First-generation community college students and their sense of place: An opportunity to succeed; an opportunity to belong

Cheryl J. Williams
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First-generation community college students and their sense of place:  
An opportunity to succeed; an opportunity to belong

by

Cheryl J. Williams

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:
Linda Serra Hagedorn, Major Professor
Larry Ebbers
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Ran Li

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The Graduate College will ensure this dissertation is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2017

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DEDICATION

To my sons, Grant and Stewart, and my husband, Mike.
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ABSTRACT

Over the past decades, community college attendance has continued to be the first stop and school of choice for over half of the college student population, particularly for first-generation students. However, despite their enrollment, degree attainment remains low for first-generation students. It is not enough to get them in the door—it is critical that they belong. A college experience that provides a sense of belonging and sense of place for first-generation students is crucial. Sense of belonging has been shown to contribute to a positive student identity and experience that leads to higher retention and graduation rates. Student belonging has been an important topic of research for many student populations, while sense of place has not. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of community college students concerning their perceptions of the community college as a place. Specifically, this study explored the perceptions and preferences of students at a Midwest community college to gain a deeper understanding of how they like to experience sense of place from their perspective.

In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain deeper understanding of students’ sense of place. Participants were asked questions related to the sense of place that involved historical, cultural, social, and physical aspects of their community college experience. Research oftentimes finds perceptions of the first-generation community college student experience as lonely or even debilitating. Results of this study found first-generation community college students’ experiences as thriving. This study can contribute to literature related to sense of belonging and the college experience from the perspective of sense of place.
Sense of place allows a view into what sense of belonging looks like for first-generation students by a) introducing a sense of place model applicable to first-generation community college students; b) emphasizing the importance of a critical mass of FGS; c) providing a holistic view of sense of belonging and how sense of place is a more appropriate lens to view FGS; and d) focusing on how cultural forces influence sense of place and how to capitalize on them to best benefit FGS. The sense of place theoretical construct can be applied to future studies on various student populations to enhance sense of belonging. These findings can be collectively significant for all higher education professionals that can influence success for FGS.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Between the years of 1998 and 2012, overall college enrollment has increased approximately 42% (Hussar & Bailey, 2016). Included in the enrollment increase are first-generation (FGS) and historically underrepresented students. These students come in hopes of finding employment or obtaining new skills. These groups accounted for an overall 40 percent increase in college enrollment and 146 percent for minority students alone (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup & Kuh, 2008). More than half of all college students attend or begin at a 2 year community college and almost one third of current college students are first-generation (AACC, 2017). FGS are overrepresented at two-year community colleges representing 73 percent of the student population and underrepresented at four-year institutions consisting of 34 percent (Choy, 2001). FGS are known as being the first person in their family to attend college which commonly involves many struggles that stem from extra responsibilities and no family support systems. Many FGS must work full-time to support a family or even contribute to the finances of their immediate and extended families making it more challenging for college attendance. Additionally, while many families do not have the extra finances required for college attendance, many also may not value the importance of an education; sometimes even discouraging attendance. This is not beneficial for FGS because forgoing a college credential or degree today is a risky venture with stiff consequences.

Many high school graduates have been able to coast through decades of the manufacturing boom successfully raising families. However, jobs that require a college degree or credential in the United States as a whole has now become the new norm, including in the state of Iowa. If a high school diploma does not bring as much value as in the past, median incomes will drop significantly sending much of that population into poverty. The 2017 Bureau of Labor
Statistics report showed incomes for less than a high school diploma as $26,200, $36,000 with a high school diploma and $60,100 with a bachelor’s degree. Unfortunately, a family of four with the median salary level for a high school diploma would be considered at poverty level. In the state of Iowa for example, it is projected that 68% of all jobs will require an education beyond high school creating a workforce shortage by 2025. That could leave a large percentage of Iowa’s population in poverty particularly when in 2014; only 60% of Iowans were qualified for those jobs that required higher education. Government officials have been preparing for the shortage with a workforce initiative and goal that 70% of Iowans obtain postsecondary education or training by 2025.

