Someone Like Me: The Impact of Engagement on High Achieving First Generation Community College Students in California’s Central Valley

Emily Berg
Brandman University, eberg@mail.brandman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.brandman.edu/edd_dissertations

Part of the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by Brandman Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Brandman Digital Repository. For more information, please contact jlee1@brandman.edu.
Someone Like Me: The Impact of Engagement on High Achieving First Generation Community College Students in California’s Central Valley

A Dissertation by

Emily Berg

Brandman University
Irvine, California
School of Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

November 2020

Committee in charge:
Philip O. Pendley, Ed.D. Committee Chair
Carol Anderson-Woo, Ed.D.
Linda Carvalho Cooley, Ed.D.
The dissertation proposal of Emily Berg is approved.

Dissertation Chair
Philip O. Pendley, Ed.D.

Committee Member
Carol Anderson-Woo, Ed.D.

Committee Member
Linda Carvalho Cooley, Ed.D.

Associate Dean
Doug Devore, Ed.D.

November 2020
Someone Like Me: The Impact of Engagement on High Achieving First Generation Community College Students in California’s Central Valley

Copyright © 2020

by Emily Berg
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I cannot express my gratitude enough for each person who has been on this dissertation journey with me the last couple of years. This experience has been a good reminder to me that no one ever succeeds alone, and that with encouragement, people can do far more than they ever thought possible.

For my incredible dissertation committee, I give you my absolute appreciation. Dr. Pendley, you are a role model for me of how much can be accomplished by people who are held to high standards that are buttressed by unwavering encouragement. Dr. Pendley, thank you, most of all, for believing in what I can do and contribute, and thank you for talking me down off the ledge on more occasions than I want to admit. Dr. Linda Cooley—along with Dr. Marie Harris—gave me the charge to become a fellow Lady in Red, and told me that not only could I accomplish this goal, but that I should—and had the grace to remind me of this repeatedly when needed. Dr. Carol Anderson-Woo’s leadership of our incredible online Eta cohort was nothing short of admirable; with her support and mentoring, I was able to carry out projects successfully that I never thought I could do.

To my fellow students, thank you for your support during this time. Online Etas, experiencing this journey with you all made everything more enjoyable; I learned so much from each one of you. Kim Clemons, my accountability partner: I deeply appreciate how you have intentionally been here for me every step of the way, and I hope I have returned it in kind.

To my family: Thank you for your patience with me as I brought along textbooks to family events over the years, and as I talked about little else than my research at great
length. To my mother who faced giants in boardrooms while in high heels and shoulder pads, thank you for all these years of inspiring me in what women can and should contribute, as well as my father who supported her while encouraging me and my sister. To my boys: Your encouragement means more than I could ever tell you; thank you for checking in on me regularly to see how “EdD-y” was coming along. And to my running partner who has made so very many sacrifices for me to be in this program: You are my all.
ABSTRACT

Someone Like Me: The Impact of Engagement on High Achieving First Generation Community College Students in California’s Central Valley

by Emily Berg

Purpose: The purpose of this comparative phenomenological study was to describe how the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs compares with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college.

Methodology: A comparative phenomenological research design was selected for this study. The qualitative method was used to gather data using semi-structured questions in individual interviews to get the students’ perspective on their engagement and its impact on their academic achievement. After qualitative collection, data were compared between the two groups of students.

Findings: Three major findings were identified as a result of this study: First, the lack of a consistent definition for first generation students created difficulty on accurate reporting and analysis of this student population. Access to honors programs for first generation students was also found to be challenging, and, finally, there was no statistical difference in the engagement between honors and non-honors student participants.
Conclusions: The study based its conclusions directly from the findings. The lack of a consistent definition for first generation students creates impediments to serve this group fully. Additionally, first generation students experience both perceptual and structural barriers to enrolling in honors programs in community colleges. There is no discernable difference in the experience of engagement between first generation students enrolled in honors programs and first generation students not enrolled in honors programs.

Recommendation: Several recommendations for action were proposed to serve more fully first generation students both in honors programs and in community colleges to increase their engagement. An elimination of competing definitions for first generation students was called for, as well as an expansion of possibilities for first generation students by mitigating perceptual and structural barriers to honors programs.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.................................................................1
Background..................................................................................3
Student Demographics in California Community Colleges..................5
Prevalence of First Generation Community College Students ............6
Characteristics of First Generation Community College Students .......7
Community College Students and Achievement ................................8
Importance of Engagement in Fostering Student Success ..................10
Interactions with instructors..........................................................10
Interactions with student peers.....................................................11
Time on campus............................................................................12
Oral and written assignments.......................................................12
Critical thinking skills.................................................................13
Further Research Called for in Student Engagement ......................14
Statement of the Research Problem .............................................14
Purpose Statement.......................................................................16
Research Questions......................................................................16
Research Sub-Questions................................................................17
Significance of the Problem..........................................................18
Definitions...................................................................................20
Delimitations................................................................................22
Organization of the Study.............................................................23

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE .........................................24
Introduction..................................................................................24
History of Community Colleges.....................................................25
History of Community Colleges in the United States ......................25
History of California Community Colleges....................................27
Honors Programs in California Community Colleges .....................29
High Achieving Honors Students in California Community Colleges ...29
Overall Student Achievement in California Community Colleges .......30
Transfer History for High Achieving Honors Students in California Community Colleges..........................31
High Achieving Non-Honors Students in California Community Colleges.........................................................31
Student Demographics in California Community Colleges..............34
Prevalence of First Generation Community College Students ..........35
Characteristics of First Generation Community College Students .......37
First Generation Community College Students in California ............38
First Generation Students and Academic Preparation .....................38
Racially Minoritized Students.......................................................41
Theoretical Framework of Engagement........................................42
Student Engagement Factors.......................................................44
Interaction with Instructors.........................................................44
Interaction with Student Peers.....................................................47
Time on Campus .........................................................................50
CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Major Findings

Major Finding 1: The Competing Definitions of First Generation Students

Major Finding 2: Access Difficulties for First Generation Students to Honors Programs

Major Finding 3: Lack of Difference in Experience Between Honors Students and Non-Honors Students in Student Engagement

Conclusions

Conclusions Based on Major Finding 1: The Lack of a Standard Definition of First Generation Students Creates Impediments
## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.  Student-Faculty Interaction Benchmark .................................................47
Table 2.  Active and Collaborative Learning Benchmark ...........................................49
Table 3.  Student Effort Benchmark ........................................................................52
Table 4.  Demographic Data ......................................................................................83
Table 5.  Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Interaction with Faculty as Discussed by the Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor ........................................88
Table 6.  Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Interaction with Student Peers as Discussed by the Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor .................................92
Table 7.  Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Time on Campus as Discussed by the Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor .........................................................95
Table 8.  Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Participation in Oral and Written Reports as Discussed by the Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor .........................................................97
Table 9.  Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Application of Critical Thinking Skills as Discussed by the Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor .........................................................100
Table 10. Frequency of the Engagement Factor of the Effect of Disruption as Discussed by the Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor .........................................................104
Table 11. Frequency of Each Engagement Factor as Discussed by the Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for Each Engagement Factor .................................................................105

Table 12. Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Interaction with Faculty as Discussed by the Non-Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor .................................................................109

Table 13. Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Interaction with Student Peers as Discussed by the Non-Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor .........................112

Table 14. Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Time on Campus as Discussed by the Student Participants Not Enrolled in Honors Programs in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor .........................115

Table 15. Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Participation in Oral and Written Reports as Discussed by the Non-Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor .........................117

Table 16. Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Application of Critical Thinking Skills as Discussed by the Non-Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor .........................119

Table 17. Frequency of the Engagement Factor of the Effect of Disruption as Discussed by the Non-Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor .................................................................123
Table 18. Frequency of Each Engagement Factor as Discussed by the Student Not Enrolled in Honors Programs Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for Each Engagement Factor .................................................................123

Table 19. Percentage of Total Frequency for Each Engagement Factor for Honors and Non-Honors Students in Addition to the Range of Difference in Percentages Between Honors and Non-Honors Students .................................................................124

Table 20. Comparison of References to Engagement Factors in Honors and Non-Honors Participants ..........................................................................................................................................................125
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Overall grade point average of admitted California Community College Students to the California Community College System from 2000-2018 ..........................32

Figure 2. Grade point average of admitted California Community College Students to the University of California System from 1994-2018 ...........................................33

Figure 3. Total number of admitted first generation and non-first generation California Community College Students to the University of California System from 1994-2018 ..........................................................34
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

California’s Community College system was first created by the 1960 Higher Education Act, which legislated a three-tiered education system; a hierarchy was created, funneling the University of California system for a small number of top achieving high school students, the California State University for the middle students, and the community college for the largest number of students, those with the lowest academic ability (Beach, 2011). By this design, the intended demographic for California Community Colleges was that of an open door policy where students of any ability could attend (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018). Therefore, community colleges need to offer services for all students: Community colleges must provide engaging instruction, support, and mentoring for those who struggle with transfer-level curriculum, for instance. Furthermore, these services must also be extended to high achieving students who may not have the option to attend outside of their local geographic area and may therefore be attracted to additional support such as honors programs. Research is clear that, for all students, their level of engagement on their college campus is key to their success (Dudley, Liu, Hao, & Stallard, 2015; Hausemann, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Price & Tovar, 2014; Tinto, 2012).

Another significant dynamic of community college student demographics created by the Higher Education Act is the fact that California Community Colleges disproportionately attract more first generation students, or those students who are the first in their families to attend higher education, than the other four-year institutions in the state (Fain, 2019). First generation students have been identified as having a markedly different set of characteristics and needs than those non-first generation
students whose parents graduated from higher education and could share their wisdom in successfully navigating the complex world of academia (Mead, 2018). First generation students, for instance, work more hours off-campus and spend less time on campus than other groups of students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; McConnell, 2000).

While the needs of first generation students are unique, research shows that a determining factor for any students’ success is their engagement on the college campus (Tinto, 2012). As such, community college professionals have identified a need to understand more fully how engagement impacts community college students’ success and first generation community college students’ success in particular.

One aspect of student engagement that is evident on some California Community Colleges is their honors programs. Of all student groups at these institutions, students who enroll in honors programs are unique in that an intent to transfer to a four-year university is usually a requirement for admission into the program. Typically, honors programs offer students increased opportunities to engage more fully on their campus and with their instructors (Engelen-Eigles & Milner, 2014). These interactions can include the more formal contacts, such as visitations to office hours with faculty, to the more informal connections, such as the formation of study groups.

Engagement has been found to be critical to any student’s success, and this is also true for first generation students. While some first generation students have been successful community college students, studies show that many first generation students have not succeeded compared to non-first generation students for college completion (Boone, 2017; Engle & Tinto, 2008). From those who have achieved success, some have
been high achieving, earning high grades, and transferring to four year universities. For some of those successful students, honors programs may have played a role in helping the students engage on their college campuses. Little is known about how honors education impacts students through the community college system.

**Background**

Funding for California’s Higher Education Act in 1960 created an unequal distribution of funds to the three tiers of higher education: The Act provided the most money to the Universities of California, with the least funding coming to the community colleges, and this funding model has not changed since its inception (Beach, 2011). Community colleges have been admired for their open door policy to increase access for large numbers of students enacted by the Higher Education Act, something that sets these institutions apart from most in the world (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018).

However, this open access for all students has led to serious negative consequences, however unintended they may have been: low levels of success for its students, particularly in regards to their rates of transfer to four-year universities in addition to completion rates of associate’s degrees or certificates (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Jenkins (2014) noted that community college’s “broad access…makes them poorly designed to facilitate completion” (p. 2). A vast majority of community college students, 80%, indicate that they intend to transfer (Boone, 2017). Nationally, within a large time frame of six years, fewer than 14% of them are able to transfer and then continue to complete their bachelor’s degree (Wyner, Deane, Jenkins, & Fink, 2016). Another national study found similarly dismal outcomes for the same time frame of six years:
Fewer than 40% enrolled in a community college achieved any degree or certificate of completion across the nation (Bailey, Smith-Jaggers, & Jenkins, 2015). Chancellor Oakley’s Vision for Success described the completion rate for California community colleges as “anemic” (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018, p. 10); the authors further cited that 48% of California community college students were able to earn certificates or degrees within a six-year period, while admitting this figure would be actually lower as the data excluded students who did not take English or math courses within three years (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018).

Because of the hierarchy in overall student ability created in higher education, the student demographics at each of the three-tiered California institutions were remarkably dissimilar: research indicated students attending community college were much more likely to be first generation students, or the first in their families to attend college (Fain, 2019). Additionally, community college students were more likely to come from a low socio-economic background and from ethnic minority backgrounds (Fain, 2019). Students at community colleges completed college at markedly lower rates than those attending four-year institutions (Wyner et al., 2016). This unintended consequence of open access has created unequitable outcomes for its students, with the Foundation for California Community Colleges (2018) asserting, “students should not bear the burden of misaligned policies between educational systems” (p. 3). McNair, Bensimon, and Malcom-Piqueux (2020) define equity as “understanding students’ needs and addressing those needs by providing the necessary academic and social support services to help level the playing field so students can achieve their goals” (p. 2). Marginalized students are
provided access but struggle to succeed, thus making for an inequitable situation for them.

What would best be done to increase student success for community college students, particularly for first generation students, becomes increasingly important. Research indicated that focusing on students’ engagement on community college campuses was a potential means to help the most vulnerable students, including first generation students (Davis, 2010; Dudley et al., 2015).

**Student Demographics in California Community Colleges**

The demographics that have been created by the Higher Education Act were stark. In 2018, 2.1 million students enrolled in California’s 114 community colleges, compared to 465,686 in the 23 California State University campuses, and 251,714 in the nine University of California campuses (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018).

The student demographics that have resulted from this legislation were also sobering for a number of reasons. First, the widening gap in educational attainment between high and low income students seemed to be accelerating rather than reducing opportunities for social mobility for community college students (Beach, 2011; Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Tough (2019) noted that for low income students, higher education functioned as “an obstacle to mobility, an instrument that reinforces a rigid social hierarchy and prevents them from moving beyond the circumstances of their birth” (p. 20). Researchers found that 50,000 high achieving nation-wide community college students from low and medium income family income groups chose not to transfer to any institution each year, with approximately 30% of these students having a 3.7 grade point
average (GPA) and above (LaViolet, Fresquez, Maxson, & Wyner, 2018). Similarly, wealthier students were found to be much more likely to enroll in California’s four-year universities than its community colleges (Fain, 2019).

Furthermore, the gap between those students with high income and those with low income appears to be increasing as well when examining success rates, thus causing further concern in terms of equity. Multiple studies indicated there was a widening gap in college completion rates in terms of students’ family income (Johnson, Mejia, & Bohn, 2018; Sheehan, 2018; Tinto, 2012), as high income students were three times more likely to complete a college degree. An “excellence gap” has been identified and found to have been widening between the achievement levels of higher income students and lower income students, and this gap caused lower income students to participate in fewer accelerated academic opportunities in their K-12 education and choose less selective institutions (Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, 2019). In terms of income in California’s higher education system, low income students enrolled disproportionately at community colleges, and even worse, experienced less success than students from higher economic backgrounds.

**Prevalence of First Generation Community College Students**

In terms of student demographics, California’s community colleges were likewise quite different from the other higher educational institutions in the state. They were the most diverse system in the nation, let alone California (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018). Multiple studies have documented the fact that students who attend community colleges were much more likely than those from four-year universities to be from racial minority groups, first generation, or from low income
families (California Community Colleges, 2014; Davis, 2010; Fain, 2019; Johnson et al., 2018; E. T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

California’s community colleges are well-known for attracting students who were the first in their families to attend college, or first generation students. Several studies identified that California’s Community Colleges enroll 42% of the first generation student population state-wide (California Community Colleges, 2014; Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018).

First generation students’ performance was also markedly different than other students. For first generation students, they succeed at the lowest rates in higher education. Engle and Tinto (2008) asserted that “the newly-opened door to American higher education has been a revolving one” (p. 3) at community colleges in particular. A majority, 63%, of low income first generation students stated that their intent was to earn a bachelor’s degree, yet within a period of six years, only 5% were able to do so (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

**Characteristics of First Generation Community College Students**

First generation students, research shows, were more likely to attend community college than any other type of institution (Fain, 2019; Johnson et al., 2018). Additionally, this population was increasing to the point that nationally, they constituted a majority of the student population on community college campuses (Davis, 2010). For many reasons, these students choose colleges based on their proximity to their home, rather than by the institution’s selectivity. For first generation students, multiple researchers confirmed that an “undermatch” exists between their academic abilities and the overall rigor of the intuitions they choose to attend (Moritz, 2011; Sanon-Jules, 2010; Smith
Jaggar, Fay, Farakish, 2019). In other words, often first generation students could have qualified for more selective institutions, but often chose to attend colleges closer to home: their local community college. Reasons for why they may choose to stay geographically close to their families range from cost, family obligations, employment, and lack of confidence.

Demographically, first generation students had several unique characteristics compared to the rest of the community college population. For instance, several studies indicated that first generation students were more likely than the general population to have the following characteristics: to be female, to be older, to be Hispanic, to be low-income, and to have children (McConnell, 2000; Mead, 2018; Saenz & Barrera, 2007).

Disproportionately, the first generation students came from minority populations (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Sanon-Jules, 2010). Because so many first generation students come from racially minoritized groups, some studies, such as Davis (2010), have called upon researchers to use students’ first generation status as a “proxy” (p. 14) for disaggregated groups.

The research is clear: The first generation student demographic has grown and was projected to continue to do so (Sanon-Jules, 2010). One study in 2009 found that 33% nation-wide were first generation students (Martinez et al., 2009), while another study in 2018 established that 58% of the nation’s population were first generation students (Mead, 2018).

**Community College Students and Achievement**

Transfer rates from community colleges were low, studies indicated, in spite of students’ stated intentions to transfer. For the general population at community colleges
in California, an overwhelming majority, 80%, of community college students stated that they intended to transfer (Boone, 2017), yet few of them actually did. In California, only 48% of students within six years had a certificate or degree, or were able to transfer (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018).

The stark difference between what the students said they aspired to accomplish at community colleges and what these students were actually able to achieve has researchers concerned. The situation was so dire that one researcher stated that students who enrolled at community colleges were “handicap[ped]” by their institution (Boone, 2017), an observation echoed by several other researchers (Beach, 2011; Herman & Hilton, 2017; E. T. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). One study showed that for minorities who began their studies at community college, there was a significant decreased chance of attaining a Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math, (STEM) degree (E. T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Herman and Hilton (2017) indicated that students who entered and dropped out of community college and four-year universities were “worse off” (p. 21) than those who had not attempted higher education at all.

Failure appeared to be structured and systematic for large groups of students; as one researcher noted, community colleges could be seen as “holding pens for the underprivileged” (Beach, 2011, p. xxxv). Community colleges attract large numbers of students whose abilities and family circumstances place them at risk of failure, leading researchers to wonder what could be done to support these students more fully. The level of engagement students feel on their college campuses was thought to be a means towards helping support these community college students.
Importance of Engagement in Fostering Student Success

Engagement, several studies have indicated, was a critical component of students’ ability to succeed at higher education (Dudley et al., 2015; Price & Tovar, 2014). Defined as “the amount of time and effort that students place in their involvement in educationally beneficial practices that promote their learning and development” (Price & Tovar, 2014, p. 770), engagement was an important element towards fostering all students’ success. Research also indicated that students need to be fully integrated into the campus community to be successful, and the scholars had measured the students’ engagement on their college campus based on the extent of their interactions with faculty and peers (Dudley et al., 2015).

Further research added to the understanding of the relationship between engagement and student achievement (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; E. T. Pascarella et al., 2004; Tinto, 2012). The connection between students’ engagement and their success specified that the more frequent the students’ social integration into campus, the more likely the students were to persist into a second year of study (Hausmann et al., 2009). Additionally, the students’ sense of belonging on the college campus had also been demonstrated to be consistent with their GPA (Hausmann et al., 2009). Students’ engagement on the college campus can be examined in the following ways.

**Interactions with instructors.** Multiple studies strongly indicated that students’ engagement was the strongest predictor of their academic success (E.T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012). This engagement was seen in a variety of ways, but it was the students’ interactions with faculty that had the greatest bearing on their overall academic achievements on campus far above any other aspect (Komarraju, Musulkin, &
Bhattacharya, 2010). This factor was so significant that if students interacted with just one faculty member, they reported feeling more connected to the campus and had increased ambitions beyond college as a result of that relationship (Komarraju et al., 2010). Students who reported increased numbers of interactions with faculty had higher retention rates and greater satisfaction, and these interactions included those both in and out of the classroom as well as formal and informal exchanges (Tinto, 2012).

All students benefit from increased interaction with faculty; however, the greatest impact of engagement was seen most profoundly on those who were most under-prepared (Dudley et al., 2015). In other words, students who would have been least likely to succeed academically benefited the most from frequent interaction with faculty. For first generation students in particular, this impact meant the difference between succeeding and dropping out: they reported that they would have likely not persisted unless they felt supported by faculty (Davis, 2010), as the faculty seemed to take the place of family support. When instructors had high expectations for students, Tinto (2012) showed that students would rise to meet those expectations, although the opposite was also true, thus reinforcing the significance of this relationship.

**Interactions with student peers.** Literature also indicates that all students benefit from more frequent interactions with their student peers. This connection to their student classmates led to a greater sense of belonging to the overall campus community (Herman & Hilton, 2017). This benefit of peer interaction, however, could be seen most profoundly on the disproportionately impacted groups such as first generation students who statistically had lower success rates (Herman & Hilton, 2017). This connection was so strong that students who did not interact regularly with peers spend less time on
campus, particularly in the beginning of their college education when they were most vulnerable to dropping out (Trucker, 2014). Time on campus has long been shown to be a predictor of student success (McClenney, Marti, & Adkins, 2007), so increasing opportunities for interaction with student peers was a powerful force in their overall success.

**Time on campus.** The amount of time students spent on college campus was another important indicator of the students’ engagement. While literature indicated the positive effect of the time students spend on campus for all, the greatest impact of activities on campus was demonstrated in first generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). While first generation students were the least likely to be able to spend time on campus beyond class time, this increased time on campus was precisely what was most helpful for them (McConnell, 2000).

The kinds of activities the students actually participated in seemed not to have much bearing on the outcome, either. All activities that promoted time on campus benefited students, including: (a) on-campus employment, (b) participation in research activities, (c) time with faculty. Time on campus for extra-curricular activities has been shown to have a significant impact on critical thinking and perceptions of academic success for first generation students in particular (E. T. Pascarella et al., 2004). Davis (2010) identified a positive correlation between time on campus and first generation students, indicating that the more time and participation first generation students had on campus, the more likely these same students were to persist and graduate on time.

**Oral and written assignments.** Students’ time and efforts on coursework were a further indication of their engagement on the college campus. For instance, Pace (1984)
in his seminal work *Measuring the Quality of College Student Experience* found that the “best predictor of students’ progress in acquiring intellectual skills is the quality of effort they devote to course learning activities” (p. 42).

As such, projects that encouraged students to devote quality effort result in gains in the students’ overall college success. For instance, in-depth research projects have been found in several studies to improve students’ retention rates in remaining enrolled in college (Bangera & Brownell, 2014; Hensel & Davidson, 2018). Additionally, these research projects also have been demonstrated to improve students’ quality of the assignments (Hensel & Davidson, 2018). Students themselves reported significantly higher engagement when they participated in research projects; these students also reported longer retention of knowledge gained from these projects that promote deeper levels of learning (Murray, Obare, & Hageman, 2016; Tinto, 2012). More time and effort on assignments was positively linked to students’ increased engagement.

**Critical thinking skills.** Studies indicated that there is a relationship between students’ critical thinking skills and engagement. Attending college in and of itself has been shown to increase students’ abilities to think reflectively and critically, in addition to being linked to students’ positive mental well-being and outlook (E. T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Learning these crucial skills took place in a variety of different ways for students. Research projects, for one, were identified by several studies as a best practice for improving students’ skills and fostering curiosity (Hensel & Davidson, 2018; Hewlett, 2016; Wyner et al., 2016). Also, projects such as these that emphasize collaboration
between students and faculty have been shown to help students learn content more deeply, as well as increase students’ sense of self-efficacy (Tinto, 2012).

**Further Research Called for in Student Engagement**

Understanding that students’ engagement, in all of its forms, was a critical element for their success on community college campuses. The question then turned to how community colleges could foster programs and systems that aid students in becoming more integrated onto the college campus, particularly for those who have the lowest educational attainment levels, such as first generation students. Preliminary research into the effectiveness of honors programs as a potential means to foster students’ engagement on college campuses showed promising results, while at the same time, further research was called for (Korah, 2018; Lanier, 2008; Long & Lange, 2002; F. Shushok, Jr., 2006; F. X. Shushok, Jr., 2003; Trucker, 2014).

**Statement of the Research Problem**

Research has clearly pointed out the fact that community colleges struggle in their ability to assist students in transferring to a four-year institution. Despite legislation designed to enable students to begin their studies at a local community college and then transfer to the other four year institutions, California’s Community Colleges have since struggled to achieve success for large numbers of their enrolled students (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018). Those students who felt the greatest negative impact of this circumstance were, unfortunately, the state’s most vulnerable. Many studies identify that community colleges disproportionately enroll the largest numbers of the poor, those from minority backgrounds, and first generation students (California Community Colleges, 2014; Davis, 2010; Fain, 2019; Johnson et al., 2018; E. T.
Engagement was widely understood to be a key factor for student success for all students (Price & Tovar, 2014; Tinto, 1994), and engagement was indicated in several ways, such as students’ interactions with faculty and time on campus.

Some studies indicated that those students who were the first generation in their families to enroll in college were among the least engaged on the college campuses (Engle & Tinto, 2008; McConnell, 2000; Sanon-Jules, 2010). Additionally, first generation students, when they do drop out of college, often do so for non-academic reasons, including balancing obligations outside of school (McConnell, 2000). How best to help these students succeed was a challenge. There was a great need to assess carefully the most effective programs and services to offer for these large, underserved student populations, the majority of whom were first generation students (Reed & McClenney, 2013).

A review of the literature reveals a need for deeper understanding in a few ways. A few studies have indicated that community colleges, while far more prevalent in number than four-year universities, are not studied to the degree that four-year universities are (Espinosa, McGuire, & Jackson, 2018). Further adding complexity to this issue, honors programs at community colleges have been studied infrequently, compared to four-year university honors programs, and there are even fewer empirical quantitative studies devoted to those community college honors programs (Korah, 2018; Lanier, 2008; Long & Lange, 2002; F. Shushok, Jr., 2006; F. X. Shushok, Jr., 2003; Smith Jaggars et al., 2019; Trucker, 2014).

