# FACTORS AFFECTING THE ACADEMIC ASPIRATIONS AND PERSISTENCE

# OF TRIO STUDENTS AT SOUTHWEST TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

## THESIS

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By

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# ABSTRACT

## FACTORS AFFECTING THE ACADEMIC ASPIRATIONS AND PERSISTENCE

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This qualitative case study explored the factors—including family and peer relationships, self-related/psychological, institutional, and societal factors—that influenced TRIO students' academic aspirations and persistence and to what degree. Student participants were also given the opportunity to offer recommendations to educators/practitioners in terms of how to increase the aspirations and persistence of students from similar low-income, first-generation backgrounds. It was found that having a supportive family was the most important factor in determining aspirations and that students' high self-motivation levels were the main factor accounting for their persistence. Student participants also offer recommendations for how to improve Southwest Texas State University's current TRIO programs, Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Several studies (Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Mau &

Bikos, 2000; Trippi & Stewart, 1989) have examined the interpersonal, institutional, and

societal factors that positively or negatively affect the aspirations and persistence of low-

income and/or minority students* in higher education. No previous study, however, has

specifically delimited their sample population to include only students who currently

participate (or previously participated) in the TRIO programs, three federally funded

grant programs (Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services) that assist

disadvantaged high school and college students to enroll and achieve success in college.

(A history of TRIO and its programmatic structures will be provided in the following

section).

With additional support provided by the program and/or other people, many

students in TRIO persist to earn their degrees; some, however, still fail to graduate.

Assuming similar socioeconomic backgrounds, why do some TRIO students thrive in

higher education while others drop out? In the answer to this question lies great

potential—the potential for parents and educators to positively affect their students'

academic and economic futures. For, as will be discussed in greater length during the

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* The researcher does not assume that all or most low-income students are minorities or vice-versa. They
are referred to together throughout this study because several previous studies (Hubbard, 1999; Gerardi,
1990) have studied these populations together.

"Significance of the Study" section of this chapter, education offers hope for the first-generation, low-income and/or minority student—hope for a life free from poverty and its negative repercussions.

Theoretical frameworks for the study, including the works of Eccles (1983), Ogbu (1991), Sewell (1969), and Tinto (1975) will be discussed at length in Chapter 2, the review of the relevant literature. Before reviewing the literature on the aspirations and persistence of first-generation, low-income college students however, it is first necessary to set the context for the study by introducing the three TRIO programs separately to readers.

## Introduction to TRIO Programs

The TRIO programs were conceived as a part of Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" programs of the 1960s and authorized under the Higher Education Act of 1965. The original three programs, Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services (formerly known as Special Services for Disadvantaged Students) will be the focus of this study, but throughout the years other programs, including McNair and Educational Opportunity Centers, have been added under the TRIO umbrella as well. All of the programs target low-income and/or first-generation students (students whose parents did not attend college) with the intent purpose of increasing the number of disadvantaged students who participate in and earn degrees in higher education. In the paragraphs below, each of the three original TRIO programs, beginning with Talent Search and ending with Student Support Services, will be explained in further detail.

Talent Search's role is to expose large numbers of students to the higher education experience. Students are recruited for the program beginning in the 6th grade

and can continue in the program throughout graduation from secondary school. High school dropouts are also eligible to participate (Sennett Hebert, 1997). Students participating in Talent Search receive academic support services as well as opportunities to visit and tour college campuses located within their geographical area.

Upward Bound (UB) targets disadvantaged high school students who are not college bound. The program's main goal is to prepare these students for enrollment in and completion of postsecondary education. In general, UB programs provide academic counseling, tutoring, and enrichment activities beginning in the students' 9th grade year and continuing through their graduation from high school. The culminating activity of each school year consists of a residential summer program on a local college campus. Upward Bound assumes the philosophy that the cultural and educational deficits of disadvantaged youth can be addressed through specific interventions such as academic enrichment and through access to such information as scholarship and student loan opportunities (Guzman-Foster, 1997).

Student Support Services (SSS) programs are specifically for low-income, first-generation students already enrolled in institutions of higher learning. Services provided under the program include orientation to the campus, tutoring, counseling, developmental and other courses, summer programs, and academic advising (Sennett Hebert, 1997). Although some SSS students are graduates of either Talent Search or Upward Bound, participation in one of the other TRIO programs is not a requirement for eligibility.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of family background, peer relationships, institutional factors, psychological/self-related factors, and societal factors

on the academic aspirations and persistence of low-income and/or first-generation college students who participate(d) in at least one of Southwest Texas State University's TRIO programs.

## Research Questions

There was one central research question in this study along with three sub-questions:

1. What factors affect the academic aspirations and persistence of college students participating in the TRIO programs? (For categories of factors, see the paragraph above).

   a.) What is the relative significance of each set of factors?

   b.) What dimensions of the TRIO programs help to determine student aspirations and persistence?

   c.) What recommendations do students have in terms of how to increase aspirations and persistence? Do they have any specific recommendations for ways to improve the effectiveness of the TRIO programs?

## Definitions of Terms

Academic Aspirations—The level of education that any particular student sees him or herself striving to achieve (i.e. high school diploma, some college, bachelor's degree, etc.). Mau and Bikos (2000) phrase it in the form of a question: "As things stand now, how far in school do you think you will go?"

Academic Persistence—For the purpose of this study, persistence will be defined as 3rd through 6th semester students who are eligible to return to the same college for the next semester.

Academic Self-Concept—One's conception of his/her own ability to learn the accepted

types of academic behavior, such as effective study skills, and so forth. It also

encompasses students' perceptions of their abilities (or lack thereof) to perform well

academically (Brookover, et. al, 1964).

Disadvantaged Students—Individuals from low-income families or students from

families in which neither parent has graduated from or attended college (Okuwa, 1994).

First-Generation College Students—Refers to students who are among the first

generation to attend and/or graduate from a postsecondary institution (Guzman-Foster,

1997).

Low-Income and/or Minority Students—For the purposes of this study, the term low-

income and/or minority students refers to the students who are most likely to participate

in one of the TRIO programs. The researcher does not assume that most minority

students are low-income (or vice-versa). The two are linked in that: 1) the majority of

students who participate in TRIO programs are from minority populations (58%

nationwide according to The Directory of TRIO programs' 1996-1997 data) and 2)

several researchers (Gerardi, 1990; Hubbard, 1999) have studied these populations

together. Asian students are not included in this definition because according to the U.S.

Census Bureau (n.d.(a)), it is projected that by the year 2003, approximately 46.3% of

Asian males and 37.4% of Asian females aged 25 and over will have earned their

bachelor's degree—the highest percentage of any racial group, including Whites.

Triangulation—The qualitative research method that utilizes two or more data gathering

techniques in order to increase the study's validity (Okuwa, 1994).

<u>TRIO</u>—The name by which the cluster of the three original programs (Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services) instituted under the Educational Act of 1965 is known (Okuwa, 1994).

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**Delimitations of the Study**

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This study was delimited in the following ways:

1.  All students participating in the study were participants either in Southwest Texas State University's Upward Bound or Talent Search program during their enrollment in high school and/or in Student Support Services as college students. All Student Support Services students will have been participants for at least one semester.

2.  All students participating in the study had completed at least two semesters of coursework at Southwest Texas State University.

3.  The researcher differed from the student informants in terms of race/ethnicity, age, and social class; she is a thirty-year-old White woman raised in a middle class family. Therefore, the possibility existed that students did not feel sufficiently comfortable with her to be completely forthright when answering some of the questions posed to them during the one-on-one interviews. This possibility may have been lessened due to the fact that the researcher has worked with similar populations through AmeriCorps* VISTA and an internship at the University of Texas at Austin's University Outreach program for the past five years.

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**Significance of the Study**

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Since most minority/low SES students attend relatively poor quality schools (Arbona & Novy, 1990; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Kerr, Colangelo, Maxey, & Christensen, 1992), they tend to demonstrate lower levels of academic achievement than their White or Asian-descent counterparts (Kerr et. al). Because prior achievement predicts future educational attainment (Dugan, 1976; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969), and educational attainment predicts future economic success (Sewell, Haller, & Portes; Sewell & Hauser, 1975), it is crucial for educators and parents to understand what personal, interpersonal, and societal factors positively or negatively influence the educational aspirations and persistence of minority and/or low-income students to make certain that all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic background, are given the same educational and, subsequently, economic opportunities.

As is obvious when looking at national statistics, something within the educational system needs to change in order to ensure future educational and economic equality among all groups. For example, according to Devarics (2000), only 30% of African American students and 22% of Hispanics participate in higher education—significantly less than the number of Whites (41%) and Asian Americans (64.5% according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) who attend college. (Note: it is unclear in the Devarics data whether or not these statistics take into consideration those students who return to school at a later age which is significant as some studies indicate (Choy & Premo, 1995; Horn, 1995). If educators at all levels—from administrators to counselors to high school teachers and college instructors—were more knowledgeable regarding what factors influence their students' aspirations, they would then be able to develop beneficial programs and teach/counsel more effectively. If parents were also

aware of their influence on their children's aspirations, they could serve as more positive role models and aid in the decision-making process students go through when choosing whether or not to attend college.

The percentage of minority students who actually persist in college (i.e. graduate with at least a bachelor's degree) is even lower; only 7% of all baccalaureate degrees are awarded to African Americans though they comprise 12.3% of the U.S. population according to the 2000 Census (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.(c)) and 5% to Hispanic students (Wilds & Wilson, 1998) who make up 12.5% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.(c)). Whites, in the mean time, earn 79% of all degrees though they make up only 75.1% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.(c)). Once again, if more college staff and faculty were familiar with the factors affecting the persistence of minority and/or low-income students, they would be more able to give these students the support and guidance they require to be successful.

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of family background, peer relationships, institutional factors, self-perceptions, and societal factors on the aspirations and persistence of 3rd through 6th semester college students who participate(d) in or more of SWT's TRIO programs. Other research questions included the relative significance of each set of factors and student perceptions on how important participation in TRIO has been in determining their level of persistence. Finally, the researcher gathered recommendations from the student informants regarding how to increase student aspirations and persistence in the future.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW


Despite some scholars' claims that racial inequality in education has diminished

over the years (Blackwell, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Hauser & Featherman, 1976;

Jencks, Crouse, J., & Mueser, P., 1973), schools with higher percentages of minority

and/or low socioeconomic (SES) students still offer a relatively poor quality of education

when compared to other schools (Arbona, 1990; Fordham, 1986; Kerr, Colangelo, Maxey

& Christensen, 1992). Because they attend poor quality schools, these students (namely

African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans) demonstrate lower levels of

educational achievement than  or Asian Americans (Kerr, et al.). Since prior educational

achievement predicts future educational attainment (Dugan, 1976; Sewell, Haller, &

Portes, 1969), and educational attainment predicts future economic success (Sewell,

Haller, & Portes, 1969; Sewell & Hauser, 1975), it becomes clear that this cycle of

negative predictions for minority/low SES students must be broken to ensure more equal

educational and economic opportunities for all citizens. In other words, a greater number

of disadvantaged students need to increase their levels of educational attainment—that is,

attend and persist in (graduate from) higher education. Currently, only 30% of African

American students and 22% of Hispanics participate in higher education (Devarics,

2000). Baccalaureate degree attainment rates are even more

discouraging, with only 7% of degrees being awarded to African Americans and 5% to Hispanics (Wilds & Wilson, 1998).

Various programs on college campuses are available for minority and/or low-income students in order to increase their academic chances. The U.S. Department of Education's programs, Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services, known as the TRIO programs, were introduced in Chapter 1-- their history and programmatic structures to increase college attendance and graduation rates among the target population.

The following review of the literature will discuss several factors that affect the academic aspirations and persistence of minority and/or low SES students. Although aspirations and persistence are interrelated, that is, persons with higher academic aspirations tend to persist in higher numbers (Brown & Kurpius, 1997; Ethington, 1990), they will be examined separately for the purpose of this review. Scholars' recommendations for practitioners working with minority and/or low-income populations will then be enumerated and discussed. Before exploring the factors that affect student aspirations and persistence, however, a brief examination of the characteristics of first-generation college students will be given.

## First-Generation College Students

Students in the TRIO programs are not only from low-income families, but also from families in which neither parent has attended and/or graduated from higher education. These first-generation college students differ from their more traditional peers in both entering characteristics and college experiences (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nova, 1996). For example, first-generation students are at a disadvantage,

in most cases, regarding their basic knowledge of college, their personal commitment, as well as the levels of support offered by their families (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). In regards to their actual learning experiences in college, studies have shown that first-generation students spend fewer hours per week studying (possibly due to the fact that they have to work more hours) and are less likely to perceive faculty members as being concerned for their development as students (Terenzini, et. al).

Along with the normal social and academic transitions that all students must face when entering college, a large proportion of first-generation students must also face cultural transitions (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nova, 1996). Since "college-going was not a part of their family's tradition or expectations...[first-generation students] were *breaking*, not continuing, family tradition" (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994, p. 63). Because of all these issues, according to Billson and Terry (1982), first-generation students are at greater risk in terms of persistence and degree attainment than their peers.

Recommendations for increasing the academic successes and persistence of first-generation college students include the continuation/expansion of "bridge programs" (such as Upward Bound) between high schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nova, 1996) and finding ways to increase the study time available to first-generation students since they are much more likely to work off campus (Terenzini, et. al). This could be achieved by the development of study groups, peer tutoring, improved financial assistance for these students in order to reduce the need to work, and a reduction of first-year involvement in other nonacademic activities.

Other recommendations for better serving the first-generation population

campuses include involving faculty members in new student orientation programs and

orienting parents to the campus as well as students (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar,

Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994). Finally, and most importantly, these students need

validation that they do indeed belong on a college campus; "most of the students…who

appeared to have successfully made the transition from work or high school to college,

identified someone who had clearly indicated to them that they cared" (Terenzini, et. al,

p. 72).

## Academic Aspirations

Minority and/or low-income students' academic aspirations, or the level of

education that they strive to reach, are influenced by several factors: family background,

peer relationships, institutions/school personnel, psychological (or self-related) and

societal factors. Before discussing each separate factor and how it affects students'

aspirations, however, it is first necessary to understand two dominant theories relating to

the formation of academic aspirations, the status attainment model (Sewell, Haller, &

Portes, 1969) and Ogbu's "Blocked opportunities" model (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986;

Ogbu, 1991).

### *Theoretical Background*

*Status Attainment Model*

According to the status attainment model, family variables (such as the level of

family income and the education levels of one's parents) and cognitive variables (i.e.

prior academic performance and mental ability) affect social psychological processes,

which in turn affect a person's educational aspirations and attainment (Sewell, Haller, &

Portes, 1969). Also important in the formation of educational aspirations are the influences of significant others outside of the family—teachers, friends, and so forth—who serve as models or communicate to a person their expectations for his/her behavior (Woelfel, 1967). In other words, "…aspirations are developed in structured situations…and…one's actions [i.e. whether or not those aspirations are obtained] are a result of the cognitive and motivational orientations one brings to the action situation…" (Sewell, et al., p. 83).

According to the status attainment model, a person with significant others who have encouraged and/or modeled participation in higher education would be more likely to aspire to higher degree attainment than someone without such encouragement. Since, according to the status attainment theory, students' prior achievement affects their academic aspirations, it would also stand to reason that a student who has struggled in school would have lower academic aspirations than a class valedictorian.

*"Blocked Opportunities" Model*

Ogbu (1991) theorized about the gap in school performance between "involuntary" or "castelike" minorities (i.e. those who were brought into American society through slavery, conquest, or colonization, including Native Americans, African Americans, and Mexican Americans), and other minority and majority students, his main theoretical focus being African American populations. According to the author, castelike minorities resent their loss of freedom and tend to interpret social, political, and economic barriers against them as deliberately oppressive (Ogbu). In response to this perceived oppression, involuntary minorities, as a coping response, respond negatively to societal institutions controlled by  and value the opposite of White ideal behaviors

(Ogbu). Since schools are one such example of White-controlled societal institutions, African American students feel internal and external pressures to not fully participate in education, that is, to maintain low levels of achievement despite the fact that they may express high educational aspirations (Ogbu).

Those African American students who do achieve highly feel the same self-inflicted and peer-inflicted pressures to not succeed in school (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1991). They, however, have developed certain strategies that "resolve the tension" between such pressures and their desires for high achievement and aspirations (Fordham & Ogbu, p. 186). These strategies include: participating in athletic activities (regarded as "black" activities), playing the class clown to mask academic achievements, acquiring the protection of bullies in exchange for homework assistance, and generally not calling attention to or bragging about their grades and schoolwork, the latter strategy also being used by students of Mexican origin in Texas (Romo & Falbo, 1996).

*Factors Affecting Academic Aspirations*

In the paragraphs below, the literature on aspirations will be discussed, including how family, peers, schools/institutions, society, and self-related/psychological factors play a part in its development.

*Family Influence on Academic Aspirations*

Several studies (Brown & Kurpius, 1997; Ethington, 1990; Freeman, 1999; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Hubbard, 1999; Ogbu, 1991) have reported the importance of family background on minority and/or low-income students' educational aspirations. As could be expected, family influence can either positively or negatively affect aspirations.

The ways in which family can positively influence student aspirations will be discussed first, followed by possible negative family influences.