The 2025 Iowa workforce goal calls for a narrative change for nontraditional students to obtain the education and training not needed in the past with most choosing to attend a community college. College attendance is a “newly-opened door” (p. 28) to educational attainment for these students, however research finds the door is a “revolving one” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 28). Statistics show community colleges struggle with educational attainment and completion leaving all community college students at risk for not obtaining the needed workforce credentials. The risk is much higher for first-generation, low-income, and minority students. That attainment gap is very prevalent in Iowa between low-income and non-low-income and minority groups showing 56 percent black and 36 percent Hispanic having some form of postsecondary education or training. Students from rural Iowa can be at an even higher risk of not obtaining the necessary education from college attendance. Most have a double disadvantage of being first in the family to attend college but may not attend because of location or they are not academically prepared for college. The state of Iowa as a whole has one of the highest high school graduation rates in the country however; rates for college preparedness are
low. The 2015 ACT college readiness benchmarks met for Iowa minorities consisted of only 16 percent for Hispanics and 10 percent for black students. All of these issues contribute to college enrollment and attainment problems for first-generation community college students.

Other reasons for disruptions that FGS struggle with range from high drop-out rates, swirling, full-time work, part-time attendance, family rhetoric, and lack of sense of belonging (Johnson, 2006; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Snyder, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012). Many rural Iowa students can also be at that higher risk for many issues as well as they may struggle with feeling a strong sense of place and space that is so different from their rural small town. Historically students from rural communities may feel a strong sense of obligation to continue the family legacy which does not include college as a place for them. Another issue is a mismatch of cultures between institutions and first-generation or minority students which can become problematic when students try to assimilate into the college campus. Many students cite feelings of apprehension, cultural suicide, cultural mismatch, homesickness, and lack of fit (Stroebe, van Vliet, Hewstone & Willis, 2002; & Maramba, 2011; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson & Covarrubias, 2012). FGS have also been found to possess low aspirations to attend college where high-achieving students are qualified to attend a selective four-year institution, and then never apply. Many of those higher-achieving FGS in Iowa for example, may never even leave the local community college. The bottom line is most FGS are less likely to attain a postsecondary degree (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Higher education research has indicated that the college experience and campus life can be very influential and have a positive impact on student satisfaction, sense of belonging, student identities, moral development, persistence and retention for all students (Tinto, 1975; Rendon, 1994; Strayhorn, 2012; Casidy, 2013; Rest & Narvaez, 2014). However, the impact can be
greater for certain student populations such as first-generation, low income, underrepresented-minority and rural student groups who frequently experience a lack of sense of belonging, culture shock, struggle with student identity, have a harder time persisting in college and are more likely to drop-out. Moreover, positive college experiences can be diminished with attendance at a two-year community college due to structural issues that come with a community college.

The current body of research in this area strives to understand how various student populations experience college and belonging in several ways. Some of those areas of research consist of examining the effects of student integration and engagement on retention, persistence, completion, and sense of belonging (Gifford, Briceño-Perriott & Mianzo, 2006; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Museus & Maramba, 2011; Myers, 2013). Other studies focus on effects of how student demographics and characteristics influence the college experience (Byrant, Spenner & Martin, 2006; Gushue, Clarke, Pantzer & Scanlan, 2006; Cavazos, Johnson & Sparrow, 2010; Krumrei-Mancuso, Klein, 2013; Newton, Kim & Wilcox, 2013). Lastly, other research has included many phenomenological and narrative studies that have shown actual words and perceptions of first-generation college student and oftentimes, their debilitating college experiences (Engle, Bermeo & O’Brien, 2006; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Karp & Bork, 2012).

These studies have contributed to understanding and identifying solutions to helping FGS feel that they belong which has led to better college experiences. However, little research is found that considers sense of belonging for first-generation community college students and their sense of place as a holistic theoretical perspective to examine their perceptions. Research has shown that students who feel a greater sense of belonging in college are more likely to persist
and graduate. Sense of place on the other hand, can create a powerful medium that captures the complex connections between student and environment that go beyond the belong/not belong concept. Sense of place is connected to the history and ancestry of each individual student and depends on the context and environment they are encountering. Students will experience sense of place differently between the student and their family and friends at home as well as those communities they belong to at home. Sense of place can also serve as a bridge between student and community college and systems outside of the community college or those who do not attend college. Students might experience a lack of belonging or place in both environments with not fitting in at the college and not fitting in at home because of the desire to attend college. Sense of place could be conflicted with that student depending on which environment they are encountering. Therefore, with the large and growing diverse student population attending community colleges, it is crucial to understand their experiences and perceptions of the community college and their sense of place.

This study collected data from community college students enrolled in the spring of 2017 semester at a Midwest multi-campus community college using in-depth interviews and phenomenological thematic analysis to examine how students perceive their campus. Consideration of Strayhorn’s (2012) sense of belonging as a backdrop and Hay’s (1988) theory of sense of place as theoretical perspective will contribute to current literature and extend perspectives.