While there is significant research on the importance of engagement on students’ success, examination of first generation students in community college and their
engagement is an area that increased publication of research is needed for further understanding. As such, the trend in the research points to a need for deeper understanding on how to increase first generation students’ engagement on the California’s Community College campuses. Additionally, based on the trends in research on community college honors programs, there is an additional need to understand what impact honors programs can have to engage first generation students. More information is necessary regarding how engagement impacts the success of first generation California Community College students enrolled in honors programs.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this comparative phenomenological study was to describe how the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs compare with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college.

**Research Questions**

What are the descriptions of the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs, and how
do they compare with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college?

Research Sub-Questions

This study was guided by three qualitative research questions and 13 research sub-questions.

1. How do high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students in college honors programs describe the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?
   a. interaction with faculty
   b. interaction with student peers
   c. time on the college campus
   d. participation in oral and written reports
   e. application of critical thinking skills
   f. effect of disruption

2. How do high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students who are not in college honors programs describe the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?
   a. interaction with faculty
   b. interaction with student peers
   c. time on the college campus
   d. participation in oral and written reports
e. application of critical thinking skills

f. effect of disruption

3. How do the descriptions of the high achieving Central Valley, California first generation honors program students compare to the descriptions of the high achieving Central Valley first generation non-honors program students?

**Significance of the Problem**

This study focuses on high achieving first generation students in the California Community College system and seeks to understand the levels of engagement these students have on their campuses, including their participation in honors programs. This study is significant in several different ways.

This study, to begin, advances the work of Tinto (1994). Engagement, he found, was key to a student’s success; multiple studies since then have strongly indicated that students’ engagement is the strongest predictor of their academic success (E. T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012), and students’ engagement can be identified and measured in various ways, including time on campus and interactions with faculty.

Additionally, findings from this study would be significant as it would illuminate the potential of California Community Colleges. These institutions provide low-cost access to all students as designed by the 1960 Higher Education Act to the admiration of many internationally of this “audacious, remarkable accomplishment” (Reed & McClenney, 2013, p. 20). More students are enrolled in California’s Community Colleges than any other institution of higher education in the state, and, as such, their ability to provide quality services for their students to succeed ultimately is imperative to the state’s vitality.
This study also highlights findings on the California’s Community College student population of first generation students. The detriment of open access is that for many of the state’s most vulnerable student populations, including the state’s poorest, those from minority backgrounds, and first generation students, community colleges are able to offer little more than access alone (Beach, 2011). First generation students complete community college and transfer at low rates over lengthy periods of time, despite their high aspirations to transfer: 80% of community college students state their primary intention is to transfer (Boone, 2017).

Furthermore, the findings from this study would be significant in that it would provide best practices for decision makers in California Community Colleges to help first generation students succeed at higher rates. This study has implications for first generation community college students, their families, instructors, administrators, and policymakers. For example, a finding from this study might be regarding the importance of instructor interactions on first generation community college students. This could provide valuable insight to those that are teaching in community college and in community college honors programs because the instructors could then design curriculum and craft policies for their classes that would foster increased interaction with their students.

Findings from this study would additionally help further the research done on honors programs in higher education. A majority of the research on honors programs has focused on four-year universities, so this study would shed further light on honors programs at community colleges. Little research has been done to quantify the
effectiveness of honors programs at two and four year institutions, furthering the understanding of the impact of honors education for all students of higher education.

As a result of this study, policymakers and community college administrators could recognize the need to foster engagement for all students, adding to its significance. They may see that engagement is most beneficial for first generation students who are typically the least prepared for college and the least engaged in the culture of the college (Davis, 2010). For these reasons, first generation students face the greatest challenges in succeeding in California community colleges. Honors programs are a high impact tool to foster student engagement (Korah, 2018; Ross & Roman, 2009). As such, research may provide valuable insight into whether intentionally expanding honors programs to reach first generation students could be a powerful tool to increase student success on California community college campuses.

**Definitions**

*Critical thinking skills.* Refers to the skill set students need to be successful in all college courses, including the ability to interpret, analyze, evaluate, infer, present argument, and reflect (Jones, Dougherty, Fantaske, & Hoffman, 1995).

*Disruption.* Christensen, Horn, and Johnson (2011) define disruption as “the process by which an innovation transforms a market whose services or products are complicated and expensive into one where simplicity, convenience, accessibility, and affordability characterize the industry” (p. 11).

*Disruption.* Tough (2019) finds that for many disadvantaged students seeking to find their place in the unfamiliar educational world of academia, the experience is a “process of cultural disruption” (p. 10) in which students must go through the disturbance
of “leaving behind one set of values and assumptions and plunging into a new and foreign one” (p. 10).

Engagement. Seminal author Tinto (2012) defines engagement as the extent of a “person’s interaction with those values and norms (of their institution) and the individuals who share them” (p. 160).

First generation students. According to The Center for Community College Student Engagement (2019a), “if the respondent indicated that his or her mother or father had attended at least some college, then the student is classified as Not First generation; otherwise, he or she is classified as First generation” (First-Generation & Not First-Generation section).

High achieving students. Defined by this study as community college students who have maintained a cumulative GPA between 3.0-3.99 (a “B” average grade).

Honors programs. “Opportunities for measurably broader, deeper, and more complex learning-centered and learner-directed experiences for its students than are available elsewhere in the institution” (National Collegiate Honors Council [NCHC], 2013, Honors Education section). How these experiences are administered is a local decision and can include any but not typically all of the following: honors contracts, in which students enrolled in regular classes write in-depth project proposals with honors instructors; stand-alone honors courses; or hybrid courses in which regular and honors students are enrolled in the same section. Honors programs can have strict entrance requirements that only admit students according to selection criteria such as GPA, essay questions, standardized test scores, or interviews; few honors programs allow open enrollment for any interested student. Typically, honors programs will award a
scholarship, certificate of completion, or a notation on students’ transcripts for successful completion of the program, which can include a minimum cumulative GPA and a specified minimum number of honors units.

_Instructor interaction._ Refers to both the formal and informal exchanges, or “social connections” (Tinto, 2012, p. 64) between students and instructors inside and outside of the classroom.

_Oral and written assignments._ Refers to in-class and out-of-class work and projects assigned by instructors to assess students’ understanding of the course’s student learning objectives. These projects can be assigned to an individual or group, and can result in a written report or oral presentation (Tinto, 2012).

_Student interaction._ Refers to both the formal and informal exchanges between students inside and outside of the classroom (Tinto, 2012).

_Time on campus._ Refers to both formal and informal activities students engage in on the college campus. These can include, but are not limited to, time in the classroom; time in office hours; time spent attending appointments with coordinators, librarians, and counselors; time spent performing on-campus employment; time in student facilities such as dormitories, dining commons, health clinics, tutorial centers, student service centers, and libraries; and time spent in structured activities such as clubs, athletic teams, and student government (Tinto, 2012).

**Delimitations**

The study’s focus was delimited to high achieving honors and non-honors first generation students at Fresno City College, Clovis Community College, Reedley College,
and Modesto Junior College in California’s Central Valley, which may not be generalized to the general population of community college students.

**Organization of the Study**

This study is arranged in five chapters and concludes with a list of references and appendices. Chapter I introduces the background as well as the statement of the research problem. Chapter II details a review of the literature related to California’s Higher Education Act of 1960, the disproportionate impact upon students from the consequences incurred from this legislation upon community colleges, the impact of student engagement upon students’ success, honors program’s impact on engagement, and an identification of gaps in research. Following this, Chapter III presents the methodology of this qualitative study and describes the procedures of data collection and population sample. The analysis of data collected for this study is detailed in Chapter IV, and Chapter V discusses the findings of this study, makes recommendations based on those findings, and suggests areas for future research. References and appendices conclude the study.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

California Community College Chancellor Eloy Oakley’s Vision for Success called for steep, quantifiable increases in completion rates for all students as well as closure of achievement gaps for disproportionately impacted groups of students within a five-year time frame (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018). As a result of this mandate, boards of trustees, college administration, and faculty are looking for best practices to increase student success dramatically and quickly for its ailing student body. A wealth of research was clear: engagement of students was imperative to their success at any institution, community colleges in particular.

This chapter will review the existing literature on student engagement and examine the role in which honors programs can play in engaging students to ground this study. First, the history of community colleges in the nation and in California will be detailed to provide context and in many cases reasons for the challenges the institutions face today. The demographic information of California’s Community College students will be provided, showing the stark differences between both California and Central Valley Community College students and students enrolled in more selective public institutions, such as University of California. Seminal research on student engagement will be reviewed, examining what the existing literature found about the engagement factors of instructor interaction, student interaction, time spent on campus, time spent on assignments, critical thinking, and the effect of disruption. This chapter will also review the literature on honors programs at universities and their role in engagement for
students, concluding with an identification of a gap in the research of community college honors programs and engagement of its students.

**History of Community Colleges**

A 1950s slogan for a Texas community college read: “We will teach anyone, anywhere, anything, at any time whenever there are enough people interested in the program to justify its offerings” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 22). Since their inception, community colleges in the nation and in California seemed to grapple with the sentiments expressed in the slogan.

**History of Community Colleges in the United States**

From their beginnings, community colleges originated as institutions connected to local high schools. The first community college in the nation was Joilet Junior College in Illinois, which was formed as an extension of the local high school in 1901 (Dougherty, 1994); Fresno City College in California was the second institution, founded in 1910 and again annexed to one of the local high schools, Fresno High School (Beach, 2011).

At the turn of the 20th century, both the growth in national population and in the number of students graduating from high schools led to fast, steady increasing numbers of junior colleges; from 1920-1960, an average of two junior colleges opened annually (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Several policymakers saw the role of these institutions as a larger shift in organization of education beyond elementary with a streamlined progression from “the junior high school, the senior high school, and the junior college” (Beach, 2011, p. 6). In 1925, the American Association of Junior Colleges defined the growing number of junior colleges as institutions that that “develop…curriculum suited
to the larger and ever-changing civic, social, religious, and vocational needs of the entire community in which the college is located” (as cited in Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 4).

The growing number of institutions caught the attention of universities such as University of California and Stanford, whose administration advocated for the growth of what they envisioned as grades 13 and 14, or institutions for university preparation (Beach, 2011). The policymakers argued that the junior colleges should exist to prepare students for upper division research coursework and leave the research institutions to teach solely upper division courses (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). This proposed reorganization ultimately never transpired, and the result, some researchers claim, had “doomed community colleges to the status of alternative institutions” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 8). They grappled with their identity without this reorganization; their mission was still unclear if the institutions were “expanded secondary schools or truncated colleges” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 11).

Legislative acts throughout the 20th and 21st centuries gave great attention to community colleges but little funding to back up the mandates (Beach, 2011). In 1947, the Truman Commission’s Report, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, served to provide increased legitimacy to the institutions they identified as community colleges (Beach, 2011); the report called for an increased access to college for all Americans to earn a degree from these institutions beyond high school (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). This idea was much later echoed by President Clinton in 1998, who envisioned having an associate’s degree as common as a high school diploma (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). The Obama administration called for an increase of 10 million additional college graduates by 2020, and proposed unprecedented funding to improve community college outcomes for
its students that was ultimately scaled back dramatically in funding (Bailey et al., 2015).

With the largest number of community colleges located in California, the California Community College Chancellor’s 2018 “Vision for Success” was another mandate to increase student outcomes as it argues that “given its size, scope, and multiple missions, the California Community College System is essential to California’s success as a state” (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018, p. 5).

Community colleges had, as noted by the director of the American Association of Community Colleges in 1968, served a critical role as a “safety valve” (Dougherty, 1994, p. 18) for the nation. This open access continues into the 21st century as community colleges enroll approximately half of the nation’s students (Beach, 2011). However, as researchers have noted, the questions of identity, funding, and purpose the institutions were contending with in their early years remained problematic well into the next century. These struggles include their unresolved work towards “devising a consistent type of organization, maintaining local or state control, developing an adequate general education program integrated with the occupational, finding the right kinds of teachers, maintaining adequate student guidance services, getting the states to appropriate sufficient funds” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 31).

**History of California Community Colleges**

Created by California’s 1960 Higher Education Act, the higher education system was legislated into a three-tiered education system; a hierarchy was created, funneling University of California system for a small number of top high school students, the California State University for the middle students, and the community college for the largest number of students, those with the lowest ability (Beach, 2011). With this
legislative act, the community college system was therefore generated to “maximize enrollment at a low cost” (Jenkins, 2014). Funding for the Higher Education Act provided the most money to the Universities of California’s fewest students with the least funding coming to the community colleges with the largest student population, and this funding model has not changed significantly since its inception even as tuition costs for students continues to rise (Beach, 2011).

The California Community College Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) in 2018 identified that there were 2,376,406 total students enrolled in its 114 institutions (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office [CCCCO], 2018a). These California’s community colleges are challenged by the multiple missions instated by the Higher Education Act simultaneously to provide “collegiate degrees, career technical education, [and] adult education” (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018, p. 5). Because they are chronically underfunded, this financial instability results in disjointed services and programs that do not focus on the students themselves (Jenkins, 2014). Community colleges suffer from what Beach (2011) calls an “exhaustion of education” (p. xv); open access, he asserted, has led to these institutions being able to offer little more than mere access. Reed and McLenney (2013) stated that the principle behind the Higher Educational Act’s vision of community colleges—instiutions that provide low cost education for everyone—was “something irreducibly utopian, and maybe even absurd” (p. 20).
Honors Programs in California Community Colleges

According to the organization National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), the premier organization devoted to promoting honors education for higher education, there were over 900 institutions that belonged, representing 330,000 two-year and four-year students nationally (NCHC, 2019). Honors education, as defined by NCHC, was such that “ignites passion for lifelong learning and encourages student creativity, collaboration, and leadership in the classroom and beyond” (NCHC, 2019, para. 1).

In the state of California, the Honors Transfer Council of California served as a similar organization that focuses solely on honors education for California Community College students; they reported that 59 community colleges belong to their organization (Honors Transfer Council of California, 2019). A survey conducted by Honors Transfer Council of California (2017) from its member institutions revealed the total student population at 534,500 with the honors student enrollment at these institutions of 12,485, an overall average of 2.34% of the student population. The survey, which was conducted from the honors directors without identifying from which colleges, showed that the institutions with the lowest honors student enrollment were in the .02% of the student population, with the highest student honors student enrollment at 5.9% of the student body (“Honors program statistics by FTES,” 2017).

High Achieving Honors Students in California Community Colleges

Several studies indicated that there were benefits to the students as a result of participation in honors education. One of which was retention. Several studies pointed out that honors programs foster student retention (Cosgrove, 2004; Slavin, Coladarci, & Pratt, 2008). While no data could be found for California Community College honors
students and their retention, persistence rates, or the percentage of students who remain enrolled in the college from one semester to the next, was 79.4% for California Community College students who were college prepared (CCCO, 2018a).

Participation in honors programs had been shown in several studies to raise students’ GPA (Cosgrove, 2004; Slavin et al., 2008). Additionally, students who participated in honors programs had a higher graduation rate (Cosgrove, 2004; Slavin et al., 2008), with one study demonstrating graduation in a shorter period of time compared to the general student population (Cosgrove, 2004). No data could be found on GPAs for California community college honors students. For California Community College students who began as college prepared, these students had a completion rate of 70.4% within six years of enrollment (CCCO, 2018a).

**Overall Student Achievement in California Community Colleges**

According to the CCCCO (2018a), in 2018 there were 2,376,406 total students enrolled in the 114 institutions across the state. Persistence rates for the overall student population was 76.5% (CCCO, 2018a). For the overall student population, 48.2% of the students completed a degree or certificate within a six-year time frame (CCCO, 2018a).

The grade breakdown for California Community College students in Fall 2018 was as follows:

- 33.16% of the student population earned an A cumulative GPA
- 20.42% earned a B cumulative GPA
- 13.14% earned a C cumulative GPA
- 4.53% earned a D cumulative GPA
- 10.20% earned an F cumulative GPA (CCCO, 2018a)

Transfer History for High Achieving Honors Students in California Community Colleges

Transfer data provided by the California Chancellor’s Office, California State University, and University of California was not disaggregated by honors students or non-honors students, but rather by student GPA as indicated below (The California State University, 2018; University of California, 2018).

High Achieving Non-Honors Students in California Community Colleges

For community college students who transferred to the California State University system, the GPA for students admitted had risen steadily (The California State University, 2018). From the years 2000-2018, the GPA of California Community College students admitted into the California State University system for the fall semesters has risen steadily; the lowest GPA of admitted students was in the year 2001 when the average was 2.90. Since 2010, the GPA has been above 3.0 and has steadily risen until 2018 (The California State University, 2018). The data were not disaggregated by first generation or non-first generation status. Figure 1 displays the GPA of community college students admitted to the California State University system from the years 2000-2018.
Figure 1. Overall grade point average of admitted California Community College Students to the California Community College System from 2000-2018. Adapted from “Enrollment Summary,” by The California State University, 2020. Retrieved from http://asd.calstate.edu/dashboard/enrollment-live.html

For the University of California, data showed that admitted GPAs for California Community College students also rose steadily for students (University of California, 2018).

The three groups of GPAs reported, which demonstrates a steady upward trend during this timeframe from 1994-2018. The greatest gains in number of admissions to all University of California campuses for those California Community College students with the highest GPA of 3.6-4.0, with steady increases over the timeframe of the data (University of California, 2018) (see Figure 2).
Figure 2. Grade point average of admitted California Community College Students to the University of California System from 1994-2018. Adapted from “Transfer Fall Admissions Summary,” by University of California, 2020. Retrieved from https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/infocenter/transfer-admissions-summary

The overall number of California Community College admitted students for the 1994-2018 timeframe has consistently risen after 1999 for first generation students, which the University of California defines as “a student with neither parent having a four-year college degree” (University of California, 2018, Footnote 7). For non-first generation students, the admission rates decreased slightly from the years 2012-2015; despite this slight decrease, the number of admitted California Community College students have risen for both groups of first generation and non-first generation by more than double in the timeframe of the data (University of California, 2018). While GPAs are rising steadily for students admitted to the competitive California public universities, the number of first generation students admitted to the University of California system has also risen.

Figure 3 indicates the total number of admitted California Community College students in the same timeframe, breaking down the admitted students into two groups:
those who were first generation students, and those who were not (University of California, 2018).

![Graph showing the number of admitted first generation and non-first generation California Community College Students to the University of California System from 1994-2018.](https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/infocenter/transfer-admissions-summary)

**Figure 3.** Total number of admitted first generation and non-first generation California Community College Students to the University of California System from 1994-2018. Adapted from “Transfer Fall Admissions Summary,” by University of California, 2020. Retrieved from https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/infocenter/transfer-admissions-summary

**Student Demographics in California Community Colleges**

The demographics that have been created by the Higher Education Act were staggering: In 2018, there were 2.1 million students enrolled in California’s 114 community colleges, compared to 465,686 in the 23 California State University campuses, and 251,714 in the nine University of California campuses (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018).

The student demographics that have resulted from this legislation were also sobering for a number of reasons. First, despite increased admission of first generation students to the University of California, the widening gap in educational attainment between high and low income students seemed to be accelerating, reducing opportunities
for social mobility for community college students (Beach, 2011; Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Tough (2019) noted that for low income students, higher education functioned as “an obstacle to mobility, an instrument that reinforces a rigid social hierarchy and prevents them from moving beyond the circumstances of their birth” (p. 20). Researchers found that 50,000 high achieving nation-wide community college students from low and medium income family income groups chose not to transfer to any institution each year, with approximately 30% of these students having a 3.7 GPA and above (LaViolet et al., 2018). Wealthier students were much more likely to enroll in California’s four-year universities than its community colleges (Fain, 2019).

There was a widening gap in college completion rates in terms of students’ family income (Johnson et al., 2018; Sheehan, 2018; Tinto, 2012), as high income students were three times more likely to complete a degree. An “excellence gap” has been identified and found to have been widening between the achievement levels of higher income students and lower income students, and this gap caused lower income students to participate in fewer accelerated academic opportunities in their K-12 education and choose less selective institutions (Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, 2019).

Prevalence of First Generation Community College Students

In terms of ethnicity, California’s Community Colleges are also quite different from the other higher educational institutions in the state; they were the most diverse system in the nation, let alone California (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018). It is well documented that students who attend community colleges were much more likely to be minorities, first generation, or from low income families.
than four-year universities (California Community Colleges, 2014; Davis, 2010; Fain, 2019; Johnson et al., 2018; E. T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Defining the term first generation is problematic, as it is documented that there is no “universally accepted definition” (Davis, 2010, p. 2) of the term. For the purposes of this study, first generation students are defined as the first in their families to attend college (The Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2019a).

California’s Community Colleges are well-known for attracting students who were the first generation in their families to attend college, comprising 42% of the student population state-wide (California Community Colleges, 2014; Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018). For first generation students, they succeed at the lowest rates. Researchers asserted that “the newly-opened door to American higher education has been a revolving one” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 3) at community colleges in particular. A majority, 63%, of low income first generation students stated that their intent was to earn bachelor’s degree, yet within a period of six years, only 5% were able to do so (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

For the general population at community colleges, an overwhelming majority, 80%, of community college students stated that they intended to transfer (Boone, 2017), yet few of them actually did. In California, 48% of students within six years had a certificate or degree, or were able to transfer (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018). The disparity between students’ aspirations and their ability to fulfil them was so dire that one researcher stated that students who enrolled at community colleges were “handicap[ped]” by their institution (Boone, 2017), an observation echoed by several other researchers. One study showed that for minorities who began their
studies at community college, there was a significant decreased chance of attaining a
STEM, degree (E. T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Herman and Hilton (2017) indicated
that students who entered and dropped out of community college and four-year
universities were “worse off” (p. 21) than those who did not enroll at any institution at
all, in terms of finances and general sense of well-being and confidence. Failure
appeared to be structured and systematic for large groups of students; as Beach (2011)
noted, community colleges were “holding pens for the underprivileged” (p. xxxv). These
studies shed light on the struggles that community college students face in the vast
majority of students having high aspirations to transfer and few of them actually able to
do so.

**Characteristics of First Generation Community College Students**

First generation students, research shows, were more likely to attend community
college than any other type of institution; additionally, this population was increasing to
the point that nationally, they constituted a majority of the student population on
community college campuses (Davis, 2010). These students chose colleges based on
their proximity to their home, rather than by the institution’s selectivity, thereby creating
an “undermatch” between their academic abilities and the overall rigor of the intuitions
they attend (Moritz, 2011; Sanon-Jules, 2010; Smith Jaggars et al., 2019).

Demographically, first generation students were more likely to have the following
characteristics than the general population: to be female and older, Hispanic, low-income,
and parents (McConnell, 2000; Mead, 2018; Saenz & Barrera, 2007). Disproportionately, the first generation students came from minority populations (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Sanon-Jules, 2010), so much so that studies have called upon researchers
to use students’ first generation status as a “proxy” for disaggregated groups (Davis, 2010, p. 14).

The research is clear: this student demographic has grown and was projected to continue to do so (Sanon-Jules, 2010). One study in 2009 found that 33% nation-wide were first generation students (Martinez et al., 2009), while another in 2018 identified 58% of students enrolled in higher education as first generation students (Mead, 2018).

**First Generation Community College Students in California**

In 2018, California identified between 42% - 43.2% of its student population at community colleges as first generation students (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018).

In California’s Central Valley, the first generation population was higher than the state-wide average for most of the colleges in the study. Reedley College in rural Fresno County had 52.4% first generation student population, while Fresno City College had 47.9% (CCCCO, 2018a) and Clovis had 30.1% (CCCCO, 2018a). At Modesto Junior College in Stanislaus County, there were 48.4% of the student population were first generation students. In California’s Central Valley, degree attainment was low, as only one out of five adults had a bachelor’s degree (Sheehan, 2018); for those from a Hispanic background, only 1 out of 10 adults had earned a bachelor’s degree.

**First Generation Students and Academic Preparation**

As the first generation population continued to grow, so did the need to understand the attributes of this population. For this student population, several studies identified a gap between what students need to know to be successful on a college campus and what the first generation students entered the institution knowing. One study
identified that “cultural adaptation” was a challenge for these students as they negotiate between the two different worlds of family and academia (Engle & Tinto, 2008), and another noted that first generation students lack the “shared knowledge” of cultural capital they need to succeed in college (Tinto, 2012). Another identified they needed “academic validation” (McConnell, 2000, p. 79), while another noted these students existed in “academic limbo” (Folger, Carter, & Chase, 2004, p. 472).

Statistically, first generation students were more likely to be academically unprepared for college (Dudley et al., 2015; Martinez et al., 2009; McConnell, 2000). Several researchers have noted the need for first generation students to integrate onto college campus, as researchers found them to be less likely to be engaged on campus in activities that promote success (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Sanon-Jules, 2010). Similarly, McConnell (2000) found that first generation students showed “lower levels of academic integration” on the college campus (McConnell, 2000). In fact, researchers noted that first generation students often intentionally do not participate in activities on campus because they want to focus on academics, not realizing these exact activities promote success (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Other researchers also noted that first generation students do not understand academic culture, and they do not recognize the importance of interaction with faculty (Hensel & Davidson, 2018). Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin (2014) found that first generation students did not understand the cultural capital of college of needing to seek out academic support from faculty and support services; as a result, they were more likely to feel alienated than the general student population, and therefore they were even less likely to seek help. Davis (2010) notes this student
population frequently describe suffering from “low confidence and isolation” (p. 1) while at college.

