to-student ratio and the typical class size"* (Noah, Interview). For Noah, enrollment and class size played a greater role in his search criteria than for the other case participants.

Additional reasons

In addition to Kenmont's institutional selectivity, academic prestige, financial aid, and enrollment and class size, some of the individual case participants cited additional reasons for choosing to attend Kenmont. While in high school, Evan visited his older brother at Kenmont on multiple occasions. Through these visits, Evan developed a sense of the campus community at Kenmont. Its liberal leanings and progressive atmosphere appealed to him. When explaining why he ultimately chose Kenmont, Evan explained, "*the political activism, the progressive mindset, the fact that the students were really empowered*" (Evan, Interview). Through multiple exposures during his visits to campus, Evan developed a greater understanding of Kenmont's cultural underpinnings and how they shaped the student experience.

Kenmont's rural location was important to James. Having grown up in a rural area in northern Illinois, James' parents had instilled in him the value of rural areas. As James explained, "*Something that influenced me from my parents was a very pro-rural, anti-urban lifestyle, even though I've learned that I really like cities. But I didn't know that about myself at the time. So I looked exclusively for rural colleges*" (James, Interview).

Juan shared James' interest in Kenmont's rural location, but for different reasons. Having grown up in urban Los Angeles, Juan believed the absence of many urban distractions provided by Kenmont's geographic location would foster a suitable environment for him to concentrate on his academic studies:

I thought it would be interesting to be able to study in such a sort of nice community where you could really put your academics forward; and this is a small town [where] you don't have some of the problems you do in urban settings. That was also attractive. (Juan, Interview)

While not ubiquitously shared among the case participants, the importance of Kenmont's liberal leanings to Evan and the importance of Kenmont's rural location to both James and Juan were additional reasons motivating case participants to elect to attend Kenmont College.

Surprisingly immaterial

Despite the many reasons that attracted the case participants to Kenmont, there were a few topics commonly associated with liberal arts colleges and/or first-generation students that did not materialize.

To begin, the vast majority of the case participants did not mention the fact that Kenmont was a "liberal arts college" as a reason for applying or choosing to attend. As a traditional liberal arts college, Kenmont's focus on the humanities, social sciences, and sciences has a direct impact on the structure of the curriculum and the types of majors offered. This lack of consideration of Kenmont's academic focus and structure was striking, considering the central role the liberal arts plays as part of the college's identity.

The proximity of Kenmont College to each of the case participants' homes was inconsequential. Six of the eight case participants lived between 101 and 500 miles from Kenmont, whereas the other two participants lived in excess of 500 miles from the College (Questionnaire). When asked about the importance of attending a college near home, only Kyle indicated that it was somewhat important (Kyle, Questionnaire). The remaining case participants indicated that it was not important. Although Evan's home was the closest to Kenmont, he shared, *"I've never been home other than during a break"* (Evan, Interview).

Finally, a measure by which many colleges and universities are judged—by accreditation agencies and public rankings—is the rate at which their students graduate from

college. Although Kenmont's four-year, six-year, and overall graduation rates (83%, 84%, and 88% respectively) are high, this aspect was of little importance to any of the participants. Graduation rate was not mentioned during any of the interviews, and it was identified as only somewhat important to three of the eight participants and as not important at all to the remaining five participants (Questionnaire).

Experiencing Kenmont

The remainder of this chapter explores the Kenmont College environment as experienced by the case participants. Friends and peers, professors, the classroom environment, and the residential campus community emerged as additional microsystems having a distinct influence on the participants' experiences. This section is divided into two parts—co-curricular and curricular environment. The co-curricular environment includes the case participants' experiences that occurred primarily outside the classroom, focusing on their interactions with peers, friends, and other members and features of the broader campus community. The curricular environment focuses on the case participants' academic experiences, including how they encountered and navigated the curriculum, chose courses, and interacted with and responded to the expectations of their professors. The findings are more clearly delineated for the purpose of this research than actually expressed by the case participants, whose experiences—and the ways in which their varied microsystems interacted—were far more fluid than presented in this discussion.

Co-curricular environment

The various ways in which college students are affected by their curricular and co-curricular experiences are well documented (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, et al., 2005;

Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012). Much learning and discovery occurs in, but is not restricted to, the college classroom. Many who have attended college, including the eight case participants in this study, share the sentiments that much is learned outside the classroom. As Logan testified:

I have to say that the majority of my learning at this school has happened outside of the classroom. Personally, I think that's awesome. I'm obviously learning in the classroom, but I'm learning so much more by interacting with the things that are happening at this school [and] the people that are at this school. (Logan, Interview)

Logan's comment speaks to the nuanced features of Kenmont's co-curricular environment, and how its happenings and inhabitants influence the college-going experience. Four themes emerged as key features of the participants' co-curricular experience: (1) Pervasive intellectual community; (2) Supportive campus environment; (3) Open and diverse culture; and (4) Unbounded learning opportunities.

Pervasive intellectualism

Seven of the eight case participants graduated from high school with weighted GPAs above a 4.0 average. Of the six who had a high school rank, five were in the top 10% of their high school class and the sixth ranked in the top quarter. Compared to their peers, these young men were among the brightest students in their high school environments. However, when compared to one another, and to the remainder of their peers at Kenmont, their intellectually elite status was no longer inimitable. At Kenmont, nearly everyone is smart.

As Michael stated:

College has been eye-opening in that respect. Up to and through high school, I was always one of the smartest people I knew. But now, I'm surrounded by people who are just as smart as me or smarter, which has been good for me definitely. (Michael, Interview)

Kyle shared Michael's appreciation of the smart, intellectual students who were seemingly ubiquitous at Kenmont. In addition, Kyle acknowledged that this may, indeed, be a rare opportunity:

You have this concentrated amount of very intellectually motivated people, and I don't think I'm going to have that again ever in my life, so I really am grateful for that. (Kyle, Interview)

Evan, on the other hand, was relieved to finally be among a group of individuals with whom he could discuss topics that captured his interest. In high school, such conversations were rare, simply because he did not have many friends who shared his interests. This was not an issue at Kenmont:

I definitely would say the biggest relief was that at lunch I'd have discussions about Marxism or politics, and that was something that I never would have experienced, except for between me and [a close friend] in high school. That was the biggest eye-opener. I remember so often thinking in my head: I would never have had this discussion in so many other social circles that I could be in right now. And that was really great. (Evan, Interview)

Whether at lunch or in the residence hall, intellectual discourse at Kenmont pervaded campus life. Michael described this pervasiveness as Kenmont's "academic culture":

Here is just much more academic culture all around. I feel like I could just come back to my roommates and talk to them about what I just learned in class. And they might come home talking about what they learned in class. (Michael, Interview)

To some of the other case participants, including Juan, who no longer held the status as one of the smartest students in the room, it caused some doubt and angst. In fact, despite Juan's strong high school performance, he questioned his readiness and ability to meet the demands of this new place:

I was worried. Coming to this private school I was thinking, "Am I even up to par to do these things? Am I going to be able to perform as well as my

classmates who probably come from all these well-educated backgrounds?” So there was always that kind of idea in my mind or worry. (Juan, Interview)

When Logan first applied to Kenmont, he was originally waitlisted. Although he was eventually offered admission, the process of being on the waitlist was enough for him to question whether or not he was “good enough” to be at Kenmont. As a result, he felt slightly intimidated by his peers upon arrival:

When I did first get here...a lot of the students, I think, were more intimidating. I was coming in off the waitlist, so I think I already had this preconceived notion that I wasn't good enough to get in just off the basic enrollment. So, I think, when I got here, I just assumed that everyone was already smarter than me. (Logan, Interview)

James arrived at Kenmont with a relentless focus on his academics. Having taken a gap year to volunteer in the Northwest, he was eager to reimmerge himself in an academic setting. While Kenmont's academic culture and high-achieving students certainly made this easy for James, he was eventually able to see how this focus impacted other areas of his college experience:

I wish coming in my first year I had my social scene more as an equal priority to my academic scene. Those first-week conditions determine a lot of the rest of your four years here. And I just didn't care about students, my peers, as much as I should've. I was just focused on getting my game together. (James, Interview)

Whether the case participants found Kenmont to be welcoming and refreshing or uneasy and intimidating, the perceived pervasive intellectualism at the College was a key feature of the co-curricular environment.

Supportive community

Another feature of Kenmont mentioned explicitly by some case participants and alluded to by others was the extent to which they perceived they were members of a

supportive community. A learning community of high-achieving students might (and could) result in a divisive, competitive atmosphere. However, this was not the experience of the case participants. The following examples provide insight into the various forms of support some of the case participants experienced outside the classroom.

Born and reared in one of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States, Juan compared his experience of growing up in Los Angeles to the community he encountered at Kenmont College:

Back home in the area where I live we're not too close [with many people], even with my neighbors. Having such a rushed lifestyle, people don't spend too much time directly outside. It's an urban setting, so you don't really want to be outside. Then coming here it's completely the opposite; you know everyone on your floor [because] you see them every day. I didn't really know what to expect coming here to the college social life. What I've found it to be is that it's a close-knit community. (Juan, Interview)

Even though Juan grew up around millions of people and attended a high school with more than 4,000 students, he had never before encountered the sort of close-knit community he discovered at Kenmont. While at times missing the anonymity afforded by urban living, Juan shared that there were significant benefits to this small, residential experience:

[During] my first year, a month or so into school, I overslept for one of my classes and I missed my first exam. I didn't know what to do. I just threw my clothes on and was going to talk to the professor. I remember passing by [my multicultural adviser] and as she passed by me, she stopped and said, "Juan, what's going on? How's it going?" I explained what happened to her and she told me to send him an email first [and then] go talk to him. She helped me; she told me he'd understand. At that point I was, like, I'm screwed. He's not going to give me another chance. Am I going to fail this course? It ended up being okay because he let me re-take it. [This experience] was very strange because I was just walking out and someone stopped by and they helped me. And I would never have guessed that's what would have happened coming from a city where no one really stops and asks you anything. (Juan, Interview)

Juan experienced that he was no longer in a community surrounded by uninterested strangers. His multicultural adviser not only knew Juan, but also knew him well enough to read Juan's non-verbal behavior when he was under duress. This impromptu advising session was based on familiarity and a relationship developed between these two individuals despite this incident occurring during Juan's first year at Kenmont.

To Logan, Kenmont's supportive community was reassuring not only to him, but also to his parents. As Logan described, his parents simply thought this was a place where he would have the necessary support, should he need it:

I think they understood that this is a place that any concern that they may have, whether it be a health concern...oh, well, there's a [health and counseling center] on campus. If you need to go to the doctor, [the college] will drive you there, take care of you, and drive you back. I think that [my parents] knew that there were so many institutions in place and so many things in place and so many outlets for stress relief or any other problem that I'd be having that they knew that I was already well taken care of when they dropped me off. (Logan, Interview)

While many colleges and universities provide the kind of support services Kyle described, Logan and his family sensed that, perhaps, the "safety net" available at Kenmont had a tighter weave than might be found at larger colleges and universities. To illustrate the importance of knowing about and accessing these support services, three of the eight case participants (37.5%) indicated on their questionnaire that they had sought personal counseling during their time at Kenmont (Questionnaire).

Beyond the extensive support services provided by Kenmont, Logan shared an example of the collaborative and supportive spirit among the student body. Again, rather than viewing one another as academic foes, students at Kenmont would regularly help one

another with coursework and other endeavors. When Logan was enrolled in calculus, it became clear to him that he was in over his head:

[I talked with] friends on my floor who knew what calculus was, because I honestly had no idea what the hell I was doing throughout all of it. They were willing to just sit me down for literally hours every day and help walk me through problem sets and lessons and stuff and really explain things to me. I'm forever grateful for the friends that I've made here because they've really almost carried me through college. (Logan, Interview)

This culture of peer support is a key feature of Kenmont's co-curricular environment. From the library to the residence hall to the writing, reading, and math labs, student tutors can be found in many areas throughout the college. The College supports and conveys the notion that one's peers are a source of support and information.

Engaging diversity and difference

When the case participants matriculated in the fall of 2009 as first-year students, they were joined by approximately 400 entering students. Among their entering class at Kenmont, more than 1 in 10 students were from a country other than the United States and more than one-fourth identified with a race/ethnic category other than White/Caucasian. Furthermore, there was at least one student from nearly every state in the union and approximately 30 different countries. As a result, diversity—of racial, ethnic, geographic, and socioeconomic status—was cited by several case participants as a key feature of Kenmont's co-curricular environment.

In Los Angeles, Juan attended a high school where more than 90% of the students were Latino/a. As a Latino, Juan was invited to participate in a pre-orientation program for multicultural students at Kenmont:

I remember coming [as part of] multicultural student orientation. It was with people from different backgrounds coming together and that was where there were other kids, students that were Latinos were there. I didn't feel like I was a part of that group. I guess it felt more forced. Like, "it's for the people who aren't White. We're going to put them together." Even now, a lot of my friends are White, which I wasn't expecting even coming here. And that's one thing that was surprising to me: you don't have to hang out with people that are from your same background. You make connections with people who are completely different and that you never expected to be with. But that took me awhile to adjust to see that. Culturally there's a lot of things that are different. (Juan, Interview)

While Juan did not find this pre-orientation program especially helpful, it is clear that, through his experience at Kenmont, Juan had a more ethnically diverse group of friends than ever before. Interacting with people from myriad backgrounds was not something with which he was familiar, given the concentration of Latino/a students from his high school, but it has become a feature of his Kenmont experience that he values.

As an Asian-American, Kyle provided an interesting analysis, comparing his predominantly White, suburban environment with what he encountered at Kenmont. Even as a member of a particular ethnic group, he was somewhat surprised by the diversity at Kenmont College:

[My hometown] is a pretty homogenous social environment. We don't celebrate difference. We listen to the same music. We all watch sports and talk about all the same kind of things. When I first went to Kenmont, in addition to just not being able to adapt academically right away, I was struck by the diversity a little bit. I wasn't used to that. In [my hometown], the majority is White/Caucasian. Not that I had issue with it; it was just strange talking to people from these different environments. I had to change my conversation a little bit where I never had to before. (Kyle, Interview)

More than just the physical presence of ethnic diversity on campus, the myriad cultures and backgrounds challenged Kyle—and other case participants—to reflect on their own identities. As Kyle alluded, when a community values and celebrates diversity, the

members of that community are challenged to ponder the ways in which they contribute uniquely to this diversity:

At Kenmont, we really celebrate things like diversity and difference. I don't think I was quite appreciative of my identity as the son of immigrants. I took that so much more for granted in high school. I mean, this was not a topic of discussion at [my high school]. There's only so many people in my high school who are children of immigrants. But at Kenmont, it's much more diverse. You hear different viewpoints all the time. I was able to start talking about that experience here at Kenmont. And I learned that my difference is not something to be scorned. In high school, I just conformed to the White, America lifestyle. But here at Kenmont, I embrace my Chinese-American-ness a lot more. And that's part of why I started taking Mandarin. That's why I started studying Chinese culture a little more. And that's also why I'm applying for a Fulbright English Teaching Grant for Macao. I have a better connection to my heritage and I've talked to my parents about this, and they appreciate it with some amusement. I don't think they think I'm all that serious about it, but I am. (Kyle, Interview)

While at first a challenge, the diversity Kyle encountered at Kenmont challenged him to revisit—or simply made it permissible to explore—key aspects of his identity. This distinctive feature of his life was valued at Kenmont, and he was encouraged to explore it.