**Statement of the Problem**

While the numbers of FGS continue to increase, studies have shown that first generation students are more likely to leave prematurely (Jehangir, 2010). Research shows that first-generation community college students may experience a lack of fit, feel alienated, balance
multiple identities, have lower levels of involvement and engagement, have a different college experience, and are more likely to drop-out -- particularly in their first year (Choy, 2001; Jehangir, 2010; Orbe, 2004; Engle & Tinto, 2008). These feelings can be exacerbated for students that come from rural communities prevalent in the state of Iowa. Many colleges and universities across the country have made many changes to their campuses to better accommodate FGS and help them feel that they belong. These types of efforts can be seen in the increase of multicultural centers, early alert systems, proactive advising, pathway navigators, inclusive orientation programs, and specific success programs such as TRIO (Vivian, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2012). Meanwhile success rates in terms of degree attainment and college readiness of FGS remains substantially low (ACT, 2016).

With the disappearance of the higher salary manufacturing jobs and declining community college budgets that come with increased accountability, it is critical that these students feel the natural next step for them is the community college. A deeper understanding of how students perceive the community college is needed so they can feel welcome, want to continue their educational journey and substantiate their goals. Research also indicates that students who feel a greater sense of belonging are more likely to succeed (Strayhorn, 2012), however none focus on a sense of place that is worthy of exploration. Jehangir (2010) conducted a study using stories of university FGS to show how multicultural learning communities (MLC) and critical pedagogies in the classroom helped increase their sense of place, voice, and belonging. Other than that, there does not appear to be research that explores the perceptions of community college students related to their sense of place and a void in understanding of sense of place exists as experienced by these students.
Despite efforts and promising accommodations for FGS, institutional values may not always align with student perceptions. Mazzarol, Soutar and Thein’s (2001) comparative study between institutional and student perspectives showed discrepancies between the two groups. The institutional sample rated image and reputation as most important while the student sample chose employability and other factors (p. 51). Specific needs of urban students may include interest in vocational trades while a suburban community college may primarily serve students who intend to transfer to a university. Perspectives can also differ between urban, suburban, and rural campuses. Manzo and Perkins (2006) argue that in order to find common ground, students need to experience emotional attachment and highlight the importance of using the concept of place attachment. Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001) found social attachment to be stronger than physical attachment however, both were linked together. Low and Altman (1992) define place attachment as an affective bond between people and places which stems from Hay’s (1988) theory of sense of place. Hay’s research on human behavior and how they experience place, culminated into some of the following thoughts rather than a definition:

“Both a sensing element, affected by perceptual, spatial, and structural constraints, and a bonding element involving emotions, motives, insider traits, and taken-for-grantedness come together to form a sense of place” and “places that are meaningful revolve around feelings of membership or belongingness to a group, including an emotional connection base” (p. 162).

In addition, Tinto (1975), Strayhorn (2012) and other researchers in higher education have found social engagement and sense of belonging important factors in improving retention. Many researchers have used Astin’s (1984) Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) model of student involvement that posits the input of the student with the environment of the institution
influence the outcome; usually connected to student success and retention, which the model is even less pertinent to the community college population.

Although studies have identified many specific needs of the growing diverse student population, there appears to be a gap in the literature about the experiences of community college students and their perceived sense of place within the community college landscape. For the purpose of this study, sense of place is defined as how student interactions with the physical and social environment interact together to form how a student perceives his or her subjective emotional attachment and belonging to the place. This phenomenological study posits that a “sense of place is primarily determined by the meanings given to it by those whose place it is” (Campelo, Aitken, Thyne & Gnoth, 2013, p. 154). Exploring community college student perspectives and their sense of place lens can provide further understanding to those in higher education that could benefit from this knowledge.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of community college students in regard to their perceptions of the community college as a place. This study hopes to contribute and extend the literature related to sense of place and sense of belonging among first generation community college students. Most critically, this study intends to describe and understand interactions between the students and the institution viewed from the perspective of a first generation community college student. For the purpose of this study, first generation student status is defined as a student having at least one parent without a postsecondary degree. Exploring experiences of community college students can provide a deeper understanding that could impact how community colleges are viewed which in turn could lead to better student experiences designed for them. Admissions, recruiting, or marketing
departments might benefit from increased knowledge when helping prospective students with deciding to attend and assimilating. Furthermore, this study has the potential to provide college presidents, administrators, and marketing departments with a deeper understanding of the student experience.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this research study was to identify, describe, and understand first generation community college students’ perceptions of the community college and the role that community college plays in students’ interpretations of the sense of place. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are first-generation students overall perceptions of the community college?
2. What role does the community college play in the perceptions of first-generation students?
3. How do first-generation students perceive a sense of place related to the community college?