The results of several studies indicate that first generation students are at an enormous disadvantage (Davis, 2010; E. T. Pascarella et al., 2004), because they were “significantly handicapped” (E. T. Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 275) by their challenges compared to other demographic groups. While 63% of low income first generation students began their studies stating that their intent was to earn bachelor’s degree, only 5% were able to do so within a period of six years (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Multiple studies assert that first generation students earn lower GPAs as compared to the general student population (Martinez et al., 2009; Sanon-Jules, 2010; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). Further, the first generation students were more likely to work off-campus and work more than part-time hours (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Martinez et al., 2009; McConnell, 2000). While the majority of first generation students were more likely to begin higher education at a community college, those who began at a four-year university performed significantly better than those that began at community colleges (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This disadvantage of attending a community college was also found to be long-reaching; there were negative effects of attending community college first compared to four-year institution on long-term occupational status and earnings (E. T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Because first generation students lacked cultural capital that made them feel alienated on the college campus, several studies indicated that any activities in and out of classroom that increased “cultural capital” of first generation students were found to benefit them (Davis, 2010; Pressler, 2009). Another study similarly identified that a
“structure of support” (Saenz & Barrera, 2007, p. 3) was needed for first generation students during transition from family to academia. Faculty who stepped in for family to help navigate students through transitions were found to be especially helpful for first generation students (Komarraju et al., 2010). Small group intervention was also found to increase frequency of first generation student’s participation on campus, which led to higher GPA and retention rates for them (Folger et al., 2004). Time on campus for extra-curricular activities also had a significant impact on the critical thinking and perceptions of their own academic success for first generation students (E. T. Pascarella et al., 2004; E. T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

**Racially Minoritized Students**

To provide background on the general population of this study, a general discussion of racially minoritized students will provide additional context. Since the majority of first generation students came from underrepresented backgrounds, community colleges were among the most diverse institutions with larger percentages of student populations from these groups. A significant majority, 80%, of underrepresented groups nationally began their higher education at community college (Beach, 2011). Like first generation students, it was racially minoritized students whose “uncertainty about belonging” (Walton & Cohen, 2011, p. 1447) that weakened their overall academic ability. Interventions and programs that promoted a sense of belonging were impactful for all students, but they showed the greatest benefit to those students in underrepresented groups (Herman & Hilton, 2017). Several studies identified that interventions that fostered a “sense of belonging” had the greatest impact for these disproportionately impacted groups (Hausmann et al., 2009; Herman & Hilton, 2017).
Also noteworthy was the finding that students’ perceptions of their own success mirror the institution’s perceptions of their ability to succeed, and this was found to be especially true for minority student populations, both in terms of negative and positive perceptions (Satterfield, 2008). Honors programs have been shown to promote higher levels of engagement for minorities (F. X. Shushok, Jr., 2003), yet from elementary schools onward, those students from minority groups have been under-identified for gifted education (Rinn & Cobane, 2009).

**Theoretical Framework of Engagement**

As several studies identify the importance of students’ integration onto college campuses, particularly for first generation and minority students, it is important to understand what this sense of belonging means (Hausmann et al., 2009; Herman & Hilton, 2017). One researcher identified the student seeking upward mobility through education as “a process of cultural disruption, leaving behind one set of values and assumptions and plunging into a new and foreign one” (Tough, 2019, p. 10).

One study defined the sense of belonging as the students’ integration into the institution (Herman & Hilton, 2017), and another finds this belonging as the students’ “psychological sense of identification and affiliation with the campus community” (Hausmann et al., 2009, p. 650). Students’ reported sense of belonging has been shown to be consistent with their GPA (Hausmann et al., 2009).

Students’ engagement on the campus was defined as the “amount of time and effort that students place in their involvement in educationally beneficial practices that promote their learning and development” (Price & Tovar, 2014, p. 770), while Tinto
(2012) found that engagement was “a person’s interaction with those values and norms and the individuals who share them” (p. 160).

A study indicated that students needed to be integrated into their campus community to be successful, and this integration was measured by interactions with faculty and peers (Dudley et al., 2015). The more social integration into the college campus that the students experienced had a direct correlation on how likely students were to persist into their second year of study (Hausmann et al., 2009). Interaction with faculty was reported as the highest indication of students’ engagement on campus (Komarraju et al., 2010). How engaged a student was on campus with faculty and peers determined the extent of their academic success (Hausmann et al., 2009).

The seminal study by Tinto (2012) defined student’s integration onto college campuses as “degree to which a person integrates the values and norms of a community into his or her own value system” (p. 160). His integration model, the Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure, identified three stages of students’ integration: (a) separation, (b) transition, and (c) incorporation (Tinto, 1994). The Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure argues the following:

Individual departure from institutions can be viewed as arising out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational resources, and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of the academic and social systems of the institution. (V. Tino, 1994, p. 113)

This model has been cited frequently (Burnette, 2017; Komarraju et al., 2010; Martinez et al., 2009; McConnell, 2000; Sanon-Jules, 2010). Tinto (2012) in his later
research identified a gap in his earlier study. He admitted his model does not indicate what needs to be done to support students’ integration, saying that “knowledge of effective action remains fragmented and poorly organized” (p. 5).

**Student Engagement Factors**

As indicated previously, multiple studies strongly indicated that students’ engagement was the strongest predictor of their academic success (E.T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012). As discussed below, the engagement factors can be demonstrated in a multitude of ways, including interactions with instructors, interaction with peers, time on campus, oral and written assignments, critical thinking skills, and the effect of disruption.

**Interaction with Instructors**

Several factors indicated students’ levels of engagement on campus as will be discussed below, but their interactions with faculty had the greatest bearing on their overall academic achievements on campus far above any other aspect (Komarraju et al., 2010). This factor was so significant that if students had interacted with just one faculty member, they reported feeling more connected to the campus and had increased ambitions beyond college as a result of that relationship (Komarraju et al., 2010). Higher retention rates and greater satisfaction were also conveyed among students who reported increased interactions with faculty, both in and out of the classroom (Tinto, 2012).

There were several different models that foster instructor interaction that lead to increased engagement for students on campus. In-depth research projects increased the number of faculty points of contact outside of class (Hensel & Davidson, 2018; LaViolet et al., 2018; E. T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), as students worked with faculty mentors
to complete these assignments. Additionally, honors students reported more time spent with faculty (Korah, 2018; F. Shushok, Jr., 2006). This additional time was attributed to the typical smaller class size of the honors courses, as well as the increased likelihood that these classes more frequently assigned research-based inquiry projects. Honors programs were, by their design, a type of learning community, which have been shown to increase students’ time with faculty; these communities “exist to promote and maximize the individual and shared learning of its members” (Lenning, 2013, p. 7), thereby intentionally fostering interaction with faculty for students’ benefit. Learning communities have also been shown to raise students’ GPAs and rates of retention, as the students saw themselves as connected to the campus and to the faculty (Tinto, 2012).

All students benefited from increased interaction with faculty. However, the greatest impact of engagement was seen most profoundly on those who were most under-prepared (Dudley et al., 2015). In other words, students who would have been least likely to succeed academically benefited the most from frequent interaction with faculty. For first generation students in particular, this impact meant quite simply the difference between succeeding and dropping out. First generation students reported that they would have likely not persisted unless they felt supported by faculty (Davis, 2010), as the faculty took the place of family support. When instructors had high expectations for students, studies showed that students would rise to meet those expectations, although the opposite was also true, reinforcing the significance of this relationship (Tinto, 2012).

Clearly faculty were key to students’ success, and the research provided numerous explanations to identify the reasons behind this connection. One study identified that the relationship “enhances the learning process” for students (Bell, 2008), which helped
explain why the relationship was so beneficial to underprepared students in particular. Similarly, the greatest impact of faculty interaction was seen in students’ first year (Komarraju et al., 2010); with this year being the most vulnerable for underprepared students, this relationship became even more important for them. Studies also demonstrated that even casual interactions with faculty outside of class led to greater retention of knowledge (E. T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; F. X. Shushok, Jr., 2003). For STEM majors, the number of interactions with faculty was greatest indicator of the students’ ability to complete their major (Herman & Hilton, 2017). Finally, research indicated that interaction with even one faculty member was indicative of increased student satisfaction with college campus; this impact was seen most readily upon female students (Komarraju et al., 2010).

The Center for Community College Student Engagement provided this researcher a three year, 2017-2019, 25% randomized sample of the full cohort dataset of their instrument (Appendix A). The dataset included 103,537 observations from 694 community colleges in 47 states (The Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2019b). When the data were delimited to students who self-reported a 3.0-3.9 cumulative GPA, there were 46,412 students; when delimited further to first generation students with a 3.0-3.9 GPA, there were 16,431 students. The dataset included the student-faculty interaction benchmark, which contained a total of six of the instrument’s questions about student and faculty interaction to provide an overall benchmark score for the six questions.

Analysis of the dataset revealed almost no difference between the two groups of students, the honors and non-honors first generation high achieving students, in regards to
their Student-Faculty Interaction Benchmark scores on the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). The critical value for \( t \) with a confidence level of 0.95 is 0.05 while critical \( t \) is -10.72605244, much greater. \( P \) is significantly smaller at 8.76266E-26. Table 1 demonstrated the descriptive and interpretive statistics performed on the responses of these 16,431 students.

Table 1

**Student-Faculty Interaction Benchmark**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Honors Students</th>
<th>Honors Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>0.473172845</td>
<td>0.540815245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>0.040062881</td>
<td>0.042424558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>15286</td>
<td>1142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized Mean Difference</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>1307</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Stat</td>
<td>-10.72605244</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( P(T&lt;=t) ) one-tail</td>
<td>4.38133E-26</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical one-tail</td>
<td>1.646020311</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( P(T&lt;=t) ) two-tail</td>
<td>8.76266E-26</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical two-tail</td>
<td>1.961780689</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from “The Community College Survey of Student Engagement,” by The Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2017, with permission. Copyright by The University of Texas at Austin.

**Interaction with Student Peers**

Another important aspect of student engagement on college campuses besides their relationships with faculty were their levels of interaction with each other. Students’ time spent with each other increased their levels of engagement to the college campus (Tinto, 2012), and there were a number of activities that increased students’ connection with each other. For instance, in-depth research projects have been shown to increase interactions between student peers (Hensel & Davidson, 2018). When instructors utilized team projects, research showed this interaction increased persistence for students in
engineering majors (Herman & Hilton, 2017). Studies also show that students were influenced, both positively and negatively, by their student peers and the expectations they had for each other in the climate created in the classroom (Tinto, 2012).

All students benefited from more frequent connection with student peers, as it led to a greater sense of belonging to the overall campus community (Herman & Hilton, 2017). This benefit of peer interaction, however, was seen most profoundly on the disproportionately impacted groups who statistically had a lower success rate (Herman & Hilton, 2017). This connection was so strong that students who did not interact regularly with peers, particularly in the beginning of their college education when they are most vulnerable to dropping out, spent less time on campus (Trucker, 2014). Time on campus has long been shown to be a predictor of student success (McClenney et al., 2007), so increasing opportunities for interaction with student peers was a powerful force in their overall success.

Literature revealed that honors courses and programs were instrumental in fostering students’ interactions with each other. Honors students reported more group work overall in their honors courses as compared to the non-honors courses (Korah, 2018). This connection was so strong that even if students enrolled in only one honors class over their college career, this one course led to increased connections with their peers (Trucker, 2014).

The Center for Community College Student Engagement (2019b) provided 2017-2019, 25% randomized sample of the full cohort dataset of their instrument. The dataset included 103,537 observations from 694 community colleges in 47 states (The Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2019b). When the data were delimited to
students who self-reported a 3.0-3.9 cumulative GPA, there were 46,412 students; when delimited further to first generation students with a 3.0-3.9 GPA, there were 16,431 students. The dataset included the active and collaborative learning benchmark, which contained seven of the instrument’s questions about students’ perceptions of active and collaborative learning to prove an overall benchmark score for the seven questions.

Table 2 demonstrates the descriptive and interpretive statistics performed on these 16,431 students.

Analysis of these values reveals almost no difference between the two groups of students, the honors and non-honors first generation high achieving students, in regards to their active and collaborative learning benchmark scores on the CCSSE. The critical value for $t$ with a confidence level of 0.95 is 0.05, while critical $t$ is 13.59118608, much greater. $P$ is significantly smaller at 2.08596E-39.

Table 2

*Active and Collaborative Learning Benchmark*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Honors Students</th>
<th>Honors Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td>52.93559828</td>
<td>64.2979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Variance</strong></td>
<td>617.867913</td>
<td>751.3419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observations</strong></td>
<td>15290</td>
<td>1141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hypothesized Mean Difference</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>df</strong></td>
<td>1284</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>t Stat</strong></td>
<td>-13.59118608</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$P(T&lt;=t)$ one-tail</td>
<td>1.04298E-39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$t$ Critical one-tail</td>
<td>1.646041225</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$P(T&lt;=t)$ two-tail</td>
<td>2.08596E-39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$t$ Critical two-tail</td>
<td>1.961813261</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from “The Community College Survey of Student Engagement,” by The Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2017, with permission. Copyright by The University of Texas at Austin.
Time on Campus

The amount of time students spent on campus had a positive correlation with their success (Burnette, 2017). As such, projects, on-campus employment, and activities that encouraged students to remain on campus benefited them. For instance, in-depth research projects fostered time on campus, thereby promoting student engagement in the campus community at large (Hensel & Davidson, 2018; Wyner et al., 2016). These research projects also have been found to foster faculty interaction, another vital aspect that contributed to the students’ larger sense of belonging on campus (Long & Lange, 2002).

While literature indicated the positive effect of time on campus for all students, the greatest impact of activities on campus was demonstrated in first generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). While first generation students were the least likely to be able to spend time on campus beyond class time, it was precisely this increased time on campus that was most helpful for them (McConnell, 2000).

The kinds of activities the students actually participated in seem not to have much bearing on the outcome, either, as all benefited students: On-campus employment, participation in research activities, time with faculty. Time on campus for extra-curricular activities has been shown to have a significant impact on critical thinking and perceptions of academic success for first generation students in particular (Ernest T. Pascarella et al., 2004). Davis (2010) identified a positive correlation between time on campus and first generation students, indicating that the more time and participation first generation students have on campus, the more likely these same students were to persist and graduate on time.
Time Spent on Oral or Written Assignments

Students’ time and efforts on coursework were a further indication of their engagement on the college campus. Pace (1984) in his seminal work *Measuring the Quality of College Student Experience* found that the “best predictor of students’ progress in acquiring intellectual skills is the quality of effort they devote to course learning activities” (p. 42).

Empowerment came for students when they were encouraged to discover topics they were interested in and allowed time to pursue the topic in-depth in a sustained way, with studies indicating students spend more time on meaningful projects (Tinto, 2012). Honors students reported more time spent on projects, as well as increased satisfaction with their efforts with their work (Korah, 2018; Ross & Roman, 2009).

As such, in-depth research projects have been found in several studies to improve students’ retention (Bangera & Brownell, 2014; Hensel & Davidson, 2018). Additionally, these research projects also have been demonstrated to improve students’ quality of the assignments themselves (Hensel & Davidson, 2018). Students themselves reported significantly higher engagement when they participated in research projects; these students also reported longer retention of knowledge gained from these projects that promote deeper levels of learning (Murray, Obare, & Hageman, 2016; Tinto, 2012).

The Center for Community College Student Engagement (2019b) provided this researcher a three year, 2017-2019, 25% randomized sample of the full cohort dataset of their instrument. The dataset included 103,537 observations from 694 community colleges in 47 states. When the data were delimited to students who self-reported a 3.0-3.9 cumulative GPA, there were 46,412 students; when delimited further to first
generation students with a 3.0-3.9 GPA, there were 16,430 students. The dataset included the student effort benchmark, which contained a total of eight of the instrument’s questions about student effort to prove an overall benchmark score for the eight questions.

Analysis of the dataset revealed almost no difference between the two groups of students, the honors and non-honors first generation high achieving students, in regards to their student effort benchmark scores on the CCSSE survey. The critical value for t with a confidence level of 0.95 is 0.05, and critical t is -11.02309612, much greater. P is significantly smaller at 4.20606E-27.

Table 3 demonstrates the descriptive and interpretive statistics performed on these 16,430 students.

**Table 3**

*Student Effort Benchmark*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Honors Students</th>
<th>Honors Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>55.74640986</td>
<td>63.61368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>586.6549263</td>
<td>537.4223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>15290</td>
<td>1141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized Mean Difference</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>1333</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Stat</td>
<td>-11.02309612</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt;=t) one-tail</td>
<td>2.10303E-27</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical one-tail</td>
<td>1.645997539</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt;=t) two-tail</td>
<td>4.20606E-27</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical two-tail</td>
<td>1.961745222</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from “The Community College Survey of Student Engagement,” by The Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2017, with permission. Copyright by The University of Texas at Austin.
Critical Thinking

Attending college in and of itself has been shown to increase students’ abilities to think reflectively and critically, in addition to being linked to students’ positive mental well-being and outlook (E. T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Learning these crucial skills took place in a variety of different ways for students. Research projects, for one, were identified by several studies as a best practice for improving students’ skills and fostering curiosity (Hensel & Davidson, 2018; Hewlett, 2016; Wyner et al., 2016). Projects such as these that emphasized collaboration between students and faculty have also been shown to help students learn content more deeply as well as increase their sense of self-efficacy (Tinto, 2012).

Honors programs, as defined by the NCHC, were identified as learning communities that “foster a culture of thinking, growing, and inquiring” (NCHC, 2013, Definition of Honors Education section). Along with this culture, the honors programs emphasized “active learning and participatory education” (NCHC, 2017, para. 15). Literature indicated that honors classes promote critical thinking skills for students (F. X. Shushok, Jr., 2003; Slavin et al., 2008).

As Pace (1984) indicated in his seminal study, students directly learned course material in proportion to the effort they exerted on their assignments. Indeed, instructors’ high expectations of their students and their abilities has been shown to be a powerful force in shaping students’ beliefs and subsequent efforts in their own abilities (Tinto, 2012).
Current Knowledge of Honors Programs and Their Impact on Student Engagement

At their best, honors programs promoted opportunities for engagement for students, helping them integrate more fully into the college community and thereby allowing for a formalized system to lead to “cultural transformation” (Berger, 2007). Honors programs provided the social and cultural capital to allow students, particularly those unfamiliar with the systems of academia, to integrate more fully and successfully onto the campus (Engelen-Eigles & Milner, 2014). They allowed students to bolster their own resources and capabilities (Pressler, 2009). Honors programs have been shown to foster relationships between students and faculty; interaction with faculty was demonstrated to be the greatest indicator of changing of shift in student attitudes towards engagement (Komarraju et al., 2010). Some studies indicated that there were statistically significant indications of both increased engagement in class and interactions with faculty for honors community college students versus non-honors community students (Korah, 2018; Ross & Roman, 2009). The data from these studies appears to contradict the analysis of the archival dataset from 2017-2019, in which analysis revealed almost no difference between the two groups of community college students, the honors and non-honors first generation high achieving students, in regards to their student-faculty interaction benchmark scores on the CCSSE survey. Honors classes became a “culturally acceptable” (F. Shushok, Jr., 2006, p. 94) place for students to show that they valued academic intelligence.

Because honors programs provided increased opportunities to support students’ engagement on campus, there are a myriad of benefits that occur for students as a result of their participation in these programs. The greatest impact of engagement levels for
honors classes were identified in students’ first year of higher education in four-year universities, that crucial year for students’ success (F. Shushok, Jr., 2006). Similarly, several studies of four-year universities pointed out that honors programs foster student retention (Cosgrove, 2004; Slavin et al., 2008). Participation in honors programs at universities has been shown to raise students’ GPA (Cosgrove, 2004; Slavin et al., 2008), and this effect was particularly for first year university students (F. Shushok, Jr., 2006). University students who participated in honors programs have a higher graduation rate (Cosgrove, 2004; Slavin et al., 2008), graduating in a shorter period of time (Cosgrove, 2004).

Besides the value to the students, honors programs have been noted to benefit the overall campus as well. First of all, honors students have taken a small number of their courses together, if at all, as some honors programs work only on contract basis rather than dedicated courses. As such, honors students took the majority of their classes outside of the honors program, thus raising the level of intellect in the other classes (Cosgrove, 2004; Gee, 2015; Pehlke, 2003). Additionally, teaching honors classes seemed to increase engagement for faculty (Pehlke, 2003), who like their students, taught typically only one or a few honors sections each semester.

Because honors programs helped students integrate into the larger academic environment of the college, they have been shown to help all students, although for slightly different reasons. Honors programs promoted faculty interaction for male university students in particular, giving them permission and encouraging them to seek help (F. Shushok, Jr., 2006; F. X. Shushok, Jr., 2003). For women at universities who were often conditioned to avoid taking risks, honors programs appeared to raise their
overall GPA (Hartleroad, 2005). Honors programs helped foster a sense of belonging, which was especially beneficial for first generation students (Moritz, 2011). That being said, few first generation students enrolled in honors programs nationally: 28.6% of all honors students were first generation students (E. T. Pascarella et al., 2004; Mead, 2018).

Disruptions and Their Impact on Student Engagement

Tough (2019) finds that for many disadvantaged students seeking to find their place in the unfamiliar academic environment, the experience is a “process of cultural disruption” (p. 10) in which students must go through the disturbance of “leaving behind one set of values and assumptions and plunging into a new and foreign one” (p. 10). The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 caused a disruption on students’ lives as they were moved into courses online with little notice mid-semester. The ability for higher education to serve students suddenly shifted as instructors scrambled to switch dramatically from face-to-face instruction to online, most with less than a week’s notice (Lederman, 2020). As the future looks increasingly likely that online education will become a way many colleges and universities offer instruction, college administrators and boards of trustees ponder about the effect this will have on their enrollment for the Fall 2020 term and for several years beyond (Hartocollis & Levin, 2020). The questions being raised as the pandemic continues are whether students, especially those in the community college system who are statistically among the least skilled in California’s higher education system and the most vulnerable (“The excellence gap is growing,” 2019), are going to embrace online offerings, or try to return to the workforce to wait out the pandemic. Projections forecast as much as a 20% loss of student enrollment for fall, especially for those private universities with higher tuition (Jaschick, 2020a). Students
are facing decisions of whether they want to pay for public four-year university’s or private institution’s tuition that will be offered online when they can attend their local community college online to pay considerably less for the same class (Jaschick, 2020b), leading some to project an increase in community college enrollment (Worley & Williams, 2020). There is serious doubt whether community colleges can handle such a dramatic projection of increased enrollment, amid its history of underfunding and near certain loss of revenue in the economic downturn caused by the pandemic (Goldrick-Rab, 2020).

As students, instructors, and administrators gear up for a fall semester that increasingly appears to be offered mostly online in California (Jaschik, 2020), attention needs to be paid to how students historically have fared in distance education. As discussed previously, research shows in several studies that student engagement is tantamount to students’ success (Dudley et al., 2015; Price & Tovar, 2014), but this research has mostly been conducted in surveying traditional students taking classes on campus alone (Dumford & Miller, 2018). Students perform at significantly lower levels in online classes, and this sobering fact is attributed to lower levels of engagement in online environments compared to face-to-face instruction (Meyer, 2014). The kinds of engagement that were statistically significant in online classes included “lower levels of collaborative learning in their courses, fewer diverse discussion with others, and lower quality of interactions” (Dumford & Miller, 2018, p. 458) with both student peers and instructors.

There is a demographic of students for whom online education works well; Meyer (2014) noted that these students would not have otherwise enrolled in a face-to-face
university because of the flexibility online courses offered them and their families. Dumford and Miller (2018) note students who succeeded in online education tended to be older, typically female, non-racially minoritized adults who were highly motivated.

Those who thrive in complex environments, the ones Drucker (1985) calls entrepreneurs, are able to think ahead and thrive on change as opportunity to pursue innovation; he notes that they view “change as normal and indeed as healthy” (p. 26).

This pandemic demands the importance of embracing opportunities the crisis has forced upon institutions of higher education—and their students. Christensen, Horn, and Johnson (2011) discuss the disruption innovation theory, which suggests that for every innovation, there are early adopters of the service or product, such as in this case, online education. Innovation fails, they say, if companies or institutions focus too much on improving their service only for those early adopters, those who would choose and succeed with the innovation no matter what. Those institutions who succeed in sustaining the innovation efforts, according to Christensen et al. are those who focus on the larger population; they invest resources to come up with creative means for how this service can be disruptive with this larger population to get them to embrace and therefore sustain the new technology. The COVID-19 pandemic has been disruptive for all students and their institutions; finding means to keep the large number of students who would have not normally taken online classes engaged is institutions’ challenge in this time.

Gap in the Research for Community Colleges and Honors Programs

The Higher Educational Act may have been hailed as a crowning achievement with its open access, but the current situation has called some to wonder if community
colleges were “a relic of a bygone culture” (Reed & McClenney, 2013, p. 20). Gaps in the research overall for community colleges make it difficult to know for sure because community colleges as institutions and their students have not been studied as much as four-year universities by a large degree (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Espinosa et al., 2018). One researcher found that less than 10% of higher education studies include data from community colleges (Korah, 2018), and another noted that no extended studies had been conducted of California’s Community Colleges (Beach, 2011). Because of the lack of research, Beach (2011) also was “unclear if this institution actually helps students, let alone how it might help” (Beach, 2011, p. xix).

Honors programs abound across the United States, but what was surprising given the vast number of them was how little research there was (F. X. Shushok, Jr., 2003). Overall, there was a profound lack of studies on honors education in higher education overall compared to K-12 educational system (Hartleroad, 2005). That gap became more pronounced when examining the differences between the number of studies on four-year university honors programs compared to community college honors program; there are extremely few studies specifically on community college honors programs, and fewer empirical quantitative studies on this student population (Korah, 2018; Lanier, 2008; Long & Lange, 2002; F. Shushok, Jr., 2006; F. X. Shushok, Jr., 2003; Smith Jaggars et al., 2019; Trucker, 2014). Of the published dissertations about honors programs, the majority were about university honors students, and they overwhelmingly did not compare honors students with non-honors students (Trucker, 2014). No studies on the impact of honors programs for first generation students were found by this researcher,
although researchers called for future research on underrepresented groups in honors (Korah, 2018; Trucker, 2014).

**Summary**

This chapter examined the literature that discusses the role that honors programs played in engaging students as well as the existing literature on the impact of student engagement. A brief history of community colleges both in the nation and in the state of California was provided by researchers that link the problems of 21st century community colleges back to their origins. The demographic information of California’s Community College students was examined to demonstrate the differences in student population in these institutions in terms of first generation students in particular. Research on student engagement was reviewed for discussion of engagement factors, such as instructor interaction, student interaction, time spent on campus, time spent on assignments, and critical thinking. The impact of disruptions on student engagement was discussed. The literature on honors programs and their role in engagement for students was detailed, and this chapter concluded with an identification of a gap in the literature of community colleges in general and community college honors programs.

To assist this researcher in the organization of the review of literature, a synthesis matrix was created and utilized (see Appendix B). In preparation of the synthesis matrix, this researcher discovered a wealth of research on the importance of student engagement, but little research on the role of engagement at community college for honors programs and no research on first generation students in community college honors programs. Chapter III details the methodology used to conduct this study. Chapter IV will review the data collected from the engagement factors of high achieving honors and non-honors
Central Valley Community College students in California, collected from the quantitative and qualitative studies. Chapter V discusses the conclusions reached by the researcher in reviewing the data collected, as well as detailing the recommendations for future research on this topic.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

This chapter describes the comparative qualitative methodology used to conduct this study, which was to describe and compare the impact of engagement factors between California’s high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students not enrolled in college honors programs. The purpose statement and research questions that guided this study are included in this chapter. In addition, this chapter details the research design, rationale, study population, sample selection, research instrument, data collection process, data analysis, and the limitations of this study. Prior to conducting this qualitative study, approval was granted from Brandman University’s Institutional Review Board (see Appendix C) and the necessary course work was completed and certification was granted by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) (see Appendix D).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this comparative phenomenological study was to describe how the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs compares with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and
other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college.