Like Kyle, James' perspective on his own background shifted while attending Kenmont. As a White male having grown up in rural Illinois, James was at first reluctant to share much about his background for fear it would be perceived as pedestrian and uninteresting:

I've come to realize that people come from very different backgrounds, and that's helped me to appreciate my background a lot more. At first I was very hesitant to tell anybody about [where I'm from], that they wouldn't think it's that interesting. But it is cool to say that I grew up on a farm and baled hay. That's really pretty unique. I only know a couple kids who've done that. (James, Interview)

Through his experiences at Kenmont, it became clear that James had reconsidered and broadened his own definition of what counts as diverse and what value can be derived from

difference. Even he, as the son of a farmer in Illinois, possessed a background to share and a perspective to contribute.

At the beginning of this section, I shared a comment from Logan, in which he testified that he learned as much outside the classroom at Kenmont as he did inside the classroom. A portion of that learning certainly stemmed from his interactions with his eclectic group of friends and the peers with whom he interacted:

It's really amazing how you can learn from just talking with people, as ridiculous as that sounds; but I'm able to interact and have these relationships with people from absolutely different perspectives around the world. It's not like we're sitting down and having an academic discourse about it. With just our interactions with each other, experiences through each other, and relationships with each other. I have friends from India, Turkey, Brazil, Japan, China, Greece; literally all over the world. And how we get along, what experiences we have, even when they are kind of contradictory. Why are you doing that or something? It's also the ability to try new things here I think as well. (Logan, Interview)

Thus, the diverse community of peers and friends at Kenmont contributed significantly to Logan's understanding of others' and his own cultural background, behaviors, and customs.

Having grown up in a conservative area in rural Southeast Missouri, Noah was at first befuddled by the diversity he encountered at Kenmont. Born and reared in a fairly homogenous area—ethnically, politically, and religiously—Noah was unprepared for the various forms of difference he came upon in college:

Meeting someone from South Africa and meeting someone from Mexico, it was overwhelming to some extent. Even things like seeing a Jewish person. [I'm] pretty sure I'd never met a Jewish person in my life before coming to Kenmont, which seems so strange now. I guess there was a diversity shock, but it wasn't a bad thing by any means. (Noah, Interview)

With both of his parents working blue-collar roles in large factories, Evan had always identified with his working-class background. Despite the various ways in which difference

and diversity are celebrated at Kenmont, social class and socioeconomic status are seldom discussed. Nevertheless, Evan shared, *“I would say I never really felt like the working-class kid among rich kids, but there were a few students [who made public judgments]”* (Evan, Interview). In one circumstance, Evan and a classmate were sharing stories about their experiences of working fast-food jobs in high school. They were laughing and carrying on until they were interrupted by another student, as he described:

A student walked in, who definitely likes to be perceived as very liberal and open-minded, and said to me, “You worked at Burger King? That’s so embarrassing. I can’t believe that. Wasn’t that so embarrassing to be seen at Burger King? Working in fast food?” I was no way ashamed, but it was the type of feeling that I was like, “You pretentious asshole.” That’s just a great example of how someone sees themselves as above someone who works at Burger King. (Evan, Interview)

While Evan agreed that Kenmont is an accepting environment where different perspectives are welcomed and explored and diversity is celebrated, he also acknowledged that some forms of diversity are less visible and, thus, discussed less often.

In addition to his working-class background, Evan became more aware of another dimension of his identity that was equally transparent to others—his status as a first-generation college student. Through conversations with his peers during the past three years, Evan learned a lot about the various careers pursued by his friends’ and peers’ parents. In light of these discoveries, Evan shared, *“It definitely became apparent that a lot of my friends’ parents had bachelor’s, master’s, and Ph.D. degrees”* (Evan, Interview). Whether he was cognizant of his parents’ educational levels prior to matriculating at Kenmont, his interactions with his peers and learning about their parents certainly provided him with a new, more palpable, lens through which to interpret the educational roots of one’s family and what that means and reflects.

The diversity and difference the case participants encountered at Kenmont had a profound impact on their college experience as a whole, both beyond and within the classroom (as will be discussed later in this chapter). In many ways, this feature of the Kenmont environment was inescapable. As a residential college, the students live, dine, and socialize with one another, and they go to class together. Through these various, regular, and repeated encounters with different forms of diversity, the case participants learned a great deal about other peoples' cultures and backgrounds and, perhaps, even more about themselves.

Unbounded learning environment

In addition to the rich diversity, there are abundant opportunities for students to be actively engaged in the life of Kenmont College. With more than 100 existing student groups and the opportunity to create one's own group, there are seemingly endless possibilities to get involved on campus. While some were more active than others, all of the case participants indicated that they had participated in a student group at some point during their time at Kenmont College (Questionnaire).

Through chance and serendipity, Kyle found his niche in Kenmont's student government organization. Being involved in student government not only provided him with an opportunity to get involved, spend time with friends, and add some value to the college and student experience, but it was also an opportunity for him to develop some practical skills:

I ran to be a senator in my residential hall out of a whim, out of someone telling me, "Hey, you should probably do this because I'm doing it, too." Once I did that, I was exposed to this pretty legitimate organization: student government. We have a \$400,000 budget and a ten-person cabinet team to

distribute it. The framework just really fascinated me. Like, how do a bunch of intellectual students who have probably never built anything before, how have they constructed the kind of framework over time? How has it evolved? I find this really interesting. I find this really applicable to the real world.
(Kyle, Interview)

Kyle was a member of the student government cabinet his senior year and did, indeed, learn a lot as a result of this experience. As he prepares to graduate and enter the world of work, Kyle attributed his experiences in student government as helping to ready him for this transition: *“I just really appreciate the fact that [student government] was a very natural way of using skills and developing skills that I could use in the real world”* (Kyle, Interview).

Although Logan was not a theatre major, he decided to get involved with several theatrical productions during his time at Kenmont. Interestingly, this was something completely new to Logan. His involvement was not predicated upon a dossier of formal experience. As he described, *“I never did theatre before. It was kind of something I dabbled in and really started to enjoy while I was here”* (Logan, Interview). Despite his lack of formal experience, he had the opportunity to try something new, explore an interest, and get involved. When reflecting on Logan’s assertion about how much he learned outside the classroom, his involvement in theatre was, indeed, a learning experience.

James and Michael also discovered outlets to become involved on campus and within the broader community. On one hand, Michael was an avid soccer player through high school and discovered Ultimate Frisbee at Kenmont. He described his frisbee teammates as family, and shared that participating in the National Frisbee Tournament was just as important as graduating from Kenmont. On the other hand, James had become involved as an alternative spring break leader. Working with and leading a group of his peers during a service trip had been a tremendous learning opportunity for him as well.

Unlike these individuals, a few of the other case participants had some difficulty getting involved in and taking advantage of the campus activities available at Kenmont. When asked about the ease with which they developed close relationships with friends, half of the case participants indicated that it was somewhat to very difficult (Questionnaire). Noah, who was both reserved and naturally quiet, encountered some difficulty in the social sphere of Kenmont:

I do have a tendency to be slightly quieter, introverted in company. It was sort of difficult to make friends outside of your immediate hallway. I'm not the sort of person who can just make conversations in class. I still find that difficult. So maybe the transition in that way was a little difficult in meeting new people. I'm not someone who does well with networking, which is a word I hear a lot here. (Noah, Interview)

Noah's reserved and quiet nature certainly impacted his ability to broaden his friendship groups and get involved on campus. Unfortunately, he did recount some feelings of loneliness during his time at Kenmont:

I do remember feeling pretty lonely. And it's hard to say why that would be. Even having friends close. Like I said, it's hard to go out and talk to people. Even the idea that it's hard to find someone here that you have some common experiences with. And maybe that was a little surprising. So I'm a quiet person, but I wouldn't say I'm necessarily an asocial person. That was one of the tougher aspects. (Noah, Interview)

Despite the close-knit, supportive, and open community at Kenmont, getting involved on campus does require some social risk and initiative that can be difficult to muster for someone who is as introverted as Noah. Knowing this about him, I was personally grateful to Noah for his willingness to participate in this study.

Similar to Noah, Sean also struggled socially at Kenmont. As Sean remarked, *"I'm not as socially successful as I would like to be. I have some friends here. I have a girlfriend here. And that's good enough"* (Sean, Interview). Although Sean experimented with a

couple student groups, he was not a regular member. When questioned about what he might do differently, Sean was unsure. His hesitance was, in part, because he has mixed views on how much college should pander to the social interests of its students. As he jested:

It's difficult to say, but I'm not really convinced by the argument that college is for having fun and all that sort of thing. I think that's kind of weak. I don't know... I feel like I might be just recoloring my evaluation criteria so that I look best to myself. You know, I can succeed academically, so I value academia. So maybe that's what's happening. (Sean, Interview)

While the breadth and depth of involvement on campus varied considerably among case participants, the co-curricular environment at Kenmont contributed to each of the case participant's college experience. From their high-achieving peers to the vast diversity on campus, the Kenmont student body—including the case participants—was an influential microsystem within the social domain of Kenmont. Additionally, the case participants' sense of support and their engagement with an array of activities—from student government to theatrical productions to intramural sports to volunteering—served as an additional space in which the participants could learn from others and about themselves. As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, it was neither the social sphere of Kenmont nor the opportunity to study the liberal arts that drew these students to this particular college. What attracted all of the participants to Kenmont was the institution's status as an elite college with a strong reputation for its academic offerings. The last section of this chapter explores how the case participants encountered the curricular environment at Kenmont College.

Curricular environment

While the previous section presented evidence of how the co-curricular environment contributed to the case participants' experiences at Kenmont, this section focuses on five

themes that emerged from the participants' comments regarding their curricular experiences: (1) Academic expectations; (2) Interactions with faculty; (3) Classroom experiences; (4) Course and major selection; and (5) Intellectual discoveries. While each of these themes provides distinct insight into the experiences of the case participants, the themes collectively provide a more holistic understanding of how these first-generation students encountered and navigated the curricular environment at this highly selective, residential liberal arts college.

Academic expectations

Although the case participants' cited many reasons for choosing to attend Kenmont, common was their interest in this college's strong academic reputation. As discussed in the previous section, all of the case participants' indicated that Kenmont's academic reputation was either very or somewhat important in their decision to attend this particular college. Now in the midst of their final year, the case participants were in a position to reflect on whether or not Kenmont was able to satiate their appetite for academic rigor.

In the pre-interview questionnaire, all of the case participants were asked about their adjustment to the academic demands of Kenmont College. Five of the eight participants (62.5%) indicated that it was either somewhat or very difficult to adjust to these new academic expectations (Questionnaire). The participants were also asked to comment on their ability to develop effective study and time management skills to meet these academic demands, and several of the case participants struggled with these endeavors as well. Six of the eight participants (75%) found developing effective study skills to be either very or somewhat difficult. Five (62.5%) found effective time management to be either very or

somewhat difficult. And half of the case participants found understanding their professors' expectations to be either very or somewhat difficult (Questionnaire).

Juan's academic struggles took a toll on his confidence. From his perspective, it appeared that he was the only person in class who was struggling with the academic expectations:

I felt like I couldn't perform in [my Spanish] classes like I was supposed to. I saw my classmates, and it looked like they didn't have any problems discussing things. And also because I'm sort of a native speaker in Spanish, and I can read Spanish pretty well, I felt like I should be able to comprehend these things just as well as my classmates, at least just as well as them. But there were a lot of times that I didn't. I didn't know how to read [the articles] properly, [like] not taking notes while reading or the things you're supposed to do while reading an article. My ideas were jumbled. I couldn't dissect things properly. And that just really got me pretty frustrated because I felt like I wasn't performing up to the standard. It did shake my confidence.
(Juan, Interview)

As a Latino who grew up speaking Spanish, experiencing academic difficulty in his Spanish classes was particularly troubling. He felt added pressure to perform from both his professor and his classmates. As he described, "*I felt like it was expected that I would already know it or would be able to answer everything. Or at least I felt like that was what my classmates maybe thought or saw*" (Juan, Interview). These added expectations compounded Juan's frustration and pressure to perform.

During his first semester at Kenmont, James struggled with managing his time so that he could keep up with his coursework while maintaining his part-time position in the dining hall as well as other responsibilities. This new challenge manifested itself one day in class:

I've always worked quite a bit, at least ten hours a week every semester. My first year I was doing this 5:00 a.m. dining hall shift. I remember being up late the night before writing a paper for [class]. I did my shift and then went to [class] to give an impromptu speech and just broke down in the middle of it. I wasn't able to give the speech. I mean it was really, really bad, and I

made it very clear that I was struggling a lot. And then right after that I went to see a counselor, and that was a good session. (James, Interview)

The ease with which James managed his multiple commitments in high school was not replicated at Kenmont. James finished the semester strong, with a 3.75 GPA, but his confidence was shaken as a result of this incident. He had never been in a position where he was unprepared academically.

In his Chicago suburban high school, Kyle was used to earning A's for his academic work. In fact, a perusal of his high school transcript revealed that he earned an A-minus or higher in 85% of his high school courses. When he came to Kenmont, earning an A became much more difficult. After six semesters at Kenmont, Kyle had earned a 3.25 GPA, earning an A-minus or higher in only 36% of his classes and B-level grades in 56% of his courses.

With a notable change in his academic performance, Kyle was unsure what to do about it.

As he characterized:

When a college professor would give me a B, I would be, like, "Whoa! I don't like this, but I guess I deserve this and I'm not going to the office and ask why I got a B." I assumed I would do better at some point. I would just read the rubric a little more or something. But it doesn't work like that. And I didn't know that you should go to your professors and ask what expectations they have of you. That wasn't apparent to me based on the high school environment I was coming from. (Kyle, Interview)

However, even more profound than earning a B were the pedagogical methods used by his professors. The materials they read and the way they approached the subject matter were foreign to Kyle. The teaching methods he became accustomed to during his high school experience were not reflective of what he encountered at Kenmont:

When I entered Kenmont, I was expecting multiple-choice tests. I was expecting a very SparkNotes, condensed history book. But when they started making me read all these primary sources and rigorous, scholarly articles on history, I was, like, "Wait, this is not how I did history in high school. I'm just

totally flabbergasted. How do I do this? How do I even raise my hand in class and say something?" I wasn't used to this. History class in high school was an extended lecture for sixty minutes. That was it. You just did PowerPoints every class session and then you took the test on Friday. And that was pretty much modeled. I was just struck how Kenmont did things at first. I even questioned the merit of it. Like, "Why don't you just test me on knowledge? Why are you testing me on my interpretive power? My writing ability?" Because those things weren't tested very rigorously in high school. For an essay, you would get a checkmark. You wouldn't actually get comments back or feedback about anything. I guess my expectations were just really shaped by the way I did high school. (Kyle, Interview)

In time, Kyle suppressed his resistance and opened himself to the teaching and learning process employed by his Kenmont professors. As a result, Kyle has not only developed skills he was not required to use during his high school experience, but he has also developed a vision and understanding regarding how the ability to structure and articulate his ideas will be relevant after he graduates:

Sometime between second year and third year, I realized that I should try harder to accept the things that Kenmont is trying to teach me. I think now I am a lot better at speaking and at structuring my ideas. It does seem like those are tangible things that I can translate into a career. Which is good because I didn't necessarily believe that when I came into Kenmont my first year. (Kyle, Interview)

High expectations certainly come from the faculty, but they are not the only source; many students have high expectations of themselves and of their peers. Sean, in particular, spoke at length about the value and importance of taking one's coursework seriously. Upon arrival at Kenmont, Sean was disappointed in his student colleagues. As he shared, *"The first semester classes, I think, gave me a severe inaccurate impression of other people studying here. I thought everyone was just messing around, not very smart, not trying hard"* (Sean, Interview).