One way in which families can increase students' academic aspirations is through simple emotional support and encouragement to achieve (Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Hubbard, 1999). Such support can be especially important for minority students (Brown & Robinson Kurpius). There is little agreement regarding whether support from one parent over the other or from the extended family as opposed to either parent is a more powerful facilitator of high aspirations; any family encouragement at all appears to increase aspiration levels. For example, one study (Bowker, 1992) cited the importance of the role of mothers and grandmothers, another argued that fathers play the most influential role (Shultz, 1961). Still others indicated the importance of both parents (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns) and the extended family (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996).

Parental involvement in children's schooling, such as helping with homework, and talking to them about their high school plans (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998), also tends to increase academic aspirations. Parents can also increase their children's aspirations by providing them with opportunities to learn outside of the school setting. Examples of such opportunities include participation in art or music classes, visiting art museums, and attending concerts and other performances (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns). Provisions of books, home computers, magazines, and newspapers in the home, along with a designated place to study (Murname, et al., 1981; Teachman, 1987) also positively affect student aspirations.

Some scholars (Freeman, 1999; Hubbard, 1999) make the argument that minority/low SES students develop high academic aspirations in response to the difficult lives their parents have had without the benefits of a high level of academic attainment. For example, one student in Hubbard's study, when asked why she wanted to participate in higher education, "…focused on the opportunity that college gave her to have a better life than her mother had" (Hubbard, p. 371). In other words, some minority and/or low-income students, having grown up in families where there is little money (and all the accompanying problems related to a low level of income) view college participation as an avenue toward a better job and a different kind of life for themselves. Looking at national statistics, a disproportionate number of students that fall into this category are Native Americans, African Americans and Hispanics, since they are more likely to grow up in poverty than are Whites or Asians. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.(b)), during the years 1998-2000, 25.9% of Native Americans, 23.9% of African Americans, and 23.1% of Hispanics lived in poverty, compared to 9.9% of Whites and 11.3% of Asian Americans.

Family background can also unintentionally negatively affect children's aspirations since these same children grow up "assimilated into the culture of the disadvantaged" (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998, p.178). Matute-Bianchi (1986) gives the example of the children of Mexican immigrants who tend to live in communities where adults hold low-skill or seasonal jobs. These children are at a disadvantage because they are not raised in an environment that models how schoolwork and high educational aspirations can lead to future economic success.

Research shows that there are significant positive effects on student levels of aspiration in relation to parental education, income, and occupation (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998); if one's parents are well educated and have high-paying jobs, then he or she is more likely to a) graduate from high school (Romo & Falbo, 1996) and b) aspire to higher education. Logically, then, since low-income and/or minority parents tend to be less educated and hold lower-wage jobs, their children might suffer some negative effects. Most parents in low socioeconomic situations may not have the time or the financial resources to be actively involved in their children's education, mentioned above to be a potentially important factor in the development of educational aspirations.

*The Influence of Peer Relationships on Academic Aspirations*

As with family members, relationships with peers can also encourage or discourage the development of high academic aspirations. In the literature on low-income and/or minority students, however, relationships with peers most often have a negative impact on academic aspirations (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1991; Romo & Falbo, 1996). In their study of Latino high school graduation rates, Romo and Falbo observe a conflict between family and peer values. While parents in the study tended to encourage their children's academic achievement and aspirations, peers encouraged involvement in activities (such as gang membership) that lower a student's chances and desires of going to college.

As was theorized in the "blocked opportunities" model (Ogbu, 1991), castelike minorities see the educational system as a part of the oppressive majority and therefore choose not to fully participate in it. Students within these populations, in particular Hispanics, African Americans, and Native Americans, who do succeed academically are

ridiculed by their peers for "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Ogbu; Romo & Falbo, 1996;). There exist more negative sanctions by peers for succeeding in school among African American and Hispanic students than among Asians or (Kao & Tienda). Those students who choose to succeed anyway are forced to adopt strategies to hide school successes in order to avoid rejection by their peers (Fordham & Ogbu; Romo & Falbo).

*Institution/School Personnel Influences on Academic Aspirations*

School personnel, especially teachers and counselors, also have an important role in the development of students' academic aspirations (Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997; Freeman, 1999; Hubbard, 1999; Kao & Tienda, 1998). As with family influences, schools also can either increase or diminish a student's desires to attend higher education. Much literature regarding the formation of minority and/or low-income students' aspirations focuses on the negatives, that is, how schools tend to hinder the development of their aspirations. (Freeman, 1999; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Hubbard, 1999; Kao & Tienda, 1998;). In fact, according to Hao and Bonstead-Bruns, schools with greater proportions of minority students have the tendency to negate and overwhelm the positive effects of family expectations so that attending students are even less likely to aspire to college than they otherwise would be.

How is this possible? According to the literature, teachers and counselors in public education, either consciously or subconsciously, negatively affect their minority students' aspirations (Freeman, 1999; Hubbard, 1999; Kao & Tienda, 1998). Kao and Tienda argue that school authorities tend to supply a "dearth of information" about college requirements and financial aid options to their minority populations (p. 378).

According to Obgu's interactions with students, those who aspired to careers requiring high degrees of education, such as medicine and engineering, were no more serious about their schoolwork than those who aspired only to finish high school; they did not comprehend the level of commitment necessary for succeeding in college (1991). Freeman, in her qualitative study regarding African Americans' college choices, found the same problem; one student she interviewed claimed, '…you don't have anybody to help you, to want you to excel, to inspire you that you need to get a higher education…' (p. 19).

Some teachers and counselors take a more active role in dissuading minority students from aspiring to attend college (Hubbard, 1999). Hubbard spoke with a group of African American high school students about their relationships with teachers and counselors. The students, in particular the males, reported that they had intentions of attending college until their counselors and other school personnel discouraged them from taking the necessary preparatory classes. One particular student asked his counselor for information regarding a four-year college. Her reply: 'What for? It's just a waste of your time and mine. You won't make it anyway' (p. 375). Green and Farquhar (1965) suggest that negative student-teacher relationships, such as the one above, stem from the fact that some school personnel grade and judge African American students on their "social desirability" (i.e. how well they fit into the culture of the school) instead of academic performance (p. 243). Hispanic students, specifically students of Mexican origin, face similar discouragement. Despite earning high grades, one particular Hispanic student who participated in a study in Texas was told by his math teacher that he was not

"college material" and therefore should not bother taking advanced classes (Romo &

Falbo, p. 21).

Obviously, if more minority students are to attend and succeed in higher

education, some changes in the current educational system need to be made. However,

schools are not the only factor affecting the aspiration levels of these students. Larger

societal forces, such as systematic racial discrimination, also play an important role

(Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Hubbard, 1999; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Ogbu, 1991; Sewell,

Haller, & Portes, 1969).

*Societal Influences on Academic Aspirations*

Some minority students' academic aspirations are negatively influenced by

societal factors. African American students' aspirations might be affected by the

existence of discrimination in the workplace (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Freeman, 1999).

The "job ceiling," or the fact that minority persons—despite good educational

credentials—are not necessarily given equal access to good jobs and benefits (Fordham &

Ogbu) is still present in today's society. According to Braun (1995),

> ...Professional degrees do not necessarily close the earnings gap:
>
> [for example] African American men with professional degrees
>
> earn 79 percent of the amount earned by white males who hold the
>
> same degree, and who are in the same job category. (pg. 8)

African Americans are not the only group affected by this job ceiling. According to the

Federal Glass Ceiling Commission's 1995 report, Hispanics—while making up

approximately 8% of the population—held only 0.4% of available management positions.

This apparent income gap can discourage students from reaching their academic potential, the feeling being that it might not be worth the time and effort required to earn a college degree since doing so might not necessarily guarantee a good-paying job after graduation anyway. (Freeman, 1999). Such feelings are especially prevalent among African American males (Mickelson, 1990; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992).

One final impediment to some minority students' desire to attend college stems from what Freeman (1999) calls the "intimidation factor" (p.20). Many students, having gone to school primarily with other minority students, have a sense of uneasiness about attending a predominantly White school. As one student remarked, 'To me, I have always been around all Blacks. I just don't see myself being comfortable around…having a White person for a roommate' (p. 21).

*Psychological (Self) Influences on Academic Aspirations*

Although they are fairly self-evident, several psychological variables also affect each student's aspiration level. For example, students with higher self-esteem exhibit higher academic aspirations (Mau, 1995). An internal locus of control—or feeling that one is in charge of and responsible for his or her own actions—is also important for a high level of aspiration formation (Mau). Lastly, according to Shepard (1992), those students who spend more time thinking about their plans after high school also tend to aspire to college participation.

## Recommendations to Increase Student Aspirations

Family members and school personnel can positively affect minority and low-income students' aspirations in several ways (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Freeman, 1999; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Newmann, Rutter, & Smith, 1989). For one thing, more

programs specifically designed to increase parent-child educational interactions, both inside and outside of the formal school setting, need to be implemented (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns). Also necessary is an increased awareness throughout all schools and communities of the importance and relevance of cultures other than that of the majority population (Freeman, 1999). Banks (1988) gives an excellent example of society's tendency to overlook minority cultures; he points out that Black history is relegated to its own month and not studied or celebrated throughout the year. Omitting their culture for 11/12ths of the year can make African Americans feel as if they have no "cultural relevance" (Freeman, p. 22). Since feelings of cultural relevance would allow these students to maximize their academic potential (Ladson-Billings, 1994), it stands to reason that its absence could dissuade them from seeing higher education as a viable option.

Along with celebrating diverse cultures in school, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) call for the development of programs and counseling to help minority students "divorce" the phenomenon of high achievement and aspirations from "acting white" (p. 203). They need to be taught that they can still embrace their cultural background without denying themselves the benefits of academic success and attainment.

One final recommendation for increasing minority/low SES student aspirations is highly relevant for teachers and other school personnel. According to Newmann, Rutter, and Smith (1989), teachers and administrators in schools with a high percentage of minority and/or low-income students need to make an extra effort to provide special attention to their students so they are able to overcome any prior academic deficiencies. More important, though, is the need for teachers to have high academic expectations for

minority students—even higher expectations than for White students—since students tend to meet their teachers' expectation levels (Newmann, Rutter, and Smith).

## Academic Persistence

As was stated earlier, persons with high academic aspirations are more likely to enroll and persist in higher education (Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997; Ethington, 1990). What exactly is meant by the term "persistence" however, depends on the particulars of each individual researcher and his or her study. For example, Brown and Robinson Kurpius (1997) define a persister as a student who had already obtained a bachelor's degree or was still actively enrolled, Pascarella (1985) as a student who had graduated within a nine-year period, and Trippi and Stewart (1989) as a student who returned to college for the fall semester of his or her second year. Therefore, throughout this section, the reader should bear in mind the fact that one author's definition of academic persistence might vary slightly from another's. One can assume, however, that attainment of at least a bachelor's degree remains the "ideal" definition of academic persistence.

As with the formation of academic aspirations, "personal and environmental characteristics interact in the prediction of persistence" (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). In the section below, these characteristics, or factors, will be explored in depth—starting with self-related or psychological factors, then institutional/faculty-oriented factors, and ending with family background/socioeconomic status factors. First, however, it is important to introduce two theories that dominate the literature regarding academic persistence, Tinto's model regarding dropout from higher education and Eccles' theoretical model of achievement behaviors.

*Theoretical Background*

*Tinto's Model of Dropout*

Vincent Tinto sought to explain, not simply describe (as earlier research had done), the processes that can bring someone to drop out of higher education (1975). His review of the literature confirmed that many factors, including self-related factors, family background, high school experiences, and so forth, commingle to influence student persistence. However, Tinto's analysis goes further to offer theoretical explanations as to how a student who withdraws voluntarily differs from one who leaves due to academic failure. He also discusses possible differences between permanent dropouts and temporary ones.

Expanding on Durkheim's theory of suicide (1951), which theorizes that a person is more likely to commit suicide when he or she is not sufficiently integrated into society, Tinto (1975) believes that students who drop out of higher education suffer a similar lack of integration—not into the society as a whole, necessarily, but into either the academic and/or social culture of their particular institution. For example, it is possible for a student who is well integrated into the social domain of the college (i.e. has a lot of friends, belongs to student groups, etc.) to be forced to withdraw because of failure to integrate into the academic sphere (i.e. poor academic performance). The opposite scenario, where one has good grades yet feels disconnected socially and chooses to drop out, is also possible. Tinto's model argues, therefore, that student integration into both spheres "…most directly relates to his continuance in that college" (p. 96).

Tinto (1975) goes on to discuss goal and institutional commitments and how they affect student persistence. Goal commitment, how strongly one is committed to the idea

of completing college, depends on the factors listed above (prior school experiences, family background, etc.) and to whether or not a college degree is perceived by the individual student to outweigh the costs of obtaining it, costs such as time, tuition, and so forth. Logically then, the lower a student's goal commitment, the less likely s/he is to persist. Students with high goal commitments, on the other hand, are likely to "stick it out" and graduate (Tinto, p. 96) even if they are insufficiently integrated into the academic and/or social sphere of the college.

Students' institutional commitment is also important when considering dropout versus persistence. For example, a person with low institutional commitment and high goal commitment is more likely to transfer schools or "stop out" temporarily, while one with high institutional commitment and low goal commitment may stay at the same school but just "get by" academically (Tinto, 1975, p. 97).

Although his theory does not relate specifically to low-income students, Tinto (1975) does address some issues regarding this population's rates of dropout and persistence. Due to the relatively high number of low SES students who are dismissed due to their academic records, Tinto believes it is imperative for schools to continue to offer programs designed to improve the academic performance of their low-income students. Although not named specifically, one can assume that he is speaking about the federally funded TRIO programs and other similar institution-based programs such as learning assistance centers.

*Eccles' Integrative Theoretical Model of Achievement Behaviors*

Although Eccles' psychological model of achievement (1983) was not specifically developed to study persistence, it has been found to be promising for

application in the area of student attrition (Ethington, 1990). Eccles' model indicates causal relationships between students' aptitude, socialization, and attitudinal and affective factors. These causal relationships are specified between 1) various cognitive factors of students and 2) factors associated with the beliefs and attitudes of students' parents and teachers (Ethington, p. 280).

More specifically, according to Eccles' model (1983), a student's expectancies in regard to academic persistence can be seen as being directly influenced by his or her cognitive abilities and perceptions of what continuing in higher education will amount to in terms of workload  The above expectancies are "in turn influenced by the individual's perceptions of socializers' [parents and teachers] beliefs and behaviors" (Ethington, 1990, p. 282). In simple language, persistence depends on the interplay between students' ability, their perceptions of how much work staying in school will entail (and whether or not they are willing to commit to that level of work), and whether or not their "socializers" have led them to believe they are "college material".

*Factors Affecting Academic Persistence*

As with the formation of academic aspirations, a student's academic persistence is dependent upon a number of variables—self-related/psychological factors, institutional factors, and family background. The first set of factors to be discussed, which are self-related (or psychological) in nature, are the most prevalent throughout the literature on academic persistence. Two different, yet interrelated, sets of psychological factors—including self-concept/self perceptions and self-efficacy/self-appraisal in terms of academic ability—will be defined and explored separately below.

A word to the reader: unless otherwise noted, the reader can assume that the studies detailed below did *not* specifically target low-income or minority populations. Because a study does not target these individuals, however, one cannot assume that the presence or absence of certain psychological factors do not affect their rates of persistence—especially since most studies that do focus on low-income/minority students prove otherwise.

*Academic Self-Concept/Self Perceptions*

Defined by Shavelson and Bolus (1982) as a student's perceptions of his or her academic abilities (influenced by school experiences and the student's interpretations of such experiences in the context of the school environment), academic self-concept has been found to be a crucial piece in determining whether or not students, regardless of their race, ethnicity or SES, will persist in higher education. A notable exception to this finding is Arbona and Novy's study (1990), which found non-cognitive variables (including self-concept) to be predictive of persistence for White students, but not for African Americans or Mexican Americans. For studies that find non-cognitive variables as being crucial to minority students' success in college, see Tracey and Sedlacek (1984, 1985, & 1987) in the section below.

From studying minority and low-income students in an engineering technology program, Gerardi (1990) concluded that student success was "by far" best predicted by academic self-concept as opposed to "traditional cognitive skills" (p. 402). Those students who demonstrate high self-concepts, for example, are more able to disregard feedback from others that they perceive as negative or inconsistent with how they view themselves and their abilities (Jussim, Coleman, & Nassau, 1987). Possessing such an

ability could be especially important for the success of low-income and minority students, as they are well aware of other people's generalized low perceptions of them regarding their abilities and chances for future success.

Green and Farquhar (1965) found results similar to Gerardi (1990). For both African American males and females, the number one predictor of academic achievement was a high self-concept. One must keep in mind, however, that socioeconomic status was not controlled for in this study; it cannot be assumed that a significant percentage of the 233 Black participants in the study were from low-income backgrounds. Like Green and Farquhar, House (1992) did not specifically seek out students from low-income backgrounds to study. He did, however, look for connections between students' self-perceptions and their academic persistence. He, too, found a positive correlation between self-perception and persistence (i.e. a high academic self-concept predicts high educational attainment).