**Research Question**

What are the descriptions of the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs, and how do they compare with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college?

**Research Sub-Questions**

This study was guided by three qualitative research questions and 13 research sub-questions.

1. How do high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students in college honors programs describe the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?
   a. interaction with faculty
   b. interaction with student peers
   c. time on the college campus
   d. participation in oral and written reports
   e. application of critical thinking skills
   f. effect of disruption
2. How do high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students who are not in college honors programs describe the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?

a. interaction with faculty
b. interaction with student peers
c. time on the college campus
d. participation in oral and written reports
e. application of critical thinking skills
f. effect of disruption

3. How do the descriptions of the high achieving Central Valley, California first generation honors program students compare to the descriptions of the high achieving Central Valley first generation non-honors program students?

**Research Design**

In this study, a comparative phenomenological study research design was used. Creswell (2014) stated that phenomenological research is “a design of inquiry…in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals” (p. 14). Patton (2015) described the methodology involved with phenomenology as the methodical analysis of phenomenon, documenting “how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (p. 115). Phenomenological theory allows the researcher to find meaning through the examination of the stories of the participants’ lived experiences. In this study, the lived experiences of first generation Central Valley community college high achieving students and their descriptions of their engagement was examined by using phenomenological methodology. This study sought
to examine the lived experiences of first generation, high achieving community college students in the Central Valley by collecting and analyzing data from semi-structured interviews. Using questions that were semi-structured for the interviews were appropriate to the study’s design, as a semi-structured question “allows for an open-ended question but is fairly specific in its intent” (McMillian & Schumacher, 2006, p. 204). The researcher, by creating semi-structured questions, aligned them to the research question and sub-question for the study (Appendix E).

The qualitative phenomenological comparison of the student groups’ data allowed the researcher “to investigate whether there are differences between two or more groups on the phenomena being studied” (McMillian & Schumacher, 2006, p. 25). The researcher used semi-structured questions in individual interviews with high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students from the Central Valley Community Colleges that have honors programs. Triangulation is necessary in research, according to Patten (2014), for researchers to “establish the dependability and trustworthiness of their data” (p. 167), and data triangulation is an example of numerous sources of data on the research topic, according to the same researcher. For this study, using data triangulation added perspective to the data, as “if themes are established based on converging several sources of data or perspectives from participants, then this process can be claimed as adding to the validity of the study” (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). This study sought to understand the reasons for the differences that exist, if any, between engagement levels of high achieving Central Valley first generation students enrolled in community college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation students who were not enrolled in community college honors programs. Comparing the
data collected from the two groups of students contributed to the study’s triangulation; further validating the study included conducting field tests and allowing participants to check the accuracy of the transcription of their individual interviews. Validity of the study was also ensured by intercoder agreement (Patten, 2014), or having a colleague trained in qualitative research examine a random sample of transcripts and comparing the coding.

First generation students enrolled in the 2019-2020 academic year with the GPA between 3.0-3.9 at Central Valley Community Colleges that have honors programs were contacted by email. The email included information about the study, and the researcher sent a follow up email shortly after to encourage participation. A final email was sent two weeks after the follow up email.

For the data, the researcher asked semi-structured questions to high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students in Central Valley Community Colleges that have honors students. The students, both those enrolled in college honors programs and those who were not enrolled in college honors programs, were asked semi-structured questions about their perceptions of the impact of engagement factors. A comparative research design was used to study and seek to understand the relationships between these groups of students (McMillian & Schumacher, 2006).

**Population**

Patten (2014) defined population as a “group in which researchers are ultimately interested” (p. 55). According to the Chancellor’s Office for California Community College, in the year 2018, there were 1,182,897 full-time equivalent students (FTES) attending 114 community colleges in the state of California (CCCCO, 2018a). The
population for this study was the 1,182,897 FTES attending 114 community colleges in the state of California.

**Target Population**

McMillan and Schumacher (2006) define target population as a group of individuals who “conform to specific criteria” (p. 119) that the researcher will “generalize the results of the research” (p. 119). For this study, the target population was high achieving first generation community college students at California’s Central Valley community that have honors programs. The high achieving first generation students who were not enrolled in the honors program came from the general population of each of those colleges; for the purposes of this study, high achieving was defined as those students who have between a 3.0-3.9 GPA. At the time of the study, there were four community colleges within the Central Valley that have active honors programs:

- Clovis Community College
- Fresno City College
- Modesto Junior College
- Reedley College

The total full-time equivalent population of all students at these four identified Central Valley Community Colleges is 42,769 (CCCCO, 2018a).

In the State Center Community College District, there were the following colleges: Reedley College, Fresno City College, and Clovis Community College. There were 175 honors students at Fresno City College, whose FTES count was 17,258 according to the 2018 California Community College’s Student Success Scorecard (CCCCO, 20118a). At Reedley College, there were 7,260 FTES with 75 students
enrolled in the honors program; there were also 150 honors students at Clovis Community College, whose FTES was 4,663 (CCCCO, 2018a).

Outside of the State Center Community College District, there was one active honors program that participated. Modesto Junior College’s honors program had 60 students, and FTES was 13,588. The total full-time equivalent population of all students at these four identified Central Valley community colleges was 42,769 (CCCCO, 2018a).

According to the California Chancellor’s Office, for fall 2018, there were 20.4% of community college students statewide with a cumulative GPA between 3.0-3.9 (CCCCO, 2018b). Using this estimation, there were a total of 8,725 high achieving students at the identified Central Valley Community Colleges.

In 2018, California identified 43.2% of its student population at community colleges as first generation students (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2018). Using this estimation, there were a total of 18,476 first generation students at the identified Central Valley Community Colleges.

Using the estimations listed above for both high achieving and first generation students in California, a total of 3,767 students were identified as high achieving and first generation community college students enrolled at the four identified Central Valley Community Colleges.

The target population for this study was the 3,767 high achieving first generation students from these same campuses, of which approximately 460 were enrolled in honors programs.
Sample

McMillan and Schumacher (2006) defined a sample as a group from which the data were collected. For this study, various methods of sampling were used for the different parts of the study.

For this study, the researcher used a combination of purposive sampling and convenience sampling to construct the sample for this study. The qualitative sample for this study was three participants, at least one high achieving honors student and at least one high achieving non-honors student, from each identified college for a total of 12 qualitative participants.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) explained that purposeful sampling provides researchers a selection of “particular elements from the population that will be representative or informative about the topic of interest” (p. 138). The strategy employed to identify the participants was criterion sampling based on the research problem, purpose, and questions. The criterion sampling method allowed the researcher to select participants based on specific criteria (Patton, 2015). The following criteria were established to select eligible participants for this study:

- All students must have a cumulative GPA of between 3.0-3.9
- All students must be first generation students
- Honors students must be enrolled in an honors program

In addition, the convenience sampling strategy allows a qualitative researcher to establish an accessible sample based on location and time (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2015). In this study, the convenience sampling strategy was simultaneously applied with the purposeful sampling strategy to identify participants who met the criteria
and were available to the researcher at a mutually convenient time and location (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2015).

The researcher used a combination of purposive and convenience sampling to identify participants for the qualitative portion of this study. To achieve stratified random sampling, the researcher worked with the Institutional Researchers at each of the Central Valley Community Colleges that have honors programs to identify first generation high achieving non-honors students that have the same GPA as honors students (3.0-3.9 GPA). Before the data collection process began, permission was granted by Brandman University’s Institutional Review Board to conduct research, and a copy of this permission was provided to each district and/or community college’s Institutional Review Board as applicable.

**Sample Selection Process**

To achieve purposive sampling, the procedure was as follows:

1. Permission was granted by Brandman University’s Institutional Review Board to conduct research.

2. A letter of permission was issued to each of the Central Valley Community Colleges that have honors programs, including Fresno City College, Reedley College, Clovis Community College, and Modesto Junior College.

3. Consent was gained from each of the district’s and/or college’s Institutional Research Boards as applicable (see Appendix F, G, and H).

4. The Institutional Researchers identified high achieving students at their college with a GPA between 3.0-3.9.
5. According to the California Chancellor’s Office, for fall 2018, there were 20.4% of community college students statewide with a cumulative GPA between 3.0-3.9.

6. Of the 42,769 total students at the identified California Community Colleges, a range of 20.4% would be high achieving characterized by this study as having a GPA in the range of 3.0-3.9, and 42% would be first generation students.

7. A total of 3,767 high achieving first generation students were identified by the Central Valley Community Colleges and sent an email inviting them to participate in individual interviews.

8. It was anticipated that 10% of the identified students would respond to the invitation to participate in the individual interviews.

9. A list of all high achieving students willing to participate in the study was created.

10. The researcher selected 12 participants across campuses, five from high achieving first generation students enrolled in honors programs and seven from high achieving first generation students not enrolled in honors programs. At each college, there were at least one participant enrolled in honors program and at least one participant not enrolled in honors programs.

11. Participants were provided with the following: Letter of Invitation (see Appendix I); Informed Consent (see Appendix J), and Participant Bill of Rights (see Appendix K).
12. Interviews were scheduled and administered after securing the participants’ agreement to the Informed Consent documents, including an Audio Release form (see Appendix L).

**Instrumentation**

A qualitative research design was used by the researcher to collect the data for this study. The researcher was the instrument, gathering qualitative data through interviews with high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students.

As qualitative research relied upon words not reduced to numbers easily, the instrument became the researcher, conducting interviews (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In this qualitative study, the researcher used interviews to collect data from high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students enrolled in honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students not enrolled in honors programs. The students were asked semi-structured questions about their perceptions of the impact of engagement factors. A copy of the interview protocol is contained in Appendix M.

**Reliability of Research**

The researcher collected data from the interviews, thereby becoming the instrument of data collection for that phase of research. In qualitative studies, several strategies can contribute to the “trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility” (Creswell, 2014, p. 201) of the data. One of the methods used to ensure reliability in this study was to conduct a field test with the following steps:
1. Field test interviews were conducted with three non-participating high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students.

2. An observer experienced in non-biased interview techniques evaluated the researcher delivering the field test interviews to give feedback regarding any biased behavior.

3. Feedback was received, and the researcher conducted additional field test interviews to eliminate biased behavior, as deemed necessary.

4. Feedback was received from the high achieving students regarding the clarity of instructions and questions and the delivery of interviews.

5. Adjustments based on the feedback received to the process were made as necessary.

Validity of Research

In the qualitative research, data were obtained from the participants in the interviews, and as such, the validity of the data came from their responses. Each participant was selected based on their eligibility of the criteria of their level of achievement as demonstrated by their cumulative GPA and their first generation status prior to the selection for the study. The qualitative interview questions were directly aligned to the research questions and the variables of the study using an Interview Question Development Matrix to assure that the data gathered directly addressed the research questions and variables. Triangulation, or the “cross-validation among data-sources [and] data collection strategies” (McMillian & Schumacher, 2006, p. 374), was used to support the validation of the study in comparing the responses from the two groups of students. The interviews were recorded via Zoom to obtain verbatim
transcripts, which were then checked against the video recording to ensure validity. Participants were also sent copies of their transcripts to check for accuracy.

**Data Collection**

Data collection is an important step in qualitative studies in which multiple methods can contribute to the accuracy of the data; these methods can include in-depth interviews, field tests, transcriptions reviewed for accuracy, triangulation of data, and intercoder reliability (Creswell, 2014). Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained approval from the Brandman University Institutional Review Board in order to conduct research beginning July 2020. College and district’s institutional review board was secured in July and August 2020 with invitations to participate going out after. The email invitation to participate was open from July to September 2020, with interviews held during this timeframe. The participants’ right to privacy was protected throughout the study.

For qualitative research, data were collected through “measures that yield words that are not easily reduced to numbers,” (Patten, 2014, p. 19) such as interviews or observations. Once permission was obtained from the district’s institutional research boards, high achieving first generation students enrolled at Fresno City College, Reedley College, Clovis Community College, and Modesto Junior College were invited to participate in individual interviews. All interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom, an interactive video conferencing tool, and participants were provided transcripts of their individual interviews to check for accuracy.

Phenomenological interviews investigate “what was experienced, how it was experienced, and finally the meanings the interviewees assign to the experience”
The purpose of the phenomenological interviews was to determine how students described the level of engagement the students experienced on their campuses. The interviews were held to answer the research question and sub-questions of this study. Participants were provided the following documents in advance of their interviews: Informed Consent, Letter of Invitation, and Participant Bill of Rights. Interviews were held for participants who provided a verbal confirmation of agreement to the Informed Consent document.

**Data Analysis**

This research design, a phenomenological approach, collected qualitative data. The qualitative data were retrieved from interviews conducted with the high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students.

Qualitative research allowed for comparison of data from interviews, requiring the researcher to meticulously analyze transcriptions from interviews held. The researcher analyzed the data collected from the interviews with Central Valley high achieving first generation students after recording with Zoom, which provides a transcript file the researcher used to transcribe the interviews into a Microsoft Word document. Then, the researcher used computer software to help code the information. Using computer software such as NVivo is an acceptable procedure that enables researchers to “organize, sort and search for information” (Creswell, 2014, p. 195).

**Process of analysis**

The process of analysis this researcher adhered to was as follows:

1. Each interview was coded to determine themes in the data using the program NVivo to code the data to identify patterns and analyze the data.
2. The data from the codes were placed into frequency tables, which were created to summarize, display, compare, and describe the interviewees’ responses.

3. Patterns were identified for the two groups of interviews of the high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students enrolled in honors programs and the high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students not enrolled in honors programs to allow for comparison.

4. To provide inter-coder reliability, a colleague familiar with the coding process was provided an anonymous 20% sample of the data to code, and the codes between the researcher and non-researcher matched with at least a 90% accuracy for the sample.

Limitations

Roberts (2010) defined limitations as the aspects of research that may negatively impact the findings or its generalizations. This study had several limitations. Data analysis for this study relied upon accurate information provided by the respondents and participants. The researcher is involved in honors programs for Community College students, so safeguards to prevent researcher bias had to be taken. Finally, the study design required a level of proficiency for the researcher in qualitative research.

Summary

This study used a phenomenological comparative study research design. Qualitative data were collected and analyzed to determine the engagement factors of high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students. The results for high achieving first generation honors and non-honors students were compared. This
chapter reviewed the researcher’s purpose statement, research questions, and methodology used in this study, in addition to the population, target population, and sample chosen by this study. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the collection process of the data, the measures taken to triangulate data and ensure accuracy, and the analysis of the data that followed.

Chapter IV will detail the results of the data collected in this research study, and Chapter V will discuss the significance of these findings, the conclusions the researcher has drawn from the study, and recommendations for research for future studies.
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter analyzes the data collected from this research study, which described and compared high achieving first generation community college students’ engagement. Chapter IV reviews the study’s purpose and research questions, and the chapter provides a summary of the methodology, data collection, population, and sample of the research design. The chapter culminates with the data collected and analysis organized by the research questions, concluding with a summary of the chapter.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this comparative phenomenological study was to describe how the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs compares with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time spent on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college.

Research Questions

What are the descriptions of the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs, and how
do they compare with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time spent on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college?

**Research Sub-Questions**

This study was guided by three qualitative research questions and 13 research sub-questions.

1. How do high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students in college honors programs describe the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?
   a. interaction with faculty
   b. interaction with student peers
   c. time spent on the college campus
   d. participation in oral and written reports
   e. application of critical thinking skills
   f. effect of disruption

2. How do high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students who are not in college honors programs describe the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?
   a. interaction with faculty
   b. interaction with student peers
   c. time spent on the college campus
   d. participation in oral and written reports
e. application of critical thinking skills

f. effect of disruption

3. How do the descriptions of the high achieving Central Valley, California first generation honors program students compare to the descriptions of the high achieving Central Valley first generation non-honors program students?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

A comparative phenomenological research design was selected for this study in order to describe and compare the lived experiences and descriptions of student engagement from those who were first generation, high achieving community colleges in the Central Valley. The qualitative method was used to gather data using semi-structured questions in individual interviews to get the students’ perspective on their engagement and its impact on their academic achievement. The researcher conducted interviews through Zoom with 12 community college students who were high achieving, first generation students enrolled in Central Valley institutions that have active honors programs. The participants selected a date and time for the interviews at a mutually convenient time for them and the researcher; in advance of the interview, the participants received Informed Consent documents to review.

At the interview, the participants acknowledged the receipt of the Informed Consent documents and had an opportunity to ask questions regarding the information; after that, the interviews were recorded using Zoom technology. Following the interview, the researcher transcribed the interviews and sent them to the individual participants to review for accuracy in both content and meaning; corrections were made according to participants’ feedback. Following the transcription and accuracy review,
the researcher coded the data using NVivo software to analyze the data for themes. After qualitative analysis, data were compared between the two groups of students, aligning the themes with the research questions. Intercoder reliability was used in the study, in which a portion of the data, 20%, was shared with a colleague trained in qualitative research to code to check for consistency in the researcher’s themes with at least a 90% accuracy for the sample. Using a comparative phenomenological research design allowed the researcher to describe and compare the lived experiences of first generation, high achieving community college students in the Central Valley in regards to their perceptions of engagement.

**Population**

The population for this study was the students who attended California community colleges. This population, in 2018, consisted of 1,182,897 full-time equivalent students enrolled in the 114 community colleges in the state (CCCCO, 2018a). The target population for this study was high achieving first generation community college students enrolled in the four community colleges in the Central Valley that have honors programs. High achieving was defined as those who have earned a cumulative grade point average of 3.0-3.9. One district in the Central Valley that has active honors programs is the State Center Community College District with three colleges: (a) Reedley College, (b) Fresno City College, and (c) Clovis Community College. In Yosemite Community College District, Modesto Junior College was also included in the study.

**Sample**

In this qualitative research, a variety of sampling methods were used in different stages of the study. First, the qualitative sample for this study was three high achieving
first generation students from each of the four colleges that have honors programs. At each college, at least one honors student and one non-honors student was selected to participate. For purposive sampling methods of this study, each student needed to have a cumulative grade point average of 3.0-3.9, they must have been first generation students, and they must have been enrolled in one of the four Central Valley community colleges that had honors programs. Additionally, honors students must have been enrolled in the college’s honors programs. Institutional researchers at each district identified a randomized sample of students who met the criteria to provide to the researcher as a stratified random sampling method. Convenience sampling was also used in this study to arrange for participants who met the criteria and were interested in participating to meet at a mutually convenient time and location, in this case via Zoom.

**Demographic Data**

A total of 12 high achieving first generation students participated in the study. These students were enrolled in the four community colleges in the Central Valley that have active honors programs. Five of the student participants were accepted into honors programs, with at least one participant from each of these colleges. Seven of the participants were not enrolled in honors programs, with at least one participant from each of these colleges. At each college, there were a total of three participants, with at least one honors and one non-honors participant.

The students themselves had a diverse background, in keeping with the demographics of community college students.

Nine of the participants were female, and three of the participants were male. In terms of ethnicity, seven of the 12 participants were Hispanic, three were Asian, and two
were Caucasian. Their ages were also diverse, spanning in range from 18-39: six of the 12 participants were in their late teens to early 20s, three students were in their mid to late 20s, and three were in their 30s. As far as their majors, six students were in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), four were humanities majors, and two were business majors. Five of the students were returning from several years after a first attempt at college, and this time away from college for these students ranged from one year to 15 years. Two of the participants were in their first year of study, while the remainder, 10, had completed at least one full year of college study. One of the participants was married, and three of the participants were parents. In terms of employment, eight of the 12 participants mentioned they worked, with hours ranging from part-time to full-time.

Table 4 provides demographic data about the participants.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male: 3</td>
<td>Asian: 3</td>
<td>25-29: 3</td>
<td>Humanities: 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Married: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White: 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>30-39: 3</td>
<td>Business: 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Parents: 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Presentación y Análisis de los Datos

To answer the primary research question, the researcher coded emergent themes from the data gathered from the 12 participating high achieving first generation community college students from the four Central Valley community colleges that have active honors programs. The interview questions aligned with the research questions, asking participants about their experiences with the engagement factors cited in the
research questions. For the participants enrolled in honors programs, there were 14 interview questions that aligned to the first research sub-question. For participants not enrolled in honors programs, there were 12 interview questions aligned to the second research sub-question. The third sub-question addressed the comparison of responses between the two groups of participants.

**Research Sub-Question 1: Engagement Factors for Honors Students**

The first sub-question of this study sought to address the following: *How do high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students in college honors programs describe the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?*

a. interaction with faculty  
b. interaction with student peers  
c. time on the college campus  
d. participation in oral and written reports  
e. application of critical thinking skills  
f. effect of disruption  

Fourteen individual themes were identified from the five participants, which ranged from a frequency count of four to 28.

**Interaction with faculty.** Discussions with honors participants regarding their interactions with faculty revealed two themes: The impact of the instructors’ expectations upon the students, as well as the difficulty the students experienced in seeking assistance from these instructors. Each theme will be discussed individually with individual participants’ perspectives.
**Impact of expectations.** With 28 references, the theme of the instructors’ expectations having an impact upon students was the largest of all the themes with each of the participants noting the importance of this aspect upon their success.

Some of the participants noted that the instructors set the tone for their classes to succeed. For Participant 1, he noted a sense of “professionalism” that the instructors provide. What Participant 1 appreciates from his best instructors is this sense of connection to “something beyond community college” that helps him in “staying motivated, for sure.” For Participant 4, that tone is set by the instructors on the first day of class when “you can tell if a professor is going to be lenient or…you have to be on point.” He shared that this sense of how “I interact with the professors on the first day” is “the way I deal with that class the whole semester” (Participant 4).

Several participants noted that the difficulty of the course itself encouraged students to reach out to instructors. Participant 2 said that “when I have been very confused,” there had been several instructors who had “helped out.” Participant 2 mentioned one instructor who, in their interactions, encouraged her “to continue on even if it’s hard sometimes.” Participant 3 mentioned that an instructor in her harder classes encouraged her to visit office hours since “they are there for you.” In going to the office hours, “she helped me” (Participant 3). Participant 3 also mentioned that this instructor “was really nice about it; it’s not like I was bothering her.”

The instructors’ availability, especially in informal encounters after class ended, was mentioned frequently by the participants. Participant 2 mentioned one instructor in particular that she mentioned would “always stay afterwards with the class,” sometimes as long as an hour, and because the course was difficult, she said, “I think that really
helped a lot.” Participant 4 noted the positive attitude of his instructor, who “encouraged you to stay after class and ask questions,” which he felt had contributed to the “general atmosphere of the class” even as he struggled with the content.

The instructors’ attitude was noted as having an effect on the participants. Participant 1 identified that “speaking with faculty motivates me to do my work more,” and he mentioned the team effort in doing so. He finds speaking with faculty “helpful because it is like a common goal” (Participant 1) of working towards his completion. Participant 5 expressed enthusiasm towards the material in the course that motivated him “to bring up these really in-depth questions, and I kind of want to keep learning and talking about it” with the instructors. He noted that some instructors had been more receptive to “providing me materials and resources” (Participant 5) than others to encourage his questions beyond the course.

**Difficulty in seeking assistance.** Each of the five honors participants identified that they experienced difficulty in approaching their instructors to get help in their classes. With 21 total references from each of the participants, this theme was the second highest in terms of overall frequency in all the engagement factors expressed in the interviews with the honors students.

Some participants shared that they resist reaching out to faculty. Participant 1 explained, “I like to do things on my own” and admitted he “avoided it [talking to faculty] whenever I can.” Participant 2 shared, “I don’t really talk to faculty. That’s on me.” Participant 5 noted, “I value their time and try not to take up too much of it.”

For some of the participants, it was overcoming a fear of talking to faculty that was impactful to them. Participant 5, a Veteran, shared:
I am in my mid-30s, I am a father of two. So, even for me, it feels a little awkward to approach someone, and even though that maybe what I am hinting at or trying to express, there is still a timidness [sic] in me to ask for that assistance.

Some participants mentioned that they have slowly begun to reach out more frequently to faculty, taking on this action themselves. Participant 2 acknowledged the overall benefit of talking to faculty and said it would help her if she “initiated first more.” Furthermore, she was “changing that slowly” (Participant 2) about herself: Her hesitancy to speak out to faculty. Participant 3 said that as a first year student, she “never used to go to office hours or anything; I was really scared or I didn’t think that I needed to go.” Participant 3 noted that reminding herself that the faculty “are there to help you” helped her get past her fear to seek out faculty feedback. Participant 5 mentioned that “I had little interaction on a personal level like face-to-face until I took it upon myself,” and later mentioned again that “I have made efforts to keep the dialogue going.” Furthermore, Participant 5 was a returning student at least a decade after a failed first attempt at college when he came to college after his high school graduation. He said, “A lot of my successes now are from learning the hard way” (Participant 5).

Faculty seen as approachable helped some participants get beyond their hesitation of seeking them out. For Participant 4, the instructor’s “cheerfulness” encouraged him to “stay after class and ask questions.” Without this perceived attitude, he shared, “otherwise, most of the time, I would just leave” without getting his questions answered from instructors. For Participant 3, having the courage to go into the professors’ office hours when she was struggling was what “helped me become a little more comfortable
with my professors.” For Participant 5, there was still hesitancy in reaching out, as he says, “I also do respect their time, and I do not want to try to make myself the center of their attention.”

Table 5 illustrates for each of these themes, the number of participants who spoke to these themes, in addition to the total number of references made by all honors participants.

Table 5

*Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Interaction with Faculty as Discussed by the Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants Who Discussed This Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of References to This Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact of Expectations</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in Seeking Assistance</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals for Interaction with Faculty</td>
<td>Average: 5</td>
<td>Total References: 49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

49/161=30.43%

**Interaction with student peers.** Three themes emerged from discussions with honors participants regarding their interactions with student peers: (a) the impact of the peers’ attitudes upon the students, (b) the difficulty the students experienced in seeking assistance from their peers, and (c) their feelings of resignation about their engagement with student peers and their student peers’ engagement. Overall, this theme was in the middle in terms of frequency by the honors participants regarding the engagement factors.
**Impact of peers’ attitude.** All of the honors participants noted 15 times the effect that the attitude of their peers had upon them, making this the most frequent cited theme in the engagement factor of interactions with student peers.

For some of the participants, the attitude of their peers had a negative impact. Participant 1 said he avoids collaborating with peers: “It's more difficult to be social with people who are also trying to figure it out because they are like you. There's always some kind of confusion in this.” Participant 1 also noted: “Talking to someone who doesn't really care… makes another person feel as if maybe there shouldn't be much effort put into this… in general people say that college is a waste of my time.” Similarly, Participant 5 had intentionally little to no interaction with peers, as he found that discussion with peers particularly in an online environment “are not very substantial.” He noted that many of his peers had “the tendency that people are just doing it because it is part of the job or part of the curriculum” (Participant 5).