Sean's impression was based upon an occurrence in an interdisciplinary course comprised only of first-year students. The students were expected to write a two-page paper

and were given one week to do it. Much to Sean's chagrin, two students arrived to class without their papers completed. Sean was stunned:

When you have to write a two-page paper, that's nothing, right? That's something that at this point, if you've gotten accepted into Kenmont College, you should be able to do that given a week. Two of the ten people in [the class] showed up with just nothing. And then I was, just, "How does that happen?" (Sean, Interview)

To Sean, it was not the incomplete work itself that bothered him. It was what the incomplete work represented: a lack of focus, intention, and seriousness. These were the attributes Sean had come to believe that represented the students at Kenmont, and he felt deceived: *"It [peers showing up to class without completing the assignments] wasn't how it was supposed to be. It was supposed to be all of these hard-working, motivated people coming together and doing whatever people do in college"* (Sean, Interview). To Sean, students comprised a major facet of the learning community at Kenmont, and, if the students did not approach their academics seriously, then educational opportunity would be depreciated for all. As he questioned, *"If the learning community is comprised of people like that, then how much does it mean to have an education from this place"* (Sean, Interview)?

Fortunately, Sean encountered one of the two students who did not complete his two-page paper in another course during his second year at Kenmont. The effort and behavior he exhibited in this course reshaped Sean's opinion:

I don't know whether they changed or whether it was just the environment of the [the course] that was causing that kind of apathy. I had a class with one of the people who didn't write the two-paged paper in second year. I think I had a history class with him. And they would just talk forever about everything. They would really get into discussions, and they clearly did the reading. And I didn't agree with them, but that doesn't matter. They were very clearly trying, when they very clearly weren't before. (Sean, Interview)

This student's effort—and the effort of other students—was important to Sean. The Kenmont students contributed to and were a reflection of this academically rigorous, highly selective institution. As Sean described, *“That gives me some sense of self-worth, because if the community as a whole is more impressive, and I’m a part of the community, then that says something about me”* (Sean, Interview).

Interactions with faculty

As incoming first-generation college students, the case participants found it difficult to conceptualize or predict how they would interact with members of the Kenmont faculty. To paraphrase their interviews, they simply “didn’t know” what to expect. Faculty members played many roles in the lives of these students. To some, faculty served as role models and mentors; to others, they were institutional navigators and ambassadors of intellectual discovery. Whether the case participants were content with the interactions they did have with their faculty members or not, it is clear—and unsurprising—that professors played a key and critical role in the curricular environment at Kenmont.

As a voracious reader and aspiring member of the professoriate, Noah was in awe of the accomplishments of some of his professors. He made these discoveries while perusing their websites and curricula vitae:

I do remember having one “ah-ha” moment. It was a week into classes and I was on [one of my professor’s] webpage, and it said something about what he’s working on and books that he’s written. And I stopped and was, like, “Books that he’s written? This person has written books?” It was so impressive. I was almost overwhelmed by that to some extent. (Noah, Interview)

Noah has maintained this sense of reverence and respect throughout his time at Kenmont, a perspective that he did not feel was necessarily shared by his more privileged peers.

Interestingly, the accomplishments of his professors had also functioned as barriers. Whether it was the power dynamic or a sense of intellectual unworthiness, Noah found it difficult to develop personal relationships with these accomplished academics:

One of the things that really still plays into it is I think I have much more respect for them than a lot of students, especially ones from more privileged backgrounds who don't see what they're doing as particularly important. And even more respect as someone who wants to be a professor. I told you how blown away I was when I figured out that these people actually do things. To that extent there's a power dynamic, and maybe that's one of the things that really keeps me from trying to develop a personal relationship with a lot of them. (Noah, Interview)

Now in the midst of his final year at Kenmont, Noah expressed some concerns about his lack of personal connections with his professors. After graduation Noah plans to continue his studies in graduate school. While he has performed well in the classroom, he worried if his personal connections with professors would be sufficient to garner the sort of letters of recommendation to yield acceptance at a competitive doctoral program:

I still have a difficult time developing closer relationships with professors and things outside of the classroom or visiting office hours. Inside the classroom, I would say things were pretty much as expected. But as I think about the recommendations I need, I've done really well inside the classroom, but is it enough? I get a little worried because they say that if the personal relationship isn't there...not that I think that they dislike me, but there haven't been a lot of exchanges outside of the classroom. (Noah, Interview)

Evan had found a home-away-from-home in the Art Department, and his comfort was partially attributable to the people with whom he has spent a great deal of time, especially his professors. When asked what he thought his relationships with his professors might be like, he replied:

I never expected they'd be as good as they are. I never thought they'd be bad by any means. But I definitely thought they'd be more distant, like visiting them in office hours once in a while. (Evan, Interview)

Evan's passion and interest in the field of art helped him to cultivate what have become very close and personal relationships with a number of his art professors. His curiosity and demonstrated interest in the fields of art and architecture created opportunities for these relationships to flourish. In the end, Evan felt as though his relationships with some professors transformed from being student-faculty to more collegial:

I've spent an afternoon with a professor, going into his private studio and eating lunch with him and walking around [the city] looking at architecture because he knew of my interests. Two of my faculty members have invited us to openings of shows in [nearby cities] and I'm, like, "I want to go to that." And then I go and I'm the only student there, besides me and the friend that I bring. I think that sends a message to them about how engaged I am and how seriously I take it. And it's not just that I'm doing it for the show of it, but because I really am passionate about it. I think that that is the kind of thing that I never would've imagined that I would have the kind of relationships I do where I definitely almost see my professors as colleagues in a little bit of a sense. I feel like they treat me like that sometimes out of the classroom. (Evan, Interview)

Similar to Noah, the opportunity to interact and cultivate these sorts of relationships with professors was not lost on Evan. To Evan, this was a special and unique opportunity. As he described, *"I feel almost in a way kind of unusual here, because to me having a relationship with a professor is so unique to me. But to a lot of students, their dad is a professor, and it's not special to them"* (Evan, Interview).

James was also surprised by the relationships he was able to have with his professors, connecting primarily in the classroom. Now, as James concludes his time at Kenmont, he has found himself longing for more personal connections with a few of his professors. He had heard from friends about having dinner in faculty homes or spending extended time with

professors outside of class, but these were not his experiences, which he attributed to his own lack of initiative:

I think they've been more than what I expected, because I'd never had relationships like this. There's very few professors that I relate with on a deeper than intellectual level, yet being intellectually connected with a professor is super satisfying. And I don't know if I'd want to be any deeper than that with them. But I wish I had a couple professors that I would go to their house sometimes and hang out. That's probably just my fault for not cultivating that type of relationship with them. (James, Interview)

In addition to the academic and relational connections with professors, several of the case participants cited how their faculty members were helpful navigators of the curricular environment at Kenmont. However, before receiving help, Kyle first had to overcome his fear of even approaching one particular professor:

I took [one particular history class] with [a professor] who has a reputation for being the intimidating hardass of the department. I was naturally even afraid to even step into his office, but it was at that point that I didn't understand the paper topic. I was like so phenomenally scared that I would get it wrong and then he would call me out in class. Because he does do that to certain people. So, I figured I should go in and see him to spare myself this embarrassment. So, I went in and he looked at the thesis I constructed and he was kind of stoic about it. There were no signals that he liked my idea, but after five minutes of contemplating he said something like, "I think I really like this idea, so here's what you can do. Here are the resources you can access and hopefully you have a better picture of what you want." I guess in a sense that increased my security because he told me exactly what he wanted, and some professors are more abstract about it. They don't tell you necessarily what they want out of you. (Kyle, Interview)

In the end, the fear of public humiliation outweighed his fear of this particular professor.

Kyle not only received the help he needed but, as he explained, this interaction “*increased my confidence a lot*” (Kyle, Interview). Suddenly, approaching his professors was more feasible.

Professor Smith, who has been a member of the Chemistry Department for seven years and was a first-generation college graduate himself, was aware of the reluctance of some students, particularly first-generation students, to approach their professors for assistance:

I've seen this with some students that I've interacted with, students and [advisees] who are first-generation students. They're very hesitant to really make that first step into the doorway. And I've got to really reach out and bring those [students] in. And it's something that's really personal to me. I don't want to say I seek out those students, but I keep my eyes open for those students to try to help them facilitate that relationship a little bit more.
(Professor Smith, Interview)

Fortunately, as an adviser at Kenmont, Professor Smith is provided with the admission application for all his advisees, which includes information about their parents' education level. Thus, he is able to identify which of his students are first-generation students. When asked if he reviews this information about his advisees, he responded, *"I look for it immediately; it's one of the first things I look at"* (Professor Smith, Interview).

When Juan began struggling in some of his courses, he recalled the advice of a high school teacher and reached out to his professors for assistance. The small class sizes at Kenmont made these connections more feasible because he was not some random stranger in a sea of students:

Kenmont has such small class sizes. So [my professors] realize that I'm having trouble participating. Like my sociology professor, even, I would talk to them and explain my situation, so I felt, like, to some degree there was a bit of understanding or they were trying to reach out. This especially helped me in Spanish. Going to my professor and telling them, "It is very difficult for me to participate in class." And my professor actually helped by giving me [suggestions on] how to read articles. She challenged me to take notes and actually try to organize the things as you're reading. And I think that's been very helpful being able to get that attention from my professors and having them be very understanding of my situation. It definitely prevented me from getting so frustrated that I would just quit. (Juan, Interview)

The personal attention and assistance Juan received from his professors not only helped him establish his academic footing but also directly correlated to minimizing his frustration and any desire he might have had to depart college. In his words, their assistance “*helped me persist*” (Juan, Interview).

With more than 25 years of experience at Kenmont College as a member of the Philosophy Department, Professor Jones echoed Juan’s assessment of how the small class sizes play an instrumental role in facilitating student-faculty interactions. As he shared:

It’s so easy to have a one-on-one conversation with every student in every one of my classes, and I think that can be translated to providing a level of support for the relatively uninformed or ill-informed first-year student who just doesn’t know the rules of this particular game and can’t get any information from their parents. That would be a very positive thing that Kenmont could provide. (Professor Jones, Interview)

To Professor Jones, the focus of his conversations with students includes, but clearly ventures beyond, course content. As a professor, adviser, and first-generation college graduate, he strives to help students navigate their college experience, particularly those who may not be receiving much support from their parents. If Kenmont’s class sizes were larger, having one-on-one conversations with every student in his class would be profoundly more difficult.

Despite Noah’s difficulty connecting personally with his professors, he was able to establish a relationship with a professor of Renaissance literature. Regrettably, this faculty member was a visiting lecturer and, therefore, not a permanent member of the English Department. Nevertheless, the professor had a practice that Noah found beneficial—mandatory office hours. As Noah described:

The previous Renaissance professor was a really cool guy. He had mandatory office hours where you had to come in to talk to him. And that

helped a lot. I remember probably talking to him for maybe an hour about Elizabethan literature and things like that. It's not quite a personal [relationship], but it was enough. I was probably closer with him than [I was with] a lot of my other professors (Noah, Interview).

This professor's practice of mandating student visits during office hours not only helped Noah overcome a barrier that had prevented him from fostering relationships with professors, in general, but also unveiled to Noah the sorts of conversations that are welcomed and appreciated by professors. These are individuals with whom to explore ideas, discuss one's aspirations, and ask for help.

Professor Smith used a similar tactic in his organic chemistry course, a course that is notoriously difficult for many students. Knowing that many students struggle on the first exam in this course, Professor Smith adopted a somewhat unconventional method for returning the exams to his students:

When I give my first organic chemistry exam, I don't hand it back in class. I require [students] to come to my office and pick it up where I make them sit down and we go over it immediately. And I put them in the most uncomfortable position imaginable. After that, it's easy to come to me for help. And this is something that's really important to me. And what I see is a dramatic increase in interactions with students after that first exam. (Professor Smith, Interview)

By mandating students to come to his office to retrieve their exams, Professor Smith takes the opportunity to begin building a trusting relationship with his students. The implications of this tactic are visible. As he shared, *"I have a line [of students waiting outside my office] the rest of the semester when I give exams. Once they've seen that process is not so bad, they continue to take me up on it"* (Professor Smith, Interview).

Unfortunately, not all the case participants had this sort of experience. As a first-year student, Kyle struggled with identifying the appropriate reasons why someone would visit a

professor during her or his office hours. As someone who performed well in high school, he was unaccustomed to asking for help. As he described:

As a first-year, I don't think I understood that [you should approach your professors with concerns]. I don't think I understood that you could drop into office hours and say, "I'm really concerned that I don't have anything to say in this class." I just thought that professors were disconnected from students the same way high school teachers were disconnected from their students.
(Kyle, Interview)

Kyle's strong academic performance in high school, coupled with the disconnected interactions with his teachers, provided useful context for interpreting this comment. Kyle simply did not bring a history of asking for help or having close relationships with teachers to Kenmont.

For Logan, his challenge to interacting with professors and asking for assistance was twofold—intimidation and lack of exposure. During his first year at Kenmont, Kyle reflected, *"I know that professors were another outlet [for help], and I think honestly I was a bit intimidated to see them as much as I should have"* (Logan, Interview). When pressed for the source of intimidation, Logan speculated:

I really don't know why I was timid to see my professors. Honestly, I never had interactions with "professor-like" adults. Most of the adults I knew didn't have college (let alone graduate) degrees, other than my high school teachers, I suppose. I really don't know how to act around them. (Logan, Interview)

What is most striking about Logan's comment is the present tense in his final rationalization. As a senior in college, Logan was still unsure about how to act around his professors.

Having served as dean of students for over four years, and as a first-generation college graduate himself, Dean Brown suggested the reluctance for some first-generation

college students to ask for help may stem from their desire to prove that they belong at an elite liberal arts college like Kenmont:

If your first-gen, you're probably not likely to admit that you need some help right away because you're trying to prove that you belong here. And there might be some stigma attached. When I went to [college], if you had a tutor or if you went to the writing lab, which I did both, there was a stigma that you were somehow inferior to your peers. (Dean Brown, Interview)

This was certainly the case for Sean. When he struggled with particular courses, Sean did not seek assistance from his professors. To him, the need for assistance was a sign of weakness. Sean's solution was to reread and muscle through the material until he grasped and understood the concepts at hand. As he shared, *"The extra time that professors or teachers would spend out of class: that was for people who couldn't do it on their own. And I didn't identify as that kind of a person. So I just didn't bother them"* (Sean, Interview).