Unlike the other researchers discussed in this section, Rovezzi-Carroll and Thompson (1980) focused solely on intellective variables (SAT math and verbal scores, high school GPA) when studying college graduation rates among the low-income student population. However, they discovered that *no combination* of the variables studied was an effective predictor of college graduation, withdrawal, or academic dismissal. They concluded, therefore, that when considering this specific population, it would be prudent in the future to look at "antecedent" variables, such as academic self-concept, and "intervening" variables, like college environment, in order to understand what makes them stay in school as opposed to dropping out (p. 343). The traditional cognitive variables that are easily associated with success for middle-class, White populations are

not sufficient for explaining success among low-income and/or minority students—something else, such as a high academic self-concept, must also be present.

*Academic Self-Appraisal/Self-Efficacy*

While some studies look at academic self-concept in general terms, others look for more specific skills in order to determine what factors affect low-income and/or minority student persistence. For example, self-appraisal is the ability to appraise oneself in terms of academic strengths and weaknesses. According to Tracey and Sedlacek (as discussed in Trippi & Stewart, 1989), accurate self-appraisal (i.e. being aware of one's talents and shortcomings) has proven to be *the most* important variable for African American college students' persistence throughout their college career—at the second year (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984), the fourth year (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985), and through to graduation (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1987). For example, in their 1984 study, they found that African American students who expressed concern regarding their chances of graduating persisted in greater numbers than similar counterparts who appeared more confident of their chances.

Chemers, Hu, and Garcia (2001) explored a trait similar to self-appraisal, academic self-efficacy, in order to explain first-year college students' achievement and persistence. Self-efficacy, a term that describes confidence in one's relevant academic abilities, as well as a sense of optimism, were found to be strongly related to both academic performance and commitment to return to school the following year.

*Student Attitude and Motivation*

Educators and students agree that having a positive attitude and a high level of motivation and commitment to education increases one's chances of persisting in higher

education. For example, from a survey of Navajo college graduates (Native Americans

being smallest minority group among undergraduates on most college campuses

(Hodginson, 1990), 68% of the respondents claimed that they wanted to achieve

academically and 45% listed their own personal motivation as the factor that most

contributed to their success (Rindone, 1988).

Khan (1970) believes that attitude and motivation are important in that they can

help students succeed even if they are lacking in academic aptitude. To ensure that more

students are successful, he recommends early identification of students with poor

attitudes and motivation levels so that they can undergo counseling and guidance since

"nonintellective characteristics are easier to modify…than mental abilities" (p. 80).

*Problem-solving Appraisal*

As will be discussed in the following section of this literature review, students'

level of academic achievement is also predictive of their persistence or attrition

(Ethington, 1990; Trippi & Stewart, 1989). One study (Elliott, et. al, 1990) focused on the

influence that self-appraised problem solving abilities (i.e. the level to which students

believe they can handle difficult situations) have on academic achievement. For 63

college students enrolled in developmental education courses, self-reported problem

solving skills were significantly related to semester GPA; the more self-confidence a

student displayed regarding his or her ability to solve problems, the higher his/her grades

in a given semester. One possible reason for this correlation is posited by Neal and

Heppner (1986), who claim that effective problem solvers tend to be more aware of their

environments and are more apt to use the student services (such as tutoring labs, etc.)

more effectively than other students.

*Academic Performance*

Along with self-perception, motivation, and other noncognitive factors, students' academic performance has also (not surprisingly) been found to affect student persistence. In fact, some authors (Ethington, 1990; Trippi & Stewart, 1989) have found it to be the most important element in determining whether or not a student will ultimately succeed in higher education. For example, Trippi and Stewart found that the higher an African American student's grades during freshman year, the more likely he or she is to persist. Grades in high school were also shown to be an important factor (i.e. students with higher high school GPAs persisted in greater numbers). Ethington concurs: the higher a student's level of prior achievement, the greater the likelihood of persistence to degree completion.

*Study Habits*

As could be expected, students who persist in higher education tend to have a variety of strategies to help them succeed. One strategy, effective study habits, has been found by several researchers to be a necessary tool for successful students (Elliott, Godshall, Shrout, & Witty, 1990; Tucker, 1972). What exactly does the term "effective study habits" entail? The following is an excerpt from Elliott, et. al:

> In order for college students to perform successfully, they must possess competencies in organizing their time, effectively studying course materials and program requirements, and being sufficiently capable of meeting academic requirements for successful completion of courses and programs. (p. 204)

It is not enough to just study—one must know *how* to study and to use their time wisely.

*Institutional Factors*

Moving away from self-related, or psychological factors, this review will now explore the effects of secondary and postsecondary institutions and their faculty/staff on the persistence of low-income and/or minority students. The importance of the high school experience will be discussed first, followed by a discussion of how a particular college and/or faculty can affect a student's desire to persist or drop out.

*Secondary institutions.*

High schools—their overarching cultures and belief systems as well as individual teachers and staff—can contribute (either positively or negatively) to a student's level of persistence in higher education. If a student is considered college material and therefore placed on the "academic track" (as opposed to vocational education, etc.), it greatly increases both African American and White students' levels of educational attainment, by 1.54 years and 1.98 respectively (List & Wolfle, 2000). As was seen in the section on academic aspirations, however, only a small percentage of minority and/or low-income students are given the opportunity to take college prep courses (Hubbard, 1999; Romo & Falbo, 1996). Tierney (1992) found that the students who showed the most promise in completing their college degree were those who considered their high school coursework as adequate preparation for college. Again, the issue of low percentages of minority students enrolled in such courses comes into play in the discussion of their persistence levels.

*Postsecondary institutions.*

Pascarella, one of the most respected scholars specializing in academic persistence (1985), has stated that the institution and the student's role within it are the

*most important* factors in determining whether or not a student will persist, regardless of his or her race. Other researchers agree—some arguing that it is the people within the institutions that matter (i.e. faculty and staff) and others that it is the specific programs offered on each campus.

For example, Brown & Robinson Kurpius (1997) and Swisher, et. al (1991) believe that persistence is more likely if students build strong, trusting relationships with the faculty and staff of their college. Positive interactions with faculty and staff are especially important for minority students because they tend to have a "moderating influence" on students' perceptions of the discrimination and racism that exist on campuses (Brown & Kurpius, p. 5). It is not even necessary for students to have positive interactions with *all* of the authority figures at their institution; Swisher, Hoisch, and Pavel observed, in their study of what characteristics determined a successful dropout prevention program for Native American students, that one common element in successful programs was that at least one adult established a positive, trusting relationship with the attending students.

Anaya & Cole (2001) report the importance of Latino students' interactions with their professors as important in determining persistence rates; academically related (i.e. visiting during office hours) and/or personal interactions with faculty were found to be positively associated with academic performance, as long as they were perceived by students to be positive. Kraft (1991) warns, though, of possible negative perceptions among White faculty members regarding their minority students' abilities, ambition, and high school preparation, which could hinder the development of a positive relationship.

Finally, Rovezzi-Carroll and Thompson (1980) discovered in their study of low-income college students that no combination of SAT scores, family income, and high school rank could accurately predict college success among this population. Therefore, they concluded that intervening variables (i.e. college environment, students' perceived isolation, and tutoring/support services) were more important in determining these students' success rates.

*Family Background*

The level of emotional and financial support a student receives from his or her family has a definite impact on his or her ability/desire to persist in higher education. Several researchers have noticed the correlation between strong familial support and high rates of persistence for low-income and/or minority students. Freeman (1999), for example, observed, through her interviews with African American high school students, that some minority families are a strong and positive influence on their children's decisions to attend and persist in college—mainly for the reason that they want them to "achieve beyond their level" (p. 17). Another study that specifically focused on African American students (Rogers, 1984) had similar findings: that support from relatives was closely related to freshman-year grades, which according to Trippi and Stewart (1989) is the most important factor in determining persistence in college.

Although several studies focus specifically on African American populations, other minority populations also benefit from family support. For example, in a study of Native American female students, Bowker (1992) credited their persistence with strong family support, especially from mothers and grandmothers.

Financial support from family members is also an important piece to the

persistence puzzle. For minority students, however, there exists a greater need to go

outside of the family in order to obtain sufficient funds for a college education.

According to Wolf and Melnick (1990), 83% of Native Americans, 75% of African

Americans, and 71% of Hispanic students applied for aid compared to only 48% of White

students. However, as was stated before, many minority students are left unaware of the

fact that there are monies to help pay for higher education due to the fact that school

personnel, either intentionally or unintentionally, fail to make them aware of financial aid

possibilities (Kao & Tienda, 1998).

## Recommendations to Increase Persistence

Several researchers have concluded their studies with recommendations for

institutions of higher learning on how to increase student persistence. Anaya and Cole

(2001) recommend that student affairs professionals create opportunities for faculty to

interact with minority and/or low-income students outside of the classroom—activities

such as tournaments, field days, and other social activities. Ethington (1990) advocates

for early intervention programs that help students "formulate and articulate" their future

academic and employment goals (p. 292). Brown and Robinson Kurpius (1997),

meanwhile, recommend that colleges suggest (or even require) that first-year minority

students enroll in study skills courses in order to remediate academic deficiencies.

Other scholars focus on counseling needs among these student populations. For

example, since student attitudes have been found to affect persistence levels, House

(1992) recommends that counseling programs be developed which target those students

with low academic self-concepts. Khan (1970) agrees that such programs are necessary;

he, however, also calls for academic counseling that helps students with their selection of courses and for the administration of "diagnostic test batteries" in order to ensure that students' academic needs are met (p. 80). According to relevant findings in the literature, if colleges and universities were to follow the above recommendations, a higher percentage of minority and/or low-income students would have the skills and support they require in order to persist and earn their degrees.

## Summary and Conclusions

Many factors contribute to the development of minority and low-income students' academic aspirations. For example, encouraging or discouraging relationships with family members, teachers or other school staff, and peers, larger societal factors such as real or perceived racial discrimination, and psychological (self) variables such as self-esteem can each contribute to a student's decision whether or not to attend college. Although each separate factor is, in and of itself, important, it would paint an incomplete picture without the others; one cannot understand why one student aspires to higher education while another does not without taking all of them, and their relations to one another, into account.

This literature review began with a discussion of the low percentages of minority students who attend and persist in higher education (Devarics, 2000; Wilds & Wilson, 1998). For the United States to truly consider itself a nation of equal opportunity for all, more minority and low-income students must be given the same opportunities as their counterparts—including the opportunity to attend quality schools, go to college, and reap the economic benefits of a college degree. Although there would have to be society-wide changes for that to happen, the recommendations outlined in the above paragraphs,

including the creation of special programs for minority and low-income parents and

students, higher teacher expectations, and the celebration of all cultures, are a good place

to start.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY


What factors (family background, peer relationships, institutional factors, self-perceptions, and/or societal factors) affect the academic aspirations and persistence of college students participating in Southwest Texas State University's TRIO programs? What is the relative significance of each set of factors? What dimensions of the TRIO programs help to determine student persistence? What recommendations do students have in terms of how to increase aspirations and persistence? What specific recommendations do students have for ways to improve the effectiveness of the university's TRIO programs? These questions were answered by this study, and this chapter offers explanations regarding the study's informants, instruments, and procedures. At the end of the chapter, the study's design and the researcher's plans for analyzing the data are outlined.

**Case Study Approach**

The purpose of the study was to determine the effects of family background, peer relationships, institutional factors, self-perceptions, and societal factors on the academic aspirations and persistence of college students who participate(d) in at least one of Southwest Texas State University's TRIO programs. A qualitative research tradition, the case study, was the format used to answer the research questions for the following reasons:

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1. The study consisted of a case that was bound by time (students attending SWT during the fall of 2001) and space (the SWT campus) (Creswell, 1998);

2. Multiple sources of information (from surveys, interviews, etc.) were collected; and

3. "Case-study approaches…afford the opportunity to deepen our understanding of the psychological and social forces that mediate educational decisions" (London, 1989, p. 146): the decisions whether or not to attend and persist in college are both educational decisions that are very much affected by both psychological and social forces.

## Informants

Informants included the directors of Southwest Texas State University's Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services programs and 3rd through 6th semester college students at SWT who participated in at least one of the TRIO programs. In all procedures involving the study's informants, Southwest Texas State University's "Informed Consent" guidelines were followed, and all subjects were made aware of their rights as described in such.

## Instruments

### *Student Surveys*

A study-specific survey was distributed that consisted of questions relating to the formation of student aspirations and the factors that could affect persistence. Topics covered by the survey included:

- Their future educational plans (i.e. whether or not they plan to continue for another semester at SWT, the likelihood that they will continue on to earn a bachelor's degree, etc.) and why;

- A ranking question regarding what students feel have been important factors in the formation of their academic aspirations and persistence (based on the literature) and open-ended questions for students to include other factors that were not listed on the survey;

- Their educational history, including their college GPA and whether or not they are currently (or have ever been) on scholastic probation; and

- Their willingness to participate in a one-on-one interview process on the same topics.

The survey was developed by the researcher because no similar models were found. Before administering the survey to students, the researcher piloted it by having various people—including students (current college students from similar backgrounds who participated in the University of Texas' University Outreach Center's high school program), TRIO staff, and fellow graduate students—offered suggestions and recommendations on how to improve its language, structure, and so forth. Suggested improvements were made to the survey before it was distributed to the student informants.

*Interviews with TRIO Directors and Students*

The study's author conducted each interview, whose average length was approximately one hour. The researcher tape-recorded and transcribed all interviews. Interviews were held with the Directors of Southwest Texas State University's Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services programs and with student informants. The specifics of topics covered in each type of interview are listed below.

Interviews with the two TRIO directors were necessary to understand SWT's specific programs. Specific question areas for them included:

- The history of the three programs on campus (number of years in existence, number of students served, student demographic information, etc.);
- Suggestions on how and where to recruit students for the study; and
- Their recommendations regarding what to consider when developing the student survey and interview questions.

One-on-one student interviews were utilized in the study to clarify/expand on student's survey responses. The following question areas were posed during each student interview:

- Their current level of aspirations;
- How their family background/relationships with family members have affected their aspirations and persistence;
- How relationships with their peers have affected their aspirations and persistence;
- How relationships with the teachers and staff of their secondary school have affected their aspirations and persistence;
- How relationships with the faculty and staff of SWT have affected their aspirations and persistence;
- Their self-perceptions regarding their academic abilities, study habits, and motivation levels;
- Their recommendations regarding how to increase similar students' aspirations and persistence; and
- Their recommendations specific to SWT's TRIO programs.

Each interview was conducted on campus and lasted between 45 minutes to 75 minutes.

Since the researcher and student informants differed in age, race/ethnicity, and social class for the most part, it was important that various interviewing techniques be employed in order to ensure that the interview process went smoothly and productively. The researcher employed the following techniques (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995):

- She wore appropriate clothing;

- She began the interview process with an informal conversation, such as chitchat or light humor;

- She tried to establish an atmosphere in which the informant felt safe to share his or her stories (through attentive listening, understanding, and respect for what he or she said);

- She translated research questions into easy-going, colloquial form;

- She asked clarifying and follow-up questions throughout the interview; and

- She offered incidences of when she had similar experiences as the informants.

## Procedures for Data Collection

To effectively answer the research question and sub-questions, data from student surveys and results from interviews with students and TRIO programs directors were collected. The first step in data collection was to interview the directors of the TRIO programs since they were able to assist the researcher in other aspects of the study, including how and where to recruit student participants.

Following their advice, the researcher then located as many 3rd through 6th semester college students as possible who participate(d) in the TRIO programs. (TRIO staff made initial contact and informed students to expect to be contacted by the researcher.)

Contacts were then made through e-mail; students were invited to participate in the study and notified of their rights as informants under Southwest Texas' guidelines for research with human subjects. Once students were aware of their rights of participation and all questions had been answered, the student survey was then distributed—again through e-mail.

The researcher then conducted one-on-one interviews with the students who agreed to further participation. The main goal of the interviews was to give students the opportunity to expand on their previous survey responses. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

## Data Analysis

An analysis of all student surveys initially determined which factors influenced student aspirations and persistence and to what degree. Transcriptions from the interviews were then read, coded, and analyzed in order to determine and establish any recurring patterns or themes from student responses, as suggested by Creswell (1997). Recurring patterns were then grouped and conceptualized, a process that Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to as "clustering" (p. 248-249). Clustering is the process of "…inductively forming categories, and the iterative sorting of things—events, actors, processes, settings, sites—into those categories" (Miles & Huberman, p. 249). For example, in this study, ways in which student motivation manifested itself from person to person were clustered and subsequently compared/contrasted with one another. In consideration of the small number of informants, any salient issues were reported—even if they were reported by only one or two students. Specific examples/quotations from the

students' experiences were also chosen which effectively illustrated relevant themes or ideas.

The researcher then engaged in the process of "member checking" (Stake, 1995), that is, sharing with participants the parts of the study in which their words are featured, so that they can verify that what was written was indeed what they intended to communicate. The member checking process was completed via e-mail and each participant had the opportunity to raise any questions or make clarifications regarding what was written about him/her. In closing, the researcher then developed "naturalistic generalizations" in which findings from this study could be generalized to fit a broader range of students (Stake)—either low-income, first-generation students in general or other college students who participated in an TRIO program at a similar university to Southwest Texas State University.