Participant 1 also noted that his peers could impact him either negatively or positively at times. He said some peers “give me the sense of not wanting to do school work anymore, and some people give me a sense that I should be doing better” (Participant 1). He summed this up, saying, “It, you know, depends on who you talk to” (Participant 1).

Other participants were energized by their interactions with peers. For Participant 2, the shared sense of struggling with the course content reassured her: “it helps you feel like, okay, they're going through the same things I'm going through, you know, we are all struggling here.” In fact, the peer interactions were so impactful that they helped her “not stress that much but still get all the study that I need,” (Participant 2) while making the
content “less boring” (Participant 2). Participant 2 concluded by saying peer interactions “make the whole college experience better.” Participant 4, likewise, found through interactions with peers that they “made me understand that I should engage,” and that engagement through increased discussions with peers made dull course material more interesting.

Some participants noted a clear connection between their engagement with peers and a positive impact upon their performance in a class. Participant 1 noted that at best with peers, there could be “a sense of community towards this common goal of we want to finish college and we will. We want to do something better.” Participant 2, who would not approach faculty for help, would therefore “go to students first because I’m always thinking they’ll know something that I don’t… I talk to other students to shed new light to the project.” Participant 3 said that “I feel like the more friends that I made in my classes, the better I did” as then she would feel comfortable getting study groups together since “more brains are better than one brain.” For Participant 4, discussions with another student in his class helped him participate fully in the course once his peer convinced him of the worth of the subject, something he previously was not interested in.

**Difficulty in seeking assistance.** A majority of the honors participants noted in four references the fact that they struggled to seek help from their student peers. Participant 1 asserted that “confusion” sometimes resulted from working with student peers, as they “were also trying to figure it out because they are like you.” Participant 4 noted the difficulty of working together with students when they simply do not want to participate, or they frequently agree with everyone else simply because it was easier than backing up their point with evidence. Participant 5 asserted, “I have had very little
contact with my peers.” Participant 5 further stated that this lack of “communication or involvement with my peers” was the direct result of previous attempts to engage with them, and he found, “it does not really lead anywhere.”

**Feeling of resignation.** A majority, three, of the honors participants cited six times their resignation towards their peers in terms of their engagement; these students seemed acquiescent in the attitude that there was little that could be done to engage others or themselves in regards to interactions with peers. Participant 2 noted that she intentionally does not interact with peers “that much unless I’ve known them for a long time, or I’ve seen them for a long time.” Participant 2 stated that when she happened to be enrolled in multiple courses with peers, she reported feeling more “comfortable” with them; otherwise, “I don’t think I interact with them much, just keep to myself.” Participant 4 asserted that there was little the college can do to help some students interact more with each other. He noted, “I think that if people do not want to engage, they never will during college” (Participant 4). He expressed a similar sentiment in dealing with a peer in a group setting, saying there was nothing that could have been done to help the student engage. Participant 5 noted that his college was a “commuter school,” and given its large size and the transitory nature of the student population, he had no recommendations for how to get individuals to engage more with peers.

Table 6 shows for each of these themes, the number of participants who spoke to these themes, in addition to the total number of references made by the five honors participants.
Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants Who Discussed This Theme</th>
<th>Number of References to This Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact of Peers’ Attitude</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in Seeking Assistance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of Resignation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals for Interaction with Student Peers</td>
<td>Average: 3.66</td>
<td>Total References: 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>25/161=15.53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Time on the college campus.** Discussions with honors participants regarding the time they spent on campus revealed two themes: the impact of the college’s atmosphere upon the students, along with feelings of resignation. Overall, this engagement factor of time on campus scored the lowest overall in terms of frequency by the honors participants.

**Impact of atmosphere.** In terms of frequency, this theme of the impact of the college’s atmosphere drew the highest number of references, 14, for this engagement factor from each of the five honors participants.

Several participants mentioned a clear connection between the campus and their own success. For instance, Participant 1 said that the college had “an atmosphere of achieving something” that had a “big impact on my work.” For him, physically being on campus “reminds you of what you’re doing,” (Participant 1) and he discussed the physical action of walking towards class being similar to walking towards his goals. All
employees that he interacted with while on campus, Participant 1 mentioned the cafeteria workers in particular, helped him with his sense of “general encouragement.” Participant 2 observed, “I feel better when I spend more time on campus working on stuff,” allowing her time to gain “different perspective” from classmates during that time on campus. Participant 3 remarked that when she first began college, she rarely spent time on campus; she remembered that “I just went to class, did what I needed to do, and then went home.” Once she began taking “harder classes that required more time on my part,” she began to notice, “I wasn’t getting enough stuff done at home” (Participant 2). Then Participant 2 began spending more time on campus and realized doing so had “impacted me positively.” Participant 5, mainly an online student, related, “There is something about just being on the campus property itself that I am very proud to be a student [of this institution]...it is for me, very comfortable there, but there is also a sense of accomplishment.” He warned that being an online student can be alienating, saying that spending too much time looking at a computer screen “could actually make you forget why you are there” (Participant 5). For Participant 5, what grounds him is time on campus to “soak it all in.” The atmosphere is so important to him that he takes his children to various weekend events on campus, such as his daughter to see a ballet event, or his son to kick the ball around on the campus green. The campus, for him, is a “place where you achieve your goals at” (Participant 5).

Other participants mentioned the convenience of informal interactions on campus as helping them succeed. For Participant 2, it was the time in between classes or before her shift at work that was impactful for her to make use of that time on campus; she says, “If I go home, I won’t even bother doing it or just ask someone.” Overall, she found “it
is way better when I’m on campus” (Participant 2) as opposed to being online. Participant 3 remarked that studying with peers on campus makes the experience “more enjoyable.” Likewise, Participant 4 felt like the connections he made through his participation on campus in Associated Student Government helped him in “keeping a positive attitude” as he worked together with fellow officers after meetings with shared coursework, spending time “just bouncing off questions together that helped a lot” in their harder classes.

**Feeling of resignation.** Three of the five participants expressed resignation five times about the college’s ability to increase engagement of fellow students on campus. For Participant 2, she had no recommendations on what the colleges could do to improve students’ time on campus, while Participant 3 said that it was up to individual students to decide to engage on campus stating, “It’s going to have to be up to you to want to do something.” He continued, “I don’t know if they really have the authority in telling you or helping you utilize the college…like if you care about your education, you will do it, if that makes sense.” Participant 5 observed that many students “choose not to be engaged, so I do not think necessarily that is a reflection of the school itself.” Participant 5 acknowledged that he observed a “vibe” that some students project that they treat college “like high school again” where they have “decided they feel like that have to be there, not that they want to be there,” through no fault of the college.

Table 7 shows for each of these themes, the number of participants who spoke to these two themes, in addition to the total number of references made by the five honors participants.
Participation in oral and written reports. Two themes became apparent from discussions with honors participants regarding their participation in oral and written reports: the difficulty the students experienced in seeking assistance with these reports, as well as feelings of struggle while working on the reports. Overall, this theme scored in the middle in terms of frequency by the honors participants.

Difficulty in seeking assistance. Four of the five participants discussed the theme of the challenges they experienced in getting help with their oral and written reports with nine references. Participant 1, for instance, spoke of the “intimidation factor” in regards to approaching faculty. He also says this factor was:

compounded with the fact that you are not sure if you could actually ask them,

and if you ask them, you might just take the first answer and run as quickly as you can because you are too afraid to ask another question.

Participant 1 had a failed first attempt at college when he attended immediately after graduating from high school, and he acknowledged that “when I first started college, I
didn’t talk to anyone, and it went pretty poorly.” He said his attitude towards attending college was “like a really bad job that you did not want to go to.” Now in his second attempt years later at college, Participant 1 still found professors “intimidating.” Unlike before, when he was struggling with reports, he will “just push through and ask the question, no matter how silly I feel” (Participant 1). Participant 2 remarked that instructors would ask her if she needed help, but she would tell them “that I’m doing good” even if that was not true. She acknowledged that “it would probably help to ask [when I am struggling], but I’m too stubborn” (Participant 2). Participant 4 divulged that “talking to professors is really hard.” Participant 5 voiced a similar sentiment about getting feedback from instructors: “it is difficult for me, and some instructors are a little more hard than others.”

Struggling with reports. All honors participants maintained with 16 references that they have encountered challenges in their work on oral and written reports, and that this struggle had helped them. For some, the struggle with the assignments produced self-assurance when they preserved. Participant 1 declared that “I have confidence in myself that…I can ask a good direct question or write a direct paper” because “the reports have helped me ask good questions.” This ability to communicate “helps me feel more motivated” (Participant 1). Participant 3 found that increased speeches have “just helped my comfort in front of a room,” especially since her first presentations were something she “really didn’t want to do.”

Working persistently with the reports helped increase their skills as well. Participant 2 said on a particular project she was confused on, working directly with an instructor “helped me understand more of the topic.” Participant 3 said “it just gets easier
when I am writing” more reports, something also acknowledged by Participant 4 who stated, “writing a lot of papers has helped me structure the content better.” Participant 4 found that his success after he “struggled during the first class I took” with research and citations, he applied that structure and research skills in other classes he struggles with, such as oral presentations. Participant 5 found the amount of writing needed for a philosophy class he took “very challenging,” but after struggling with the assignments, he then began to take additional philosophy courses, noting, “If I have to keep expressing myself, I wanted it to be with writing.”

Table 8 shows for each of these themes, the number of participants who spoke to these themes, in addition to the total number of references made by the five honors participants.

Table 8

*Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Participation in Oral and Written Reports as Discussed by the Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants Who Discussed This Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of References to This Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in Seeking Assistance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling with Reports</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals for Participation on Oral and Written Reports</td>
<td>Average: 4.5</td>
<td>Total References: 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22/161=13.66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

97
Application of critical thinking skills. In discussions with honors participants regarding their critical thinking skills, two themes appeared: the difficulty the students experienced in seeking assistance, in addition to feelings of struggle. Overall, this theme scored in the middle in terms of frequency by the honors participants.

Difficulty in seeking assistance. Three of the honors participants expressed their hardships in getting feedback to help them improve their critical thinking with seven references. For Participant 1, this struggle was, at one point in his academic career, debilitating. When Participant 1 first attended college after graduating from high school, he was “really, really embarrassed” to be wrong about an assignment and had no means to figure out how to correct his mistake “when his first answer didn’t work.” He thought, “it would just be easier to say college is dumb. I’m leaving this; it is not worth my time” (Participant 1). As a result, he dropped out of college. Participant 2 struggled in a capstone assignment for a difficult course; she shared, “I didn’t get it or understand it, and I was really struggling on that paper, but again, I refused to get help.” The peers in the class were also struggling, she said: “we were all confused, so that didn’t help” (Participant 2). Participant 3 found that instructors overall “are not like high school; they’re not going to tell you what they want. You’re going to have to read the syllabus, and you’re going to have to do everything.” He also highlighted an instructor he reached out to repeatedly with questions who did not respond; he said in instances like this, “you are going to have to figure it out yourself” (Participant 3).

Struggling with material. Each of the five honors participants affirmed the role of struggling with critical thinking as impactful in their academic success with 15 references. For Participant 1, in his first attempt in college, he was impatient to find
answers and only would “wait for me to get the right answer.” His return to college had taught him a new approach: “I now can actually do something if I don’t know what to do” (Participant 1). For Participant 1, that approach has been modeling what his physics teacher taught him, who said when encountering something new to ask: “What are you given? What are you looking for?” This perspective helped him slow down and figure out questions he needed to ask to get the help he needed. Participant 1 said:

When you are asking someone for help, and then they don’t understand what you are saying…it kicks in…They don’t understand what I am saying. What is it they don’t understand? Is it my fault? Is it something to do with them? Is it a lack of communication? Is it just different values?

Participant 2, who had actively not sought out help from instructors in the past, had an instructor who required students to pick up their papers in her office to discuss their work individually; she said, “I don’t think I would have done that otherwise.” She said she found the experience so useful that she started “approaching more of my math teachers” (Participant 2) as a result of this experience. The feedback the instructor gave her throughout the semester “improved the way I look at text and readings, and the way I structure my papers, too” (Participant 2).

Many of the participants identified a strong link between critical thinking skills and struggling with material. Participant 3 noted that in particularly difficult assignments, she “had to decipher and look at things one-by-one to understand what they were saying and make connections with things I already knew prior to reading.” Critical thinking for Participant 4 for him was developed “through experiences writing papers, talking to your peers, discussions, talking to your professors.” Struggling with
assignments that Participant 4 had to choose a topic he was interested in pushed his ability to think critically, citing one particular assignment in which he “went all out” with his effort, so much so that his motivation “was not just about the grade.” This difficult assignment became a personal challenge for him: “I just wanted to see if I could write a two-thousand word paper” (Participant 4). Participant 5 discussed humanities writing assignments where he was “really challenged to question my own assumptions” as he had to think “not so much when these things happened, but why and what influenced it.” The greatest skill he took away from this assignment was the ability “to make a point and back it up…that is huge for me” (Participant 5).

Table 9 shows for each of these themes, the number of participants who spoke to these themes, in addition to the total number of references made by the five honors participants.

Table 9

*Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Application of Critical Thinking Skills as Discussed by the Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants Who Discussed This Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of References to This Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in Seeking Assistance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling with Material</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals for Application of Critical Thinking Skills</td>
<td>Average: 4</td>
<td>Total References: 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22/161=13.66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

100
Effect of disruptions. In the interview questions, the participants were asked what factors in general had disrupted their ability to engage with their coursework during their educational journey; after asking for general disruptions, the participants were then asked specifically about the impact on their engagement caused by the disruption of the pandemic. When discussing general disruptions and disruptions caused by the pandemic, three themes became apparent from discussions with honors participants regarding the effect of these disruptions upon their academic success: one, the impact of work and family; two, the lack of connection; and three, feeling of resignation. Overall, this theme scored in the second highest in terms of frequency by the honors participants, second only to interactions with faculty.

Impact of work and family. For three honors students as discussed with 10 references, disruption meant a trying time navigating the demands of work along with family obligations. Participant 3 reported feelings of jealousy for those students who, unlike her, did not have to work full time along with the difficulties of managing a full load of college courses; she muttered sarcastically, addressing their situation, “Wow, must be nice; you have the whole weekend to study, you know?” Pushing aside her wariness, she had been forced to become effective at managing her time, saying about her employment demands, “I don’t let it affect my school negatively, but it could if I let it” (Participant 3).

Participant 4 also found the balance between the demands of college and employment challenging, especially as his full-time employment was with his own family’s business. Participant 4 reported that working full-time was “a major distraction,” and that while the family employer was “pretty flexible” with understanding
his college schedule, there were times he cited when he had to make tough choices to prioritize employment over coursework with negative consequences on his grades. He even had taken a full year away from college to save up money, as he resolved to quit working full-time once he transferred, based on his experiences.

Participant 5, a predominately online student, had found juggling work and family a major challenge; his strategy for the past several years had been to take one or two classes at a time as he worked between 10-12 hours a day. He jokingly complained about the disadvantage of this tactic, saying, “Man, this two-year degree’s going to take me about 10 years to complete” (Participant 5). The COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated the situation for his family and work even as he had years of success as an online student prior. As he has been working the night shift, his family plan to “live a healthy life” was for him to come home, help get the children ready for school, and then sleep and study while they were at school for him to be present once they came back from school before leaving again the next day for work. The pandemic, he shared, “has just increased the workload, and it actually made it a little more unmanageable” as the children were at home and needed help during the day. The pandemic “messed me up” (Participant 5).

Lack of connection. For three of the honors participants who referenced the theme 10 times, disruptions upon their lives had caused feelings of a lack of connection. Participant 1, for example, had instances where his pride was challenged by instructors’ comments to him during class, and when it happened when he enrolled in college immediately after high school, the embarrassment he faced was so debilitating that he dropped out of school. He said after the incident, “As soon as it happened, I was like, I am not going back. I said I’m never going back” (Participant 1).
The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on many of the participants as well, resulting in a loss of connection. Participant 1 shared: “all the good atmosphere, all the feeling of being in community with people that are all achieving the same thing: I mean, it is basically gone.” This loss of connection led him to procrastinate more than usual. Participant 3 noted,

I like being at home, but I just don’t like school at home because it’s just not the same, like I don’t have a desk, I have to do everything on my bed or on the dinner table, and sometimes the Wi-Fi cuts out. I’m always on my screen; it’s just not a fun time at home.

Participant 5, even though he had several years of success as an online student, found that the pandemic created problems; he had to drop a class several weeks into the semester because he could not afford the webcam the instructor required to proctor the exams. Because the financial aid office was inundated due to the increased demands caused by the pandemic, he did not have the funds to purchase this equipment and had to drop the course, a prerequisite for the program he had been working towards. He also found instructors and counselors were similarly backed up and took several weeks to respond to his urgent inquiries, and he said the pandemic has caused “you to lose the access to ask your questions to your instructors one on one” (Participant 5).

**Feeling of resignation.** Three of the honors participants expressed resignation about the college’s ability to aid students during the COVID-19 pandemic and other times of disruptions in their lives with four references. Participant 2 “couldn’t think of anything” that could be done, and Participant 3 mirrored this sentiment, saying, “I feel like the college can’t do anything for us to want to be here.” He said engagement was up
to the individual students: “if we want to be engaged, we will be engaged. Then if not, we are adults; you can’t tell us to do something” (Participant 3). Participant 5 noted that online education was challenging for students who he said “have difficulty navigating” the demands of distance education and may not have the ability to adjust to the demands of a routine and ability of scheduling online education requires.

Table 10 shows for each of these themes, the number of participants who spoke to these themes, in addition to the total number of references made by the five honors participants.

Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Factor</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants Who Discussed This Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of References to This Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact of Work and Family</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Connection</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of Resignation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals for Effects of Disruption</td>
<td>Average: 3</td>
<td>Total References: 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24/161=14.91%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11 illustrates the engagement factors and their corresponding frequency counts for the honors students. The percentages represent the total references made by honors students for each engagement factor.
Table 11

Frequency of Each Engagement Factor as Discussed by the Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for Each Engagement Factor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Factor</th>
<th>Total References by Honors Students</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Honors Student References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with Faculty</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>30.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with Student Peers</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time on the College Campus</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in Oral and Written Reports</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of Critical Thinking Skills</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of Disruption</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total References</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Sub-Question 2: Engagement Factors for Students Not in Honors Programs

The second sub-question of this study seeks to address the following: How do high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students who are not in college honors programs describe the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?

a. interaction with faculty
b. interaction with student peers
c. time on the college campus
d. participation in oral and written reports
e. application of critical thinking skills
f. effect of disruption

Fourteen individual themes were identified from the seven participants, which ranged from a frequency count of 2-47. The sections below discuss in further detail each
engagement factor, giving specific information about the participants’ responses. Each theme will be discussed individually with individual participants’ perspectives.

**Interaction with faculty.** Discussions with non-honors participants regarding their interactions with faculty revealed two themes: the impact of the instructors’ expectations upon the students, as well as the difficulty the students experienced in seeking assistance from these instructors.

**Impact of expectations.** The instructors’ expectations and their impact on students’ success was a theme that six of the seven participants discussed with the second highest frequency for all engagement factors with 23 references. For two of the participants, the instructors’ impact upon them was negative. Participant 7 discussed advice she was given in which a faculty member questioned her abilities to succeed in a course:

> I just had this little chip on my shoulder that I had to fulfill when she said this is going to be hard for you; it is going to be tough. I don’t know if you could do it; you should give it some thought.

These words stayed in her mind for the semester and ultimately drove her performance in the course; after the course was completed and she had earned a good grade, she thought to herself, “You know what: I can do anything” (Participant 7). Participant 9 reported how important faculty’s feedback was to her success and how difficult it was to get that advice she felt she needed from them: “I felt like there’s many times you want to give up…that’s basically on how bad you want to succeed in that course, how bad you want that grade, or how bad you want to learn that subject.”
Nearly all of participants shared experiences in which their instructors’ positive expectations impacted them. Participant 6 noted several instances of informal interactions with instructors, naming in particular the after-class time when the instructor would linger to answer questions as being instrumental to her success. In fact, when she was struggling to come to class when she was having a bad day, it was often her imagined disappointment the instructors would have if she did not attend that ultimately motivated her to attend. Participant 7 shared that her “interactions with faculty really impacted my engagement when they really interacted with the students, and they cared about how well you were doing.” Participant 8, a more recent high school graduate who compared her experiences from there to college, noted that in college “it was a shocker to know that the instructors are here to help you.” Likewise, Participant 9 found that the “personal” connection with the instructors “has definitely helped me with being able to understand what they want from me.” Increased expectations from the instructors led Participant 11, a normally quiet student in high school who interacted little with teachers there, to “go all out and try to reach them as much as I can.” At college, she strove to “know more about the assignments and what [the instructor’s] expectations really are so I can exceed those and do more” (Participant 11). Speech anxiety plagued Participant 12, but her instructor had “this way of wrapping you in a warm hug” when she finished her assignments. The high expectations were helpful to her to improve, noting that the instructor’s criticism “didn’t make you feel stupid about it” (Participant 12).

**Difficulty in seeking assistance.** All of the seven participants identified that they had experienced difficulty in approaching their instructors to get help in their classes. With 24 references from each of the participants, this theme was the highest in terms of
overall frequency in all engagement factors expressed in the interviews with the non-honors students.

Many of the students, for instance, worried that their attempts to reach out to the instructors would negatively impact instructors’ view of them, or infringe upon their time. Participant 6 shared, “If I don’t find that my instructor is approachable, I am a little more scared to ask questions and bother them with new ideas.” Even if she had a good relationship with instructors in previous courses, Participant 6 hesitated in reaching out to them, fearing that it would be “awkward,” or they would forget her. Participant 7 declared that instructors are “very busy.” Failed attempts to get help from some faculty left Participant 7 “really discouraged” about the course, so much so that “I didn’t want to do well in that class anymore. I just wanted it to be over.” Participant 9 found some of her instructors “very distant.” Participant 10 said, “I just feel like students should have the option to ask questions” and cited several instances where she, in an attempt to “avoid conflict,” had not sought help. Participant 11 worried aloud that her questions about the content were perceived as “sometimes very annoying” to her instructors, and she detailed the frequent delay instructors had in responding to her.

Returning students developed strategies for reaching out to instructors. Participant 12 said a lot of students “wait for [the instructors] to come to you, but that’s not how the world works.” Participant 12 said students feel “reluctant” to reach out, and that reluctance can even turn into fear; for her, she pushed through and went to instructors’ office hours on a weekly basis because she “knew it was going to be important.” Participant 9 noted that seeking out help requires “a lot of initiative from a student,” as some instructors provided “very minimal” feedback. She had found some
even gave her “pushback” (Participant 9) and “resistance” (Participant 9) in her repeated attempts to get help. To get the feedback and interaction she desired to succeed, Participant 9 stated, “I have to do a bit more digging.” For Participant 9, she had developed an elaborate strategy that included “sneaking in some personal information” about herself and her situation as a single mother, and giving instructors “compliments” about themselves and their material in order to be heard.

Table 12 shows for each of these themes, the number of participants who spoke to these themes, in addition to the total number of references made by all participants not enrolled in honors programs.

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants Who Discussed This Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of References to This Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact of Expectations</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in Seeking Assistance</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals for Interaction with Faculty</td>
<td>Average: 6.5</td>
<td>Total References: 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>47/185=25.41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interaction with student peers. Three themes emerged from discussions with the non-honors participants regarding their interactions with student peers: (a) the impact of the peers’ attitudes upon the students, (b) the difficulty the students experienced in seeking assistance from their peers, and (c) their feelings of resignation about their engagement with student peers and their student peers’ engagement. Overall, this theme
scored in the second highest in terms of frequency by the participants regarding all engagement factors, second highest to the interaction with faculty.

**Impact of peer’s attitude.** All seven participants not enrolled in honors programs noted 24 times the effect that the attitude of their peers had upon them, making this the most frequent cited theme in the engagement factor of interactions with student peers.

For many of the participants, it was the shared struggle with difficult coursework that helped bring the classmates together. Participant 1 found the instructor of one of her courses “unapproachable,” and the classmates developed a “consensus of we don’t understand” together. This shared frustration towards the course made it “become much easier to become a part of a peer group” to support each other through the course. Participant 7 found that peers “impacted me way more than professors,” especially when it came to difficult courses. Participant 7 found that was true because peers had “a level playing field,” and noted, “we are all in the same boat.” Likewise, Participant 11 found reassurance in the fact that “we are all going through the same thing.” This made her able “to connect more and be more comfortable to ask each other” (Participant 11). Participant 12, a returning student, appreciated the “professional level” she was able to get from students typically much younger than her, since “we all knew what we needed to do to get the job done.”

Some of the participants found comfort in the assistance from their peers. Participant 10 appreciated that the peers had an attitude of helping each other out with “when we had any questions on the assignments.” Participant 12 remarked that the “encouragement you get from one another” had helped her in particularly difficult assignments as she worked through her anxieties with public speaking, finding it
“important and beneficial” that she got that from them. Participant 9 gravitated towards like-minded peers who shared her curiosity about the course work and helped her “dissect my ideas and how I feel.” She asserted, “I am here for my school, and I feel like there are students that feel the same way. I have been able to befriend them because they feel the same way” (Participant 9).

Peers’ attitudes towards the courses and the college directly impacts the students, the participants shared. Participant 7 said peers have “impacted my engagement, because as I am trying to help my classmates succeed, they’re also trying to help me succeed.” Participant 8 noted that her peers “would help each other” especially in her major courses. Participant 9 found that surrounding herself intentionally with curious peers had a direct benefit to her success. She said, “I really like that they were engaged…it just made me feel like I could do this” (Participant 9).

**Difficulty in seeking assistance.** A majority of the participants, five of the seven, reported challenges in getting help from their peers with 14 references. The challenges for the non-honors participants were attributed in some cases to the participant’s own personality. Participant 6 reported that she finds “speaking with classmates or people around me...more difficult,” and admitted that she would rather search for answers on YouTube than ask for peer’s help. Participant 8 claimed to be an “introvert” as a reason why she struggled to get help from classmates, a sentiment also echoed by Participant 10 and 11. Non-honors participants also cited difficulty in working with groups on projects, with Participant 6 noting that she was “not a fan of group projects.” Participant 8 cited “clashing personalities,” and Participant 9 cited “miscommunication” among the challenges of working with peers on assignments.
**Feeling of resignation.** For four of the seven participants, feelings of complacency were expressed in regards to their peers and the impact of their attitude on themselves, making five references to this theme. For Participant 6, she believed she should be the one to “reach out more” to her peers but does not. Participant 8 noted that “not everyone wants to be engaged in the class as I am.” Participant 9 wondered about her peers who did not share the same aspirations as her: “I don’t know why they’re there…just go away, just go do something else.” Participant 12 reflected that “you just can never tell who is going to be serious about it and who is not.”