Regrettably, when Sean and other students forgo the opportunity to connect with their professors outside of class, they miss out on much more than just course content. As Professors Clark and Jones illustrated, there is much more to student-faculty interactions than discourse about one's discipline. As Professor Clark, who has been teaching in the History Department for six years and is also a first-generation college graduate, commented:

[Faculty] are very interested in students as scholars in our classes, but also in their personal wellbeing, helping them develop. This is an environment where we as faculty members are interested in helping them develop both their public and private selves. Faculty members aren't just these people who talk about their specific discipline, do research, and write and teach about it. They're also people who you can come to as resources for navigating your way through this institution. (Professor Clark, Interview)

Professor Jones affirmed how seriously the faculty at Kenmont takes their advising responsibilities, and their acknowledgment that they, indeed, serve as guides for the present

and the future. Reflecting on his own journey as a first-generation college student at an Ivy League institution, Professor Jones shared:

I try to give them very practical advice, rather than just academic advice. I got none of that as an undergraduate, and I made a number of very bad mistakes in terms of squandering opportunities that I had because I didn't understand the consequences of some of the decisions that I was making. I was making decisions strictly on the basis of what I wanted to do, not necessarily on the basis of what might be good for me in the broader scheme of things, because I didn't know what was good for me, and my adviser should have told me, because it was pretty clear what was good for me. But [my alma mater's] advising system was pretty horrible, and I've always been impressed by how seriously the Kenmont faculty takes advising. (Professor Jones, Interview)

Despite their desire to serve as guides and resources for their advisees and the seriousness with which the Kenmont faculty take their advising responsibilities, some of the case participants illustrate here a reluctance to seek their counsel. Suggestions for mediating this disconnect are explored in Chapter 6.

An active learning space

One feature of the Kenmont curricular environment that presented countless challenges to the case participants was the classroom. As small intellectual spaces, the classroom experiences at Kenmont presented a new kind of learning environment in which several case participants were unfamiliar. Small in size and with a focus on student participation, the classroom experience at Kenmont was unlike the passive learning environments in their high schools. Professor Smith characterized the Kenmont classroom as a place where students are known by name and are expected to be active participants in their learning:

[Students] are not anonymous. As a professor, I know who is missing and who is not. I can look at where they're from and maybe get a sense of what

they're struggling with. [For example], a student that's typically gone on Mondays: is there are reason for that? I'm not going to ignore [their absence], and it will come up in discussions as we interact [during the course]. And, we make our students do a lot of group work, so you've got to be involved. You don't just get to sit there and listen and soak things in. You're going to be involved. (Professor Smith, Interview)

The classroom environment at Kenmont presented numerous challenges to the case participants. Kyle arrived at Kenmont expecting the classroom environment to replicate what he experienced in high school. This expectation was partially derived from what his parents—who began, but did not finish college—told him to expect:

That's what my parents told me college is going to be. It's going to be a bunch of tests that are multiple choice and very straightforward. And you would never have to do more abstract things like class discussion. (Kyle, Interview)

At first, Kyle found the classroom environment and the expectations to contribute to class discussion quite intimidating. Compared to his peers, he felt very unprepared and was therefore initially reluctant to contribute to the discussion:

When I would go into class, people would speak up right away, and they would state this articulate mash of like five or six sentences, and all I could muster was, like, "Well, I think this text says this, and that's all I have to say about that." It was intimidating. It was very much intimidating because these kids seemed more trained in speech than I ever was in high school. So that's why my class participation wasn't very strong for a while, but I think I've gained the confidence to speak up in class, to contribute to discussion. It was just a matter of, like, "I don't want to put myself out there and say something that people might think is stupid or not worthwhile to the discussion." But I've lost that kind of fear, I think. (Kyle, Interview)

In time and through repeated exposure, Kyle had overcome this fear and developed the ability to articulate his observations in class. Some of his peers, however, had not.

As discussed previously, Juan had a difficult time adjusting to the academic demands of Kenmont College. Discerning what his professors expected of him was a challenge, and

he also struggled with establishing effective study skills. Perhaps, more than any other aspect of the curricular environment, actively participating in class was Juan's greatest challenge. Compared to his high school experience, Juan was simply not prepared for the participatory nature of the college classroom at Kenmont:

I think the toughest part for me has been the idea of participation in class. Because when you're in a class with thirty or more people, participation meant showing up and not disturbing the class by talking too much or misbehaving or anything like that. And then coming here, and in every class it seems, participation was a huge part of the grade. And it was an active participation, actually engaging in discussions, which was something I had never really seen before. Like class discussions, I mean. And that's something that has taken me a lot of time to get used to. I would say even now, being a Spanish major, a lot of my Spanish courses especially were heavy in that. Like 30% of your grade was participation. You always had to speak in class or you wouldn't do too well, and that's been, I'd say, probably the most difficult part for me. (Juan, Interview)

For Juan, the challenge was not as simple as having something to contribute to the discussion; it was also a matter of understanding the rules of participation. Juan had considerable self-doubt when it came to participating, even when he had something to say:

To be honest, I always feel like I have an answer and something I could say. I feel like every time I don't say something or I'm hesitant to say something, it's in relation to, Is it good to say now? Is this a proper time? Am I disrupting the class's discussion? It's kind of things like that, or, Am I saying the right thing? Is this really correct? Or sometimes I'm, like, Wait, do I even have anything to say? What I have to do is be pretty prepared before class with notes and know what I'm going to try to say in class for me to be able to get the participation rolling. I think now it's become less of a problem, and I've gotten more used to and more comfortable with participating in class. Or I don't have to have things written down, notes of what I have to say. But I remember it was kind of a big problem for me definitely. (Juan, Interview)

From Juan's perspective, he appeared to be the only one struggling with understanding the material and participating in class discussion. As he described, "*Most of my classmates around me were able to participate well. Sometimes I would read something*

and it would just go over my head. It was frustrating when my classmates didn't seem to have those issues" (Juan, Interview). Classroom participation was not a temporary challenge for Juan; it persisted with him throughout his experience at Kenmont. Now, as a senior, Juan attributed his challenge to adjust to this new expectation at Kenmont with how he was socialized to the classroom environment through elementary and secondary school:

[Participating in class] was just something that I've never been able to get comfortable with. Throughout school you're always taught to be quiet during class and listen to the teacher. It was something that I just got never comfortable with. (Juan, Interview)

For James, it was not necessarily the schooling experiences that stifled his ability to participate in classroom discussion; it was more of an expectation based on how he was raised:

At home, I was always critiqued if I didn't think twice about words I was going to say. Like, at the dinner table, I was told, "If you're going to ask a question, ruminate upon it for a while and then ask once you've thoroughly thought about it and you're really ready to ask a question or make a comment or anything." So that takes time, and in the classroom you can't do that. You have to speak off the top of your mind. So that wasn't really a skill that I had developed with my family I feel like, as much as I would've liked, I guess. (James, Interview)

While James' family valued reflection and thoughtfulness when asking questions or contributing to discussion at home, the pace of discussion in a college classroom did not lend itself to such behavior. As James described, the expectations were simply different: *"Professors and teachers expect you to always have a response. Always have words to share. Which is a great skill to have and I really like that, but it wasn't the expectation [at home or] in high school"* (James, Interview).

When comparing his own undergraduate experience at a large state university in California with the classroom environment at Kenmont, Professor Clark shared Juan's,

Kyle's, and James' concerns with classroom participation. In the large lecture halls where Professor Clark attended class as an undergraduate, he was anonymous, and his contributions to class discussion were minimal:

The big university was exactly what I needed in the sense that I could be anonymous. I could go to class, big lecture halls or lecture classes with 100 to 150, maybe even 200 students, where I didn't have to really participate in class on a daily basis. That was perfect for me. It would've been a bit intimidating for me to come to a place where a lot of my grade depended on my daily participation with other students, especially if the other students were very well equipped to participate in class and share their ideas.
(Professor Clark, Interview)

Given his experience at both large public universities and small liberal arts colleges, Professor Clark shared, *"I definitely sense that some students are uncomfortable being in a class where there are other students that come from completely different backgrounds who are super comfortable sharing their views"* (Professor Clark, Interview). This was indeed the case for several of the case participants.

From Logan's perspective, he would have appreciated his peers ruminating on their comments more before speaking in class. While he agreed that contributing and listening to classroom discussion was valuable, too often this became a stage for academic posturing among his peers:

I've just sat in too many classes where people have kind of known big words and been able to bullshit answers to sound really intelligent in class discussion. But really, it's, like, "Are you saying anything important or worthwhile or of value?" It's almost like there's a sterilization of the classroom environment that I don't like. You have to behave a certain way. You have to use certain academic words like "unambiguous." [Mimicking a student] "It seems pretty unambiguous to me." You don't have to say "unambiguous"; it's pretty clear that this is going on. But there's a way that certain academic discourse really just gets on my nerves. (Logan, Interview)

As part of the curricular environment, the classroom experience presented unique challenges to the case participants. No longer were they able to assume the role of passive learner or mere recipient of knowledge. They were active agents in their own learning and in the learning of their peers. In addition to the classroom, Kenmont students were also expected to be active agents in assembling their course sequence and selecting their majors.

Navigating the curriculum

A distinct feature of the Kenmont curricular environment is how the curriculum itself is structured. While many colleges and universities have structured requirements in different content areas, Kenmont's required courses are very limited. The first requirement is a course designed to orient first-year students to college-level reading and writing. The sections are quite small (no more than 10 students), and the subject matter varies based on the expertise of the faculty member who teaches the section. The only other required courses are those that comprise a student's major. Therefore, students are provided a great deal of ownership in devising their academic schedules. To ensure that students are provided a liberal arts experience, faculty advisers are expected to encourage their advisees to take courses from the departments that comprise the three academic divisions of the college: humanities, social sciences, and the sciences.

The case participants spoke at length about Kenmont's curriculum and the ways in which they chose courses and used its flexible structure to explore their interests and, ultimately, choose their major fields of study. James fully enjoyed the challenge of reading through the course offerings, prioritizing his interests, and piecing together his academic schedule:

There's never been a semester where I've had trouble determining what classes I want. There are always too many, but it's easy enough for me to parse them down and still have my top four or five. Or there's never been a semester where I can't decide what I want to take. I usually always take one physics class and a math class and two electives of my choice. I took quite a few sociology classes because I was thinking about doing that. And I've taken two social studies classes now and a couple philosophy classes and some other departments too. I look forward to it very much. [Picking classes] is one of my favorite times of the semester. (James, Interview)

Noah had a similar experience. To him, the only thing more exciting than reading course descriptions and assembling his class schedule was getting the actual reading lists for his courses:

I remember being excited about getting course lists and getting the opportunity to sign up for courses, which used to be one of my favorite things about the college experience because of the wealth of opportunities and choice. That was definitely exciting. And even things like looking at the book lists for the classes: I'm always really excited to see the booklist. I can't understand why people aren't. (Noah, Interview)

For Noah and James, course scheduling was a welcomed opportunity for them to explore and pursue their intellectual interests. Juan used Kenmont's flexible curriculum to investigate different disciplines with the hope of finding his academic niche:

I took a lot of introductory courses first semester and second semester. I was fishing around to find my place. I think a lot of that was just to see where am I, what area am I best prepared for? I remember my first year I took calculus, psychology, and sociology. I was just seeing how good can I do something that's more writing-based? How good can I do with something more arithmetic and mathematics-based? And just seeing where my strengths or weaknesses were. (Juan, Interview)

Logan's strategy was quite similar to Juan's. Rather than trying to find where he would excel, Logan was hopeful that his exposure to many different disciplines would help him discern his major and career focus. As he described:

I was honestly taking shots in the dark. I was, like, philosophy? Why not? economics? Why not? American studies? That sounds fun. I was really just

trying to figure out what it is that I wanted to do. In high school, history was always my favorite class. I always kind of imagined myself being a teacher. Less now, but more then did I imagine myself being a teacher. Actually now I'm a history education person. I made sure I kind of tested the waters of all the different departments and academic pursuits before I really kind of signed on to [this career path]. (Logan, Interview)

Similar to Logan, Kyle sought practical courses from which he could derive market-ready skills. Kyle explained his conundrum with the perceived impracticality of the liberal arts:

I convinced myself that I should take practical [courses], which is not necessarily the mission of liberal arts colleges. Sometimes we stray away from that to an extent that I still find a little uncomfortable. Because I think you can be liberally educated, but you could also apply it very tangibly to a lot of areas. And I don't think a lot of my peers agreed with that. This was a little bit of my discomfort with Kenmont at first. So, I took things that sounded like they could be useful. I took Economic Development. I took Macroeconomic Analysis. And although ultimately I learned that I didn't like any of those things, I approached it like, "What can I tangibly, actually retain with me after I graduate from college?" So, this is why I kept taking Spanish that I started in high school. This is why I started taking Mandarin Chinese, because I figured [China] is going to be a very important nation this coming century, so why not hop on that bandwagon? But I later realized that's not entirely the point of the liberal arts. (Kyle, Interview)

Sean was also exposed to the many different disciplines that comprise the liberal arts, partly because his faculty adviser held strong opinions about what constituted a liberally educated person. While Sean may have preferred to focus more on economics and mathematics (i.e., his two majors), his adviser thought otherwise:

I've taken advantage of [the open curriculum], not necessarily by choice. My adviser pretty much forced me into taking a lot of different things. I don't know. I think there's some value in focusing your attentions on a specific subject, but maybe undergrad isn't the best time for that. You should be broadening your horizons. (Sean, Interview)

Exposure to a variety of academic disciplines, whether by choice or through the firm recommendation of an adviser, served as a useful tool to help the case

participants make the anxiety-infused decision of choosing their majors. While some college students never deviate from their intended field of study, other students toil over this decision and change their major several times. In this study, five of the eight case participants changed their major at least once during their time at Kenmont (Questionnaire). While their selection criteria varied, the process of choosing one's major was very independent.

As a first-year student, James attended a workshop, co-sponsored by Kenmont's career center and academic advising office, entitled "You Are Not Your Major." During this presentation, staff from both offices facilitated a panel and provided evidence from alumni that debunked the myth that one's field of study dictated one's career path. This was a relief for James. As he stated, *"I did the 'You Are Not Your Major' thing here early on, and that wiped away all fears of that. It was really helpful for me"* (James, Interview). When it came to declaring physics as his major field of study, James consulted his girlfriend a lot as well as his friends at Kenmont. He also spoke with his mother, but that was more to keep apprised of what he was deciding (James, Interview).