## Summary

This qualitative case study determined the effects of family background, peer relationships, institutional factors, self perceptions, and societal factors on the aspirations and persistence of 3rd through 6th semester college students who participate(d) in one or more of the TRIO programs at Southwest Texas State University (SWT). Informants included the above-mentioned students and the directors of SWT's TRIO programs. Instruments used in the study included student surveys and one-on-one interviews with the researcher. Once the data was collected, it was then transcribed (when necessary), coded, and analyzed for relevant themes and patterns. Student participants were also given the opportunity to view any content relating to them and to offer changes or clarification.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS


Results from the student surveys and student and TRIO director interviews will be

reported in this chapter. It will begin with findings from the director interviews,

demographic information on the student participants, and then describe the

interview/survey data relevant to each separate research question.

**Interviews with TRIO Directors**

Interviews were conducted with the two TRIO program directors during July and

August of 2001. The findings from each interview will be discussed below.

*Interview With Director of Talent Search and Upward Bound*

The Upward Bound program has been in existence at the university for at least 13

years. Currently, 60 9th through 12th grade students from six area high schools

participate in the program, approximately 12 students per campus. As with other UB

programs, two-thirds of all students must be both low-income and first-generation college

students. High school counselors and teachers refer most students to the program,

although some parents request that their child be considered for participation in the

program. Students must fill out an application and there are usually people on the waiting

list at all times.

Students in the program, primarily Hispanic and African American with some Caucasians, attend weekly meetings at their campus with a program coordinator. The students also participate in planned activities two Saturdays each month. They are also expected to attend a six-week summer program, or "bridge" program held on the SWT campus after their graduation from high school at which students are given the opportunity to take college-level courses; those unable to make the commitment to participate in the summer are exited from the program.

The current UB program proposal states the goal that, of all senior participants, 45% will immediately enroll in college and 50% will postpone enrollment for one semester. For the year prior to the interview, the program director reported that the majority of students decided to attend Southwest Texas as opposed to other colleges and universities. The program had a "good year" in 2000; 75% of the program's graduating seniors went on to college.

The director of Upward Bound also directs SWT's Talent Search program. Talent Search is similar to Upward Bound in that it has the same entrance requirements (2/3 low-income and first-generation, the other 1/3 either one or the other). The Talent Search program begins working with students in the 6th grade and continues throughout high school. Students in the program do not attend the intensive summer program that UB students do, but they do attend monthly workshops with a Talent Search counselor and visit several area colleges throughout the school year.

When asked what she would like to learn about the factors that affect her students' aspirations and persistence, program director said that she wanted to know how

the students perceived that the programs had helped them. She also expressed the desire

for some tips on how to increase students' self-motivation and persistence:

> ...because we've found too that the first roadblock many of them
>
> hit, and that's it. They don't have any stick-to-it-iveness or
>
> whatever, and I haven't figured out how to give that... if you can
>
> nurture it or pull it out or whatever.... Or even how you measure
>
> that? Because they're low-income, first-generation, they're going
>
> to have to have...we can help them so much, but when they get to
>
> college they've got to have some kind of drive themselves.
>
> Because we can't be there to pull them. I can talk to them if they
>
> want to talk to me, but I can't get them there.

### *Interview with Director of Student Support Services*

The interview was held with the previous director of SWT's Student Support

Services (SSS) program; another woman is currently the program director. According to

the previous director, SSS has been in existence at the university since1984 and was

funded for another four-year cycle in 2001. In the last cycle, at least 200 students were

served per year—in some years, it was more. Approximately 20 to 30% of SSS students

have participated in one of the other TRIO programs during middle school or high

school, and demographically, there is a fairly even split between White and Hispanic

students (roughly 40% of student participants are White, 40% Hispanic, 15% African

American, and 4% "other").

The program focuses on tutoring and other services for college freshmen and sophomores, but juniors and seniors who have postponed taking some of their entry-level courses in math and science are also eligible. SSS students are tutored by fellow students; the tutors must have at least 45 hours of college credit and a recommendation from a former professor in the subject area they wish to tutor. Other services provided by Student Support Services include TASP (Texas Academic Skills Program, an assessment for students entering public institutions of higher education) prep for students who failed one or more of the State-mandated TASP tests, academic advising, and financial aid counseling.

According to the previous director, most students who participate in SSS will graduate from college if they can persist through their freshman and sophomore years; in her experience, "…usually if you're going to drop out you usually drop out during that time." She also noticed that, although the students she serves tend to graduate, it takes them a longer period of time than other students. "But it's nice to see that B.A. or B.S. at the end of their transcript. You think, 'okay, they're graduating in the major that they want!'"

Regarding what she, as the director of Student Support Services, would like to be covered in the student surveys and interviews regarding aspirations and persistence, she was most interested in learning what the students "think they need" to make it in college. "Because that gives us a better idea, you know—are we focusing on that? Are we meeting that need through the services we provide? Because our goal…is to retain our students and help them succeed."

## Demographic Information on Survey Participants

With assistance from SWT's TRIO directors, surveys were sent out to 36

students who participate(d) in at least one of the TRIO programs offered on campus; 13

surveys were returned. Six of the 13 students participated in Talent Search during middle

school and/or high school, four participated in Upward Bound, and eight students had

been participants in Student Support Services for at least one semester during college.

Four of the 13 respondents reported having a GPA between 3.1 and 3.5; four

reported theirs between 2.51 and 3.0; another four between 2.1 and 2.5; the remaining

student's GPA was between 1.51 and 2.0, the lowest one reported. Fewer than half of the

students (four of 13) had ever been on scholastic probation due to their grades.

Approximately 70% of the students surveyed aspire to earn advanced degrees (five of

them a master's degree, the other four a doctorate or professional degree). However, one

student's interview revealed that she was not aware of the difference between a

bachelor's degree and a master's degree; she corrected herself by stating that she was

only interested in obtaining a bachelor's degree at this time.

## Demographic Information on Student Interview Participants

From March through May of 2002, the researcher interviewed eight students (of

the 13 surveyed) who currently participate in (or have participated in) one or more of the

TRIO programs—Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services. Two of

the students were male (one was Hispanic, one White) and six were female (four

Hispanic and two Black). They were all 3rd through 6th  semester students currently

enrolled at Southwest Texas State University. All of the students were from South or

Central Texas except for one, who grew up in Monterrey, Mexico. Their parents' level of education differed dramatically from student to student, from neither parent having graduated from high school to both parents having graduated from a four-year college. The majority of the students, however, had parents who had at least earned their high school diploma. In the following paragraphs, please note that pseudonyms were used to protect students' identities.

## Factors Affecting Academic Aspirations

The study's first research question asks what factors affect the academic aspirations of TRIO students at Southwest Texas. The question is then further differentiated into subsections—including how family, peers, teachers and other school staff, societal, and self-related factors influence aspirations. Each subquestion will be addressed separately below.

### *Family and Aspirations*

Family members were shown to either positively or negatively affect student aspirations. The discussion of the positive influences of family will be followed by the negative.

*College as a Given*

The majority of the students reported that part of their decision to attend college stemmed from the desire to live up to their families' expectations; it was assumed by parents or extended family that the student would go to college after graduating high school. As Anita stated, "…they always told us that we were going to go to school; they didn't give us a choice." Along with living up to family expectations, students also

expressed the desire to make their families proud of their accomplishments. As Gisela explained, "... I want to live up to her [her mother's] expectations and watch her look at me and say, 'This is my daughter. She has a good career.'"

*Older Siblings in College*

Five of the eight participants had an older brother or sister who attended college before them—four students' siblings attended Southwest Texas, the other student's sibling attends a university in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. They learned some of what they know about college and what it takes to succeed there from their siblings before they had even enrolled, which was viewed as positive by all. Carmen's siblings (and her parents' reaction to them graduating from college) had the largest impact on her decision to attend SWT. Although it took her sister seven years, she eventually graduated, as did her brother. Before that, Carmen had not seriously considered going to college. But "...as they got closer to graduation, my parents were getting all excited and everyone was talking about it. So I guess the only thing was that I wanted to come here [to college] because they came."

Gisela learned from her sister's mistakes in regard to one important aspect of college life for TRIO students—financial aid. Her sister, a student at University of Texas Pan American, was unfamiliar with the application process for financial aid; she applied once but, not realizing that she had to reapply for subsequent semesters. As Gisela said, "...so they took it away from her. But I got help, so I maintained my money and I did everything I needed to."

*Motivation From Family's Financial Situation*

      Three students, when asked how their families affected their decision to attend college, stated that their parents and extended families' financial struggles due to lack of education was a big motivator for them. Barry was most vocal about this way of thinking:

      ...None of the people [in my family] have ever graduated from

      high school. I'm the first one to do that. And so I guess that drove

      me to become better—I don't want to sound stuck up—but better

      than my family.

He went on to talk about his grandfather's lifetime of minimum wage jobs as an incentive "...to actually make a place for myself."

      Anita, reflecting back on her parents' working lives, saw a college degree as a ticket not just for a better job but also for increased happiness.

      I want to have a good job that I'm happy at. My dad installed

      carpet for like 20-something years; his knees were all tore up and

      he was always tired. My mom worked for a day care kinda thing at

      the high school. She was never happy.

In Anita's eyes, going to college was a way to ensure herself a happiness that her parents had never known.

      Alice's parents had few money problems when she was in elementary school but, due to various injuries, were unable to work as often during her middle school and high school years. This lack of work translated into financial hardship for the family, and Alice vowed that she would get a college degree and a good job so her own children

would not have to endure the same struggles in the future. Thinking back on her parents' relative prosperity during her elementary years, she stated, "so my parents' income dramatically increased by the time I got in elementary school, so it was like I saw this and I wanted more."

*Negative Role Models*

Luisa was the only student in the study who reported having negative role models within the family. While some other students mentioned the fact that college was not really a subject brought up by aunts, uncles, and other extended family, they did not cast them in a negative light. Luisa, on the other hand, saw the lives that her American cousins had and decided it was not for her; "A lot of my cousins, they're not going to college or they're just not doing anything with their life and I just didn't want to be one of them." Instead of causing her to doubt going to college, their disinterest in education fueled her desire to succeed academically.

*Parental Sacrifice*

Luisa was also the only student in the study who did not grow up in the United States. She spoke extensively about the sacrifices her parents made in order for her to be able to attend college; she left Mexico when she was fourteen so that she could attend high school in the United States. Until she graduated from high school, Luisa lived with an aunt in a town near Dallas. She was able to see her parents only during school holidays and for a few weeks in the summer. As she stated during her interview:

> They [her parents] thought it was best for me to come here.... And
>
> they made the sacrifice that our family was split—just for our

education, so we can get a good education and a good future. So

they're the main reason why I'm here.

*Differences in Opinion Regarding College Choice*

Two students reported that their families were not supportive of their first choice

of which college to attend. Alice dreamed of attending one of the nation's finest

historically Black colleges since she was in middle school. Once it came time for her to

apply to schools however, her parents strongly discouraged her from applying there due

to the fact that it was so far from home; "why don't you go to school at Southwest like

your cousin is and stay at home like your cousin is doing," was their response to her

pleas. So, Alice eventually "gave up that dream." Despite that, she stated that her parents

are now supportive of her college career at Southwest Texas.

Gisela's mother also took issue with her decision to attend a college that was

further away from home. Although her mother is now "very supportive", Gisela had to

figure out her college applications by herself. Talking about her mother's initial reaction

she said, "she didn't even want to help me with my applications! I would ask her and she

wouldn't say anything to me. So I struggled with that—I did everything on my own."

*Pressure Exerted on Students By Family Members*

One student, Gisela, felt a lot of pressure from her mother to succeed. Her

mother's philosophy throughout her daughter's school life: "she was never satisfied with

a 95. 'You can always get a 100, you can always do better than this'...." To ensure her

daughter's academic success, Gisela's mother discouraged her from participating in high

school athletics because it might distract her from schoolwork. Her mother also made the

decision when Gisela was a sophomore that she should attend the science academy, a magnet school in a town about 30 minutes away. Gisela's choice of words regarding this decision makes it clear that it was her mother's doing and not hers; "then my mom changed me to the science academy and so it's always been up to expectations...."

This pressure has, at times, been a source of contention between Gisela and her mother. When talking about no longer being able to participate in athletics, Gisela claimed that "I was kinda in conflict with her about that because I was getting straight A's and, you know, being in band and athletics and I enjoyed it." She also had a difficult time with her mother's decision that she should attend the science academy instead of her regular high school. "...It was a difficult transition for me, but I got adjusted to it and I knew that it was for the best and it was for my mom." Obviously, a good proportion of Gisela's motivation to attend college came from external sources—namely from her mother.

*Teachers/School Staff and Aspirations*

The following section will discuss how public school teachers and staff affected The TRIO students' decision to attend college. Again, positive influences will be followed by the negative.

*Teachers as Motivators*

Each of the eight students in the study reported having at least one teacher in elementary school, middle school, or high school who motivated them and made them believe they could go to college. This motivation came in several forms, from words of encouragement to extra help outside of class time. For example, Gisela's eighth grade

science teacher saw her talent in the subject and encouraged her to pursue a major in science when she went to college. Luisa was motivated by her high school chemistry teacher to do the same. Although one of Carmen's English teachers did not specifically encourage her to pursue a degree in English, she did convince her to take several college prep (advanced placement) courses her senior year.

A couple of students told of high school teachers who took extra time (outside of the classroom) to foster their skills and interest in school. Barry's biology teacher would assign him extra work to challenge him academically. Ronald reported that he and his friends would go after school to favorite teachers' classrooms if there were something they wanted to learn that wasn't covered in class.

In whatever form it took, the main thing these teachers did for their students was to increase their confidence in their own abilities. Eva said it well when talking about her English teacher during senior year; the teacher, in order to show students what college could be like, decided to make her class like a "college-level course" and the fact that Eva did well in her class really made her confident in her abilities to make it in higher education. "After taking that class, I think I could take anything!"

*Information Sharing by Teachers and Counselors*

Several students recalled specific teachers or counselors who helped them to learn more about college life--what one can study there, financial aid opportunities, what to expect from their professors, and so forth. Carmen talked about her counselor's role in her decision to attend college: "they'll show you all the possibilities. That way you're not just thinking that's its…just like high school…. That you're actually going to study

something that you want." Another teacher told her about the different financial aid options available to her. Alice's counselor let her use the computer to research different colleges and was "always open to talk to us, to answer questions about schools and stuff." A few of Ronald's teachers made him aware that the workload in college was more strenuous than what he was accustomed to at his particular high school. He was warned that, "whatever you receive here [at this high school], it's elementary. It's nothing [compared to what they expect of you in college]." And, according to Ronald's account of his first experiences in college classes, his teacher's assessment rang true.

*Questionable School District Policies*

The South Texas school district where Ronald attended was, according to him, rife with difficulties and questionable priorities. Teachers were told by administrators not to challenge their students because, "people gotta pass your class." If they questioned this demand, the teachers were replaced. Vital supplies, such as books and lab equipment, were non-existent. Ronald's calculus class did not have books, his chemistry classroom had no microscopes or other equipment, and his senior English class consisted of "grammar handouts, fill-in-the-blank stuff. And that's not gonna help you for anything." Many students attending school in such an environment would not even consider college as an option after high school, but Ronald had enough support and enough motivation to attend college despite his prior educational experiences.

*A Dearth of Caring Educators*

While some of the student participants had as many as four teachers or school staff who really affected their decision to go to college, others could only recall one.

Alice, who attended school in Central Texas, spoke of only one supportive staff person in her high school. When asked if her other teachers or counselors talked to her about college, she said, "…it wasn't anything that was pushed constantly or anything so…. But no one single teacher really stands out as constantly pushing college on us—not even my senior year I can't think of any."

*Peers and Aspirations*

How did the informants' peers affect their academic aspirations? The positive influences of peers will be enumerated below, followed by the negative.

*College As A Given*

Several students in the study reported that their friends in high school expected both them and themselves to attend college after graduating. Barry said it well:

But with college, there was never any discussion [between my

friends and me]. It was just what you were supposed to do after

high school. And so we all went to college—all my friends….

That's just the kind of people we were.

Gisela talked about her friends discouraging one another from getting off the college track. "If there's anyone that said, 'I might wanna take a couple of years off [before college]', we try to influence them [i.e. dissuade them] because that's just the way we've grown up."

*Friendly Competition Among Males*

Both male students that were interviewed, Barry and Ronald, talked about competing with their closest friends for better grades. Ronald became closest to those

classmates who shared his desire for academic achievement; "Like growing up, me and my friends were the top of our class. So we would always try to compete for the top three spots [of the graduating class]." He attributed his friendships to the fact that a small group of students were in all the advanced placement (AP) courses together and that they didn't have a lot of contact with other students at the school. In fact, Barry and Ronald were perceived as (and perceived themselves as) "the nerds" on campus. But it wasn't necessarily a negative connotation, at least not now—because they realize the value of their education. As Ronald explained it, "I've never been like your delinquents [i.e. some classmates], they were always like 'nerds' and this and that. But I just kinda laugh at them now because they're still in our hometown and they don't do anything."

*Female Encouragement*

The females in the study were different from the males in that they were supportive of their friends' academic achievements (and vice-versa) without being in competition with them. For example, Gisela talks about she and her friends "pushing each other" to strive for college but it was never couched in competitive terms. Alice also received encouragement from her friends regarding the decision to attend college—any college. "So my friends have been very supportive whether I wanted to go to Howard or North Texas or, say, California to school or whether I wanted to stay at Southwest. They were going to support me no matter what."