Table 13 shows for each of these themes, the number of participants who spoke to these themes, in addition to the total number of references made by the seven non-honors participants.

Table 13

*Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Interaction with Student Peers as Discussed by the Non-Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants Who Discussed This Theme</th>
<th>Number of References to This Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact of Peers’ Attitude</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in Seeking Assistance</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of Resignation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals for Interaction with Student Peers</td>
<td>Average: 5.33</td>
<td>Total References: 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>43/185=23.24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Time on the college campus. Discussions with participants not enrolled in honors programs regarding the time they spent on campus revealed two themes: the impact of the college’s atmosphere upon the students, along with feelings of resignation. Overall, this engagement factor of time on campus scored the third highest overall in terms of frequency by the participants, second to interactions with instructors and interactions with peers.

Impact of atmosphere. In terms of frequency, all seven non-honors participants cited 14 times that the college’s atmosphere had an impact upon their engagement. For some of the participants, being on a college campus had a certain feel to it that helped them succeed. Participant 6 said she would only attend college where she felt “comfortable,” and for her, the college she attended made her “feel at home on the campus.” Participant 7 noted that the college creates a “common setting” that encourages her to work collaboratively with peers. Being on campus, for Participant 9, was something she strove to be on all day, saying that it made her “able to be part of that community” to feel engaged and mentally “present” while on campus. Participant 10 longed to “find a quiet place on campus…that would help me” as she says that her “surroundings affect me.”

Many of the participants appreciated that time spent on campus gave them access to resources. Participant 6 made the time productive in between each class since “I’m already on campus.” She cited several examples of when she would have trouble with an assignment she was working on, and would then seek out help from the tutoring center rather than “at home spending hours waiting for a response” back from an instructor on an email she sent asking for clarification. Participant 8 appreciated time on campus as a
way to manage her stress from coursework as it was “good to have a time to relax” with friends at the student lounge, or ask for help. Participant 9 was grateful that support services she used on campus “motivates you to continue even though you are struggling.” Participant 12 appreciated campus food pantries and campus events as what she enjoyed about “campus life.”

Access to peers was cited as well from several participants as a primary reason to remain on campus. Participant 7 said “it is way easier for me to understand because I also have my peers around me.” She had found that collaboration increased when they are physically together on campus, resulting in “higher spirits.” Participant 11 said that “walking around campus and getting to know everyone” was something she hoped for on campus.

For the two participants who were single parents, they made special arrangements to be able to be present on campus for a long period of time that benefitted them greatly. Participant 9 said this dedicated time commitment was “how I made relationships” with peers and enabled them to study together at the library or other facilities like the student center or outdoor spaces. Participant 12 used this time she arranged for childcare to be able to find “lots of different nooks in different buildings where I could make a study area and have peace and quiet, and I was able to really get things done that way.”

Feeling of resignation. Six of the seven participants also expressed some resignation about engagement of students on campus with seven references. Participants 11 and 12 had no ideas on how to increase engagement for students on campus, and Participant 12 added that she “just kind of found what worked for me and became successful with that.” Participant 10 asserted that there was nothing the campus could do,
and Participant 6 said she avoids campus events, saying, “why am I going to go when it
does not really do anything for me academically.” Participant 7 resented being imposed
by mandatory requirements, citing that “if you take it upon yourself and go do it, you end
up having a much better experience.”

Table 14 shows for each of these themes, the number of participants who spoke to
these two themes, in addition to the total number of references made by the seven non-
honors participants.

Table 14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants Who Discussed This Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of References to This Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact of Atmosphere</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of Resignation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals for Time on Campus</td>
<td>Average: 6.5</td>
<td>Total References: 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>29/185=15.68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participation in oral and written reports.** Two themes emerged from
discussions with participants not enrolled in honors programs regarding their
participation in oral and written reports: the difficulty the students experienced in seeking
assistance with these reports, as well as the struggle of working on the reports. Overall,
this theme scored the lowest in terms of frequency by the non-honors participants.

**Difficulty in seeking assistance.** Two of the seven participants discussed the
theme of the challenges they faced in getting help on their oral and written reports with
two references. For Participant 6, when faced with confusing assignments, she struggled
to get help from the instructors; she had to “really push myself to raise my voice or just walk over there” to speak with the instructors, even during class. Participant 9 remarked that she had apologized to instructors when asking for help, saying, “I’m sorry. I am going to annoy you…I have tons of questions.”

**Struggling with reports.** Each of the participants not enrolled in honors courses spoke about the challenge of working through difficult material from the oral and written reports in their courses. For some of the participants, taking on this challenge successfully adds to their overall confidence in their abilities. For Participant 10, both oral and written reports were at the beginning “challenging,” but sticking with written work had “definitely expanded my ability to write.” She found the oral reports “nerve-wracking,” but had gotten increasingly “more comfortable speaking in front of people.” For Participant 11, expressing herself was a learned skill as well as she became “comfortable” and more able to express herself in “speaking more about what I have to say.” Participant 12 was able to “build more confidence” with practice on oral reports, which she found to be “a huge accomplishment for me every time I do it.”

The participants also cited several other lessons they learned from their struggles with challenging assignments. For Participant 6, someone reluctant to speak out to ask for help, practice pushing out past her fear helped her develop a “speech voice,” which she defined as the ability to speak with the following attitude: “academically when you ask questions, don’t mumble, and when you need help, don’t say it quietly.” Participant 7 noted that practice helped her feel more confident “in figuring out what to say to people when all I want to do is say ‘um’ or ‘like.’” Through research, Participant 8 delighted in “expanding my knowledge on those topics,” and being able to discern validity of
information she came across. Practice on struggling through assignments had given busy Participant 9 the gift of more time; she delighted in the fact that her time to complete complex assignments has “little by little” decreased.

Table 15 shows for each of these themes, the number of participants who spoke to these themes, in addition to the total number of references made by the seven non-honors participants.

Table 15

*Frequency of the Engagement Factor of Participation in Oral and Written Reports as Discussed by the Non-Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants Who Discussed This Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of References to This Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in Seeking Assistance</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling with Reports</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals for Participation on Oral and Written Reports</td>
<td>Average: 4.5</td>
<td>Total References: 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18/185=9.73%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Application of critical thinking skills.** In discussions with participants not enrolled in honors programs regarding their critical thinking skills, two themes appeared: the difficulty the students experienced in seeking assistance, in addition to feelings of struggle. Overall, this theme scored in the middle in terms of frequency by the honors participants.

**Difficulty in seeking assistance.** Four of the seven participants shared six times that their ability to think critically was hampered by the challenges they faced in getting help specifically from faculty. A lack of supervision impacted Participant 7, who said,
“you really have to use your own discretion to figure out what you should be doing.” Participant 8 indicated that she felt her ability to use her critical thinking skills would have been improved with more “help from instructors.” For Participant 9, critical feedback was instrumental to her overall development of her skills, but was hampered by “some professors that are there just for a paycheck” who neglected to provide it to her upon her request. Similarly, Participant 10 noted that one of her instructors “wouldn’t have her input until after the project was turned in.” She also felt a disconnect when reading what the instructor was wanting: “I’m just sitting there, just staring at my screen, trying to decipher what they are even trying to say.”

**Struggling with material.** All seven participants commented upon the fact that their critical thinking skills were used as they worked through difficult material from their courses. The skills learned, for some of the participants, helped them in other courses. Participant 6 took an English course early in her college career and struggled at the time with feeling impatient about the teacher’s expectations for revision and not understanding. She observed that in future classes, especially in her math, she learned that her assignments were “less like did you get the answer right instantly and more like how did we get there?” (Participant 6). For Participant 7, one of her English instructors emphasized the question throughout the course, “What do you think about this?” In her future courses in STEM, she kept this question in the back of her mind to “formulate my own understanding of the material that they were giving me” (Participant 7). Participant 8 noted that critical thinking skills learned in early classes helped her “know how to ask questions and strategies” that helped her with future assignments.
Other participants cited the importance of analyzing materials from different perspectives. For Participant 9, discussions with instructors have helped shaped her own thinking as she pushed the instructors to help her understand where she “lost track” in her thinking, and she held the instructors accountable in considering other perspectives as well. Participant 10 learned in an extended research project the importance of drawing research from a multitude of sources, while Participant 11 found that assignments have helped her “to really think about another person’s opinion, and elaborate and analyze more.” Returning student Participant 12 felt like in her first college class that she was “just dusting off my brain after 15 years out” and started “wondering what I was getting myself into.” Her classes in hindsight have “forced myself to step outside my box” (Participant 12) with her thinking and reasoning as she “considers the other person’s perspective or the other side of a topic” (Participant 12).

Table 16 shows for each of these themes, the number of participants who spoke to these themes, in addition to the total number of references made by the five honors participants.

Table 16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants Who Discussed This Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of References to This Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in Seeking Assistance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling with Material</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Application of Critical Thinking Skills</td>
<td>Average: 5.5</td>
<td>Total References: 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22/185=11.89%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Effect of disruptions.** Three themes became apparent from discussions with the non-honors participants regarding the effect of disruptions upon their academic success: one, the impact of work and family; two, the lack of connection; and three, feeling of resignation. Overall, this theme scored in the middle in terms of frequency by the honors participants.

**Impact of work and family.** For all but one of the participants not enrolled in honors programs, the impact of work and family was felt greatly as a disruption. None brought up work as a concern although most were employed, but all discussed the impact of family as a disruption. Problems with family’s health was mentioned by several participants, including Participant 8 who said that as she cares for a sick relative, “it still takes up space in my mind” even as she struggles to concentrate on schoolwork. For Participant 10, there was pressure because of her mother’s fragile health, feeling as though the disease was “pushing me to work as hard as I can” to graduate before the terminal disease took its toll. Witnessing her mother endure grueling treatments “makes me sad, but it is also bittersweet because she’s happy seeing me go to school” (Participant 10).

Noise was another distraction of family life, exacerbated by the pandemic. Participant 6 reminisced that attending campus was “like a break, like a breather” from her family and the “stress and pressure” they put on her as a first generation college student. Both her younger brother and her mother, seeing her example, had enrolled in college that fall, and they told her, “You’re the veteran in college now” (Participant 6). She had to provide them “a lot of guidance” because of the pandemic, showing them how to navigate college, and she mentioned the strain this situation had made on her grades.
Participant 10 described her home as “hectic” with “noise all the time” that made completing assignments take much longer than if she were on campus. Participant 11 had been embarrassed when in a Zoom class meeting to have “my mom walk in, asking me to do certain chores.” Participant 11 commented that situations like this are “awkward,” in addition to the “constant noise” from her family, making her stay up late at night to get her work done then when everyone was asleep.

For the single parent participants, having children at home instead of school had impacted their ability to focus. Participant 9 mentioned her child would “panic” during her class and needed assistance immediately, or just needed help with material being covered. Before the pandemic, Participant 9 worked out arrangements to have family help “to minimize disruptions” because “I feel like if I start stressing, I’m all stressed out, and I can’t really focus.” Participant 12 said that trying to study with her eight-year old son on Zoom in the same room had been “interesting when he’s been behind me [at his desk] and I have been here [at my desk in the same room], and I will have to pause what I am doing here and help him with his work.”

Lack of connection. The pandemic had exasperated the connection the participants felt to the college, five of the participants said with seven references. Participant 6 noted the frustration of watching YouTube videos instead of live lectures: “it’s not the same” as she cannot ask questions about the material as she would in a face-to-face course. For Participant 7, class meant “sitting on my bed,” feeling a declining motivation as she cannot get access to help. She found the courses “don’t resonate the same as if you would be going to class” (Participant 7) with her peers. Participant 8 noted the difficulty of getting assistance when she needed it as a distinct disruption, and
wanted to be “able to go to campus and see other people.” Participant 10 thought the work online was less engaging as it was self-paced, as she must methodically “read the chapter and do the work,” rather than seeing her peers. Participant 10 reported that she has felt “anxious” and “depressed” without that connection. Participant 11 reported difficulty in seeking assistance; her counselor met with her quickly and gave her information at the beginning of the pandemic, “but after that he just kind of disappeared, and I didn’t know how to get in contact with him.”

**Feeling of resignation.** Three of the participants had resigned feelings about the pandemic and the college’s ability to help. Participant 7 said she felt a lack of interaction with her instructors, but excused them, figuring “that, oh, they’re probably really busy during this pandemic, just uploading stuff on the computer all day.” Participant 10 concluded, “I just can’t wait for this to be over” and offered no ideas for what the college could do. Participant 12 noted her college “really tried,” and summed up, “Everyone was just kind of doing the best they could.”

Table 17 shows for each of these themes, the number of participants who spoke to these themes, in addition to the total number of references made by the five non-honors participants.
Table 17

*Frequency of the Engagement Factor of the Effect of Disruption as Discussed by the Non-Honors Student Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for This Engagement Factor*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants Who Discussed This Theme</th>
<th>Total Number of References to This Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact of Work and Family</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Connection</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of Resignation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals for Effects of Disruption</td>
<td>Average: 4.67</td>
<td>Total References: 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>26/185=14.05%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 18 illustrates the engagement factors and their corresponding frequency counts for the students not enrolled in honors programs. The percentages represent the total references made by students not enrolled in honors programs for each engagement factor.

Table 18

*Frequency of Each Engagement Factor as Discussed by the Student Not Enrolled in Honors Programs Participants in Addition to the Percentage of Total Frequency for Each Engagement Factor*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Factor</th>
<th>Total References by Non-Honors Students</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Non-Honors Student References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with Faculty</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>25.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with Student Peers</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>23.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time on the College Campus</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in Oral and Written Reports</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of Critical Thinking Skills</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of Disruption</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total References</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Sub-Question 3: Comparison of Engagement Factors

The third sub-question of this study sought to address the following: *How do the descriptions of the high achieving Central Valley, California first generation honors program students compare to the descriptions of the high achieving Central Valley first generation non-honors program students?*

Fourteen individual themes were identified from the 12 participants, which ranged from a Frequency count of 2-28.

Table 19 illustrates the engagement factors and their corresponding frequency counts for the honors students in comparison to the frequency count for students not enrolled in honors programs. The percentages represent the total references made by the participants in the two groups for each engagement factor, and the third column indicates the percentage difference between the two groups.

Table 19

*Percentage of Total Frequency for Each Engagement Factor for Honors and Non-Honors Students in Addition to the Range of Difference in Percentages Between Honors and Non-Honors Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Factor</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Honors Student References</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Non-Honors Student References</th>
<th>Range of Difference in Percentage between Honors and Non-Honors Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with Faculty</td>
<td>30.43%</td>
<td>25.41%</td>
<td>5.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with Student Peers</td>
<td>15.53%</td>
<td>23.24%</td>
<td>-7.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time on the College Campus</td>
<td>11.80%</td>
<td>15.68%</td>
<td>-3.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in Oral and Written Reports</td>
<td>13.66%</td>
<td>9.73%</td>
<td>3.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of Critical Thinking Skills</td>
<td>13.66%</td>
<td>11.89%</td>
<td>1.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of Disruption</td>
<td>14.91%</td>
<td>14.05%</td>
<td>0.86%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 20 demonstrates the descriptive and interpretive statistics performed on these references made for the two groups of student participants regarding all engagement factors.

Table 20

**Comparison of References to Engagement Factors in Honors and Non-Honors Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage of Total Honors Student References</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Non-Honors Student References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>0.167</td>
<td>0.167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>6.000</td>
<td>6.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized Mean Difference</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>9.000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Stat</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt;=t) one-tail</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical one-tail</td>
<td>1.833</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt;=t) two-tail</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical two-tail</td>
<td>2.262</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of the dataset revealed no statistical difference between the two groups of students, the honors and non-honors first generation high achieving students, in regards to the percentages of references for all engagement factors. The critical value for $t$ with a confidence level of 0.95 is 0.05, and critical $t$ is 0.500, much greater. $P$ is smaller at 1.00.

While there were no statistically significant differences between all of the engagement factors between the two groups of participants, there were slight observable differences in the percentages in the reporting of the honors and non-honors participants in examining the descriptive statistics. The two highest observable differences between the two participants groups were Interaction with Student Peers (-7.71%) and Interaction
with Faculty (5.02%). The remainder of the observable differences were between 3.93% and 0.86%, which means that the percentages were virtually identical.

In terms of the engagement factor of Interaction with Faculty, the honors group had an observable difference than the non-honors participants, with the percentage of references 5.02% increase in the honors participants. Every honors participant noted the instructors’ expectations as an influence in his or her success at the highest number of references for all identified themes, making this theme for them the highest frequency of all engagement factors; in comparison, six of the seven non-honors participants noted this impact. Two non-honors participants noted the influence negative expectations of the instructors, while none of the honors participants noted any negative impact of an instructors’ expectations on them. Every single participant, honors and non-honors alike, noted the difficulty they experienced in seeking assistance from faculty, and in both groups of participants, there were some that admitted that they infrequently if not never reached out to faculty, even when they needed help.

The largest observable difference in percentage between the two groups of participants was in the engagement factor of Interaction with Peers, with the non-honors participants referencing this theme 7.71% more than the honors participants. This slight increase could be contributed to the fact that the non-honors participants reported negative impact of faculty’s expectations on them. Every single participant, inclusive of the honors and non-honors participants, discussed the impact of their peers’ attitudes upon their own success. For the honors participants, this impact was reported by participants as having both negative and positive influences on them, depending on their classmates’ attitudes. For the non-honors participants, the impact of peers was their
highest frequency of engagement factors. None of the non-honors participants noted negative impact of peers on them.

**Summary**

Chapter IV detailed the data collected and the findings for this study, which described and compared the engagement factors of high achieving first generation students in Central Valley community colleges. The engagement factors the students described in their individual interviews included their self-reported interaction with faculty and peers, time spent on campus, participation in reports, critical thinking skills, and the effect of disruption. These engagement factors informed the interview questions, which were aligned with the study’s research purpose and questions. The descriptions of these engagement factors were compared between the two groups of high achieving first generation students: those enrolled in honors programs, and those not enrolled in honors programs.

The population of this study was the students who attended California community colleges. The target population for this study was high achieving first generation community college students enrolled in the four community colleges in the Central Valley that have honors programs: Reedley College, Clovis Community College, Fresno City College, and Modesto Junior College. A total of 12 participants who met the study criteria participated in the individual interviews.

The primary research question was: What are the descriptions of the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in
college honors programs, and how do they compare with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time spent on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college? A total of three research sub-questions were asked to determine the descriptions of engagement factors that included interaction with faculty and peers, time on campus, participation in reports, critical thinking skills, and effects of disruption, and compare the descriptions of these engagement factors between the two groups of students, those enrolled in honors programs and those not enrolled in honors programs.

The interview questions totaled 12 for non-honors students, and 14 for honors students, and interviews were recorded on Zoom and transcribed. The researcher then analyzed the transcriptions for themes using the software NVivo to organize and code the data, the findings of which were included in Chapter IV.

Chapter V will detail conclusions based on the findings reported in this chapter, in addition to recommendations for further effective practices and research.
CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This comparative phenomenological study intended to describe and compare the engagement factors of two groups of high achieving, first generation students in Central Valley community colleges: those enrolled in honors programs, and those who are not enrolled in honors programs. The following research question guided this study: What are the descriptions of the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs, and how do they compare with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time spent on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college?

Three research sub-questions were developed based on the central research question, with the first identifying how the first generation high achieving community college students enrolled in honors programs describe engagement factors, and the second detailing how the first generation high achieving community college students not enrolled in honors programs describe engagement factors. The third sub-question compares the descriptions of the two groups of students.

The population of this study was designed to highlight the 1.18 million full-time equivalent students enrolled in California community colleges. The target population for this study included the community college students enrolled in the four California Central Valley community colleges that have honors programs. The sample were the
participants, 12 high achieving first generation students enrolled in the four community colleges in the Central Valley that have active honors programs in the time frame of the study. The major findings, conclusions, implications for action, and recommendations for future research are included in this chapter.

**Major Findings**

Analysis of the data and review of literature gathered in this research study led to the identification of several major findings. The major findings of this qualitative study guided the researcher in generating conclusions, resulting in recommendations for action based on the findings and conclusions. The following are the three discoveries made by the researcher.

**Major Finding 1: The Competing Definitions of First Generation Students**

As Davis (2010) noted, the definition of first generation students itself creates confusion, and this fact was evident through the review of literature.

Tracking data throughout the higher education system in California causes confusion, as the three different systems of higher education—community colleges, California State University, and University of California—have different definitions. As illustrated in Appendix N, various definitions of first generation students are used throughout the state of California and nationally. For example, The Chancellor’s Office for the California Community Colleges defines first generation students as those “for whom no parent or guardian has earned more than a high school diploma nor has any college experience” (CCCCO, 2013, Methodology for College Profile Metrics section). The University of California defines a first generation student as one “with neither parent having a four-year college degree” (University of California, 2018, Transfer Fall...
Admissions Summary section). As the community college system in California was designed to facilitate transfer to these two institutions, an accurate representation of how prevalent the population is extremely difficult without a standardized definition between systems.

Besides the difficulty of accurately establishing how many first generation students are enrolled throughout the system, the difference in definition causes confusion for the students themselves when they transfer between the institutions. A student, for instance, whose father enrolled in a few classes at a community college 15 years ago would not be considered by the community colleges to be a first generation student; however, when that student transfers to the University of California, he would then be considered a first generation student and qualify for whatever additional support the campus would offer him. He may miss opportunities when he transfers as he likely would be unaware of the impact of the two institutions’ different definitions has upon his ability to qualify for resources. Notably, a student may begin her studies at a University of California campus and fail, then enroll at her local community college. She would be considered a first generation student at the University of California but not at the community college.

In the process of conducting research for this study, some of the institutional researchers expressed concern in the fact that this identification itself is student designated during their initial application in the shared Cal-Pass system run through the CCCCO. Indeed, on the CCCCO (2020) Metric Definition Dictionary, it is noted that “in cases where students are enrolled at more than one college or district and have provided conflicting information regarding goals or characteristics, assignments will be handled as
described below” (Duplication section) which for first generation, it states, “if a student is listed as first generation at any college, they [sic] will be considered first generation at all colleges” (Duplication section). This information itself on the application indicates that students, because the information is self-disclosed, may indicate differently upon applying at other institutions as they have developed recommendations for when this situation occurs. Another district provided data for students who met the grade point average without the first generation designation, and the researcher when contacting the students confirmed they met the first generation status before interviewing them. Several students had questions about the term and the definition; a few said, like the example above, they thought they should qualify as their parent had only enrolled in a course or two. Another student said her parent had a degree from a foreign university but not from the United States and wondered if she qualified. The designation itself caused concern for the institutional researchers and students; only students who met the definition used by both the California Chancellor’s Office that aligns with the Center for Community College Student Engagement were interviewed for this study, in keeping with the study’s methodology.

**Major Finding 2: Access Difficulties for First Generation Students to Honors Programs**

There are very few first generation community college students enrolled in honors programs, the data revealed. The Center for Community College Student Engagement provided this researcher a three year, 2017-2019, 25% randomized sample of the full cohort dataset of their instrument. The dataset included 103,537 observations from 694 community colleges in 47 states (The Center for Community College Student
Engagement, 2019b). From the 103,537 total students in the dataset, the first generation high achieving students enrolled in honors programs were 1,142 total students who met this criterion, or 1.10% of this randomized nationwide community college student population. This data is in keeping with the review of literature that finds first generation students to be less likely to be engaged on campus in activities that promote success (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Sanon-Jules, 2010), and several researchers noted that isolation and alienation are common sentiments first generation students feel (Davis, 2010; Stephens et al., 2014).

A few honors participants revealed perceptions of resignation about the honors programs. One participant noted that while the honors program on her campus offered many resources to its students, few actually used them; she said the program “does a good job of reaching out to students and helping them all, giving them resources and stuff. It's just up to that student if they want to take advantage of that” (Participant 2). Another participant cited that requirements of the honors program frequently were “restrictive” in terms of who was invited to join, citing limitations on enrollment status and instructional delivery preferences for honors students. He found the honors program was “geared for students who have that Ivy League or UC aspiration” (Participant 5) and have more time than those balancing employment and family like himself. He noted the presence of several structural barriers that make it difficult for “someone like me” (Participant 5) to take advantage of the opportunities honors students receive, such as smaller class sizes, priority registration, scholarships, or transfer agreements.
Major Finding 3: Lack of Difference in Experience Between Honors Students and Non-Honors Students in Student Engagement

As reported in the Data Analysis section of Chapter IV, analysis of data gathered from participant interviews revealed no statistically significant difference in reporting of all engagement factors for honors and non-honors students.

Two observable differences were noted in comparing the individual engagement factors. Slight increases of interactions with faculty were reported by students enrolled in honors programs (5.02% more), but even in this group, all of the honors participants spoke of their fear and in some cases refusal to seek out faculty assistance. For the non-honors participants, each participant as well indicated a reticence in approaching faculty. In other words, every participant, honors and non-honors, reported fear in seeking help from faculty. The other observable difference in between groups was in their interactions with peers, with the non-honors participants noting a slightly higher engagement with peers than honors students (-7.71%). Within this engagement factor, the non-honors students reported a slightly higher impact of their peers’ attitudes on their success than the honors students, and a slightly higher difficulty seeking help from their peers than the honors students. In all other engagement factors, there was little observable difference between the two groups of participants. Disruptions were reported equally between the two groups of participants, with both sharing feeling the demands of family and work on top of the effects of the pandemic. Honors participants reported the difficulties of juggling employment with coursework demands, while the non-honors participants shared of the weight of family’s expectations on them. One participant, whose mother had worked as an entry-level position in the medical field until she reached the end-stages
of a terminal disease, said her mother “would do everything in her power to get me into medical school and see me do all the things I want to do and that she could have done” (Participant 10).

**Conclusions**

This study described and compared the impact of engagement factors upon two groups of high achieving Central Valley community college first generation students: those enrolled in honors programs, and those not enrolled in honors programs. The engagement factors included the impact of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time spent on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college. Several conclusions were made based on the results of the study’s findings.

**Conclusions Based on Major Finding 1: The Lack of a Standard Definition of First Generation Students Creates Impediments**

The lack of a consistent definition of first generation students has several ramifications: first of all, because the definitions vary in between systems across the nation and especially within the higher education system in California, data analysis on this student population is difficult to perform with validity. As the higher education system was designed to work in conjunction, allowing students to go from one institution to another, this lack of a consistent, standardized definition is troubling.