While Juan did not attend the workshop referenced by James, he received the same message: your major does not determine your career path. This, too, was a relief for Juan because he struggled with this decision:

I would say [choosing a major] was very difficult for me actually. It was very difficult. One of the things that helped me to actually finalize my choice was that I got from a lot of people that your major doesn't dictate where you're going to go in life. (Juan, Interview)

Noah did not express much concern about the selection of his majors (i.e., English and classics), and both his adviser and his friends were supportive resources. He did not

consult with his parents, largely because it was a decision in which he felt they could lend little assistance. As Noah described, *“I had my adviser to go and talk to. And my friends. After I had started taking Latin and developed that interest and realized that it’s something I was really into, it wasn’t a hard decision”* (Noah, Interview).

Similar to the framework he applied to his selection of courses, Kyle was initially interested in pursuing a field of study that would more directly prepare him for a career after Kenmont. This focus on a career was partly influenced by his parents:

I started off school here thinking that I could still get the intellectual experience with Kenmont, but I could also have a developed career path just to reassure my parents that my time here wasn’t being wasted in their eyes. As a first-year it made sense to me to consider an economics major, because, of the majors at this school, it has the most direct relationship with a career path, some vague mix of business and enterprise. (Kyle, Interview)

However, at the end of his second year at Kenmont, Kyle made a realization, *“I didn’t like economics”* (Kyle, Interview). Knowing this would be a disappointment to his parents, Kyle first consulted his uncle, a successful stockbroker who had attended business school. In summarizing the discussion, Kyle stated that, *“[My uncle] didn’t see that a history degree would be so much more disadvantageous than an economics degree. So, I asked him if he would run this by my parents, because I didn’t think I could tell them myself”* (Kyle, Interview). His uncle agreed, and shortly thereafter Kyle received a phone call from his mother. As he recounted:

I got an angry call from my mom saying, “Oh my gosh! What are you doing? This is ridiculous. I thought you were going to do economics, which is not as good as pre-med but it’s still something. And now you’re doing history? What is this? What are you doing with your life?” (Kyle, Interview)

From his mother’s perspective, Kyle was making a bad situation worse. Not only did he turn down an opportunity to enter St. Bonaventure’s BS/MD dual-admit program,

securing him admission in a medical program at the age of 18, but now he was also choosing a field of study that was altering the trajectory of his life.

Certainly less vehemently, Logan also faced pressure from his parents when it came to the selection of his major. Although he entered Kenmont with an interest in becoming a secondary history teacher, Logan's exposure to and involvement with the Theatre Department prompted him to consider switching his major from history to theatre and dance. When he presented this idea to his parents, they reacted firmly, "*No, do not do that*" (Logan, Interview). Logan heeded their advice and remained a history major with a focus on completing his secondary teaching endorsement.

Sean's selection of a major was a matter of eliminating options and following the advice of a classmate. He entered Kenmont with the hopes of enrolling in a 3/2 engineering program with one of Kenmont's partner institutions. When he was unable to get the required chemistry and physics coursework completed in time, he decided to switch to economics. After sharing his potential interest in going to graduate school with a fellow classmate, he was encouraged to take additional math courses since the economics major was very theoretical. Whether true or not, Sean took this peer's advice and picked up a second major in mathematics. This was clearly not his preferred pathway; Kenmont was not his first-choice college, and he would have rather studied engineering instead of economics. Regardless, Sean was content with his decisions and experiences. As he summarized, "*I'm definitely satisfied because this is, I think, the best I could've done for myself, given the circumstances*" (Sean, Interview).

Despite the various challenges encountered by several of the case participants, the curricular environment afforded several intellectual discoveries. Although Evan had taken

several art classes in high school, he entered college with a penchant for political science. Despite his leanings toward change and advocacy, his academic trajectory changed with his enrollment in an art course. As he recounted:

I remember I rushed and got the last open spot in studio art and then after a couple of months in that class, I just knew that's what I wanted to do. I just kind of shifted my curriculum to fit that major kind of late, and that's what I'm doing right now. I just feel at home in the Art Department and that's been great. (Evan, Interview)

Noah arrived at Kenmont with the intent of majoring in English, which he has since supplemented with a second major in classics. With Kenmont's minimal course requirements, Noah had the freedom and flexibility to pursue other academic interests in some depth. This was true not only for classics but also for history:

One of the things that I've developed is a stronger interest in history, which I've had the opportunity to indulge in here as a non-major. In my second year, like I said, I took Latin and at some point I decided that I was going to be a classics major as well and then saw how that could fit in with my goals for the future. I think that's really the biggest thing that's changed is discovering that interest which I didn't have the opportunity to in high school. My adviser being a classics professor couldn't hurt. (Noah, Interview)

In Sean's case, his discoveries were more intellectual than content- or discipline-based. He expected the rigorous academics at Kenmont to advance and expand the knowledge base he had constructed through his previous school experiences. While that may have, indeed, been true, what he garnered from his academic experiences at Kenmont was perhaps even more important:

I thought that I would be learning things, like tools and methods and facts. Like in math, I was expecting to learn something like calculus, but super calculus. Just all the way down. But when you get deeper into it, it's not about facts and how you push around numbers; it's about proving things. It's about how you think about systems of information. That was a big disconnect for me. I was expecting to learn how to do things, and instead I was learning something else. You could call it how to think. (Sean, Interview)

The curricular environment at Kenmont was a place of academic challenge and intellectual discovery. The passive roles the case participants had become accustomed to during their prior schooling experiences were not reflective of the active-learner roles they were expected to assume at Kenmont. Although the faculty members played various roles in the life of the college—from intellectual mentor to academic adviser to institutional navigator—some of case participants lacked the social capital to approach and forge substantive relationships with these individuals. As a result, some of these first-generation college students made their way through Kenmont much more independently than was perhaps necessary.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this chapter provided insight into how these first-generation college students came to know and ultimately chose to attend Kenmont College. Despite the many challenges and obstacles these individuals faced prior to and throughout their college experiences, all had successfully persisted to graduation at one of the most selective institutions of higher learning in the United States. Regrettably, a quarter of their male first-generation classmates have departed Kenmont. Chapter 6, the final chapter of this study, will provide a synthesis of the findings within the context of the four research questions that framed this study. Implications of how the findings of this study may influence higher education policy and practice will be explored, and recommendations for future research will be offered.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this collective case study was to examine and understand the distinct and shared experiences of eight male first-generation college students who attended Kenmont College, a highly selective, residential liberal arts college in the Midwest. Each student was viewed as a distinct case; therefore, multiple data collection methods were used to garner a detailed understanding of the case participants' experiences: document analysis (of admission applications, admission essays, high school and college transcripts); a 34-item questionnaire; and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with each of the case participants. Additionally, three members of the faculty and the dean of students at Kenmont were also interviewed, all of whom were male and also first-generation college graduates. In total, more than 21 hours of in-depth interviews were conducted as a part of this study (see Appendix C-4).

The selection of these data-collection methods was in direct response to the research questions that framed this study. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How did a small cohort of first-generation college students come to know, choose to attend, and ultimately experience the academic and campus environments at a highly selective, residential liberal arts college?
2. What features of the case participants' pre-college environments influenced their readiness for and decision to attend this type of institution?
3. How do the case participants characterize their curricular and co-curricular experiences at this type of institution?

4. Taken together, what features of the case participants' pre-college and residential liberal arts environments do they attribute to their successful persistence to graduation?

This chapter is comprised of three sections. The first section revisits the research questions and includes a summary and synthesis of the findings presented in the previous two chapters. The second section includes a discussion of implications for policy and practice as well as recommendations for future research endeavors. The final section includes a reflexive commentary from the author of this study.

Summary of Findings

Research Question 1

How did a small cohort of first-generation college students come to know, choose to attend, and ultimately experience the academic and campus environments at a highly selective, residential liberal arts college?

This fundamental question reflects the overarching purpose and goal for this study. To answer this question regarding the case participants' experiences, three specific questions were created to elicit the necessary data that were presented in Chapters 4 and 5. Thus, the remainder of this section addresses the remaining research questions. Collectively, the summary and synthesis of the findings in relation to these three questions provide a comprehensive response to this study's overarching research question.

Research Question 2

What features of the case participants' pre-college environments influenced their readiness for and decision to attend this type of institution?

As presented in Chapter 5, the case participants identified and disclosed a number of variables that influenced their readiness for and decision to attend a highly selective, residential liberal arts college. Four themes emerged as particularly relevant: parental investment in education, the influence of siblings, the impact of the high school environment, and the role of friendship groups.

Parental investment in education. It became clear through the majority of the case participants' narratives that their parents, despite not having college degrees themselves, placed considerable value on the education of their children. Notwithstanding the absence of a rich history of college attendance and graduation in their respective families, none of the case participants questioned whether they would go to college. The value of education was instilled in them, which was partly the result of the actions of their parents. In Kyle's case, his parents moved from the city of Chicago to the suburbs so he and his younger brother would be able to directly enroll in a stronger public school district. Despite their limited means, both Logan's and Michael's parents invested in a private, parochial education for them and their siblings. Even though financial resources were scarce, Evan's parents acquired a loan so he could participate in a selective summer program at Stanford University. And instead of sleeping away his Saturday mornings like many teenagers, James palled around with some of the nation's leading particle research physicists at Fermilab.

In isolation, these educational events are seemingly random. However, when viewed through the lens of chaos theory, one can see that these decisions and events are anything but

accidental or serendipitous. Indeed, they are indicative and consequential in the lives of the case participants and hold a notable place within the case participants' educational trajectories that brought them to Kenmont College. While these first-generation college students varied in their recognition of the importance and value of these events, they had little doubt about the important and impactful role of their parents.

Influence of siblings. From sibling support to sibling rivalry, the brothers and sisters in this collective narrative served as motivating forces in the lives of the case participants. For Evan and Logan, their elder siblings were seen as resources and viable members of their support systems. Sean's older siblings, particularly his brother, were more inclined to be sources of competition than support. Having two younger brothers, Juan sensed a great deal of responsibility in setting an example for them to follow. Noah had watched his siblings struggle with unemployment and drug addiction and simply wanted a different life for himself. From role models to anti-archetypes, siblings served a viable role in the case participants' pre-college environments.

Impact of schooling environments. The important and influential role of the case participants' schooling environments, particularly high school, resonated with the existing literature on this topic (e.g., McDonough, 1997). From the ethos and culture of the schools they attended to the availability of advanced curricula, it became clear that these educational environments yielded considerable influence on the case participants' considerations of and preparation for college. All of the participants had access to higher-level coursework through either a series of Advance Placement and Honors courses and/or access to courses offered through a nearby community college. Additionally, several of the participants cited

examples of how their schooling environments were explicitly preparing them for college. In Michael's case, the production of his college admissions essay began as a class assignment, and his exposure to different institutions of higher learning was facilitated through college visits organized by his school. In his magnet elementary school, Juan's fifth grade teacher stressed how becoming a strong essayist would help him once he and his classmates were in college. The synergistic influence of the parents' investments in education and the schooling environments can be used to explain, at least partially, why the case participants "*always knew*" they would go to college. Valuing education pervaded their homes and their pre-college classrooms.

Friendship groups. Perhaps more than any other feature of their pre-college environments, friendship groups played a profound and influential role in the case participants' considerations of and preparations for college. Through these personal connections, the case participants expanded their knowledge about the college search process and recalibrated their expectations. As members of small enclaves of high-achieving students, the case participants and their friends were simultaneously supportive of and competitive with one another. Through this experience, many of the case participants benefited from the social capital of their friends and families. From completing applications to navigating financial aid to visiting actual campuses, the case participants' friendship groups served as a conduit through which they enriched their personal understanding of the college search and application process.

Research Question 3

How do the case participants characterize their curricular and co-curricular experiences at this type of institution?

There were several features of the Kenmont environment, both within and beyond the classroom, that were influential in the case participants' experiences. Within the curricular environment, Kenmont's academic expectations, the classroom experience, and the faculty were all pronounced features. These were coupled with Kenmont's pervasive learning community, the intelligent and diverse student body, and supportive campus atmosphere within the co-curricular environment. While the case participants' experiences were, indeed, diverse, these emerged as the most salient features of the Kenmont College environment.

Academic expectations. Perhaps more than any other criterion, Kenmont's reputation for offering a challenging and rigorous academic experience was cited as a reason by all eight case participants for choosing to submit an admission application. Simply put, these bright, high-achieving first-generation college students wanted to attend a college that would challenge them academically. Despite their history of performing well in high school, nearly two-thirds (62.5%) of the participants stated that they struggled with adjusting to Kenmont's academic expectations. Developing effective study skills, understanding professors' expectations, and managing one's time effectively were areas in which several of the case participants encountered difficulties. In addition to the amount and complexity of academic work they encountered, there was a dramatic shift in the pedagogical methods that pervaded the college classroom.

Classroom experience. At Kenmont, classes are small and led by full-time professors who are experts in their fields of study. Students read secondary source materials

(e.g., books, journal articles) and are expected to grapple with, question, and form insights about the material. In class, students are expected to share their insights, question and challenge the contributions of their peers, and actively participate in intellectual discourse. Basking in the anonymity of a large lecture hall is not possible at Kenmont. Professors know their students' names, and make note when they are missing from class. As Professor Smith stated, "*As a professor, I know who's missing, and who is not*" (Professor Smith, Interview). At Kenmont, the students are expected to be active agents in the classroom. Rhodes (2001) addressed this phenomenon in his book *The Creation of the Future: The Role of the American University*: "Education is not a spectator sport; it is a transforming encounter. It demands active engagement, not passive submission; personal participation, not listless attendance" (p. 65). For the case participants, this learning environment facilitated several academic discoveries and substantial intellectual growth, but it was not without considerable challenge. From knowing how to approach an assignment to dissecting an article to knowing what, when, and how to contribute to class discussion, several of these first-generation college students struggled with adjusting from the passive roles they assumed in their high school classrooms to the active roles they were expected to play at Kenmont.

Faculty. None of the case participants cited that their professors were inaccessible, unsupportive, or generally uninterested in them as students. In fact, for those who did actively engage their professors, quite the opposite was true. Nearly all the case participants gave specific examples of how interactions with their professors outside of class were instrumental in their experiences at Kenmont. However, as discussed in the implications section of this chapter, simply making faculty members accessible does not mean that all

students will take advantage of this access. Whether it was the case participant's pride, reverence, personal discomfort, or confusion about how to approach faculty, some of these first-generation college students did not reap the benefits of having easy access to their professors.

Pervasive learning community. Any attempt to “fence off” the domains where learning occurs at Kenmont is a fool's errand. In the classroom, over dinner, in the residence hall, during a walk to the library, or sitting out on the lawn, the learning opportunities afforded at Kenmont are truly boundless. As Dean Brown shared:

I often overhear students talk about deconstructing social identities and interrogating narratives and using language that almost requires a Ph.D. sometimes to understand. A residential campus is rich with opportunity to engage in discussion, debate, revelry at all hours of the day. (Dean Brown, Interview)

While the source of these conversations varies—from course material to current events to policy changes at Kenmont—intellectual discussions across campus pervaded the case participants' experiences, providing context for Logan's assertion that “*the majority of my learning at this school has happened outside the classroom*” (Logan, Interview). While such an assertion is difficult to measure, his sentiments are clear: learning at Kenmont is not restricted to the college classroom or laboratory.