*Positive Peer Pressure*

Carmen was the only student in the study who had not really thought much about college before her friends started talking about it; it was almost as if she first became

interested in the idea of going to college in order to fit in with her peers. As she explained it,

> ...as far as friends go, I think they had a big part in it too because they were like, 'where are you going to school?' And that's when I actually started thinking about it and getting serious and meeting with the counselors.... And before I didn't pay any attention to that. But then everyone starts making like appointments and stuff.

If her friends had not been thinking about college for themselves, then Carmen might have made a different decision about what to do after graduating from high school.

*Older Friends In College*

A couple of students had older friends who served as mentors of a sort. Anita considered some of the residential assistants (RAs) from her Upward Bound summer program to be friends as well as role models. They encouraged her to succeed academically despite the fact that some of her high school friends were making decisions that led them away from the possibility of college. Eva's excitement about college was heightened by her older friends' experiences there—they even affected her decision to attend Southwest Texas. As she said, "...they'd come over and they'd tell me all these stories. And they're like, 'oh it's so much fun' and a lot of my friends actually suggested this school." Her friends specifically spoke well about SWT's music program, which was especially important to Eva due to her desire to major in music.

*Interaction With Peers In Extracurricular Activities*

When asked what all in terms of peer interactions had influenced her decision to attend college, Alice mentioned the fun that she had in high school while participating in various extracurricular activities—time to interact with her peers outside of the classroom. In her own words,

> I know in high school I wasn't Ms. Popular or anything, but I was
>
> always involved in activities and stuff. And just the atmosphere of
>
> being around people all the time and having fun—you're learning
>
> yet you're still able to have fun.

She looked forward to having the possibility to react with fellow students in a fun and learning atmosphere in college as she had in high school.

*The Need To Separate From Friends*

Both Gisela and Luisa felt the need to separate themselves from their friends in order to achieve academically. Gisela, heavily influenced by her mother's wishes, left her high school during sophomore year in order to enroll in the Science Academy, a more challenging magnet school about 30 minutes from home. Luisa felt it necessary to leave her comfortable niche of the ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom after her freshman year so that she could participate in "regular" classes. Both students experienced feelings of isolation from their peers due to the decisions they made about their education. As Gisela explained her changed relationship with friends from her former high school after she began attending the Science Academy,

…it was a little bit difficult because they saw me as a different

person even though I wasn't. I mean, they would still hug me and

be all happy when I came over, but it drifted me apart also from

them—from everything I was and everything I used to enjoy....

*Inner Factors and Aspirations*

The literature on academic aspirations also focuses on how one's own self-perception, including motivation level, study habits, and confidence as a student, affects the decision on whether or not to attend college. The inner factors that affected the study's participants' decisions regarding college will be discussed below.

*High Expectations*

Several interview respondents spoke of their decision to attend college as a necessary part of meeting their own personal and/or career goals. For example, Barry came to college not only because he wants to be a teacher and because a degree is required in order to get a job in that field. He also came because he has a true love of learning; as he said, "I love learning new stuff and understanding why things are the way they are and college helps me do that. It helps me get an education." Like Barry, Ronald, Eva, and Anita also view college as the only means toward reaching their career goals. Eva also wants to be a teacher—a music teacher, while Anita wants to work in public administration. Ronald, largely due to his earlier experiences at working in the clinic in his hometown, aspires to be a medical doctor. As he stated so succinctly, "I know what it takes [to become a doctor] so I know what I have to do to do it."

Carmen remarked that she was in competition—but only with herself—to achieve.

> I'm very competitive. Like I have this motivation. I want to
>
> achieve something.... After I find out I can finish high school why
>
> not go to college? I owe it to myself.... I just keep wanting more
>
> and more. Right now I'm working toward my bachelor's [degree],
>
> but I decided that I want to get my master's. And if I can get the
>
> CPA, hopefully I want to get like a Ph.D. And I'm just wanting
>
> more and more.

*Desire for Financial Security/Independence*

Two of the females in the study, Anita and Alice, spoke of their desire to attend college and earn a degree partially for the sake of ensuring a secure environment for their own children. Alice spoke of "...want[ing] my kids to have parents who are educated" and the financial security that comes with that higher level of education. Anita intuited that her children's happiness as well as their financial security was at stake should she not obtain a college degree. This kind of thinking is understandable in light of the financial hardships the students and their families have endured—which might not have been as pervasive had their parents been better educated.

While Anita and Alice considered college as a way to ensure their children's futures, Gisela viewed it as a way to achieve her own sense of security and well being in the future. Not assuming that she would ever marry or have a family, Gisela spoke about her desire for financial security.

> I don't wanna have any problems with money most of all. I wanna
>
> be able to take care of myself. If I don't get married I wanna be

able to take care of myself and be very independent. I've always

been very independent.

<div align="center">*Societal Factors and Aspirations*</div>

The following section will explore how society as a whole affected the TRIO

students' decision to attend college.

*America's Changing Workforce*

Along with other factors that influenced their academic aspirations, some students

also mentioned that their goal of continuing in higher education beyond the

undergraduate level stemmed from the fact that it is increasingly difficult to get a good

job in today's society without at least a master's degree. As Alice explained her own

desire for an advanced degree:

I would like to get my master's degree because nowadays you

know…it was, like for the first couple of years [in college] it's

been 'oh, bachelor's degree, bachelor's degree.' And now your

master's degree is probably going to be a requirement for a lot of

jobs it seems like, so…yeah, I would like to get my master's.

Anita, who is interested in getting a job in public administration, has heard that a master's

degree has become a necessity in her field—at least for the well-paid positions. "They tell

us right now you need your master's degree if you wanna get paid in the field I'm going

into…."

*Beating the Odds*

Anita and Luisa, both Hispanic students, mentioned the statistics regarding the

high dropout rates and low college attendance rates among fellow Hispanics that are

prevalent in the media today. When asked if there were anything else besides family,

teachers, peers, and self-related factors that attributed to her decision to attend college,

Luisa's response's was, "…probably the statistics that we see with a lot of Hispanic

people and minorities [not going to college]. I just don't want to help those statistics!"

Anita stated that seeing her Upward Bound counselors, who were also minorities,

attending and succeeding in college "…gave me the confidence to know that I could [do

it too]."

*Television's Influence on Today's Youth*

Alice, when asked what had affected her educational decisions, spoke about the

characters on television shows that she watched (such as Sister, Sister and Friends) who

were either in college or had already graduated and how they influenced her and other

youth to attend because college was "the thing" to do. "That [going to college] was

instilled you know, because we watch TV a lot…and we want to imitate the characters.

So I think overall they're doing an okay job on doing that."

**The Relative Significance of Each Set of Factors on Aspirations**

Before discussing the factors that affect the students' persistence in higher

education, the researcher will first address part of the study's second research question,

which asks about the relative significance of each set of factors (i.e. family,

teachers/school staff, peers, self, and society) on academic aspirations. In other words,

what factors were most important in determining student aspirations? Which were least

important? Results from the student surveys as well as interview data will be discussed.

*Survey Data*

One of the questions on the student survey asked students to rank the factors that

they perceived to have affected their decision to attend college, in other words what they

perceived to have affected their academic aspirations. As seen in Table 1 below, the top

three factors, according to the 13 respondents, in order of most important to least, were

the desire for a better paying job after graduation (ranked either #1 or 2 by 10 of 13

respondents), self-related factors such as self-esteem, which was ranked in the top two

spots by eight respondents, and family (ranked either #1 or 2 by seven respondents). The

importance of getting a better job reflects students' desire for social mobility, which will

be discussed in more depth in Chapter 5. The least important factor, according to survey

results, was participation in TRIO; only two respondents ranked it in the top two.

Table 1

*Students' Ranking of Factors That Affect Aspirations*

| Student | Family | Peers | Teachers & Staff | Better Job | Self Factors | TRIO | Other |
|---------|--------|-------|------------------|------------|--------------|------|-------|
| 1 | 1 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 3 | N/A |
| 2 | 4 | -- | -- | 1 | 2 | 3 | N/A |
| 3 | 3 | 6 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 4 | N/A |
| 4 | 1 | 6 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 3 | N/A |
| 5 | 2 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 5 | N/A |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **7** | 3 | -- | 5 | 2 | 4 | -- | 1 |
| **8** | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | N/A |
| **9** | -- | -- | 2 | 1 | 3 | 4 | N/A |
| **10** | 2 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 1 | -- | N/A |
| **11** | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 6 | N/A |
| **12** | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | N/A |
| **13** | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | -- | N/A |

*Note.* -- = Not ranked.

Student 7's top-ranked factor was "being a leader and making a difference."

Respondents 8, 12 and 13 perceived more than one factor to be equally important.

*Student Interviews*

Three students, Eva, Gisela, and Luisa, reported that family members—be it their encouragement and support, their own struggles in life due to a lack of education, or the fact that older siblings attended college before them—were the most important factor in their decision to continue their education after high school. An equal number of students (Carmen, Ronald, and Alice) considered inner factors, such as their desire for the future and high motivation level, to be the true deciding factor. Carmen expressed this feeling well when she said, "…I think people have an influence on you but you're your own person. I came to school because I wanted to do something better for myself and get further in life."

Out of the remaining two students, one of them expressed the belief that both his family and his teachers played equal part in helping to influence his decision to go to college. As Barry clarified it, "the self confidence came from my teachers. The motivation to go to college actually came from my family." Anita was the only student to single out the TRIO program that she participated in during high school, Upward Bound, as being the factor that most influenced her aspirations. She did not necessarily contribute the program's structured activities to be important, but rather the role models she met while participating;

> And it was people [UB program assistants and staff] that came
>
> from financial backgrounds that I came from and the same
>
> situations that were already succeeding, so that gave me the
>
> confidence to know that I could [go to college].

### Factors Affecting Academic Persistence

The latter part of the study's first research question asks how certain factors—family, faculty/staff, peers, and self—affect student participants' academic persistence. In other words, what keeps them from dropping out? What makes them successful in higher education? As with the section on academic aspirations, each of the above factors will be discussed separately below.

*Family and Persistence*

Family members were shown to either positively or negatively affect student persistence. The positive influences of family will be followed by the negative.

*Emotional Support*

Several of the students reported that the emotional support offered by their families has helped them to stay in school. Luisa, whose parents allowed her to leave them behind in Mexico so that she could attend college in the States, said it this way:

I don't want to let them down because they did a really good thing

for me. And I don't have money to give them presents so that's

[staying in school and doing her best] just the way I can return all

their sacrifices that they have done for me.

When Barry was asked what it takes to be successful in college, he made it clear that support from family was a necessity; "You can't do it by yourself."

*Offers of Financial Support*

Carmen was the only student in the study whose parents showed their support by offering to help her pay her tuition even though she works full time so that she can afford it herself. "I'll talk about maybe taking a semester off, they'll just give me this look. And my mom's like, 'No, if you need money we'll pay'." This offer was especially significant seeing as that Carmen's parents most probably do not have a lot of money available for expenses beyond what they are accustomed to.

*Increased Self-Reliance*

Eva reported that the physical separation from her parents had forced her to become a better student and therefore more likely to persist in higher education. In explanation as to why the separation had changed her study habits, she remarked, "because you don't have your parents here telling you, 'hey, you need to go to your

classes, you need to do this, you need to do that.' So it helped me become more independent."

*Health Problems Within The Family*

During her time as a student at Southwest Texas, Anita's father died, she and her mother were both diagnosed with cancer, and she has had to undergo five surgeries. Not surprisingly, her school attendance has suffered. She has had to drop many classes due to health issues and is currently in the process of trying to catch up on her coursework and graduate. Anita has thoughts of graduate school, but with all the health problems that her family has experienced during her four years at SWT, she is uncertain. "Like every semester, something has happened. So my GPA is not that great. I'm just now starting to work on really trying to pick it up. But yeah, I'm pretty sure...[I'll] then go to grad school."

*High School and College Faculty/Staff and Persistence*

Educators in both high school and college can affect their students' persistence levels in either positive or negative ways. The following section will examine how secondary and post-secondary educators have affected the participants' persistence in higher education.

*Teachers As Mentors*

Ronald and Luisa both have ongoing communication with and support from at least one of their former high school teachers. For example, Ronald, a biochemistry major, has made trips to his hometown to be tutored in Chemistry by a teacher at his old high school. In his own words, "like my first Chemistry...I was getting my butt....

Seriously I was having a hard time. But I would drive back over there and he would tutor me whenever I need help so that's how I kinda got through."

*Encouragement From Faculty*

One student, Carmen, described how an English professor had boosted her self-confidence in her writing abilities during her first semester enrolled at the university;

> ...my first semester here, like everybody seemed so lost and in
>
> English everybody did so bad. And I was actually like...the
>
> professor would call me up and she would use my papers for
>
> examples and stuff. So, to me, I was really excited....

*Using The Resources Available On Campus*

When struggling with a physics class, Ronald reported taking advantage of a variety of support services in order to increase his understanding of the subject matter. When the researcher asked if he had visited his professor during office hours, he replied, "yeah, I've gone to him, I've emailed him, [and] my lab TA [teaching assistant] helps me with physics." In addition, Ronald went beyond his classroom teachers for help; "I [also] have a physics tutor [through Student Support Services] and I go to the SLAC [Student Learning Assistance Center] lab."

*Demanding Teachers/Classes*

Ronald was the only student to complain that one or more of his professors overburdened him with work to the point that it affected his ability to devote enough time to his other courses. In his opinion, teachers at the college level could be more understanding. As he elaborated,

I think teachers should understand that we're not just taking their course, because... the work they give us is a lot and I've heard teachers make little remarks like, 'I don't care about your other courses, I just care about my course.'... Like my first biology test, our review was 27 pages long...and I don't know, that's just wrong.... I just gave up.

*Undesirable And/Or Inaccessible Programs*

Carmen works 40 hours a week in order to afford her tuition and living expenses, so she is unable to participate in programs designed by the university to increase student persistence. When asked to explain her unwillingness, she replied, "it's just that I don't have time. I know other students have time, but usually when you get to college you kinda have to get a job and you have all other kinds of things going on...."

Ronald does not participate in certain university-based programs either, but not due to a lack of time—he just perceives them as not being very useful or helpful to him. Talking specifically about Paws Preview, a session at the beginning of each school year with information sharing, entertainment, and the like, Ronald said, "I guess it just depends on the person and the situation. If that [attending Paws Preview] motivates people, then they should keep it. But I've never seen a need for that.... I don't think I've ever needed [external] motivation."

*Peers and Persistence*

Peers, like family and educators, can also affect student persistence. How the TRIO students' peers have affected their own persistence in higher education is discussed below—with positive influences discussed first, followed by any negative influences.

*Encouragement From Friends*

Two participants in the study, Barry and Alice, remarked that the emotional support given to them from their friends has been important to their success and persistence in college. Alice receives the same support from her non college-going friends as from her college-going ones. "I do have a few friends…who aren't in school but they still encourage me just the same to keep going. And the ones that I do have that are in school, [it's] the same thing—to keep going."

*Peer Assistance Through Technology*

Ronald, when in need of assistance in a class, reported that he regularly receives help from his professors, teaching assistants, and peer tutors employed by the university. At times when none of those resources are available, he takes advantage of resources available on the Internet: "I'll also go like to Yahoo chat rooms and I'll start asking questions. A lot of people will be like, 'well, you have to use this formula….'" With today's technology, it is possible for students to receive help and support from other students around the country and the world.

*Peer Tutors Through Student Support Services*

Luisa's sessions with tutors through Student Support Services provide her with a sense of confidence in her academic abilities that she might not otherwise have. Even

though her schedule is tight and it is tempting to skip out on the sessions sometimes, Luisa will not allow herself to do so because she sees its value. "Sometimes I wouldn't want to go no more and I was like, 'well I have to go.' It's an hour of study that I'll actually make myself study."

*Adjusting to a New Environment*

Several students remarked on the period of adjustment they had to go through during their first semesters at Southwest Texas—due mainly to the fact that they had come from a relatively small high school to a campus of over 20,000 students. This adjustment period made it difficult for new students to find support from their peers as they had in their earlier educational endeavors. For example, when asked why it had taken him three semesters before he felt started participating in the extracurricular activities offered at the university, Barry explained,

> I guess [I was] just getting comfortable. I come from a small from
>
> a small high school and everybody knows everyone. And then I
>
> went to school [at SWT] and there's so many people and it's like
>
> starting all over again. You have to secure yourself in your classes
>
> first and then you can start messing around with after school
>
> stuff.… And now I'm starting to do really good and I think I can
>
> take a little bit more stress.

Gisela's comments about putting school before socializing in order to make it in college—especially in the first semesters— is reminiscent of what Barry had to say about the subject. She commented:

> So…I wanted to see how, without doing anything outside—just
>
> maintaining my studies, how good I was gonna do, what my
>
> rhythm was. And then see if I could…enter a certain group and see
>
> how I could schedule that so I wouldn't be too overwhelmed.