The definition used by the CCCCO and the California State University system is restrictive in nature; in essence, students are first generation only if both of their parents had never attended college. As the review of literature and data collected from
participants, first generation students are those who are at a disadvantage in that they lack guidance navigating through the educational system. If one’s parents took a few classes or even one and did not complete a degree, that student under this definition would not be considered first generation; yet that student would not have a parent who could share strategies of what made him or her successful in obtaining a degree. The result of this lack of a consistent, encompassing definition is confusion, both in terms of the students themselves and the faculty, staff, and systems designed to assist them. The rigidity of the Chancellor’s Office definition, then, becomes a barrier to first generation students’ engagement overall, and to their subsequent enrollment in honors programs. Based upon these findings from the literature, it is concluded that the lack of a common definition of first generation students impedes intentions to serve this group, as well as efforts to study and analyze data related to this group.

**Conclusions Based on Major Finding 2: First Generation Students Face Structural and Perceptual Barriers in Relation to Honors Programs**

Extremely few first generation students enroll in honors programs, and a review of the literature and data gathered from participants, two reasons can be identified: the barriers of structure and perception. Structurally, honors programs have barriers that prohibit first generation students from enrolling or even applying in the first place. In the application, several honors programs require standardized testing scores such as SAT or ACT, for instance, or letters of recommendations from counselors or instructors that first generation students may not have access to provide, and therefore do not apply.

The honors courses themselves may have restricted access in registration by the institution, so that only students admitted to the program may enroll. Honors programs
may have restrictions that do not allow for flexibility for students, such as requirements in terms of unit load that prohibit part-time enrollment, or requirements that prohibit students to be enrolled exclusively in face-to-face classes. Additionally, most honors programs offer face-to-face instruction traditionally. Some honors programs may rely on the use of contracts, rather than dedicated courses: the benefit to the students is the ability to have honors level work in almost any subject. The disadvantage for first generation students is that the onus of the ability to secure a contract lies firmly on the students’ ability to network with instructors.

The size of community college honors programs in the state is also extremely small. A survey conducted by Honors Transfer Council of California (2017) revealed that from the 37 colleges represented, students enrolled in honors programs were an overall average of 2.34% of the total full-time equivalent student population. The survey identified that community colleges with the lowest honors student enrollment were in the .02% of the student population, with the largest student honors enrollment at 5.9% (Honors Transfer Council of California, 2017). In the Central Valley, the percentage of honors students compared to the full-time equivalent number of students at the study’s colleges were as follows:

- Fresno City College: 1.01%
- Reedley College: 1.03%
- Clovis Community College: 3.22%
- Modesto Junior College: 0.44%

Based on these findings, it is concluded that the structure of honors programs creates a perceptual barrier for first generation students, who may not feel welcome to
apply, or feel that the program would not benefit them. A review of literature and data from participants revealed the hesitancy of first generation students to engage outside of required coursework. Participant 6 questioned, for instance, about events or services outside of class: “Why am I going to go when it does not really do anything for me academically?” Participant 5 noted that honors programs requirements were intentionally “restrictive” in nature and not designed for “someone like me.”

**Conclusions Based on Major Finding 3: The Lack of Difference in the Experience of Student Engagement Between Honors Students and Non-Honors Students**

Findings from all research questions from this study examined in comparative analysis revealed no statistically significant difference in students’ engagement between the honors and non-honors participants, and little observational difference between each of the engagement factors in comparison.

The conclusion reached from this data shows there is no discernable difference in the delivery systems between first generation students enrolled in honors programs and those who are not in terms of their engagement. The faculty role in honors programs is not designed to generate engagement for first generation students beyond what students not enrolled in honors programs experience; peer relationships in honors programs are not fostered differently than students not enrolled in honors programs. Their participation in oral and written reports, time on campus, and application of critical thinking skills are the same between the two groups of students. There is no reported difference in navigating disruptions between first generation students enrolled in honors programs and those who are not.
Implications for Action

The conclusions reached as a result of this study have led directly to a number of actions recommended to further engagement for first generation students in California community colleges. These recommendations are directed at decision makers who impact change at community colleges: the elected board members, chancellors at the state level and district level, and administrators including presidents and their management teams who directly oversee budgets and program decisions. Faculty and staff, as revealed in the literature and the study, play a vital role in all first generation students’ success, so the recommendations are also charged at them in their role to advocate for and impact change for the first generation students, these include: (a) honors program directors, (b) department chairs, (c) honors faculty, (d) non-honors faculty, and (e) all classified professionals who interact with first generation students. The recommendations are also provided to the additional stakeholders at the community colleges—community members themselves who invest in and depend upon their local colleges.

Data gathered from this study revealed no significant difference in the engagement of first generation students enrolled in honors programs and those who are not. If significant changes to the structure of honors programs are not made, the vastly growing first generation student population will continue to feel excluded from honors programs, and few will enroll. Assuming that community colleges in California want to have robust honors programs, therefore, major structural changes need to be made to foster engagement for this student population within the honors programs, and massive perceptual changes must be made intentionally to include this student population in
honors programs. Resource allocation must be designated to make these structural changes feasible—and sustainable. If these implications for action are not carried out, honors programs at community colleges will continue to make no significant difference in engagement for first generation students, and therefore they should not exist in community colleges to exclude this important and vulnerable student population.

**Implication for Action 1: Eliminate Competing Definitions of First Generation Students by Adopting the University of California’s Definition**

To address the conclusions reached regarding the inconsistency of definitions within higher education institutions, it must be a priority for policy makers to standardize a consistent definition for this student group, especially among institutions within states whose student populations transfer in between them. Without a common definition, efforts to serve and gather data related to this important and growing student population are disjointed and lack reliability or validity.

For instance, within the state of California, the three different institutions of higher education have divergent definitions. The definitions of first generation students, within the state of California, are as follows:

- California Community College Chancellor’s Office (2013): students “for whom no parent or guardian has earned more than a high school diploma nor has any college experience” (Methodology for College Profile Metrics section).

- University of California (2018). “First Generation- A student with neither parent having a four-year college degree” (Footnote 7).
• The California State University (2018): “First in family to attend” college (Institutional Research and Analyses section).

Selecting the one identified by the University of California that identifies first generation as “a student with neither parent having a four-year college degree” would encompass a larger pool of students to meet this criterion and allow for more accurate, consistent reporting throughout the state’s higher education system. Davis (2010) argues that the necessary metric for what should constitute a non-first generation student is “being competent and comfortable navigating the higher education landscape, about growing up in a home environment that promotes the college and university culture” (p. 4). The more restrictive nature that the CCCCO defines of only identifying students whose parents have never attended college must be changed to include many more students who need assistance being guided through the complex institutions of higher education in the state and their policies. Therefore, the three public institutions of higher education within California must jointly adopt the more encompassing definition of first generation students that the University of California uses to more fully and consistently serve this student population.

Implication for Action 2: Expand Possibilities for First Generation Students by Mitigating Perceptual Barriers to Honors Programs

Data gathered from this study and in literature review revealed that several perceptual barriers exist for first generation students when considering honors programs. Several efforts must made by honors programs to mitigate these barriers as detailed below.
Addressing cultural attitudes about first generation students in honors programs. As data indicated that there is no difference in delivery systems as indicated by the comparison of engagement factors between honors students and non-honors students, advisory councils must also actively discuss how to increase engagement for first generation students; these discussions certainly should include input from current honors students who are first generation.

There will be resistance as the culture changes to embrace this attitude from all perspectives. Students themselves may believe that “honors students should not need help,” as indeed the findings from this study support the notion that first generation students have difficulty in getting assistance, even when they know they need help. Some instructors, counselors, and administrators may state overtly or think to themselves that honors students do not need or should not need extra support and are therefore reticent to provide it or even offer it as an option. A lack of sufficient financial support from the colleges for honors programs undergirds this philosophy that honors students should be self-sufficient. Increased conversations in advisory council meetings that are grounded in data about this student population will reveal that first generation students do, in fact, need increased support—and are worthy of investment of time and financial resources.

Intentional representation. To begin to address perceptual barriers first generation students face, honors programs must first ensure they are overseen by advisory councils that meet regularly, as this is not always the case; besides membership that includes faculty, counselors, administrators, and stakeholders, membership must include intentional representation from the first generation student population as named,
standing members on the council. Intentional student representation would call attention to this population as an important part of the honors programs to the committee and to the students in the program they represent. Having a “place at the table” at advisory meetings would signify that first generation students are encouraged to enroll and participate in honors programs.

**Data analysis to understand population.** Regular discussion of barriers is a necessity at advisory council meetings, and as such, all aspects of the honors programs must be examined; these conversations must be grounded in data about this student population. Honors coordinators must include data analysis at every advisory council meeting to drive program decisions.

To do so, honors coordinators must work closely with the institutional researchers at their colleges or districts to develop a culture of inquiry about this student population in the program. They must report out data on the number of this student group enrolled in the honors programs compared to the overall enrollment at the college, and the retention and success of this group must be compared to the non-first generation students. Coordinators and directors need to ask of the advisory councils in regards to the findings of this data, “Why do we do the things that we do? Is it because that is the way it has always been done? What are other ways we can approach this? Who might benefit from other approaches, and why?”

**Outreach to first generation students.** Rich discussion points also will emerge when examining the perceptual barriers first generation students face when considering honors programs, discussing how outreach must be targeted specifically to first generation students who often view themselves as excluded from traditional honors
programs. Advisory councils need to examine marketing materials to make sure that applications are not only welcome but encouraged from “someone like me,” one participant noted, not just the recent high school graduate who is going to make it to a UC or Ivy League school regardless of participation in the honors program, he further noted.

Honors coordinators and directors must work with their Public Information Offices to create targeted marketing strategy to the first generation student population, with the emphasis on an “Honors for All,” “Someone like Me,” or “Honors is For Everyone” campaign, as Skyline College in San Bruno, California has done. Marketing efforts need to be directed not only at the first generation students themselves, but the college employees and surrounding community as well to let them know all students are welcome. The use of appropriate social media as a means to reach first generation students should be considered, and focus group conversations to first generation students to determine what kinds of outreach efforts would be most impactful for them must be held.

**Marketing to first generation students.** Outreach efforts must include conversations with all college counseling faculty, particularly lead pathways counselors in the Guided Pathways framework, to inform them that first generation students have multiple points of entry into the honors program, and that first generation students including those already enrolled in the college are strongly encouraged to participate in honors courses. Honors coordinators must present informational sessions to already enrolled pathways students, featuring panels of current or former honors students who are first generation themselves.
Hybrid course offerings as advertisement for students not enrolled in honors programs. Honors advisory councils must discuss the feasibility of offering hybrid honors courses as a means to reach potential first generation students. This would mean offering a common transfer level course, such as a freshmen composition course or introductory political science course, as a cross listed course, with a certain number of seats reserved for honors students, and the majority of seats in the same class for non-honors students.

The course lecture content would remain the same for both groups of students, but the honors students would be working on in-depth research projects beyond the requirements of the other students. The honors students would report out their research in regular intervals to the entire class, thereby raising the level of inquiry within the course itself and demystifying the perception of honors programs for students not enrolled. The instructor would encourage non-honors students who are performing well in the regular class to enroll in honors classes in future semesters, telling them they recognize that potential in them to challenge themselves further.

Implication for Action 3: Expand Possibilities for First Generation Students by Mitigating Structural Barriers to Honors Programs

Data analyzed in literature review and in participant interviews revealed structural barriers to first generation students participating in honors programs; recommendations for action are listed below to reduce such barriers for first generation students.

Shift emphasis in honors programs from access to entry and completion. In many honors programs, barriers are present to separate honors students from the general
student population, and the end result is the emphasis from limiting accessing to the program rather than successfully completing the program.

Honors programs would better serve first generation students by shifting their focus onto allowing open access to honors courses, allowing students to enroll in individual courses on their own or with instructor encouragement as a means to challenge themselves within their major or areas of interest. A creation of a badge system for students who are only able to enroll in a small number of courses rather than complete the program as a whole should be considered as well as a means to incentivize further first generation students who may have already completed several semesters before considering the opportunity of honors coursework. Marketing efforts must advertise to already enrolled students that the option to enroll in a single course or two exists for students seeking extra challenge, and recommendations from faculty can help advertise to first generation students that the option exists to earn a badge, in addition to the possibility of completing the program as a whole.

Completion of the entire program should be incentivized by awarding a certificate of completion of honors, for instance, that is noted on the students’ transcripts and recognized at graduation and certificate ceremonies. Coordinators can work with the college’s foundation to award scholarships for students who complete the program.

Honors advisory councils must have discussions on how students in the program can maintain portfolios of their projects and research from one course to another, and these portfolios of capstone assignments can be shared with community members at exit interviews, rather than entrance interviews, or campus wide showcases to have students reflect upon the body of work they have done over the course of the program.
Examine existing application policies for exclusion. Examining any program requirements for barriers for non-traditional students is another important step to eliminate any stipulations that prohibit enrollment. Discussions about the value of requiring applications themselves to enroll in honors courses would be worthwhile in serving the first generation student population more intentionally. Besides the presence of the application process itself, additional restrictions are seen in honors programs, including admission requirements that dictate that interested students must be enrolled as a full-time student. Some programs require that the students’ mode of instructional delivery must be taken fully face-to-face rather than online. For first generation students who are more likely to take a part-time load or need to take online classes to accommodate the demands of their work schedule, these restrictions prohibit their participation.

Some of the structural barriers the advisory councils must also examine include application procedures, examining what existing policies give extra advantages to non-first generation students. These can include the required use of standardized test scores such as SAT or ACT, additional weight for advanced placement courses, and required letters of recommendation. Some programs interview prospective students to restrict the number of students allowed into the program, and many programs have course registration codes that prohibit students not enrolled in the program from enrolling to keep the programs small in size. The advisory councils must regularly examine the total number of students enrolled in the honors program, searching for ways to increase the size overall to reach more students, especially those already enrolled on campus;
examining the application process itself is an important step towards encouraging first generation students’ participation.

**Examine the ramifications of honors schedules and requirements.** How honors classes are delivered must be considered as well, as scheduling decisions often prohibit first generation student participation. The decision to offer some honors classes online must be discussed as a means to reach a largely untapped population of the engaged working professionals looking for challenge and opportunity. The scheduling of when honors classes are offered must be examined, as many first generation students take courses year round; offering summer school classes for honors would be impactful for them. Additionally, advisory councils must consider offering shorter term honors courses with a variety of start dates during the traditional semester as a means to reach first generation students, rather than there being only two points of entry into the honors program in August and January.

Additional course scheduling decisions impact first generation students. For instance, the use of honors contracts rather than dedicated honors classes must also be discussed as a barrier for first generation students who fear reaching out to faculty. Restrictions prohibiting non-honors students to enroll in the course registration system itself must also be addressed. Instead of placing prohibitions on course enrollment, honors coordinators must solicit recommendations from non-honors faculty early in the semester for motivated students to enroll in at least one honors course, starting with their major.

**Cohort model as a best practice for beginning honors students.** Structurally, honors programs must be redesigned to encourage faculty and peer interaction for first
generation students, thereby serving as an increased buffer against disruption. A cohort model must be implemented, for instance, folded within the Guided Pathways framework. An extensive cohort model in which all honors classes are identified for students in advance may be too restrictive for first generation students, as it would prohibit multiple points of entry into and out of the program, as well as not providing freedom in individual course selection. It would also allow first generation students to select specific courses based on their own interests and abilities.

However, a first semester or first year cohort model would be beneficial to the students at the time when they are most vulnerable to dropping out of college. Tying in this cohort within Guided Pathways framework, such as creating a STEM pathway honors cohort, would be a best practice. The same STEM instructor or instructors would teach more than one class of the same students in the same semester or ideally, into the next semester as well. Good design would require a thoughtful approach to course selection for the honors courses that would come from their required introductory general education courses.

These honors pathways courses could then be themed within the students’ pathway to unify their coursework and allow for students to work on in-depth inquiry projects across classes, examining the topic from multiple angles. This would also be advantageous for students to develop relationships with faculty and peers within their pathways, setting them up for guidance and a network of support when they reach their major coursework.

**Role of mentors within cohort honors models.** Faculty must also consider their role in intentionally supporting first generation students, along with counselors. Cohort
models for honors programs, particularly if tied into pathways, would create additional opportunities for honors students both to meet students in their major pathways, and would allow instructional faculty to have a manageable “case load” of students to oversee in tandem with counseling faculty. Faculty would have the responsibility to be the main point of contact with their student cohort group that they initiate and maintain. The size of the honors faculty student cohort must be met with commensurate reassign time, in addition to adequate reassign time for the honors coordinator to oversee these efforts.

Working within the Guided Pathways framework, a robust system of honors student pathways mentors would be an additional layer of support for first generation students tied in with their majors; honors faculty teaching these pathways cohort would need commensurate reassign time to serve as a guide for students within the pathway, and to supervise student pathway mentors. The emphasis on Guided Pathways framework and the reallocation of resources to support it may be viewed as a threat to honors programs in times of strained allocation of funds, so honors advisory councils would be wise to figure out means to stay viable within this initiative to support first generation students.

**Focus on inquiry-based learning.** Honors programs must look for opportunities for first generation students to engage in inquiry, tying research into their individual interests particularly in light of the students’ majors and pathways. The ability to share out this research to the general population is a means to further recruit first generation students already enrolled on campus. Hybrid courses cross listed where honors students share their research with the rest of the course is a start, but honors advisory councils should brainstorm ways to reach other students as well. Honors students can hold poster
sessions during busy times on campus in central locations, such as the lobby of the library or student lounge areas on campus to showcase their research and catch attention of students passing through. Honors faculty must assign students to present in other non-honors classes as well to get more public speaking practice, and to let other students and faculty know about their projects. Honors coordinators can work with Admissions and Records offices and Curriculum Analysts to determine the feasibility of non-honors students being able to switch over to honors work in that course throughout the same semester.

Instructors of dedicated honors sections, particularly those pathways cohort classes at the beginning of students’ college experience, can work with administration to identify real world challenges on the college campus or community the students can work on together to provide community service and enhance the college community. For instance, a STEM pathway cohort could identify a local high school or early college high school on their campus that might need peer mentors, or tutors in science classes. A humanities pathway cohort could work on advertising materials such as a newsletter specifically geared towards marketing first generation students. As these projects are time intensive for faculty to run, there must be reassign time dedicated for faculty to oversee these important student projects, in addition to reassign time for the honors coordinator to facilitate student projects between classes and across semesters.

**Best practices for honors faculty within cohort model.** Individual faculty members must immediately begin instituting practices the first generation students found impactful: many honors and non-honors first generation students specifically mentioned the power in the informal exchanges they had with faculty. Using Guided Pathways
terms, “Intrusive” Teaching would be impactful not just for counselors but honors faculty, too. Getting to class early, for instance, and when available, staying after class would be a best practice for faculty. Requiring students to come into office hours to pick up assignments and discuss their progress is another strategy that can be used. Holding office hours in neutral locations as well can go a long way towards reaching all students, but first generation students in particular, such as holding them in student lounges, in pathway lounges some colleges have created with the Guided Pathways initiative, or at college tutoring centers. The creation of study areas specifically for honors students would also provide a gathering space for students that faculty can use to hold office hours as well. During class, while students are working on assignments in groups to facilitate interaction with peers, instructors can meet individually in the same room to check on the students’ work or progress in class. Allowing students freedom to choose topics for extended research projects also encourages students to seek out faculty as mentors for assistance with their research; additionally, if students report out to the class about their progress on their individual research projects, this opportunity gives students chance to give each other feedback, thus increasing the interaction with peers as well during class and potentially beyond.

**Summary of Conclusions Reached**

In regards to all three recommendations for action as specified above, it is important to note that for the students and the faculty, honors programs are necessarily extra work. Students need to know that there is a discernable difference in enrolling in honors classes from regular classes, and that efforts dedicated towards that difference are
ultimately beneficial to them. If that difference is not apparent, they will not participate, and neither should they.

**Honors classes must be markedly different.** For faculty teaching honors classes and coordinating programs, honors courses should be markedly different as well. Both faculty and students enter into honors programs and classes voluntarily. Frequently, this extra work is performed without compensation of financial incentives or reassign time. If faculty and students do not feel a tangible difference between honors and non-honors programs and courses, they will not do that extra work required. The magic is in making the perception of the extra work involved exciting, engaging, and rewarding enough that both students and faculty want to devote their many talents towards these efforts.

**Faculty roles must change.** In order for the engagement desired and required for honors programs that provide an enhanced experience for all students, the role of faculty that work in them must change. Faculty must accept the role of mentor as a guide for these students to complete their course of study. The traditional faculty role of delivering content only must be replaced with a model that directly connects identified students to honors faculty who guide, counsel, and mentor their “caseload” of students through their program until completion. This is not a role that currently exists. However, if community colleges want to see first generation students participate in, profit from, and complete an honors course of study that is markedly different, such a role must be created. If community colleges want faculty to accept such a role and responsibility, then the institution must provide the resources necessary to support it.

**Resources must be provided for honors programs.** In order to have sustainable, marked differences in delivery systems of honors programs, institutional commitment of
adequate resources to support honors faculty and coordinators must be firmly in place, including both financial resources and dedicated reassign time for faculty, counselors, and coordinators commensurate with the number of students they serve. Otherwise, the growing first generation student population will continue not to enroll in honors programs in meaningful numbers, and faculty will not choose to participate if there is no compensation of time or money.

If resources are not provided to enable the major structurally changes necessary to sustain efforts to increase engagement for first generation students, honors programs will continue to be run on the fumes of benevolent energy of a few dedicated, beleaguered faculty that will ultimately run out. If community colleges want to attract first generation students into honors programs, in addition to dedicated faculty who will need to serve as mentors rather than instructors who deliver content alone, then the resources necessary to support this different model must be provided. If community colleges are unwilling to provide resource support necessary to change the delivery system at an institutional level, essentially, honors programs should not be offered on community college campuses as they will continue structurally and perceptually to exclude first generation students.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Considering the implications for action reached on this study that were based on its findings and conclusions, the researcher recommends further research as indicated below to expand the knowledge about first generation community college students that would contribute to their success in these institutions. Further research is called to:
• Provide a case study of first generation students transferring in between California community colleges and University of California who are impacted by the definition change of first generation students.

• Compare structural and perceptual barriers honors and non-honors first generation students face when considering honors programs.

• Compare the perceptions of incentives that honors students and honors faculty have in participating in community college honors programs.

• Detail the lived experiences of first generation students enrolled in honors programs that work in conjunction within the Guided Pathways framework.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

In my 14 years in the California community college system, it has always been the first generation students and their stories of struggle that have emboldened me in my work to address systems and barriers that exist for them. Six years ago, as I first began my newly appointed role as honors coordinator on my campus, I had a young woman come in to visit me in office hours who was choosing classes for the next semester and having trouble selecting her honors classes in particular: she was limiting her time on campus to two days a week because for the other five days a week, she and her family were working in the fields as laborers. Her choice of classes was therefore limited to those that meet only on the two days a week she wanted to come to campus, and she could not make the schedule work with the required courses she had to take for the honors program. The frustration she was experiencing that day was starkly evident, in addition to the pressure she was under with her family to contribute financially
compounded by the physical toll she was under in trying to work full-time in the fields while juggling the demands of the full-time honors coursework she was taking.

This story is one of many I have had the privilege to hear from students throughout my career in community colleges. This experience was the first in which I began wondering if honors programs were indeed impactful for first generation students, and what changes could be made to strengthen the network of support for first generation students. I began thinking about which students felt invited to participate in the program and which students felt as if “someone like me” was not welcomed; I began thinking of the recruitment efforts traditionally conducted for honors programs. I pondered that if more students felt welcome, how impactful it could be for the college if markedly more students strove to push themselves academically with support.

The process of conducting this research gave me opportunity to learn of the theoretical framework that grounds student engagement theories, and to research first generation students at length. Most importantly and impactfully, this dissertation has enabled me to listen to the needs of the first generation students and become more fully aware of their vulnerabilities that have, by their own words, become more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant felt the weight of serving as “guidance” for her two family members in navigating the complex process of registration and onboarding for her college, in addition to the coursework; she shared that her family called her “the Veteran of college now.” Admittedly, I wondered who had been that network of support for her when she first started college the year prior. Another participant wondered if he would be successful in ultimately completing a bachelor’s degree, despite a high GPA and many successful semesters of coursework. He
heartbreakingly dismissed his ambitions as merely “a wild dream.” A student gave me marching orders at the end of his interview: “Tell my story to remove barriers for students like me.”

For these students, and for the multitude of first generation students enrolled in California community colleges, I aspire that my study provides insight into the research for this important student population, and that policymakers and agents of change on these campuses use the recommendations found in this study to be empowering for “someone like me.”
REFERENCES


Honors Transfer Council of California. (2017). *Honors program statistics by FTES.*


Angeles, CA: Higher Education Research Institute, Graduate School of Education, University of California.


The Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2019b). 2017 Three Year CCSSE Cohort Dataset.


I have reviewed your item use agreement form and approve your request. You have listed your start date as May 2020. Two of the colleges you list are currently signed up to administer CSSE in 2020: Fresno City College and Merced College. Reedley College as of now has not signed up to administer CSSE, but if they follow their usual administration pattern, they will also be administering. Most colleges have completed administration by the beginning of May, but not all. Please be sure you coordinate with these colleges to make sure that they administer CSSE before you administer your survey. All CSSE surveys have to be returned to the Center by 13 May 2020 so administration of your survey on or after Monday, 11 May 2020 should not be a problem.

I do have two comments on your draft survey. First, in Part IV, you ask “Which of the following have you done, or are you currently doing at this college?”. The only option you provide is Honors course. This doesn’t align with the question stem because the respondents won’t have an option to choose something other than “Honors course.” If you are only interested in being able to identify individuals who are taking honors courses, I would reword the question to ask: Are you currently, or have you been, enrolled in an honors course at this college?”

The second comment is on Part VII. Through this statement, you use the pronoun “you.” However, in the sentence “No information that identifies you will be released without my separate consent...” The issue here is the word “my.” You should change this to “your” because it is the respondent who can consent to releasing such information, not the researcher.

I have also approved your request to use the 2019 dissertation data set which includes a 30% random sample of the 2019 three-year cohort covering years 2017, 2018, and 2019. You can [download the data package here](http://link-to-data-package).

Please retain this email as proof that you have permission to use both the data set and the items you have requested in the item use agreement form.

Please let me know if you have any problems downloading the data file or if you have any other questions.

Sincerely,

Mike.