Intelligent and diverse student body. Purveyors of this learning community are the Kenmont students themselves. The case participants shared numerous vignettes about the important role this intellectual and diverse student community, of which they were members, played in their experiences at Kenmont. From forging friendships with students from other countries to developing a new and deeper appreciation of their own unique backgrounds, the

case participants both benefited from and contributed to Kenmont's culture of celebrating difference and valuing individuality. For example, Kyle felt supported to more closely examine and celebrate his Asian-American identity. Logan expanded his friendship group to include people from Greece, India and Turkey. James developed a greater appreciation of his rural, agricultural background. Despite its many benefits, several of the case participants shared that surrounding oneself with such an intelligent and diverse peer group was at times intimidating and uncomfortable. However, the case participants learned eventually to navigate this community and find their place among their peers.

Supportive campus atmosphere. While it may not have registered as one of the top criteria for choosing a college, many of the case participants found Kenmont's supportive campus atmosphere a key feature of their college experience. Whether it was Kenmont's close-knit community, as experienced by Juan, or the presence of various support services, as cited by Logan, or the access to career development programming, as experienced by James, several of the case participants felt supported throughout their college journey. Providing such visible, palpable support to students at Kenmont is possible, in part, because there is a lack of anonymity. As Dean Brown stated, "*At a place like Kenmont, it's hard to be anonymous*" (Dean Brown, Interview). Students are known by their professors, advisers, and one another. Therefore, when someone is struggling or encountering difficulty, no one person responds: the community responds.

Research Question 4

Taken together, what features of the case participants' pre-college and residential liberal arts environments do they attribute to their successful persistence to graduation?

No single environmental feature—either before or during their college experience—emerged as the prevailing reason the eight case participants persisted to graduation at Kenmont. Therefore, for each of the participants, some factors emerged as more salient than others. From their family members to their professors to the general campus community, the remainder of this section presents, in the voices of the participants, the reasons they identified as influencing their desire and ability to become a member of the first generation in their family to graduate from college.

Hunger to learn

James's unquenchable desire to learn kept him engaged intellectually. Able to deeply immerse himself in his vast academic interests, James learned not only a great deal about numerous disciplines but also about himself:

I've learned so much every semester. One semester here is life-changing. The person I will be at the end of the semester is going to be radically transformed from who I am now. On the surface level, I'll be the same. But the things on my mind will be very, very different, and I like that. That's liberation. That's a liberal arts education. It just comes from seeing the world through different perspectives, and I have a lot of perspectives to gain here from talking with people. (James, Interview)

Faculty support

Evan's ability to persist to graduation was influenced notably by the relationships he developed with his professors, especially those who teach in the Art Department. From Evan's perspective, his professors served as one of the primary conduits through which he established a connection to the college.

I just feel really at home here. I'm sure my experience would be slightly different if I didn't have all the great experiences I've had the past couple years with my professors. I'm sure I would feel a little less connected to the institution, a little less prepared for graduate school if I didn't have [these relationships]. (Evan, Interview)

Perceptions of others

While the majority of the case participants gave reasons as to why they stayed, Kyle cited a specific and compelling reason as to why he could not leave Kenmont. As was discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, Kyle's parents and high school peer groups questioned his decision to attend a liberal arts college, his parents preferring the pre-medicine program at St. Bonaventure. Consequently, leaving Kenmont and transferring to another institution would have been the equivalent of admitting he had made a poor college choice, which even if he believed, he could not reveal. As he explained:

You're placed into a high school, but you make a choice about the college that you go to. And I just didn't want to deal with the fact that had I transferred; that would've been basically admitting that I had made a mistake. Not that I was necessarily prepared to know what kind of college I wanted, but I think this was incentivized by that stigma, too. I didn't want to go back to my relatives and be, like, "Oh, hey guys, I think I might want to go to St. Bonaventure after all." That just would've been too embarrassing and not something I wanted to deal with. (Kyle, Interview)

Obligation to family

Two of the case participants—Juan and Logan—cited a sense of responsibility to their families as reasons for persisting. While each of these students recalled moments of wanting to drop out, neither acted on these feelings due to what their behavior and decision would have conveyed to their respective families.

The eldest of three boys, Juan worried about what message his inability to complete college would have sent to his two younger brothers. Additionally, from Juan's perspective, his success would be an accomplishment shared by the whole family:

[Earning my bachelor's degree] is definitely not just for me. It's sort of like an accomplishment for the rest of my family, that one of us will make it through this thing that no one before them had been able to. And [my brother] knowing that it's not such an unreachable thing. That he can make it, he can do it himself. If I can do it, he can definitely do it. So, it's definitely something that would serve as an accomplishment or sense of victory for the entire family. (Juan, Interview)

For Logan, the sacrifices and investments made by his parents helped him to remain focused on finishing at Kenmont. Similar to Juan, Logan's pursuit of a college degree was not just for himself; it was also partially for his parents:

I think honestly it's just the fact I'm aware of what it took to get me here. Any conversation with my parents really reminds me of that, I think. As long as I keep my parents in mind, there's no way in hell that I'd drop out. Sometimes I might feel overburdened and completely stressed out and exhausted. Sometimes I question whether or not it's all worth it. But, when push comes to shove after talking to my parents, it's worth it. I don't know if that's what makes me part of [those] that stayed. But I'm here for my parents as much as I'm here for myself. (Logan, Interview)

Contentedness

Many college students will claim that they chose a particular college because it was the "right fit." For Noah, despite his challenges with connecting socially on campus, Kenmont has been an exceptionally good fit, and a place where he has been able to flourish and find success:

I stayed because I was happy. You think about the things that make me happy, and I do have friends and I have close friends here. But there have been people who have friends here who have left. So, being happy with the atmosphere, being happy with the campus, being happy with the work that I'm doing, classes that I'm taking, and things that I'm learning and I guess

overall, I'm just really content with my experience. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. (Noah, Interview)

Participant characteristics

In addition to these environmental characteristics, it is important to highlight some of the characteristics of the case participants themselves. As presented in Chapter 3, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) human ecological systems model is comprised of two inextricably intertwined parts: the developing person and the environment(s) with which he or she interacts. In addition to documenting features of the case participants' pre-college and college environments, it is also important to note, even if briefly, the extent to which these first-generation college students demonstrated a willingness to engage with their respective environments. Bronfenbrenner (2005) suggested that an individual's willingness to engage with his or her environment(s) is partly determined by personal *developmentally instigative characteristics*. While each case participant was a distinct individual, several common characteristics emerged through this study that are worth noting.

Intellectually curious. If TheodoreSizer (2004) were to have met the participants of this study, he would certainly have characterized them as "hungry learners." From a very young age, these first-generation college students have been driven by their intellectual curiosity. Their fundamental desire to explore and learn has facilitated their success and ability to persist to graduation at Kenmont.

Achievement-oriented. The academic accolades of these individuals have been repeatedly documented in this study. Their high school transcripts and anticipated

graduation from one of the most selective liberal arts colleges in the country are indicative of the achievement-oriented focus these individuals bring to their academic endeavors.

Resilient. Despite their perceived readiness, the case participants in this study encountered various forms of adversity. From interacting with faculty to managing their time to adjusting socially to college, all of the case participants demonstrated a great deal of resilience in order to persist to graduation.

Independent. Whether by choice or by circumstance, several of the case participants approached their college experience with a pronounced sense of personal responsibility and independence. While an admirable attribute in many ways, this may have in fact inhibited some of the participants from seeking assistance when it was clearly needed.

While this list of developmentally instigative characteristics is not exhaustive, these four emerged as particularly salient and relevant to the abilities of the case participants to persist to graduation at Kenmont. In light of the findings from this study, the next section discusses implications on policy and practice as well as recommendations for future research.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Institutions of higher education, especially those that identify as highly selective liberal arts colleges, may discover utility in the findings from this study. Administrators, faculty members, student affairs practitioners, and students all play distinct, yet complementary roles, in the cultivation of an institution's academic and campus environment. The responsibilities that these stakeholders share in the cultivation of their college environments should not be underplayed, for it is our ability to influence our

surroundings that makes us, as humans, distinct from other species. Bronfenbrenner (2005) addressed this idea as follows: “to a greater extent than for any other species, human beings create the environments that shape the course of human development... Their actions influence the multiple physical and cultural tiers of the ecology that shapes them, and this agency makes humans—for better or worse—active producers of their own development” (p. xxvii). Inarguably, higher education stakeholders have not only the ability but also the responsibility to carefully consider and assess their institutional environments to support all students on their journey to degree completion.

Based upon the site and findings from this study, the following recommendations are directed specifically toward higher education stakeholders: administrators, professors, student affairs practitioners, other staff members, and, indeed, students. To transform one’s institutional environment, each of these institutional actors must play a part. The following recommendations are grounded in the findings that emerged from this study and thus may not be applicable to stakeholders at other types of institutions of higher education in this country.

Recommendations

A reason to celebrate

Because first-generation status has been associated with student attrition, many colleges and universities carefully track which students on their respective campuses are the first in their families to pursue a college degree. More than just a data point to be tracked and analyzed when calculating retention and graduation rates, first-generation status can be a point of institutional pride. For example, with more than 20% of its incoming class identifying as first-generation students, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has

adopted this philosophy, which is reflected in their Carolina Firsts program. From admission to graduation, the Carolina Firsts program provides an array of mentoring and support services to ensure first-generation college students are equipped to traverse the university landscape. Other colleges and universities can learn from North Carolina's program and other models helping them to develop practices relevant and conducive to their respective campus environments and resources.

Unveiling the first-generation community

When American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote about “passing ships in the night,” he very well could have been writing about first-generation college students. We know these students matriculate at all types of colleges and universities, yet in the absence of a formal support program (e.g., TRIO Student Support Services), these students often go unacknowledged and their needs, unmet. Housel and Harvey (2009) documented these challenges in their book, aptly titled *The Invisibility Factor*. The findings in this study illuminated the powerful influence of friends and friendship groups in both the pre-college environment and throughout the case participants' experiences at Kenmont. This lack of an identifiable community was referenced by Evan, who asserted: “*I definitely wish that there was a working-class or first-generation community similar to how there is an African-American community or a gay community on campus*” (Evan, Interview). The benefits of unveiling the community may be twofold. Not only should professors, advisers, and other staff members be aware of these educational pioneers, but also should the first-generation students themselves be able to identify and connect with one another.

Calling all first-generation college graduates

Colleges and universities, including Kenmont, should not only unveil the first-generation college students on their respective campuses, but also they should identify those members of the faculty and staff who were also the first in their family to pursue and obtain a college degree. In his op-ed article “Think of First-Generation Students as Pioneers, not as Problems,” Greenwald (2012) invited his first-generation colleagues to “stand up and make our presence known. . . . We need to act as ambassadors, guides, and advocates for current first-generation students.” Evan had this experience at Kenmont, and he greatly appreciated knowing he was not alone. As he described, “*It’s great when the professors come and let them know how many of them are first-generation*” (Evan, Interview). Professor Smith also perceived that his first-generation background provided him a valuable connection to his first-generation advisees. As he explained:

I connect much better with students that come from first-generation families. Maybe even more than with students who have faculty members as parents, or parents as other professionals just because they don’t have that type of relationship outside the institution, so I kind of serve that role in a sense. I see they connect to me very well. (Professor Smith, Interview)

College and university officials may choose to leave these discoveries to serendipity, or they can intentionally alter their behavior and environments to demystify and regularize these interactions.

Connecting the liberal arts to post-college endeavors

Several of the case participants in this study struggled with connecting their academic coursework and major field of study to their post-college plans and goals. In general, liberal arts disciplines are not directly associated with specific career paths. As a result, a liberal

arts education is commonly associated with the development of a malleable knowledge base and versatile set of skills, which are both a blessing and a curse. Graduates from liberal arts colleges are broadly educated but often lack a sense of career clarity and purpose. Despite his best efforts to prepare himself for post-college life, Kyle contended that more could be done:

I was just really disappointed that a career path was not more integrated in the liberal arts curriculum. I always had some sense that I was going to enter the workforce right away. I'm not an academic. I'm not going to go to graduate school and study history for the rest of my life. That was never my plan. I studied history because I enjoy it. [After graduation] I'm going to have a nine-to-five job. So, I still think we should improve connections to the real world and how we should apply our skills. (Kyle, Interview)

The most recent economic recession has prompted many liberal arts colleges to reconsider their current approaches to career readiness and preparation; however, more can and should be done.

Make the familiar strange and the strange familiar

Colleges and universities have distinct cultures, and navigating these institutions effectively requires some understanding of these cultural nuances. Orientation programs are now virtually commonplace across higher education, and are designed explicitly to welcome new students to campus. While the content and structure of these programs are, sensibly, led by members of this culture, this can be problematic in that some of the cultural nuances may be overlooked given their familiarity with the institution. Whitt (1993) explained this phenomenon in the following, “Members of a subculture or subgroup have difficulty identifying aspects of their own culture because these elements have become second nature. People accept as commonplace the cultural properties that shape their behavior” (p. 81). For

first-generation college students, the challenge is twofold. Not only are they acquainting themselves with the cultural nuances of a particular college or university, but also they are more broadly learning the rules and conduct of going to college. They lack a college-going *habitus*, or what Bourdieu (1998) more casually described as “a feel for the game.”

Even as a high-achieving cluster of first-generation college students, the case participants in this study encountered several social and academic challenges. From struggles with classroom participation to understanding faculty expectations to managing one’s time and commitments to interacting with the faculty, the case participants repeatedly revealed their social capital deficiencies. These challenges are well documented in the literature, and college and university officials can influence the ways in which first-generation students are welcomed and oriented to the college environment. It will require different, perhaps more pedestrian and more frank, conversations. Professor Clark takes this approach in his classes, as he described:

I definitely don’t assume that everyone in the classroom is aware of what I’m talking about from identifying a thesis to reading critically and writing an argument. I work from the premise that these are skills and habits, ways of thinking that need to be talked about explicitly and defined. (Professor Clark, Interview)

Whitt (1993) recommended strategies that members can use to minimize the extent to which they overlook their cultural milieu when welcoming newcomers to campus. Whitt suggested college and university officials begin by reflecting on their own experience:

When you were a newcomer to the organization, what was unexpected or strange about the way things were done, how people behaved, the language people used, or the assumptions that people made? If you wanted to describe to an outsider the essential nature of your organization, what stories would you tell, and why? What should a visitor see and to whom should a visitor speak if she wanted to understand your organization? (p. 82)

Similar questions could be posed to focus groups of first-generation students (at particular institutions). Whitt contended that such reflection and group discourse can “reveal the practices and underlying values and assumptions which are often taken for granted, thereby bringing cultural elements to a level of consciousness so they can be examined and understood” (p. 83). Bringing such transparency to the college-orientation process would help make the strange world of academia a bit more familiar to first-generation college students.

Future research

This collective case study attempted to contribute to the growing body of literature focused on first-generation college students. The experiences of high-achieving first-generation students, particularly those attending highly selective liberal arts colleges, are scarcely covered in existing studies. Additionally, unlike many qualitative studies focused on first-generation college students, the case participants were not part of a structured support program (e.g., TRIO Student Support Services). It is my hope that the distinctive features of the students’ experiences—both positive and negative—may be educational and helpful to faculty, staff, and administrators at other highly selective liberal arts colleges. As with all studies, regardless of their size and scope, the researcher discovers topics and themes that warrant additional investigation. This study was no exception. Given the paucity of scholarship on first-generation college students at highly selective, residential liberal arts colleges, future investigations into all of the following would make substantive contributions to policy and practice.