*Discouragement from Peers*

During his interview, Ronald recounted a story that exemplified the negative influence that peers can have over an individual. Due to the relatively poor schools that Ronald attended as a child, he came to college with significantly fewer learning experiences than some of his classmates. For example, he told of his struggles during a Chemistry lab experiment in which he was to construct a funnel out of paper. While his classmates all knew exactly what to do, Ronald was lost. As he explained, "And they [his classmates] were like, 'you didn't know that?' And I was like, 'no.' And they were like, 'why not?' They found that hard to believe…." Several of Ronald's lab partners became so impatient with him that they asked to be placed with another partner for the remainder of the semester; eventually he was the only student in the class who did not have a partner. Ironically, his first lab partner in this particular Chemistry class specifically requested to have Ronald as a partner in another lab class because he was the only student in the previous class to have earned an A.

*Inner Factors and Persistence*

As was seen with their levels of academic aspirations, inner factors play an important role in determining whether or not a student will eventually earn his or her degree from an institution of higher learning. Discussed below are the different character

traits or self-related factors that the participants see as being important to their own persistence.

*Self-Motivation*

Six of the eight students who participated in the study pointed out their own motivation to succeed as one of the contributing factors to their persistence in college. Each individual's way of self-motivation, however, was a little different from his or her peers. For example, Gisela motivated herself by "remind[ing] yourself that you can do better." She is committed to making the best grades possible and to being a successful leader in some of the university's student organizations. She summed her self-motivation up well: "I want to know how far I can go. I want to see what limits I have. I want to give myself that chance to succeed even though I'm away from home."

Carmen's sense of personal motivation is similar to Gisela, although she couches it in competitive terms. When speaking about her desire to continue in school until she has earned a Ph.D., Carmen claimed, "I just keep wanting more and more. Like whatever you have isn't enough, I guess." To her, succeeding in college and earning a degree can only come down to one thing: "either you choose to do it or you choose not to do it."

Anita's motivation stems from not wanting the problems in her life—her father's death, her mother's cancer, and her own illness—to keep her from graduating. Although she has had to take time off and drop more than her fair share of classes, Anita is determined to earn her degree. As she said, "I've set a goal and I want to finish it. No matter what it takes. And it seems like I've been in here [school] forever and I want to accomplish that goal that I've set."

Luisa realizes that there are a lot of things that could have potentially kept her from staying in school—being away from her parents and home country, English not being her native language, and the like. But she is determined to get a doctoral degree in Chemistry so that she can teach one day. When asked what it takes to be successful in college, she summed up the various aspects of self-motivation, stating that one needs "...a goal. And after that it would be desire, determination, confidence, hard work, and being focused...."

Barry's self-motivation stems from what he knows he *does not* want for his own life, and college is the way to accomplish it—despite the hardships that being a first-generation college student from a high poverty background entails. According to Barry,

It gets so exhausting if you have to work and go to school at the

same time. And it's expensive. And there are so many reasons why

you want to quit. But you just think that one day it's going to pay

off. Having a degree you get so much farther than people who

don't go to college. They're stuck at McDonald's. I will not ever

do fast food—that's what keeps me going.

While Barry gets motivation from what he does not want to be, Ronald is motivated by what he does want to be—a medical doctor. He realizes that it is "not the easiest road" but that he has enough internal drive and desire to reach his goal. Even though he has struggled in some classes, he will not let it get the best of him; "I don't think I've ever needed [external] motivation. I know I complain a lot, but it's not going to like discourage me. So I just go and have my fits and that's it!"

*Making the Sacrifices Worth It*

For college to be a reality for Luisa, she had to leave her parents, brother, and friends in Mexico, learn English at the age of 14, and live with an aunt who seemed more interested in the money that was being paid to her to care for her niece than for Luisa's well being. Therefore, part of Luisa's educational persistence comes from not wanting the sacrifices she has made to be in vain. She said it well: "…I've been working so much since I got here [to the U.S.] that I don't want to throw everything away."

*Study Skills*

Alice believes that her improved study skills have played a major part in her continuing to attend college. She spoke about how her habits have changed for the better in her three years at Southwest Texas; "…it's…taken me [all this time] to get in that groove of making myself sit down, turn off my cell phone, turn off my home phone, and study."

*Time Management Skills*

Like Alice, Ronald perceives himself as a better student than when he first began college. When asked what within himself had made him successful in his studies, he pointed out his improved time management skills. He commented,

I think I'm successful because…I know how to prioritize my time

more now…. I used to be like a real procrastinator…there would

be times I'd be up all night finishing stuff and I would always

complain that I'm not going to do this again. Two weeks later I'm

up all night.... But as long as I prioritize my time better now, I'll

be fine.

*A Positive Attitude*

Eva reported that maintaining a good attitude has positively affected her success

in higher education. When explaining the importance of positive thinking, she claimed

that, "the better the attitude the easier it is to make the grades. You know, like if you go

in with a good attitude you come out with a good attitude."

**The Relative Significance of Each Set of Factors on Persistence**

The second research question asks about the relative significance of each set of

factors (i.e. family, teachers/school staff, peers, self-related factors) on academic

persistence. In other words, what factors were most important in determining student

aspirations? Results from the student surveys as well as interview data will be discussed.

*Survey Results*

Students were asked to rank the factors that they perceived as being important in

their academic and/or personal successes in college so far (i.e. their academic

persistence.) According to Table 2 below, the three most important factors in order from

most important to least, were relationships with family members and relationships with

faculty and staff of the university (both of which received eight rankings of #1 or 2), and

students' academic self-concept (i.e. whether or not they perceived themselves as having

the necessary skills to be successful in college)—ranked in the top two spots by five

respondents. The least important factor according to Table 2 was participation in Student

Support Services, which only one respondent ranked in the top two spots.

Table 2.

*Students' Ranking of Factors That Affect Persistence*

| Student | Family | Peers | Faculty & Staff | Academic Self-Concept | Attitude and/or Motivation | Academic Perform-ance | Student Support Services | Other |
|---------|--------|-------|------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|-------|
| 1 | 1 | 6 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 7 | 3 | N/A |
| 2 | 4 | -- | -- | 3 | 2 | 1 | -- | N/A |
| 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 7 | N/A |
| 4 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 4 | 5 | 3 | -- | N/A |
| 5 | | | | | | | | |
| 6 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | -- | N/A |
| 7 | 1 | -- | 2 | 5 | 4 | -- | 3 | N/A |
| 8 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | -- | -- | N/A |
| 9 | -- | 3 | 1 | -- | -- | -- | 2 | N/A |
| 10 | 2 | 7 | 1 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | N/A |
| 11 | -- | -- | -- | 1 | 2 | 3 | -- | N/A |
| 12 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 4 | -- | N/A |
| 13 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | -- | N/A |

*Note.* -- = Not ranked.

Respondents 8, 12, and 13 perceived more than one factor to be equally important.

*Student Interviews*

According to the students' interview responses, self-related factors—especially

self-motivation, were the most important factors in determining whether or not they will

continue on to earn their college degrees. Keeping going—despite being away from home and family, despite difficulties in classes, and so on—ultimately depends on the individual. Carmen summed up the importance of self-motivation well when talking about her friends who had already dropped out of college. "Some of my friends already left school. And it's because they didn't make time to study or because they went out too much or they just didn't care. You know, it all comes down to the individual." Other important factors in determining student persistence were encouragement from family and friends and the possession of effective study and time management skills.

### TRIO Programs & Student Aspirations and Persistence

The 3rd research question asks how participation in one or more of the TRIO programs—Talent Search, Upward Bound, or Student Support Services-- affects student aspirations and persistence. Were students more likely to attend college due to their participation in TRIO? Do students feel that the programs taught them new skills or strategies to more easily navigate college courses? What did they find most useful? Responses to these questions will be discussed below.

*TRIO Programs and Student Aspirations*

The ways in which students' participation in either Upward Bound or Talent Search in junior high and/or high school affected their decision to attend college will be discussed below.

*Information Sharing and Assistance from TRIO Staff*

Several students believed that the information about college given to them by TRIO staff, including information about financial aid, social and academic aspects of

university life, and the like, were important in helping them to make the decision to attend. They also reported receiving valuable help with preparation for college entrance exams and financial aid and college applications. Carmen, who participated in Talent Search during high school, said that the staff members of the program were "…willing to help with college applications and scholarships, helping find more scholarships…. Like they helped do all the college prep stuff like the SAT, to sign up for the ACT, and anything else that you had to get done."

*Expanding Horizons*

Anita credited her participation in the Upward Bound program with exposing her things that she would not otherwise have experienced—which in turn increased her desire to attend college. When asked what factor had been most important in her making the decision to go to college, she said:

> Upward Bound helped me a lot. It made a big difference in my life,
>
> a huge difference. It was the first place that I really went on trips.
>
> They took us like, not far, like to Houston. They showed us
>
> different universities and different museums and baseball games.
>
> They took us to stuff like that.

Later in her interview, Anita clarified the significance of these activities to her life and the lives of her fellow students:

> …Seeing something can change your life—even the bad kids. If
>
> they see something it can change their life, just inspire them.
>
> Going somewhere, just being somewhere else. I went with the

choir, I think my freshman or sophomore year, to Tennessee. And I just remember…it was just like, there's more than this funky little town.

*TRIO Programs and Student Persistence*

The ways in which participation in one or more of the TRIO programs have affected participants' academic persistence in higher education are discussed below.

*An Early Taste of College Life*

Half of the student informants commented on the contribution of their participation in either Upward Bound or Student Support Services' summer educational programs to their success as college students. Each program—SSS' Summer Enrichment program, UB's Math and Science summer program, or UB's bridge program—allowed time for the students to experience a taste of college life, academic and otherwise, while they were still in high school. Barry described his experience at an Upward Bound Math and Science program held at the University of North Texas in Denton. He had the opportunity to:

> Go to a college and take courses that they [college students] would
> take. It'd be a much more broken-down course than a college
> course would be, it didn't count for any credit, but it let you know
> what it was gonna be like. And then you'd have to go to class, you
> had to do your work or you'd fall behind. There [at the UB
> program] you'd get in trouble, but here you just fall behind and
> they don't even care. You'd be stuck on your own and you'd flunk

out of college. But you know what it's like and you get used to it. I

actually looked forward to getting out of high school [after

participating in the program] because you have more freedom [in

college]—even in the program, than you did in high school. They

let you be your own self. It gets you away from your family for a

couple of weeks, so you can see what it'd be like to be without

them for about six weeks, which is half a semester. It was nice.

And looking back on that, that's helped me to persevere now.

Carmen spoke specifically about the benefits of a high school student attending a

summer program at the college he or she planned to attend. Talking about people she had

met at Southwest Texas who had attended a summer program there during high school,

she explained why it was beneficial. "They got more familiar with it before it's just all

23,000 [students] coming in at once. Because that makes it a lot less intimidating,

because I know when everybody first comes, it's just whoa!"

*Support from TRIO Staff*

Gisela, who participated in the Student Support Services summer enrichment

program, remembered the extra support she was given by the program staff during her

freshman year even though she was no longer officially receiving their services. "They

kept in touch with us all throughout our fall semester so it kept us doing good in our

classes. And if we ever needed something, someone to talk to, we had them."

*Increased Self Confidence*

As was discussed earlier in the section relating to peers and student persistence, Luisa's confidence in her abilities as a student were increased by the tutoring she received from Student Support Services. As she stated, "my first year, because I didn't know what to expect, it did help me a lot. The tutors that they have…it just made me feel more confident about the material that we were looking at [in my classes] at that time."

**Student Recommendations Regarding Aspirations and Persistence**

The first part of the final research question gave students the opportunity to recommend ways that public school and college educators can increase the academic aspirations and persistence of students from similar low-income and/or first-generation backgrounds. Their recommendations for secondary schools will be enumerated first, followed by recommendations for institutions of higher learning.

*Recommendations for Secondary School Staff*

Recommendations for high schools, including providing challenges for students, diversifying teaching staff, teaching study habits and time management, sharing information, increasing multiculturalism, and expanding student's opportunities, will be outlined below.

*Challenge Your Students*

Carmen and Eva recommended that high schools should do a better job at preparing their students for college by creating a more rigorous learning environment. Eva explained the differences between teacher expectations in high school versus college:

Now that I look back at high school, it was really easy. They could

have made it a little more at the college level—especially when

you get into your junior and senior years.... But they made it pretty

simple. Like when you come to college, you have to take your own

notes. They'll do that for you in high school. They tell you, 'okay,

this is what you need...write it down.' They tell you exactly what's

going to be on a test; they don't do that here. So I think they should

help out with that. Put it more on a college level.

*Diversify Your Teaching Staff*

Anita recommended that schools make a concerted effort to recruit minority

teachers. As a Hispanic woman, she felt it would have been beneficial to her during high

school to have more minority teachers who could serve as role models.

*Teach Study Habits and Time Management Skills*

Alice's high school did not teach her how to study effectively or how to manage

her time effectively, which was detrimental once she entered higher education. She

recommended that students be taught these skills during secondary school:

...Once they [secondary school staff] know that a kid wants to go

to college and they're serious about going to college, teach them

some serious study habits and time management skills. Because

my freshman year...it's barely now taken me to get in that groove

of making myself sit down, turn off my cell phone, turn off my

home phone, and study. ...Not that L High School's program is

not…is a breeze or anything, but in high school I didn't study, you

know? And coming to college was a big slap in the face. So I think

that's something—from back when I was in school and even

now—that I don't think they're doing a good job in, teaching

students how to study and time management.

*Share Information on the Benefits of College*

Barry believed that students would benefit from school staff being explicit about

what the advantages are for students in getting a college education. As he put it, "…give

them a full view of the options they have with college—with a college degree compared

to what they have without it." When asked for clarification on what he meant by

"options", he explained,

Jobs. I guess with a degree in college you'd have more financial

security than if you didn't have a degree. And I think that would

motivate a lot of kids because no one wants to have to struggle for

the rest of their life.

*Increase Multiculturalism and Field Trip Opportunities*

Anita thought it important that schools make an effort to expose students to

different cultures and places through multicultural learning activities and by taking

students on field trips. Explaining why this was a good way to increase student

aspirations she said, "…seeing something can change your life, even the bad kids. If they

see something it can change their life—just inspire them."

*Recommendations for Higher Education Staff*

Students also made recommendations on how faculty and staff at institutions of higher learning could affect the aspirations and persistence of students. Outreach programs for elementary and secondary students as well as programs for college students will be discussed below.

*Outreach to Younger Students*

Luisa worked one summer at a university-based program for eighth graders from the colonias—a very poor area along the Mexican border of South Texas. She believes that programs such as this one, programs geared toward students as young as elementary school, are a critical piece to increasing the aspirations of low-income and/or minority students. As she said, "…I think when they're starting high school it's already kinda late [to increase their aspiration level]. You have to build them and shape them [earlier]."

Carmen and Gisela believed that high school students should be the focus of any outreach programs through colleges and universities. They each spoke about the necessity of colleges making the first move to get students thinking about continuing their education past high school. This could be accomplished through such activities as college fairs, informational sessions, and the distribution of brochures or pamphlets. As Gisela said when describing a college fair she had attended:

> Different colleges came by and you got to talk to them and they
>
> told you what their school was about, what they offered, what
>
> degrees they offered, what programs they offered on the
>
> side—athletic-wise, just everything…. That gets their [the

students'] attention. Then once they have their attention, they're

gonna be looking into the university on their own. Usually high

school students won't go out of their way to look for

something—unless they're goal oriented. I think if they [colleges]

come and look for them [students], they'll grab their attention. And

once they grab their attention, then the students on their own will

be looking for them.

*More Effective Tutoring Services*

Barry suggested that academic persistence would increase among college students

at Southwest Texas if better tutoring services were provided. (Note to reader: he had not

taken advantage of the tutoring services provided by Student Support Services at the time

of the interview.) Talking about his experience with SLAC (the Student Learning

Assistance Center at the campus library), he said,

SLAC is nice but you need more of a one-to-one instead of a tutor

that just sort of goes around to everybody. If your grades start to

slip, you get pretty discouraged. So you wanna help the students

keep their grades up. And that would help them stay.

The researcher recommended that Barry look into receiving additional tutoring services

through the Student Support Services office on campus.

## Student Recommendations for TRIO Programs

Students also made specific recommendations on how to improve the services

provided by the TRIO programs, including Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student

Support Services. Their recommendations are enumerated below.

### An Earlier Start

Gisela and Luisa both recommended that the TRIO programs begin talking

seriously to students about higher education and what it takes to be successful in college

at an earlier age. Gisela suggested regular conversations with students about college

starting their freshman year in high school. Luisa recommended starting even earlier, as

early as elementary school; she served as a counselor for an SWT program that worked

with eighth grade students from the colonias in South Texas; when asked what the

program consisted of and why she thought it was beneficial, she said:

> And they [SWT] bring them here, and I know that a lot of—some
>
> of the professors that came to teach the classes, they have
>
> programs with kids in elementary. They kinda shape them until
>
> they're like in high school and they make sure they do good. There
>
> have been a lot of cases where they go like to Harvard, Princeton,
>
> like good schools. I think when they're starting high school it's
>
> already kinda late. You have to build them and shape them....

### Better-Prepared Tutors

Eva, who received tutoring from Student Support Services, suggested that the

program develop a system whereby tutors could be notified about what it is that the tutee

was needing help on before their tutoring sessions. Describing one particular experience

with a tutor, she said, "…I had a geography tutor there and she was really nice. But she

didn't know any more than I did so it really didn't help out much."