---

E. Michael Bohlig, Ph.D. | Assistant Director of Research
Center for Community College Student Engagement
Program in Higher Education Leadership
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy
College of Education
The University of Texas at Austin
3316 Goodwin St
Austin, Texas 78716
512-322-4949
512-232-4298 (fax)
bolilg@ccse.org
ecceccse.org
## APPENDIX B

### Synthesis Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Success</th>
<th>Retention</th>
<th>Norms of Academia</th>
<th>Critical Thinking</th>
<th>First Generation</th>
<th>Minorities</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Benefits of Honors</th>
<th>Allegations of Honors</th>
<th>Community College Challenges</th>
<th>Further Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Definition of honors education&quot; (2013)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Methodology for college profile metrics&quot; (2013)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;First generation students in the California community college system&quot; (2014)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Basic characteristics of a fully developed honors program&quot; (2017)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Vision for success: Strengthening the California community colleges to meet California's needs&quot; (2018)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Honors program statistics by FTES&quot; (2017)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;2018 Student success scorecard&quot; (2018)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Grade distribution summary&quot; (2018)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;State-supported enrollment&quot; (2018)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Transfer fall admission summary&quot; (2018).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“2016 Three Year CCSSE Cohort Data Set” (2019).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Community college survey of student engagement&quot; (2019).</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;About NCHC&quot; (2019).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The excellence gap is growing&quot; (2019).</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bell, G. (2008)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnett, M.N. (2017)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coleman, L. L., &amp; Kotnek, J. D. (2010).</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis, J. (2010).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dougherty, K.J. (1994).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engle, J. &amp; Tinto, V. (2008)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fain, P. (2019)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hewlett, J. (2016)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenkins, D. (2014)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenning, O.T.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long, E.C.J. &amp; Lange, S.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masterson, K.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price, D V., &amp; Tovar, E. (2014)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reed, M., &amp; McClenney, K. (2013)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Code 1</td>
<td>Code 2</td>
<td>Code 3</td>
<td>Code 4</td>
<td>Code 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tinto, V.</td>
<td>(1994)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tinto, V.</td>
<td>(2012)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trucker, J. A.</td>
<td>(2014)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

177
APPENDIX C

Brandman University Institutional Review Board Approval

8/5/2020
Brandman University Mail - BUIRB Application Approved. Emily Berg

Emily Berg <eberg@mail.brandman.edu>

BUIRB Application Approved: Emily Berg

Institutional Review Board <my@brandman.edu>
Reply-To: webmaster@brandman.edu

Wed, Aug 5, 2020 at 10:06 AM

To: [Redacted]

Dear Emily Berg,

Congratulations! Your IRB application to conduct research has been approved by the Brandman University Institutional Review Board. Please keep this email for your records, as it will need to be included in your research appendix.

If you need to modify your BUIRB application for any reason, please fill out the "Application Modification Form" before proceeding with your research. The Modification form can be found at: BUIRB.Brandman.edu

Best wishes for a successful completion of your study.

Thank You,

BUIRB
Academic Affairs
Brandman University
18355 Laguna Canyon Road
Irvine, CA 92618
buri@brandman.edu
www.brandman.edu
A Member of the Chapman University System

This email is an automated notification. If you have questions please email us at buri@brandman.edu.
APPENDIX D

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Certification

This is to certify that:

Emily Berg

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

- Human Subjects Research (Curriculum Group)
- Social-Behavioral-Educational Researchers (Course Learner Group)
- 1 - Basic (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Brandman University

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wa6a801a3-27bc-446d-8b49-de4e25fde4f-31453679
## Qualitative Interview Question Development Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Question</strong>: What are the descriptions of the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs, and how do they compare with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college?</td>
<td><strong>Interview Question 1</strong>: Please describe how your interaction with faculty has impacted your academic success in Community College, and with regard to: 1. Personal assistance with coursework. 2. Advice/direction regarding coursework. 3. Advice/direction with overall success. 4. Mentoring. 5. Direct involvement with projects or assignments.</td>
<td>Source 1: (Komarraju et al., 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Sub-Question 1</strong>: How do high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students in college honors programs rate the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college? <strong>Variable A</strong>: Interaction with Faculty</td>
<td><strong>Interview Question 2</strong>: Please describe how faculty interaction could be changed or enhanced to strengthen your educational experience.</td>
<td>Source 2: (Tinto, 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Source 3: (Dudley et al., 2015).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Source 4: (Davis, 2010)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Research Sub-Question 2:** How do high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not in college honors programs rate the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?

**Variable A:** Interaction with Faculty

**Research Question:** What are the descriptions of the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs, and how do they compare with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college?

**Interview Question 3:** Please describe how your interaction with student peers has impacted your academic success in Community College, and with regard to:
1. Personal assistance with coursework.
2. Collaboration regarding coursework.
4. Mentoring.
5. Direct involvement with projects or assignments.

**Interview Question 4:** Please describe how peer interaction could be changed or enhanced to strengthen your educational experience.

**Source 5:** (Tinto, 2012)

**Source 6:** (Herman & Hilton, 2017)

**Source 7:** (Hensel & Davidson, 2018)
**Research Sub-Question 1:** How do high-achieving Central Valley first generation community college students in college honors programs rate the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?

**Variable B:** Interaction with Student Peers

**Research Sub-Question 2:** How do high-achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not in college honors programs rate the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?

**Variable B:** Interaction with Student Peers

**Research Question:** What are the descriptions of the impact of engagement factors between high-achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high-achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs, and how do they compare with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their

**Interview Question 5:** Please describe how the time you spend on campus has impacted your academic success in Community College, and with regard to:

1. Access to assistance with coursework.
2. Access to advice/direction regarding coursework.
3. Access to advice/direction with overall success.
5. Access to partners to be involved with projects or assignments.

**Interview Question 6:** Please describe how your time on campus could be changed or enhanced to strengthen your educational experience.

**Source 8:** (Burnette, 2017)

**Source 9:** (Engle & Tinto, 2008)

**Source 10:** (McConnell, 2000)

**Source 11:** (Ernest T. Pascarella et al., 2004)

**Source 12:** (Davis, 2010)
academic achievement in college?

**Research Sub-Question 1:** How do high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students in college honors programs rate the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?

**Variable C:** Time on Campus

**Research Sub-Question 2:** How do high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not in college honors programs rate the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?

**Variable C:** Time on Campus

**Research Question:** What are the descriptions of the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs, and how do they compare with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Interview Question 7:</strong> Please describe how your participation in oral and written reports has impacted your academic success in Community College, and with regard to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Access to assistance with coursework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Access to advice/direction regarding coursework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Access to advice/direction with overall success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Access to partners to be involved with projects or assignments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Interview Question 8:** Please describe how your participation in projects, oral, and written reports could be changed or enhanced to |

**Source 13:** (Pace, 1984)

**Source 14:** (Tinto, 2012)

**Source 15:** (Bangera & Brownell, 2014)

**Source 16:** (Hensel & Davidson, 2018).
disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college?

**Research Sub-Question 1:** How do high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students in college honors programs rate the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?

**Variable D:** Time Spent on Oral or Written Assignments

**Research Sub-Question 2:** How do high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not in college honors programs rate the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?

**Variable D:** Time Spent on Oral or Written Assignments

**Research Question:** What are the descriptions of the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs, and how do they compare with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time on the college campus, participation in oral and written

**Interview Question 9:** Please describe how your application of critical thinking skills has impacted your academic success in Community College, and with regard to:

1. Access to assistance with coursework.
2. Access to advice/direction regarding coursework.
3. Access to advice/direction with overall success.
5. Access to partners to be involved with projects or assignments.

| Source 17: (E.T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) |
| Source 18: (Tinto, 2012) |
| Source 19: (Pace, 1984) |
reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college?

**Research Sub-Question 1:** How do high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students in college honors programs rate the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?

**Variable E:** Critical Thinking

**Research Sub-Question 2:** How do high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not in college honors programs rate the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?

**Variable E:** Critical Thinking

**Research Question:** What are the descriptions of the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs, and how do they compare with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time on the college campus, participation in oral and written

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question 10:</th>
<th>Please describe how your ability to use your critical thinking skills could be changed or enhanced to strengthen your educational experience.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source 20:</td>
<td>(Christensen, Horn, &amp; Johnson, 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source 21:</td>
<td>(Dumford &amp; Miller, 2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Question 11:</td>
<td>Please describe how disruption has impacted your engagement related to academic success in Community College, and with regard to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Question 12:</td>
<td>Please describe how your college could change or enhance your engagement related to academic success to strengthen your educational experience during the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college?

**Research Sub-Question 1**: How do high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students in college honors programs rate the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?

**Variable F**: The Effect of Disruption

**Research Sub-Question 2**: How do high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not in college honors programs rate the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?

**Variable F**: The Effect of Disruption

**Research Question**: What are the descriptions of the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs, and how do they compare with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty,

**Interview Question 13**: As a student in the honors program, please describe factors that you see as specific to your honors program that other students do not receive.

**Interview Question 14**: Please describe how these factors could be changed or enhanced to strengthen your educational experience as an honors student.

**Source 22**: (E.T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005)
**Source 23**: (Tinto, 2012)
interaction with student peers, time on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college?

**Research Sub-Question 1**: How do high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students in college honors programs rate the impact of the following factors on their academic success in college?

**Variable F**: Disruptive Factors
APPENDIX F

IRB Approval from State Center Community College District

7/30/2020

Brandman University Mail - Request for a Letter of Authorization to conduct study in SCCCD

Emily Berg <eberg@mail.brandman.edu>

Request for a Letter of Authorization to conduct study in SCCCD

Dmitri Rogulkin <dmitri.rogulkin@scccd.edu>
To: Emily Berg - [redacted]

Fri, Jul 24, 2020 at 10:26 AM

Emily,

After reviewing the proposed study, "Contagious Inquiry: The impact of Engagement on High Achieving First Generation Community College Students in California's Central Valley", the State Center Institutional Research Group has granted you the authorization to conduct the research as described in your proposal at the State Center Community College District site. In order to start the research, please provide us with the final IRB approval from Brandman University.

Dmitri Rogulkin, Ph.D., M.B.A.
Executive Director
Research and Institutional Effectiveness
State Center Community College District
dmitri.rogulkin@scccd.edu

[Quoted text hidden]
APPENDIX G

IRB Approval from Modesto Junior College in Yosemite Community College District

![Email screenshot showing IRB approval for Modesto Junior College.]

7/30/2020
Brandman University Mail - IRB application for Modesto Junior College

Emily Berg

IRB application for Modesto Junior College

Janni Abbott
To: Emily Berg

Hi Emily,

Your IRB application is approved. When you get to data collection, let me know and we can provide you with a list of 50 student names and emails for your outreach. I look forward to hearing the findings of your research.

[Quote text hidden]

325K
APPENDIX H

IRB Approval from Modesto Junior College

Modesto Junior College IRB Project Review Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investigator/Institutional Information</th>
<th>IRB USE:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project Title</td>
<td>Exempt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contagious Inquiry: The Impact of Engagement on High Achieving First Generation Community College Students in California’s Central Valley</td>
<td>Expedited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Investigator</td>
<td>Full Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily A. Berg</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Degree Held</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Arts</td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department/Institution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandman University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-Principal Investigators</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department/Institution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reedley College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal-wide Assurance (FWA) number of Investigator’s Institution (if applicable)</td>
<td>Name/contact information of External IRB (if applicable)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Dr. Phil Pendley, <a href="mailto:pendley@brandman.edu">pendley@brandman.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Subjects Training Completed?</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date Completed: 4/30/2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Project Summary.** Briefly describe (a) the project or study and its purpose, and (b) what human participants will experience during the proposed study or project.

The purpose of this comparative phenomenological study was to describe how the impact of engagement factors between high achieving Central Valley, California first generation community college students enrolled in college honors programs and high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students who are not enrolled in college honors programs compares with regard to engagement factors of interaction with faculty, interaction with student peers, time spent on the college campus, participation in oral and written reports, the application of critical thinking skills, and other student identified factors related to disruption in their lives on their academic achievement in college.

This study is being conducted for a dissertation for the Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership program at Brandman University. A comparative phenomenological research design was selected for this study. The qualitative method will be used to gather data using open-ended questions in individual interviews to get the students’ perspective on their engagement and its impact on their academic achievement. After qualitative collection, data will be compared between the two groups of students. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the impact of engagement on high achieving first generation community college students in the Central Valley. This study explores the data from high achieving first generation students to understand the impact of engagement factors. Results from the study will be summarized in a doctoral dissertation.

The researcher will be the instrument, gathering qualitative data through interviews with high achieving Central Valley first generation community college students.
Strategies and Methodologies. (Describe who the research participants will be, how they will be recruited and contacted, how much time will be required of each participant, what procedures or activities participants will encounter).

For this study, the target population is high achieving first generation community college students in California’s Central Valley. The population of this study is high achieving Central Valley community college students whose institutions have honors programs. The high achieving first generation students who were not enrolled in the honors program came from the general population of each of those colleges; for the purposes of this study, high achieving was defined as those students who have between a 3.0 and 3.9 GPA (grade point average). At the time of the study, there were five community colleges within the Central Valley that have honors programs: Fresno City College, Reedley College, Clovis Community College, Merced College, and Modesto Junior College.

Attachment A gives the sample invitation to participate information that will be emailed out to all Modesto Junior College first generation students with the cumulative grade point average of 3.0 to 3.9; Attachment B, the informed consent document, and attachment D, the research participants’ bill of rights, will be provided to identified students to ensure that their participation is voluntary.

Sample Selection Process:
1. Permission was granted by Brandman University’s Institutional Review Board to conduct research.
2. A letter of permission was issued to each of the Central Valley Community Colleges that have honors programs, including Fresno City College, Reedley College, Clovis Community College.
3. Consent was gained from each of the district’s and/or college’s Institutional Research Boards as applicable.
4. The Dean of Institutional Effectiveness at Modesto Junior College provided a list of randomly selected 50 first generation high achieving students at the college with a GPA between 3.0 to 3.9. The list with the students’ names and email addresses was provided to the researcher.

Data, measures, observations to be collected. (Include description and one copy of the instruments).

Records of information that students provide for the research study and any personal information they provide will not be linked in any way. It will not be possible to identify anyone as the person who provided any specific information for the study.

As it outlines in the Attachment C, the individual interviews will be audio-recorded, and the recordings will not be used beyond the scope of this project. Audio recordings will be used to transcribe the interview. Once the interviews are transcribed, the audio and interview transcripts will be kept for a minimum of five years by the investigator in a secure location. Students will understand that the recording will be used for transcription purposes and the information obtained during the interview may be published in a journal/dissertation or presented at meetings/presentations. A final copy of the study will be provided to interested students.
Research Project Checklist (Check all that apply)

- No data will be collected that may identify individuals, (e.g., cohort databases that include SSN, data on individuals, surveys or interviews identifiable by name).
- Protections are in place to ensure individual, identifiable data will not be shared (published articles, conference, presentations).
- Participants may be offered incentives to participate (e.g., money, extra credit for the class). List the incentives here: entered into a randomized drawing for gift card.
- Participants may be videotaped, audio taped or digitally recorded during the project or study.
- The funding source may have potential for financial or professional benefit from the outcomes for this study or project.
- Participation in this study is voluntary for the individuals participating in the study.
- Participants will be debriefed following completion of the project or study.

Project Type (check all that apply)

- Faculty research
- Thesis or dissertation
- Federal grant
- Student class project (under faculty direction – list class/course number:
  - Sabbatical research
  - Undergraduate research
  - Non-federal grant
  - Other (please describe)

Risks. List any potential risks to participants.

There are no known major risks to students’ participation in this research study. It may be inconvenient for them to spend up to one hour in the interview. However, the interviews will be held on Zoom to minimize this inconvenience.

How they will be reduced or addressed (physical, psychological, or social injury).

N/A

Procedures to Maintain Confidentiality. Describe the methods to be used to safeguard the privacy of your participants and ensure the confidentiality of data obtained. (Include plans for publication, storage, and ultimate destruction of data).

Records of information that students provide for the research study and any personal information they provide will not be linked in any way. It will not be possible to identify anyone as the person who provided any specific information for the study.

As it outlines in the Attachment C, the focus group study will be audio-recorded, and the recordings will not be used beyond the scope of this project. Audio recordings will be used to transcribe the interview. Once the interviews are transcribed, the audio and interview transcripts will be kept for a minimum of five years by the investigator in a secure location. Students will understand that the recording will be used for transcription purposes and the information obtained during the interview may be published in a journal/dissertation or presented at meetings/presentations. A final copy of the study will be provided to interested students.
### Potential Conflict of Interest

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
<td><strong>No</strong></td>
<td>Do any of the involved investigators or their immediate family (as described below) have consulting arrangements, management responsibilities or equity holdings in the Sponsoring company, vendor(s) provider(s) of goods, or subcontractors?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
<td><strong>No</strong></td>
<td>Is any investigator a member of an advisory board with the Sponsoring company?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
<td><strong>No</strong></td>
<td>Do any investigators receive gifts, honorarium, income or other funds from the Sponsoring company?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
<td><strong>No</strong></td>
<td>Do any investigators or their immediate family have an ownership or royalty interest in any intellectual property utilized in this protocol?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Approved** 7/20/20

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A signed copy of this form will be returned to the PI with an email explaining the status of the IRB decision.
APPENDIX I

Invitation to Participate

Research Study Title: Contagious Inquiry: The Impact of Engagement on High Achieving First Generation Community College Students in California’s Central Valley

<Date>

Dear Prospective Study Participant:

You have been selected to participate in qualitative phenomenological research study about the impact that engagement has on high achieving first generation community college students in the Central Valley. The main investigator of this study is Emily Berg, Doctoral Candidate in Brandman University’s Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership program. You were chosen to participate in this study because you have been identified by your institution as a high achieving first generation community college student in the Central Valley. High achieving first generation students from four community colleges in the Central Valley that have honors programs were targeted.

Participation in the interview will take about an hour of your time and is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to understand the impact of engagement on high achieving first generation community college students. This study explores the data from high achieving first generation community college students in the Central Valley. Results from the study will be summarized in a doctoral dissertation.

PROCEDURES: If you decide to participate in the study, you will be interviewed by the researcher. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions designed to allow you to share your experience of how engagement has impacted your success as a high achieving first generation community college student. The interview sessions will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes.

RISKS, INCONVENIENCES, AND DISCOMFORTS: There are no known major risks to your participation in this research study. It may be inconvenient for you to spend up to one hour in the interview. However, the interviews will be held on Zoom to minimize this inconvenience.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS: There are no major benefits to you for participation, but your feedback could impact community colleges and their policies to foster student success. The information from this study is intended to inform researchers, policymakers,
administrators, and educators. The findings and recommendations from this study will be made available to all participants.

**ANONYMITY:** Records of information that you provide for the research study and any personal information you provide will not be linked in any way. It will not be possible to identify you as the person who provided any specific information for the study.

You are encouraged to ask any questions, at any time, that will help you understand how this study will be performed and/or how it will affect you. You may contact me by phone at [redacted] or email [redacted]. You can also contact Dr. Phil Pendley by email at pendley@brandman.edu. If you have any further questions or concerns about this study or your rights as a study participant, you may write or call the Office of the Executive Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, and 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

Sincerely,

Emily Berg
Doctoral Candidate, Brandman University
APPENDIX J

Informed Consent Form

INFORMATION ABOUT: Contagious Inquiry: The Impact of Engagement on High Achieving First Generation Community College Students in California’s Central Valley

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Emily Berg, Doctoral Candidate

PURPOSE OF STUDY: This study is being conducted for a dissertation for the Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership program at Brandman University. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand the impact of engagement on high achieving first generation community college students. This study explores the data from high achieving first generation students to understand the impact of engagement factors. Results from the study will be summarized in a doctoral dissertation.

In participating in this research study, I agree to partake in an audio-recorded, semi-structured interview. The interview will take place by Zoom and will last approximately one hour. During this interview, I will be asked a series of questions designed to allow me to share my experiences as to how engagement has impacted my success as a high-achieving first generation community college student. Completion of the individual interviews will take place from July through September 2020.

I understand that:

a) There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. I understand that the Investigator will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes and research materials in a locked file drawer that is available only to the researcher.

b) I understand that the interview will be audio recorded. The recordings will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist. The audio recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue and to ensure the accuracy of the information collected during the interview. All information will be identifier-redacted and my confidentiality will be maintained. Upon completion of the study all recordings will be destroyed. All other data and consents will be securely stored for three years after completion of data collection and confidentially shredded or fully deleted.

c) The possible benefit of this study to me is that my input may help add to the research on the impact of engagement on high achieving first generation community college students. The findings and recommendations from this study will be made available to all participants. I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation.
d) If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Emily Berg by phone at [redacted] or email at [redacted]. The dissertation chair Dr. Phil Pendley may also answer questions at pendley@brandman.edu.

e) My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not participate in the study and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide not to answer particular questions during the interview if I so choose. I understand that I may refuse to participate or may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the Investigator may stop the study at any time.

f) No information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent re-obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the “Research Participant’s Bill of Rights.” I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

I have read the above and understand it and hereby voluntarily consent to the procedures(s) set forth.

__________________________________________
Signature of Participant or Responsible Party

__________________________________________
Signature of Principal Investigator

__________________________________________
Date
APPENDIX K

Research Participant’s Bill of Rights

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Research Participant’s Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the study.
7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the Brandman University Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The Brandman University Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.

Brandman University IRB
Adopted
November 2013
APPENDIX L

Audio Release Form

RESEARCH STUDY TITLE: Contagious Inquiry: The Impact of Engagement on High Achieving First Generation Community College Students in California’s Central Valley

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY
16355 LAGUNA CANYON ROAD
IRVINE, CA  92618

I authorize Emily Berg, Brandman University Doctoral Candidate, to record my voice. I give Brandman University and all persons or entities associated with this research study permission or authority to use this recording for activities associated with this research study.

I understand that the recording will be used for transcription purposes and the information obtained during the interview may be published in a journal/dissertation or presented at meetings/presentations.

I will be consulted about the use of the audio recordings for any purpose other than those listed above. Additionally, I waive any right to royalties or other compensation arising correlated to the use of information obtained from the recording.

By signing this form, I acknowledge that I have completely read and fully understand the above release and agree to the outlined terms. I hereby release all claims against any person or organization utilizing this material.

_____________________________________________   __________________
Signature of Participant or Responsible Party   Date
APPENDIX M

Interview Protocol

**Interviewer:** Emily Berg

**Interview time planned:** Approximately one hour

**Interview place:** Zoom

**Recording:** Digital voice recorders

**Written:** Field and observational notes

**Introductions:** Introduce ourselves to one another.

**Opening Statement:** [Interviewer states:] Thank you for taking time to meet with me and agreeing to participate in this interview. To review, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand the impact of engagement on high achieving first generation community college students. The questions I will ask are written to elicit this information and to provide you an opportunity to share any personal stories and experiences you have had, at your discretion, throughout this interview.

I would like to remind you any information that is obtained in connection to this study will remain confidential. All of the data will be reported without reference to any individual or any institution. Did you receive the Informed Consent and Brandman Bill of Rights I sent you via email? I need to hear your affirmative answer, so it is recorded as confirmation of consent to participate. Do you have any questions or need clarification about either document?

**Interview Agenda:** [Interviewer states:] I anticipate this interview will take about an hour today. First, I will begin the audio recorder and ask a list of questions related to the purpose of the study. For ease of our discussion and accuracy, I will record our conversation as indicated in the Informed Consent. I will stop the recorder and conclude our interview session. After your interview is transcribed, you will receive a copy of the complete transcripts to check for accuracy prior to the data being analyzed. Please remember that anytime during this process, you have the right to stop the interview or skip a question. If at any time you do not understand the questions being asked, please do not hesitate to ask for clarification. Do you have any questions before we begin? Okay, let’s get started, and thanks so much for your time.
Interview Questions (for all students)

1. Please describe how your interaction with faculty has impacted your academic success in Community College, and with regard to:
   a. Personal assistance with coursework.
   b. Advice/direction regarding coursework.
   c. Advice/direction with overall success.
   d. Mentoring.
   e. Direct involvement with projects or assignments.

2. Please describe how faculty interaction could be changed or enhanced to strengthen your educational experience.

3. Please describe how your interaction with student peers has impacted your academic success in Community College, and with regard to:
   a. Personal assistance with coursework.
   b. Collaboration regarding coursework.
   c. Collaboration with overall success.
   d. Mentoring.
   e. Direct involvement with projects or assignments.

4. Please describe how peer interaction could be changed or enhanced to strengthen your educational experience.

5. Please describe how the time you spend on campus has impacted your academic success in Community College, and with regard to:
   a. Access to assistance with coursework.
   b. Access to advice/direction regarding coursework.
   c. Access to advice/direction with overall success.
   d. Access to mentoring.
   e. Access to partners to be involved with projects or assignments.

6. Please describe how your time on campus could be changed or enhanced to strengthen your educational experience.

7. Please describe how your participation in oral and written reports has impacted your academic success in Community College, and with regards to:
   a. Access to assistance with coursework.
   b. Access to advice/direction regarding coursework.
   c. Access to advice/direction with overall success.
   d. Access to mentoring.
   e. Access to partners to be involved with projects or assignments.

8. Please describe how your participation in projects, oral, and written reports could be changed or enhanced to strengthen your educational experience.

9. Please describe how your application of critical thinking skills has impacted your academic success in Community College, and with regards to:
   a. Access to assistance with coursework.
   b. Access to advice/direction regarding coursework.
   c. Access to advice/direction with overall success.
d. Access to mentoring.
e. Access to partners to be involved with projects or assignments.

10. Please describe how your ability to use your critical thinking skills could be changed or enhanced to strengthen your educational experience.

11. Please describe how disruption has impacted your engagement related to academic success in Community College, and with regard to:
   • Disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

12. Please describe how your college could change or enhance your engagement related to academic success to strengthen your educational experience during the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Additional Interview Questions for Students Enrolled in Honors Program**

13. As a student in the honors program, please describe factors that you see as specific to your honors program that other students do not receive.

14. Please describe how these factors could be changed or enhanced to strengthen your educational experience as an honors student.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Institution or Organization</th>
<th>Definition of First Generation Students</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Center for Community College Student Engagement</td>
<td>“If the respondent indicated that his or her mother or father had attended at least some college, then the student is classified as Not First generation; otherwise, he or she is classified as First generation.”</td>
<td>The Center for Community College Student Engagement, (2019). Community College Survey of Student Engagement. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.ccsse.org/">http://www.ccsse.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California Community College Chancellor’s Office</td>
<td>Students “for whom no parent or guardian has earned more than a high school diploma nor has any college experience”</td>
<td>California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. (2013). Student Success initiative: Methodology for college profile metrics. Retrieved from <a href="https://scorecard.cccco.edu/scorecarddocumentation.aspx">https://scorecard.cccco.edu/scorecarddocumentation.aspx</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>