Does birth order matter?

Psychologists and biologists have been studying the effects of sibling relationships for nearly a century (Adler, 1929; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1982). All of the case participants in this study had at least one sibling, and they represented various places within the birth order: four were the youngest, one was the middle child, and three were the eldest. While not an explicit focus of this study, I became curious about the influence of birth order among first-generation college students. In essence, how would this study be different if all the case participants were the first-born children? Do they sense a greater responsibility to persist? Is there added pressure to perform and graduate, simply because of the example they are setting for younger siblings? Is there a relationship between birth order and the expectations, values, and concerns first-generation students bring to bear on the process and experience of earning a college degree? Responses to these questions would provide an additional lens through which to understand the first-generation student experience.

What about race and gender?

This collective case study focused on a small cohort of male first-generation college students. Duplicating this study with another cohort of students, delimited by different attributes, could uncover additional nuances and particularities of first-generation college experience. For example, in what ways is the first-generation college experience a gendered experience? How do male and female students navigate the college experience differently? Are some of the challenges faced by the case participants in this study shared with and/or different from the obstacles encountered by their female counterparts? Additionally, how might this study read differently if focused on a particular racial or ethnic group? The case

participants were a mixed group: six identified as Caucasian, one as Hispanic, and one as Asian-American. As colleges and universities seek to better understand the disparity in retention and graduation rates among their first-generation student populations, studies focused on particular gender and racial or ethnic groups are needed.

Tell me more about your friends

An unanticipated finding in this study was the profound influence of friendship groups, particularly in the case participants' high school environments. Scholars have studied the impact and influence of peers and friendship circles in a number of settings (Antonio, 2001, 2004; Harris, 1998), yet the implications of this influence have not been fully explored in the literature on first-generation college students. In this study, high school friends—along with their siblings and parents in some cases—had a profound influence on the case participants' college search process. Whether through Sean's discussions about college in his friend's basement, or Kyle's tag-along visits to area colleges with a high school buddy, several of the case participants provided example after example of how they—intentionally or unintentionally—leveraged and benefited from the social capital of these surrogate families. Additional scholarship on the specific roles friendship groups play in the lives of first-generation college students warrants investigation.

How do first-generation college students' experiences change over time?

This collective case study was based on the experiences of eight male first-generation college students who persisted to their final year at a single highly selective, residential liberal arts college. The interview protocol created for this study was also comprised of several questions requiring the students to reflect upon and recount experiences that occurred

in the past. As a case study, the findings presented in this study are bounded by place and time.

Building upon the methodological framework of this study, a multi-institutional, longitudinal research endeavor could explore more deeply the nuances and experiences of first-generation college students attending a variety institutions closer to when they occurred rather than in retrospect. Following participants from their junior year in high school through their first year after graduating from college would produce an incredibly rich dataset from which many conclusions could be drawn. Such a study could capture firsthand accounts from several additional stakeholders that were only referred to in this case study: peers, high school teachers, siblings, and parents. A comprehensive and inclusive approach has the potential to reveal and address the many complexities of first-generation student experiences that tend to be studied in isolation.

Reflexivity

Examining the lives of the eight first-generation college students in this study has been illuminating, challenging, rewarding, and humbling. Commencing nearly 12 months ago, this research process demanded more from me intellectually and analytically than any other academic endeavor in my life. In many ways, this dissertation research served as the capstone of my formal educational journey, not just my doctoral studies. This case study provided me an opportunity to explore deeply a topic that is of interest to me on multiple levels. As a college administrator, I am interested in learning more about college students' experiences, particularly the experiences of those who have a history of struggling through academia. As a scholar, I am hopeful this study will expand on what we currently know

about first-generation college students and help to address some of the gaps in the extant literature. Finally, as a first-generation college graduate myself, I am interested in both celebrating the accomplishments of this population of students and also keeping the challenges they face present in the minds of higher education stakeholders as they craft policies and implement practices. We have much to learn from first-generation college students, and they must be provided a platform to tell their stories. I hope to have provided such a platform through this research.

One of the greatest challenges I encountered in this study was assembling a cohesive narrative that fairly and accurately reflected the individual stories of the eight case participants in this study. With both candor and honesty, these young men disclosed, at times, deeply personal stories about their home life, high school experiences, and time at Kenmont College. With more than 400 pages of transcribed interviews, piecing together a collective narrative was a challenging task. Many qualitative researchers are faced with this challenge when writing the results of a study, but anticipating the problem does not make it easily resolved. Elliot (2012) addressed this challenge in his book *History in the Making* by asserting, “no narrative is ever fully comprehensive, no explanation total, and the balance between description and analysis is painfully elusive” (p. 94). Indeed!

Another challenge was determining how to incorporate the contributions of the three faculty members and the dean of students. I am very appreciative of their time and energy, but I remained steadfast in my focus on the students’ experiences. Therefore, I made the decision early on that the students’ stories would remain in the foreground of the study, and any contributions from the faculty and staff interviews would be supplemental. From a methodological perspective, these individuals functioned as an additional source with which

to triangulate the findings. In this sense, they more than served that purpose. However, I perceived that they, as first-generation college graduates, had a distinct lens through which to view the Kenmont experience. While I am pleased with how their contributions were incorporated, it was not without extensive consideration.

As I write this final passage, I am a bit awestruck that this journey is coming to a close. I feel very fortunate to have selected a topic that continues to capture my interest, and I am even more fortunate to have met eight very special young men through this process. They have demonstrated that, while we know a great deal about first-generation college students, there is still much more to learn. I hope other scholars will join me in the future work that remains as we strive to better understand higher education's true pioneers—first-generation college students.

APPENDIX A. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office of Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
1138 Pearson Hall
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207
515 294-4566
FAX 515 294-4267

Date: 8/21/2012

To: Mark R Peltz
304 35th St SW
Altoona, IA 50009

CC: Dr. Larry Ebbers
N256 Lagomarcino

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: An Interpretive Case Study of Male First-Generation Students Attending a Highly Selective Liberal Arts College

IRB ID: 12-382

Approval Date: 8/20/2012

Date for Continuing Review: 8/19/2014

Submission Type: New

Review Type: Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- **Use only the approved study materials** in your research, **including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.**
- **Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study**, when documented consent is required.
- **Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study** by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- **Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems involving risks** to subjects or others.
- **Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses**, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- **Complete a new continuing review form** at least three to four weeks prior to the **date for continuing review** as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. **Approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.

Kenmont College [pseudonym]

Office for Responsible Research
1138 Pearson Hall
Ames, IA 50011-2200

Dear IRB Administrator:

On behalf of Kenmont College, I am writing to inform you of our institution's support of Mark Peltz's intended study at Kenmont College as part of his doctoral dissertation for the School of Education at Iowa State University. I have reviewed his IRB application, intended survey questions, and research protocols and am comfortable with the intent, focus, and scope of his study as well as the measures he will take to ensure the confidentiality of the participants and the security of the data he collects.

Additionally, Mr. Peltz has asked for access to the admission files of the student participants of his study, including their applications for admission, high school transcripts, recommendation letters, and any admission interview notes. He would also like to receive a copy of the participants' current transcript. Again, based upon his measures to ensure these documents are safe and secure, I am comfortable granting him access to these documents upon receipt of each participant's consent.

With respect to maintaining the confidentiality of Kenmont College, we ask that Mr. Peltz begin this study with the intent of not disclosing Kenmont as the site for this study. However, if our geography, institutional selectivity, and unique institutional attributes become prominent features of the participants' interviews and the study itself, we acknowledge that a pseudonym would do little to conceal Kenmont as the site for this study. If that becomes the case, we would be willing to revisit our position on institutional confidentiality.

In closing, I do not have any concerns with or foresee any conflicts arising from Mr. Peltz's study at Kenmont. If you have any questions pertaining to the contents of this letter, please feel free to contact me at Kenmont College.

Sincerely,

Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean
Kenmont College

APPENDIX B. PARTICIPANT COMMUNICATION

B-1. Student Invitation

Dear <insert name>,

My name is Mark Peltz and I am a doctoral student at Iowa State University in the School of Education. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree, and I would like to invite you to participate.

I am studying the experiences of male students who are on pace to become the first in their family to earn a four-year college degree (i.e., first-generation college students). If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a short, online questionnaire and also participate in a semi-structured interview.

The interview will take place at a time and location that is convenient for you and should last between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed verbatim and only members of the research team will have access to the recordings and transcripts. Participation is confidential and all information pertaining to the study will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed.

Although you probably won't benefit directly from participating in this study, I hope higher education officials and policy makers will become better informed by the findings of this study. As a token of appreciation for participating in this study, you will receive a \$10.00 gift card to your college's bookstore at the conclusion of your interview.

Taking part in the study is your decision and you may choose to not answer any question you are not comfortable answering. You can end your participation at any time.

I am happy to answer any questions you have about the study. Please feel free to contact me at 563-379-1740 or mpeltz@iastate.edu if you have any questions or problems pertaining to this study. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Iowa State University at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please respond to this email and I will send information pertaining to the online questionnaire. If I don't hear from you, I will also call you within the next week to see whether you are willing, interested, and able to participate.

Sincerely,

Mark Peltz

Doctoral Candidate, Iowa State University, School of Education

B-2. Faculty & Staff Invitation

Dear <insert name>,

My name is Mark Peltz and I am a doctoral student at Iowa State University in the School of Education. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree, and I would like to invite you to participate.

I am studying the experiences of male students who are the first in their family to attend college (i.e., first-generation college students). As part of this study, I am also interviewing select college leaders and members of the faculty for their insights. If you agree to participate, your involvement would consist of participating in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 45 minutes.

The interview will take place at a time and location that is convenient for you. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed verbatim and only members of the research team will have access to the recordings and transcripts. Participation is confidential and all information pertaining to the study will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed.

Although you probably won't benefit directly from participating in this study, I hope higher education officials and policy makers will become better informed by the findings of this study.

Taking part in the study is your decision and you may choose to end your participation or not answer any question you are not comfortable answering.

I am happy to answer any questions you have about the study. Please feel free to contact me at 563-379-1740 or mpeltz@iastate.edu if you have any questions or problems pertaining to this study. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Iowa State University at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please respond to this email. I will also call you within the next week to see whether you are willing to participate.

Sincerely,

Mark Peltz
Doctoral Candidate, Iowa State University, School of Education

B-3. Follow-up Phone Script

Hello, my name is Mark Peltz and I am calling to follow-up on the email I sent you last week pertaining to my study of first-generation college students. Is this an okay time to talk?

If yes, proceed.

If no, identify a time to call back.

Again, I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at Iowa State University and I am conducting a study on the experiences of male first-generation college students and I would like to invite you to participate. But first, let me tell you more about the study and what, if you agree, you will be asked to do.

If student participant:

As a first-generation student, you will be asked to complete a brief online questionnaire and a semi-structured interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews will be audio taped and transcribed verbatim. You will be presented with an opportunity to review your interview transcript, providing you the chance to review, amend, clarify, and/or redact any statements you made during your interview.

Your participation will be confidential and all information pertaining to this study will be kept in a secure location.

Although you probably won't benefit directly from participating in this study, I hope that higher education officials and policy makers will have a better understanding of the experiences of first-generation students as they craft policy and develop practices on campus that may impact the retention, persistence, and degree completion of these students. As a small token of appreciation for participating, you will receive a \$10 gift card to your college's bookstore after your interview takes place.

Again, participation in this study is voluntary, and you may end your participation at any time and may choose to not answer any question you are not comfortable with. Do you have any questions at this time that I can answer for you?

Would you be interested in participating in this study?

If yes, schedule a time for the interview.

If no, thank them for their time and consideration.

If faculty or staff participant:

As a member of the (faculty or staff), you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. The interviews will be audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Your participation will be confidential and all information pertaining to this study will be kept in a secure location. You will be presented with an opportunity to review your interview transcript, providing you the chance to review, amend, clarify, and/or redact any statements you made during your interview.

Although you probably won't benefit directly from participating in this study, I hope that higher education officials and policy makers will have a better understanding of the experiences of first-generation students as they craft policy and develop practices on campus that may impact the retention, persistence, and degree completion of these students.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may end your participation at any time and may choose to not answer any question you are not comfortable with. Do you have any questions at this time that I can answer for you?

Would you be interested in participating in this study?

If yes, schedule a time for the interview.

If no, thank them for their time and consideration.

B-4. Informed Consent Documents

a. Student

Title of Study: An Interpretive Case Study of Male First-Generation Students Attending a Highly Selective Liberal Arts College

Investigator: Mark Peltz, Doctoral Candidate, Iowa State University

INTRODUCTION:

The purpose of this research study is to document and understand the experiences of first-generation, male college students attending Kenmont College, a highly selective, liberal arts college in the Midwest. All of the student participants have successfully persisted through the first two years of college. By developing a richer understanding of the college going experiences of these students, this study will give voice to a largely invisible and silent group of students by discovering and examining the affective, social, and educational conditions that impact these students' experiences.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES:

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last approximately 2 hours, including: A) a brief on-line questionnaire, and B) a semi-structured interview. During the study you may expect the following study procedures to be followed: Initial data will be gathered using a brief on-line questionnaire that should take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Following the completion of the questionnaire, I will contact you to schedule a semi-structured interview that will last between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview will occur in person at a location and time that is convenient for you. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed verbatim. You will be provided an opportunity to review, amend, and/or redact any statements from the interview transcription. Additionally, a brief follow-up interview may occur if it is deemed necessary by either you or me. If this is the case, it may occur over the phone or in-person at a time and location that is convenient for you and will also be audio taped and transcribed verbatim.

RISKS:

Due to the small number of participants in this study, some comments may be traceable back to some individuals. Again, you will be assigned a pseudonym and presented with the opportunity to review, clarify, amend, and/or redact any statements from your interview transcription.

BENEFITS:

If you decide to participate in this study there will be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will contribute to the broader knowledge and literature concerning the experiences of male first-generation college students.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION:

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will receive a \$10 gift card to your college's bookstore after the interview as a way to thank you for your time. If you sever your participation after the online questionnaire but prior to the interview, a gift card will still be mailed to you at the same time as the other participants.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. Additionally, you can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. If you

decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken. All participants will be provided a code name that will replace your real name on files and other documentation used throughout the study. All study documents, recordings, and related materials will be stored in a locked cabinet; all computer files will be password protected. Only the principal investigator and supervising faculty member will have access to data collected. Participants will be provided an opportunity to review the transcript of their individual interview, where they will be invited to amend, clarify, and/or redact any of their comments. All consent materials pertaining to this study will be kept for a period of 3 years, after which they will be destroyed. Additionally, interview audio recordings, academic transcripts, and admission files will be kept for a period of 3 years, after which they will be destroyed. No other research materials will contain any personable identifiable information.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS:

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact Mark Peltz at 563-379-1740 or Dr. Larry Ebbers, Major Professor, at 515-294-8067.
- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE:

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (Printed)

Participant's Signature

Date

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits, and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agree to participate.