*Caring and Effective Staff Members*

Two students iterated the importance of having caring and effective staff

members to work with the TRIO students. Alice suggested that the college-aged program

assistants serve more as mentors or role models to the younger students as opposed to

trying to be their friends. In her own words, she commented that the programs should,

> …Hire RAs and PAs who are really showing initiative and are
>
> willing to work with teenagers and show them and make sure that
>
> they do follow their dreams. And if they want to go to college and
>
> if they're expressing the will to go, that they have staff who is
>
> backing them up 100%—that they have staff that doesn't act the
>
> participants' ages pretty much.

Both Alice and Anita commented on the necessity of having TRIO staff members who

actively participate in activities and interact with the students in the program—"from the

RAs, the PAs, on up to the director" as Alice phrased it. When asked why the personal

interactions between students and staff was so crucial, Anita explained, "…if there's

somebody [a student] that, I mean they might be really…they might really not want to be

there and feel iffy about it. If they feel uncomfortable one time, that's it. It's very easy to

turn somebody off [of participating]."

## More Structure To Programs

Alice, when recounting her experiences with Upward Bound's summer program, suggested that it would have been helpful to her and fellow participants if there were a time built into the day when they received one-on-one tutoring and homework help from the program staff.

> Because I don't remember honestly—when I bridged my senior
>
> year and stayed here on campus and took two courses—I don't
>
> remember really anybody helping me with my studies. So I think
>
> that's something they should do if they're not doing it already. I
>
> know we had like a period where, in the evenings, everybody
>
> would go to their rooms and we would study or something like
>
> that. But I don't remember anybody helping me, offering me any
>
> help.

## Increased Skill Building for Participants

Alice also recommended that the summer programs hosted by TRIO (Upward Bound's bridge program in her case) include classes on study skills and time management along with the academic offerings. She saw that having those skills when starting college would have been extremely beneficial because, "...coming to college was a big slap in the face..." in terms of the demanding nature of her courses and her lack of preparedness for them.

*More of the Same*

Several students' recommendations consisted solely of increasing the services and programs that are already provided by the TRIO programs. For example, Barry suggested more programs like the Upward Bound math and science summer program that he attended at the University of North Texas. Similarly, Luisa's only recommendation for Student Support Services was to increase the number of tutors to work with qualifying students. Carmen had no recommendations at all. "I think they did a really good job", she said about the Talent Search program.

## Summary

This chapter focused on findings from student surveys and interviews with TRIO staff and student participants. Demographic information on the 13 student participants was also given. Students' survey and interview results showed what factors they perceived to affect their academic aspirations and persistence--encouraging relationships with family members, the desire for a better paying job after graduation, and self-related factors such as academic self-concept and high motivation levels being among the most important factors. Students also gave recommendations for schools from elementary schools through institutions of higher education on how to increase the aspirations and persistence of students from similar economic and family backgrounds. Specific recommendations for how to improve Southwest Texas State University's TRIO programs were also made.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION


This research study focused on students who participate(d) in at least one
of Southwest Texas State University's (SWT) TRIO programs—Talent Search, Upward
Bound, and/or Student Support Services. The purpose of the study was to determine the
effects of family background, peer relationships, institutional factors, psychological/self-
related, and societal factors on the academic aspirations and persistence of low-income
and/or first-generation college students. The research questions asked how the above
factors and participation in the TRIO programs affected students' academic aspirations
and persistence, to what extent, and what recommendations student participants had on
how to improve TRIO programs and increase aspirations and persistence of other
students from similar low-income and/or first-generation backgrounds.

In the following chapter, generalizations based on student survey results and
interviews with SWT's TRIO directors and students will be made; findings will also be
compared with the current literature on aspirations and persistence. Limitations to the
study will also be discussed, followed by suggestions for practitioners and future
research.

**Research Question 1**

The study's first research question asked what factors affect TRIO student's academic aspirations and persistence—including family, peers, teachers and school staff, societal, and self-related factors. As in previous chapters, aspirations and persistence will be discussed separately, beginning with aspirations. Each separate factor that affects student aspirations will be discussed below, including how the study's findings agreed and/or disagreed with the relevant literature.

*Family-Related Factors and Aspirations*

Family, according to the literature and the study's findings, plays an important role in the development of academic aspirations. According to survey results, student participants ranked their relationships with family members as the most important factor in their decision to attend college. Two ways in which family was shown to affect student aspirations, by providing emotional support and making clear the importance of education to one's quality of life, are present in the literature as well.

According to Brown and Robinson Kurpius (1997), Hao and Bonstead-Bruns (1998), and Hubbard (1999), students' aspirations increase when their families offer them emotional support and encouragement. Student participants in this study received encouragement from their families in several ways; parents had high expectations of their children in terms of academic achievement (i.e. college was expected after graduation from high school) and older siblings who attended college served as role models.

Studies by Freeman (1999) and Hubbard (1999) revealed that growing up in a low-income household can increase student aspirations by making students more aware

of the difficulties that exist for people without a high level of education. Several student participants believed their families' financial situation strengthened their resolve to attend college. As Barry explained, seeing his grandfather move from one minimum-wage job to another motivated him to, "...actually make a place for myself."

Family can also play a negative role in the development of academic aspirations, though this negativity was expressed differently in the literature than in student participants' situations. According to the literature, family background can negatively affect student aspirations; if a child grows up "assimilated into the culture of the disadvantaged" (Hao and Bonstead-Bruns, 1998), he or she will be at a disadvantage since s/he was not raised in an environment that models how academic achievement and high aspirations can lead to future economic success. Although most participants did grow up in low-income families, study results did not match with these findings. One way in which family negatively affected participant's aspirations was when a student desired to attend a college far away from home and her parents either refused to let her go or otherwise made it clear that they were not supportive of such a decision. Therefore, students either had to attend a college that was not their first choice or go through the application process without any family support.

*Teachers/School Staff and Aspirations*

There were both similarities and discrepancies between the literature and study results in terms of how teachers and school staff can affect student aspirations. Much of the literature (Freeman, 1999; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Hubbard, 1999; Kao & Tienda, 1998) focused on the negatives, or how teachers and staff tend to hinder the

development of low-income and/or minority students' aspirations. Results from student interviews revealed some negative influences of teachers and staff. For example, some student participants from this study reported receiving a dearth of information about college, which was Kao and Tienda's (1998) finding. However, for the most part, participants claimed that teachers and school staff had positively affected their aspirations. Each of the eight students interviewed reported having at least one teacher who motivated them and made them believe that they were college material; a couple of students are currently majoring in subjects that their high school teachers encouraged them to study. Although teachers and other school staff could do more to increase the aspiration levels of low-income and/or minority students, it was promising that each participant had at least one encouraging and supportive person in the school setting.

*Peers and Aspirations*

As seen in the literature in regards to schools' influence on the aspirations of low-income and/or minority students, the literature discussing peer influences on aspirations tends to focus on the negative (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1991; Romo & Falbo, 1996). Again, there was some evidence in the results of the study of this phenomenon. For example, Anita spoke about having to walk a thin line between wanting to attend college and not alienating her non college-bound friends. Two other students reported having to separate themselves from their peers—one to attend a magnet high school and the other to learn English—in order to achieve academically.

For the most part, however, student participants' interview responses focused on how supportive and helpful their friends were regarding their decision to attend college.

How this peer support manifested itself, however, seemed to differ according to gender. For example, the study's two male participants each remembered being the "nerds" on campus and competing in a friendly way with their friends for good grades. Most of the females gave and were given support from their friends to do well in school. In fact, Carmen did not even think about attending college until her friends began talking about it. As she described it,

> ... I think they [her friends] had a big part in it too [her decision to
>
> attend college] because they were like, 'where are you going to
>
> school?' And that's when I actually started thinking about it and
>
> getting serious....

Having older friends in college and looking forward to the social aspects of college life were also positive influences on participants' aspiration levels.

*Psychological (Self) Factors and Aspirations*

Several psychological factors, including high self-esteem (Mau, 1995), possessing an internal locus of control (Mau), and spending time thinking about plans after high school (Shepard, 1992), were reported in the literature as having a positive influence on academic aspirations. Again, the psychological factors that were perceived by student participants to influence their decision to attend college differed somewhat from those factors reported in the literature; students' specific desires for how they wanted their lives to be in the future—including desired careers and family life—were more important to their decision than a generalized sense of self-esteem or being in control. For example,

several students commented that a college degree was necessary in order for them to pursue their dreams of becoming a teacher, a doctor, or a public administrator.

Financial stability and independence were also important in the students' desire to attend college—at least in terms of the female participants. One woman reported the desire to have a good job in order to be financially independent. "If I don't get married, I wanna be able to take care of myself...." Two other female respondents believed that having a college degree was a way to ensure their own children's future—"...wanting [their] kids to have parents who are educated." These findings regarding future income levels could also be construed as a desire for increased social mobility—again, possibly stemming from the desire to not have to struggle with money like their parents or other family members have had to do.

<p align="center">*Societal Factors and Aspirations*</p>

According to the literature, several societal factors tend to negatively affect minority students' aspiration levels—including the existence of racial discrimination in the workplace (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Freeman, 1999) and the "intimidation factor" (Freeman, 1999, p. 20) minority students may feel about attending a predominantly White school.

In interviews with students, however, neither discrimination nor intimidation factors were revealed as having any affect on the student participants' decision to attend college—keeping in mind that they were never specifically asked about these deterrents. Instead, they spoke of America's changing workforce and how it is recommended that a

person receive at least a master's degree if they want to get a good job. As Alice explained,

> I would like to get my master's degree because nowadays, you
> know…. It was like, for the first couple of years [in college], it's
> been 'oh, bachelor's degree, bachelor's degree.' And now your
> master's degree is probably going to be a requirement for a lot of
> jobs it seems like….

Two Hispanic student participants mentioned that part of their desire to attend college stemmed from reports they had read or statistics they had seen regarding high drop out rates and low college attendance rates among fellow Hispanics; " I just don't want to help those statistics," Luisa claimed. Although some students did report that they had friends who had dropped out of school, the majority of them did not; it is possible that the participants in this study are the exception to the rule and therefore do not "match" the findings in the literature.

### Family-Related Factors and Persistence

The literature on academic persistence as it relates to low-income and/or minority students is fairly straightforward: emotional support from family members positively impacts student persistence (Freeman, 1999; Rogers, 1984; Trippi & Stewart, 1989; Bowker, 1992). Student participants also perceived family support as important; as Barry stated, "you can't do it by yourself."

Family was also supportive to at least one other student in another way—financially. Although she works a full 40-hour week in order to pay her tuition and

living expenses during college, Carmen's parents offered to help pay for her schooling. "I'll talk about maybe taking a semester off, [and] they'll [her parents] just give me this look. And my mom's like, 'No. If you need money, we'll pay'."

Anita was the only student to report any family-related issue as negatively affecting her persistence, and it was a negative situational variable out of anyone's control. Due to her father's death and mother's diagnosis with and treatment of cancer, Anita has had to withdraw from many classes. However, she is still determined to graduate, even if it takes her longer than she first anticipated. As will be discussed later in the chapter, her (and other participants') goal commitment is sufficiently high that she might "stop out" of school for a while, but never "drop out" (Tinto, 1975, p. 97).

*Faculty/Staff and Persistence*

According to the literature on academic persistence, only a small percentage of minority and/or low-income students are given the opportunity to take college prep courses during high school—in other words, the majority of these students are not placed on the "academic track" (Hubbard, 1999; Romo & Falbo, 1996). Several participants in the study reported not being challenged in their high school courses. For example, Ronald filled out grammar worksheets in English class his senior year instead of doing activities that prepared him for college, and Eva remembered her teachers telling students exactly what was going to be on the test instead of letting them review the course content and make those decisions for themselves like it is done in college.

High school experiences like Ronald and Eva's can be detrimental to academic persistence. According to Tierney (1992), students who consider their high school

coursework as being adequate preparation for college are more likely to persist in higher education. Hopefully Ronald and Eva's self-motivation and support systems will outweigh the negative effects of their high school experiences.

One of the most important factors that increases student persistence is their having at least one adult on campus with whom they have a positive and trusting relationship (Swisher, Hoisch, and Pavel, 1991). For the most part, however, student participants did not report having a close relationship with any one person at Southwest Texas. Ronald and Luisa maintained relationships with teachers from high school (Ronald even continued receiving tutoring) and Carmen received positive remarks about her writing abilities from her English professor freshman year, but, for the most part, none of the students had an ongoing, supportive relationship with a faculty or staff member.

The only exception to this pattern was Gisela, who reported receiving support from TRIO staff despite the fact that she was no longer participating in the program. "They kept in touch with us all throughout our fall semester so it kept us doing good in our classes. And if we ever needed something, someone to talk to, we had them." Notice, however, that she only received this additional support for one semester.

Anaya and Cole (2001), in their study of Latinos' academic persistence, found that students who engaged in academically-related and/or personal interactions with faculty were more likely to perform well in their courses. For whatever reason, Ronald was the only student who appeared to take advantage of professors' office hours when he was having difficulties in his classes. Other students reported going to the SLAC Lab for help but not to their professors directly.

*Peers and Persistence*

Peer relationships were largely absent from the literature on academic persistence. In practice, peers play an important role for student participants—they offer emotional support, informal tutoring through Internet chat rooms, and more formalized tutoring through Student Support Services.

*Psychological/Self-Related Factors and Persistence*

In the paragraphs below, self-related factors such as motivation, study skills, and time management skills will be discussed in terms of the literature on the same subjects.

*Self-Motivation*

Hodginson (1990), Khan (1970), and Rindone (1988) and believe that having a high level of motivation is one of the most important factors that contributes to academic persistence. It is the researcher's contention that self-motivation is *the most* important factor in determining the eight interviewees' persistence—even more important than academic performance. For example, Anita is determined to graduate despite the death of her father, her mother's battle with cancer, and her own diagnosis with the disease. "I've set a goal and I want to finish it. No matter what it takes," she stated during her interview.

Another student, Luisa, had to leave her home and family in Mexico at the age of 14 so that she could attend college and make a life for herself. Ronald is determined to become a medical doctor although he graduated from a poor high school that lacked in basic equipment, such as lab equipment. Despite these and other significant obstacles, the student participants in this study are determined to earn their college degrees.

The director of SWT's Talent Search and Upward Bound programs disagrees with the researcher's observations regarding the students' levels of motivation and commitment. When asked what it was that she would like to learn from this study, she commented that it would be helpful for her to know how to motivate students—because they seem to lack an internal motivation or drive. In her own words:

> ...because we've found too that the first roadblock many of them
> hit, and that's it. They don't have any stick-to-it-iveness or
> whatever, and I haven't figured out how to give that... if you can
> nurture it or pull it out or whatever.... Or even how you measure
> that? Because they're low-income, first-generation, they're going
> to have to have...we can help them so much, but when they get to
> college they've got to have some kind of drive themselves.
> Because we can't be there to pull them. I can talk to them if they
> want to talk to me, but I can't get them there.

*Study Skills*

Several researchers (Elliott, Godshall, Shrout, & Witty, 1990; Tucker, 1972) have found that effective study skills positively contribute to students' academic success and, therefore, academic persistence. The students who participated in this study perceive themselves as lacking in this area, seeing as that they were never explicitly taught these skills. As Alice complained, "...it's...taken me [until my junior year] to get in that groove of making myself sit down, turn off my cell phone, turn off my home phone, and study." Although not mentioned in the literature as affecting academic persistence,

another skill that students perceived as important (and which was also lacking) was time management.

## Research Question 2

The study's 2nd question asks what the relative significance of each set of factors—family, peers, institutional, self-related, and societal factors—is in determining students' aspirations and persistence. Obviously, each individual study focuses on a specific factor or set of factors because that researcher believes it to potentially be one of the most important factors in determining aspirations and persistence.

It is the researcher's opinion that no universal statements can be made about which of the above factors is more important in determining aspirations and persistence because "personal and environmental characteristics interact in the prediction of persistence" in students. As Chemers, Hu, and Garcia (2001) stated, each factor interacts with the others and with the individual; no one can be pointed out as more important than the others when looking at a group of students.

That being said, however, some tentative generalizations can be made. According to this study's interview results, relationships with family members appear to be the most important factor in determining aspiration levels and self-motivation levels are the most important in determining whether or not a student will persist in higher education. However, results from student surveys do not support the interview data. According to the survey, finding good job after graduation was ranked as the most important factor in terms of aspirations (followed by relationships with family), and there was a tie for the most importance factor in persistence between relationships with faculty/staff and

relationships with family. These discrepancies could be explained by the possibility that the students did not fully think through their survey responses as they did their interview responses. For example, although relationships with faculty/staff was co-ranked #1 in terms of what influenced their persistence, it was made clear in their interviews that they did not feel they had close relationships with the adults at Southwest Texas.

## Research Question 3

The study's 3rd research question was "what dimensions of the TRIO programs help to determine student aspirations and persistence?" Findings from the literature and from student survey results and interviews will be discussed below.

The literature on the effectiveness of TRIO programs is, for the most part, positive. For example, a recent national evaluation of Upward Bound (UB) found that students in the program develop higher academic aspirations than they likely would have had they not participated in the program (Myers & Moore, 1997). McLure and Child (1998) discovered that UB students were more likely to express their need for assistance in key academic areas than were other students—" a sign that they possessed a high degree of self-awareness and that they knew how… to make use of the college environment…. They also showed confidence that higher education was an achievable goal…."

Balz and Esten (1998) compared TRIO students' success rates with similar (i.e. minority and low-income) students who did not participate in any of the programs. Ten years after first enrolling in higher education, nearly 11% of TRIO participants reported having attended graduate school while only 5% of the non-TRIO group reported

participating in a post graduate program. In this same time frame, over 30% of TRIO students attained their bachelor's degree, compared to 12.9% of the non-TRIO population.

While researchers focus on the "what" of TRIO programs (in terms of what participation in a program does for students' aspirations and persistence levels), the student participants, when asked how TRIO had affected them, tended to focus on the "how"—how in particular the program helped them. For example, several students mentioned the benefits of information sharing by TRIO staff in terms of financial aid information and expectations of university life. Also helpful was the individual assistance given students with college entrance exams, financial aid, and college applications.

Students also mentioned how their participation in one or more of the TRIO programs had expanded their perceived life possibilities. As Anita stated when talking about the trips she went on with her UB program, "…seeing something can change your life.…Going somewhere, just being somewhere else…it was just like, there's more than this funky little town."

In the students' opinion, one of the most beneficial parts of the TRIO program was the summer programs that were offered. Whether it was UB's bridge program or Student Support Services' summer enrichment program, students felt that getting to take classes and live on a college campus before being enrolled was helpful to them—both in terms of helping them make the decision to attend college after high school and in terms of persisting once they were enrolled.

## Research Question 4

Several researchers have made recommendations for practitioners on how to increase the academic aspirations and persistence of low-income and/or minority students. Their recommendations will be discussed and then compared with the recommendations made by student participants. Recommendations involving aspirations will be discussed first, followed by recommendations on increasing persistence.

### Recommendations for Increasing Aspirations

Researchers made some of the same recommendations as students in terms of how to increase the aspiration levels of low-income and/or minority students. Both groups agreed to the importance of increasing multicultural awareness throughout schools and communities (Banks, 1988; Freeman, 1999) so that students from minority populations feel valued and an integral part of society. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) take this idea one step further and suggest that programs be developed to help minority students divorce the idea of high academic achievement and aspirations from "acting white" (p. 203). In other words, these students need to learn that they can achieve academically and still maintain their cultural background and identity. One participant thought that increasing the number of minority teachers would help these students by giving them more positive role models in the school environment.

Researchers and student participants also pointed out that students from low-income and/or minority populations need to be challenged academically. Since students tend to meet their teachers' expectation levels, and minority students may have a history of reduced expectations by teachers, it may be even more important that their teachers in

secondary school have high expectations of them so that they can succeed in college. Student participants felt that if they had been more challenged in high school then the transition to college would have been a lot smoother. For example, Eva explained what was expected of her in high school versus in college:

> Like when you come to college you have to take your own notes.
>
> They'll [the teachers] do that for you in high school. They tell you,
>
> 'okay, this is what you need, write it down.' They don't do that
>
> here [at SWT]. So I think they [high school teachers] should help
>
> out with that. Put it more on a college level.

Researchers Hao and Bonstead-Bruns (1998) recommended another way of increasing aspirations among these populations: the development of programs designed to increase parent-child educational interactions both inside and outside of the school setting. Other student recommendations included 1) teachers and other school staff sharing the benefits of college with students in terms of financial security and job options, 2) increasing the number of student field trips, and 3) the continuation and expansion of outreach programs by colleges to younger (i.e. elementary and middle school) students.

## *Recommendations for Increasing Persistence*

There were fewer intersections between researcher and student recommendations on how to increase students' academic persistence. Both groups advocated for the creation of new programs or the enrichment of existing programs, but with different goals in mind. Therefore, researchers' suggestions will be followed by students'.

Anaya and Cole (2001) suggest the creation of opportunities for faculty to interact with minority and/or low-income students outside of the classroom, while House (1992) recommends counseling programs targeted at students with low academic self-concepts. Khan (1970) advocates for academic counseling for this student population and Ethington (1990) believes in early intervention programs that will help students "formulate and articulate" their academic and future employment goals (p. 292).

In terms of student recommendations for how to increase persistence, Alice argued that secondary school staff could better prepare students for college life by taking the time to teach them study and time-management skills. According to Barry, students would be less likely to get discouraged and drop out if better tutoring services were offered through the campus learning assistance center at Southwest Texas, known as SLAC.

*Recommendations for TRIO Programs*

Students were also given the opportunity to make recommendations for how to improve SWT's TRIO programs. These recommendations included 1) programs that begin talking seriously about college with participants at an earlier age, 2) Student Support Services developing a system whereby tutors could be better prepared to meet student needs, 3) project staff being more caring and effective (i.e. serving more as mentors and role models than as friends), 4) having a more structured summer program (i.e. time built into the day for homework help), and 5) including among their offerings classes or workshops on study and time management skills.

## Limitations of the Study

One of the biggest limitations to the study was the small number of respondents to the student survey—only 13 out of 36 possible responses. With such a small number of responses, it was difficult to formulate a reasonable estimation of the "typical" TRIO student at Southwest Texas. Of the 13 survey respondents, only eight of them were able to participate further in the study.

Initially, the researcher had planned to hold two focus groups, or group interviews, to ensure students' comfort level and allow for conversation between students from similar backgrounds. The focus groups were to be divided into one group of "struggling" students (based on G.P.A. and self-perceptions as learners) and one group of "successful" students. This idea of dividing the groups was discarded due to the small number of survey respondents who agreed to further participation in the study. Although two dates were set and all participants were notified, no one was able to attend either session for various reasons. The decision was then made to focus solely on one-on-one interviews.

Plans to observe students and staff at TRIO functions on campus (i.e. meetings, group sessions, etc.) were also cancelled; Talent Search and Upward Bound meetings are held off campus at local school districts during the researcher's working hours, and Student Support Services did not have any scheduled meetings during the semesters that this study occurred.

Lastly, it was difficult to draw any conclusions on whether or not there existed race-based differences among student participants; Hispanic students made up the vast majority of interviewees—all but two students were of Hispanic ethnicity.

## Implications and Recommendations for Practice

In this section, the researcher will make her own recommendations for practice for elementary/secondary school educators, higher education faculty and staff, as well as for staff of SWT's TRIO programs.

### *For Elementary and Secondary School Educators*

Keeping in mind what I have learned from the literature and through my conversations with student participants, my single most important recommendation for elementary, middle school, and high school teachers and staff is simply this: to care about your students—to let them know that they are capable, that college is within their reach. This can be accomplished in various ways, from talking to them informally about college and what it can offer, to offering them specific praise when they do good work, to challenging them academically every day and making them aware of your high expectations of them. Also, make time to teach students effective note taking, study, and time management skills so that they will be prepared once they are in college.

Another important recommendation for increasing the aspirations of minority students is to celebrate their cultural contributions in the classroom. Two professors—one from the University of South Florida and the other from the University of Texas at Austin—have developed a "reality classroom" in which the cultures of minority students are included in teaching academic concepts (Stacy, 2002). For example, when modeling

the process to other educators at conferences and the like, Dr. Townsend "…often begins a lesson on geometric shapes and patterns by getting the kids talking about black hairstyles" (Stacy, p. 1).

*For Higher Education Faculty and Staff*

My recommendations for higher education faculty and staff are, in some ways, very similar to those made for elementary and secondary school staff: to develop caring relationships with students to the extent possible. In smaller classes, this could be accomplished by requiring each student to stop by during office hours at least once during the semester to check in and share any questions or concerns. It is also important that students see their professors' "human" side—which could be as simple as him/her sharing a story from his/her days as an undergraduate. My other recommendation: to teach students effective study skills and time management skills if they did not learn them in high school.

I would also recommend that students be involved in the decision-making process when it comes to the development of new projects or programs for their benefit. Giving students a voice will not only strengthen the program and make if more closely aligned to actual student needs, but their participation will give them a sense of accomplishment and empowerment that many of them do not feel on a consistent basis.

*For TRIO Program Staff*

As was my primary recommendation for other practitioners, again my first recommendation for TRIO staff is to take the time to develop relationships with the students. Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services' programmatic

structure offer the opportunity to build relationships that a regular classroom might not; students have the opportunity to come together in one place on a regular basis without the constraint of having to learn a specific concept within a certain time frame. Therefore, staff and students can spend time talking and listening to one another and focusing on the real concerns and needs of the students. With more open communication, for example, staff would realize that students need to be taught how to study and how to manage their time more effectively.

My other recommendation for TRIO, specifically for Student Support Services and Upward Bound's bridge program: develop more structure into the program. Student Support Services could, for example, host monthly or quarterly meetings for its participants so that they would have the opportunity to meet with one another to share any questions or concerns. Upward Bound could increase students' success during the summer bridge program if there were time built into the day for participants to get assistance with assignments.

## Recommendations for Future Research

It would be useful to know if the generalizations made in this study would apply to other TRIO students. Therefore, the researcher recommends that similar studies be conducted at other colleges and universities throughout the country—including comparing the aspirations and persistence of students at large public institutions of higher education (like Southwest Texas) versus those of students attending smaller private colleges, for example.

It would also be informative to track the eight student participants in this study throughout their college careers to ascertain whether or not they earned their bachelor's degree and which of them decided to continue their education through participation in a graduate or professional program. Also, checking in with the participants throughout the rest of their time at Southwest Texas would reveal whether or not time would influence or change students' perceptions regarding what they think it takes for a student to be successful in college.

Finally, the researcher would recommend that other studies focus on *how* TRIO programs meet the academic and other needs of their participants. In other words, what are some examples of activities or programs that have worked in the real world of higher education.

## Summary

This qualitative case study was conducted to answer several research questions regarding TRIO students at Southwest Texas State University—how and to what extent family, peers, institutional factors, self-related factors, and societal factors affected their aspirations and persistence, and what their recommendations would be to increase student aspirations and persistence levels as well as the campus TRIO programs. This chapter provided a discussion of the study's results, a discussion of its limitations, implications for practice for elementary/secondary school staff, faculty and staff at institutions of higher education, and TRIO staff, as well as recommendations for future research.

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Appendix A
Interview Protocol for Director of Talent Search and Upward Bound

1. I'm familiar with Upward Bound in general, but tell me specifically about the program here on campus. How long has it been in existence? How many students currently participate? What is the criterion for their selection?

2. What percentage of UB students from this program goes on to college? To SWT?

3. [I'll tell her about my study]. How do you track UB students enrolled at SWT? What suggestions do you have for my finding students to participate in the study?

4. I'll be looking for 4-5 "struggling" students and 4-5 "successful" students to interview. What criterion should I use in determining whether or not they're "struggling" or "successful"?

5. Are regular meetings held with the UB students who attend SWT? Could I survey/observe them?

6. Is there anything in particular that you're interested in knowing about their persistence, aspirations? Anything else my study should address?

Appendix B
Interview Protocol for Director of Student Support Services

1.    I'm familiar with Student Support Services in general, but tell me specifically about the program here on campus. How long has it been in existence? How many students currently participate? What services are offered?

2.    What percentage of your students came to SSS via the other TRIO programs? More from Upward Bound than Talent Search or vice-versa? What percentage of SSS students do you see graduating?

3.    [I'll tell her about my study]. What suggestions do you have for my finding students to participate in the study?

4.    I'll be looking for 4-5 "struggling" students and 4-5 "successful" students to participate in focus groups and/or one-on-one interview. What criterion should I use in determining whether or not they're "struggling" or "successful"?

5.    Are regular meetings held with the SSS students? Could I survey/observe them at one or more of those meetings?

6.    Is there anything in particular that you're interested in knowing about your students' persistence, aspirations? Anything else my study should address?

Appendix C
Interview Protocol for Student Participants

The researcher will conduct one-on-one interviews with 3$^{rd}$-6$^{th}$ semester students who participate(d) in one of SWT's TRIO programs. The following are the questions the researcher anticipates covering in the interviews.

1. How have your family members affected the decisions you've made so far about your education? Give me some examples or stories that illustrate how they've affected your decisions.

2. How have your friends and other peers affected your educational decisions? Give me some examples or stories for illustration.

3. How have teachers, counselors or other school staff affected your educational decisions? Examples and stories.

4. What within yourself helped you decide to go to college?

5. If you had to choose, which of the above factors—family, friends/peers, school personnel, or self-related factors most influenced your decision to attend college?

6.     Are there any other things that you feel have influenced your decision to attend college?

We're going to switch gears now. Before we talked about your decision to go to college, now we're going to talk about your experiences since you've been in college and your life after college.

7.     In general, what do you think it takes to be successful in college? Up to this point, what has led to your own persistence in college?

8.     Do any of you have educational goals beyond a bachelor's degree? What are they? What do you see yourself doing as a career? Is college necessary for that?

9.     What suggestions do you have for schools/colleges about how to increase other students' desires to attend college and how to make sure they succeed once they're in college? What would be your particular suggestions for the Talent Search, Upward Bound, and/or Student Support Services programs?

Appendix D
Student Survey

Please take a few minutes to fill out this survey. All responses will be kept confidential, so answer as honestly as possible. **You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Completing and returning this survey will be taken as evidence of your willingness to participate and your consent to have the information used for the purposes of the study**.

1.      Would you be willing to participate in a student focus group (discussion with 3-4 other students-- with pizza and door prizes!) and a one-on-one interview to talk about the following subjects in more detail?

             ____Yes                      ____No

2.      If you answered "Yes" to question 1, please let me know the best way to contact you:

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Other: _____

3.      In which program(s) did you participate during middle or high school?

    ____ Talent Search     ____ Upward Bound     ____ Neither

4.      How long did you participate?

    ____ One semester     ____ One year     ____ Two years     ____ More than 2 years

5.      Please check the services received in either Talent Search of Upward Bound (if applicable):

_____ Academic advising
_____ Tutoring
_____ Financial aid information
_____ Counseling services
_____ Help in applying to college
_____ Tours/visits to college campuses
_____ Summer programs

6.  Do you currently participate in SWT's Student Support Services program?

    _____ Yes          _____ No

7.  How long have you participated in Student Support Services?

    _____ One semester    _____ Two semesters    _____ More than 2 semesters

8.  Please check the services received in Student Support Services (if applicable):

    _____ Academic advising
    _____ Tutoring
    _____ Financial aid information
    _____ Counseling services

9.  Are you currently, or have you ever been, on Scholastic Probation because of your grades?

    _____ Yes          _____ No

10. What is your current GPA at Southwest Texas?

    ___0.0-1.0     ___1.1-1.5     ___1.51-2.0     ___2.1-2.5
    ___2.51-3.0     ___3.1-3.5     ___3.51-4.0

11. As things stand now, how far in school do you think you will go?

    ____Some college    ____Bachelor's degree    ____Master's degree
    ____Doctorate/Professional

12.  Rank (1 being highest or most important) the factors that affected your decision to attend college. If something is listed that was not a factor for you, please leave it blank.

_____ Relationships with family members
_____ Relationships with peers
_____ Relationships with teachers, other school personnel
_____ Desire for a better-paying job
_____ Self-related factors (self-esteem, etc.)
_____ Participation in Upward Bound or TRIO
_____ Other  (Please specify: _____ )

13.  Rank (1 being the highest or most important) the factors that have affected your academic or personal successes in college so far. If something is listed that is not a factor for you, please leave it blank.

_____ Relationships with family members
_____ Relationships with peers
_____ Relationships with faculty and staff
_____ Strong academic self-concept (the feeling that you have what it takes to succeed in college)
_____ Good attitude and/or motivation level
_____ Academic performance
_____ Participation in Student Support Services
_____ Other (Please specify: _____ )

14.  Please respond to the next two questions:

I am a successful college student.

__ Strongly Agree          __ Agree               __ Somewhat Agree
          __ Disagree          __ Strongly Disagree

15.  I find college to be a struggle.

__ Strongly Agree          __ Agree               __ Somewhat Agree
          __ Disagree          __ Strongly Disagree

Appendix E
Consent Form
Factors Affecting the Academic Aspirations and Persistence of TRIO Students at
Southwest Texas State University

You are invited to participate in a study of the factors that affect student aspirations and persistence. I am a graduate student at Southwest Texas State University in the Department of Educational and Psychological Services. I hope to learn what factors affected your decision to attend college and what you think it takes to be successful in college. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a student who participates or participated in one of the TRIO programs—Talent Search, Upward Bound, and/or Student Support Services. You will be one of 7-8 subjects chosen to participate in this study.

If you decide to participate, you will take part in a focus group discussion (with 3-4 other students) and a one-on-one interview. Both the focus groups and the interviews will be audiotaped. The focus group discussion and interview combined should take no more than four hours of your time. The possible risks to your participation include psychological or social harm from having the other students in the focus group hear your stories or from recalling something from your past that may have been hurtful or embarrassing to you. Benefits to participation could include an increased self-awareness about your decision to attend college and/or improved services for you and other students at the campus level.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. You will be given the opportunity to choose an alias, or false name, by which you will be identified in the study.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relations with Southwest Texas State University. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice. If you have any questions, please ask me. If you have any additional questions later, feel free to contact Dr. Emily Payne, my Committee Chair, at (512) 245-2303 or ep02@swt.edu and she will be happy to answer them.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate in this study. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form should you choose to do so.

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.


_____          _____
Signature of Participant                                 Date


_____          _____
Signature of Investigator                                Date

VITA


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