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Date

b. Faculty & Staff

Title of Study: An Interpretive Case Study of Male First-Generation Students Attending a Highly Selective Liberal Arts College

Investigator: Mark Peltz, Doctoral Candidate, Iowa State University

INTRODUCTION:

The purpose of this research study is to document and understand the experiences of first-generation, male college students attending Kenmont College, a highly selective, liberal arts college in the Midwest. All of the student participants have successfully persisted through the first two years of college. Select college leaders and members of the faculty will be interviewed to solicit their insights into this population of college student. By developing a richer understanding of the college going experiences of these students, this study will give voice to a largely invisible and silent group of students by discovering and examining the affective, social, and educational conditions that impact these students' experiences.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES:

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will consist of participating in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. The interview will occur in person at a location and time that is convenient for you. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed verbatim. You will be provided an opportunity to review, amend, and/or redact any statements from the interview transcription. Additionally, a brief follow-up interview may occur if it is deemed necessary by either you or me. If this is the case, it may occur over the phone or in-person at a time and location that is convenient for you and will also be audio taped and transcribed verbatim.

RISKS:

Due to the small number of participants in this study, some comments may be traceable back to some individuals. Again, you will be assigned a pseudonym and presented with the opportunity to review, clarify, amend, and/or redact any statements from your interview transcription.

BENEFITS:

If you decide to participate in this study there will be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will contribute to the broader knowledge and literature concerning the experiences of male first-generation college students.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION:

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. Additionally, you can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory

agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken. All participants will be provided a code name that will replace your real name on files and other documentation used throughout the study. All study documents, recordings, and related materials will be stored in a locked cabinet; all computer files will be password protected. Only the principal investigator and supervising faculty member will have access to data collected. Participants will be provided an opportunity to review the transcript of their individual interview, during which time they will be invited to amend, clarify, and/or redact any of their comments. All consent materials pertaining to this study will be kept for a period of 3 years, after which they will be destroyed. Additionally, interview audio recordings will be kept for a period of 3 years, after which they will be destroyed. No other research materials will contain any personable identifiable information.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS:

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact Mark Peltz at 563-379-1740 or Dr. Larry Ebbers, Major Professor, at 515-294-8067.
- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE:

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (Printed)

Participant's Signature

Date

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits, and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agree to participate.

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Date

c. Educational Records

Title of Study: An Interpretive Case Study of Male First-Generation Students
Attending a Highly Selective Liberal Arts College

Investigator: Mark Peltz, Doctoral Candidate, Iowa State University

As an additional source of data for this study, I would like to receive a copy of your admission file in the Admission Office and copies of any current undergraduate transcripts on file with the Registrar's Office. To do so, I need your consent. Please place a check below by the items you are willing to grant access to, and then provide your name, student ID number, signature, and date below. These records will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and then confidentially destroyed 6 months following the completion of this study.

___ The contents of my admission file (including, but not limited to: application form, admission essay, reference letters, interview notes, high school transcripts, standardized test scores);

___ All undergraduate transcripts on file with the Registrar's Office.

Participant's Name (Printed)

Student I.D.

Participant's Signature

Date

APPENDIX C. QUESTIONNAIRE, INTERVIEW GUIDES, AND DATES

C-1. Student Questionnaire

1. In what year did you graduate from high school?
 2011
 2010
 2009
 2008
 2007 or earlier
 Did not graduate but passed G.E.D. test.
 Never completed high school.
2. How many miles is this college from your permanent home?
 5 or less
 6–10
 11–50
 51–100
 101–500
 Over 500
3. From what kind of high school did you graduate?
 Public school (not charter or magnet)
 Public charter school
 Public magnet school
 Private religious/parochial school
 Private independent college-prep school
 Home school
4. To how many colleges other than this one did you apply for admission?
 None
 1
 2
 3
 4
 5
 6
 7–10
 11 or more
5. Were you accepted to your first choice college?
 Yes
 No
6. Is this college your:
 First choice
 Second choice
 Third choice
 Less than third choice
7. The current economic situation significantly affected my college choice:
 Agree Strongly
 Agree Somewhat

- Disagree Somewhat
Disagree Strongly
8. Please mark which of the following courses you have completed:
- Algebra II
 - Pre-calculus/Trigonometry
 - Probability & Statistics
 - Calculus
 - AP Probability & Statistics
 - AP Calculus
9. Do you have any concern about your ability to finance your college education?
- None (I am confident that I will have sufficient funds)
 - Some (but I probably will have sufficient funds)
 - Major (not sure I will have enough funds to complete college)
10. What is the highest academic degree that you intend to obtain?
- None
 - Vocational certificate
 - Associate (A.A. or equivalent)
 - Bachelor's degree (B.A., B.S., etc.)
 - Master's degree (M.A., M.S., etc.)
 - Ph.D. or Ed.D.
 - M.D., D.O., D.D.S., or D.V.M.
 - J.D. (Law)
 - B.D. or M.Div. (Divinity)
 - Other
11. What is the highest level of formal education obtained by your parents?
- Mother*
- Junior high/Middle school or less
 - Some high school
 - High school graduate
 - Postsecondary school other than college
 - Some college
 - College degree
 - Some graduate school
 - Graduate degree
- Father*
- Junior high/Middle school or less
 - Some high school
 - High school graduate
 - Postsecondary school other than college
 - Some college
 - College degree
 - Some graduate school
 - Graduate degree
12. Prior to enrolling in college, how often did you talk with your parents about going to college?
- Frequently
 - Occasionally
 - Seldom
 - Not at all

13. In deciding to go to college, how important to you was each of the following reasons? (very important, somewhat important, not important)
- To be able to get a better job
 - To gain a general education and appreciation of ideas
 - To make me a more cultured person
 - To be able to make more money
 - To learn more about things that interest me
 - To get training for a specific career
 - To prepare myself for graduate or professional school
14. Below are some reasons that you might have influenced your decision to attend this particular college. How important was each reason in your decision to come here? (very important, somewhat important, not important).
- My parents wanted me to come here
 - My relatives wanted me to come here
 - My teacher advised me
 - This college has a very good academic reputation
 - This college has a good reputation for its social activities
 - I was offered financial assistance
 - The cost of attending this college
 - High school counselor advised me
 - Private college counselor advised me
 - I wanted to live near home
 - Not offered aid by first choice
 - Could not afford first choice
 - This college's graduates gain admission to top graduate/professional schools
 - This college's graduates get good jobs
 - Rankings in national magazines
 - The athletic department recruited me
 - A visit to this campus
 - The percentage of students that graduate from this college
15. How many siblings do you have?
16. Which of the following best characterizes your place in the birth order?
- I'm the oldest.
 - I'm in the middle.
 - I'm the youngest.
17. Were you and any of your siblings ever enrolled in college at the same time (at the same or different institutions)?
- Yes
 - No
 - Not applicable
18. Did any of your siblings earn a bachelor's degree prior to you attending college?
- Yes
 - No
 - Not applicable
19. Did any of your siblings earn a graduate degree prior to you attending college?
- Yes
 - No
 - Not applicable

20. Have you worked at any time during college?
Yes
No
21. If yes, during how many semesters did you work?
1
2
3
4
5
6 or more
22. When you worked, how many hours did you work, on average, per week?
1 to 5
6 to 10
11 to 15
16 to 20
20 to 25
25+
23. Where did you work?
On campus
Off campus
Both
24. Since entering college, how often have you interacted with the following people (e.g., by phone, email, Instant Message, or in person)? [Daily, 2-3 times/week, once a week, 1-2 times/month, 1-2 times/term, Never]

Faculty during office hours
Faculty outside of class or office hours
Academic advisers/counselors
Close friends at this institution
Close friends not at this institution
Your family
Graduate students/teaching assistants
Close friends from your high school
25. Since entering this college, how has it been to: (Mark one for each item)
[Very Easy, Somewhat Easy, Somewhat Difficult, Very Difficult]

Understand what your professors expect of you academically
Develop effective study skills
Adjust to the academic demands of college
Manage your time effectively
Develop close relationships with other students
26. Since entering this college have you: (Mark yes or no)

Decided to pursue a different major
Remained undecided about a major
Changed your career choice
Participated in student government
Played club, intramural, or recreational sports
Played intercollegiate athletics
Participated in student groups/clubs
Sought personal counseling
Strengthened your religious beliefs/convictions

- Failed one or more courses
 Accumulated excessive credit card debt
 Been a leader in an organization
 Communicated regularly with your professors
27. Select the circle that best represents the quality of your relationships with people at your institution:
 Relationships with other students (1 = Unfriendly, Unsupportive, Sense of Alienation to 7 = Friendly, Supportive, Sense of Belonging)
 Relationships with faculty members (1 = Unavailable, Unhelpful, Unsympathetic to 7 = Available, Helpful, Sympathetic)
 Relationships with administrative personnel and offices (1 = Unhelpful, Inconsiderate, Rigid to 7 = Helpful, Considerate, Flexible)
28. How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?
 Excellent
 Good
 Fair
 Poor
29. If you could start over again, would you go to the same institution you are now attending?
 Definitely yes
 Probably yes
 Probably no
 Definitely no
30. Did you begin college at your current institution or elsewhere?
 Started here
 Started elsewhere
31. What is your racial or ethnic identification? (select only one)
 American Indian or other Native American
 Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander
 Black or African American
 White (non-Hispanic)
 Mexican or Mexican American
 Puerto Rican
 Other Hispanic or Latino
 Multiracial
 Other
 I prefer not to respond
32. Which of the following best characterizes your plans immediately following graduation:
 I plan to work full-time.
 I plan to enroll in graduate/professional school.
 I plan to volunteer.
 I plan to participate in a post-graduate fellowship (e.g., Fulbright).
 I plan to continue my studies at the undergraduate level.
 I plan to intern.
 I plan to travel.
 I am unsure of my plans at this time.
33. What is your primary field of study? [picklist of majors]
34. If you have a secondary field of study, please select it here: [picklist of majors]

C-2. Student Interview Guide

Introduction

“First, let me thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. While there is a great deal of literature focusing on first-generation college students, we regrettably know little about the experiences of first-gen students who attend liberal arts colleges. Furthermore, we don’t know a great deal about the experiences of men who are the first in their families to attend college. Before diving into the questions, I want to share a statistic with you. In the fall of 2009, 72 students (or 19%) of the entering class were first-generation college students. Of those 72 students, 37 were men. Today, more than 20% of those men are no longer attending this college. You are. Lots of studies focus on why students leave college. I am interested in better understanding why you stayed. We have much to learn from your experience. So again, thank you for sharing your experiences with me today.”

Background Questions

1. Tell me about your family and where you grew up.
2. What do you think prevented your parents from earning a four-year degree?
3. Tell me about your high school. To what extent did your high school experiences prepare you for college (academically and socially)?

Pre-Matriculation Decisions/Experiences

4. Tell me about when you first began thinking seriously about going to college? Who did you talk with about going to college?
5. Did anyone ever discourage you from going to college?
6. Why did you ultimately decide to pursue a bachelor’s degree?
7. Tell me about your college search process. When did it begin?
8. Prior to applying, what were your thoughts about how you would pay for college? Who did you talk to? Tell me about those conversations.
9. What attracted you to a private liberal arts college?
10. What other colleges did you apply to?
11. What factors ultimately influenced your decision to attend this college?

Transition to College

12. Tell me about your arrival at Kenmont.
 - a. Describe for me how you felt the day you moved in to your room.
 - b. Tell me about your first day of classes.
 - c. To what extent were your first experiences on campus consistent with what you perceived it would be like?
13. Prior to college, what sort of relationships did you imagine you would have with your professors?

Academic Adjustment

14. How would you describe your academic experiences here at Kenmont College?
15. How would you characterize your relationships with your professors? Academic adviser?
16. How did you navigate the college's open, individualized curriculum?
17. How did you go about choosing your major? Was this a difficult decision? Did you consult with anyone? What considerations influenced your decisions?
18. What were some of the greatest challenges adjusting to the academic expectations of the college? How did you deal with them?
19. What experiences and which people helped your academic adjustment to college?

Social Adjustment

20. What were you expecting the social scene of college to look like? How have your experiences been validated or challenged those perceptions?
21. What were some of the greatest challenges in adjusting to the social life of college? How did you handle them?
22. Who would you say helped most in your social adjustment to college?

Interactions with Family

23. Tell me how you, your family and your friends have adjusted to your life as a college student. Were they supportive? What did most of your friends do after high school?
24. Did your relationship with your family (and friends) change as a result of you going to college?

Closing Questions

25. What do you think are the benefits of being a first-generation college student? What are the limitations?
26. Why do you think you are among the 70% of first-generation men who stayed?
27. What does being the first in your family to go college mean to you?
28. If you could offer any advice to future first-generation college students attending a small, private liberal arts college, what would you say?
29. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about your experience?

C-3. Faculty & Staff Interview Guide

Introduction

“First, thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. While there is a great deal of literature focusing on first-generation college students, we regrettably know little about the experiences of first-gen students who attend liberal arts colleges, nor do we know much about the experiences of men who are the first in their families to attend college. Before diving into the questions, I want to share a statistic with you. In the fall of 2009, 72 students (or 19%) of the entering class was first-generation. Of those 72 students, 37 were men. Today, more than 20% of those men are no longer attending this college. I would like for us to talk about what features of the college experience might help and/or hinder the persistence of this unique population of students.”

Background Questions

1. What is your role at the college and how long have you been in your current position?
2. Have you held other positions at the College? If so, what were those roles?
3. Are you a first-generation college graduate?
4. At what institution did you complete your bachelor’s degree?

Facilitators of Persistence

5. Even though we lost a third of our male first-generation college students from the Class of 2013, 70% of them persisted. What elements of a residential, liberal arts environment do you sense contributed to their persistence?
 - a. Probing Question: What elements of Kenmont as a liberal arts college might help these students be successful (e.g., culture, environment, etc.)?
 - b. Probing Question: What traits do you sense help these students persist?

Hindrances to Persistence

6. What elements of a residential, liberal arts environment do you sense make it challenging for our first-generation male students?
 - a. Probing Question: What aspects of Kenmont as a liberal arts college might present academic and social obstacles to these students?
 - b. Probing Question: What could Kenmont do differently to help these students persist (e.g., academically, socially)?

Social Capital

7. How might a student's social capital deficiencies contribute to some of the challenges first-generation students face in this sort of environment?

C-4. Interview Dates and Duration

Participant	Interview Date	Duration
Noah	9/13/12	1h 47m
James	9/27/12	2h 14m
Kyle	9/24/12	2h 15m
Sean	10/17/12	2h 10m
Juan	9/19/12	2h 17m
Michael	9/25/12	1h 30m
Evan	10/18/12	3h 10m
Logan	9/10/12	1h 49m
Dean Brown	11/21/12	1h 07m
Professor Jones	11/09/12	1h 11m
Professor Smith	11/13/12	56m
Professor Clark	11/21/12	46m
Total		21h 18m

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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