**Theoretical Perspectives**

While community colleges have increased knowledge of implications for sense of belonging in underrepresented students, a gap remains in the literature about the experiences of community college students and their sense of place. This study aimed to contribute to the literature and increase understanding of how community college students experience and view sense of place. Giving community college students a platform to share their perceptions and experiences can provide rich data and deeper understandings that can be systematically analyzed using qualitative research methods. The theoretical perspectives in this study were based on Hay’s (1988) conceptualization of sense of place and Strayhorn’s (2012) concept of sense of belonging to aid in the understanding of student experiences. Hay’s (1988) perspective of sense of place takes a collective approach that depends on the context. Various factors such as
physical environment, culture, family, community, and society contribute to how a sense of place is developed. Strayhorn (2012) defines sense of belonging as a more individualistic approach that is based on “basic human need and motivation” which more importantly, “differs based on students’ social identities, such as race, gender, or sexual orientation, or the conditions they encounter on campus” (preface, 2012).

In more detail, Hay’s (1988) addition of spatial and structural constraints to group belongingness adds the physical factor to sense of place. A sense of place is constructed of interactions with the physical and social environment embedded within the social experiences that consist of subjective and emotional attachments (Campelo, et al., 2013). Figure 1 depicts Campelo and colleagues’ (2013) understanding of sense of place as a “genius loci, the atmosphere of place as a shared sense of the spirit of the place and relates it to its representation and expression as habitus” (p. 155). Destinations are interchangeable with sense of place. The experience of engagement and interaction is similar to student engagement which also requires “presence (being in) and action (being with), always influenced by physical, historical, social, and cultural aspects that, together, contribute to creating a shared sense of place” (Campelo, et al., 2013, p. 155). The Ancestry component in this model is interpreted using first-generation status.

Figure 1 is being adapted for the purpose of this study by viewing sense of place as a combination of the social and physical environments of the students and their college. Social environment represents other students on campus, culture and family background of being a first-generation student. Physical environment takes into consideration the physical attributes of the college campus itself and other factors such as college choice, college type, location, and distance. Community colleges differ from universities in both physical and social aspects which
can change how students perceive their environment and their place in it. For example, a student who does not have access to family college knowledge may not be mentally prepared to navigate a large campus that requires them to ask strangers for help and directions. FGS may also have to work many hours and juggle a full-time college schedule which could increase their stress level. Students could start to feel alone with these struggles that can start to affect their identity as a college student and their place on the college campus. These are very important factors to take into consideration when determining sense of place for a FGS.

Figure 1. Campelo et al., (2013) sense of place model (Reprinted with permission).

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study can provide new and additional literature on how students perceive their physical and social spaces, thus their community college as a sense of place. For many years, the community college has struggled to adapt to an increasing nontraditional student population that have different needs and values over the traditional student. Leaps and bounds have been made in accommodating some of these differences for the better. However, a stereotype still persists in the field that places first-generation-underrepresented students as the
“other.” The student experience of at least, the community college should reflect its current students which may differ from a university student. This study explored the perceptions and preferences of current community college students to showcase how they like to experience place from their perspective. Furthermore, this study examined the community college students’ sense of belonging as it relates to sense of place. The researcher gave community college students a microphone which allowed others the privilege of hearing their perspectives and insights on what is meaningful to them. The rich data from this study can be used by colleges and universities in several ways: (a) help improve the community college experience and sense of belonging; (b) make a positive impact on enrollment, recruitment, retention, and success; (c) provide direction and vision for updating or remodels that are geared toward this population; (d) provide insight and establish a blueprint for what works for FGS in the form of best practices.

**Definition of Terms**

**Community College:** A two-year accredited institution established to serve a specific community’s educational, vocational, and training needs to a diverse student population.

**Community College Students:** Diverse student body seeking various educational options that can range from obtaining an associate degree, certificate, or trade, with or without intent to transfer to a university.

**First-Generation College Student (FGCS):** This study defines FGS as having at least one parent who has not earned a post-secondary credential. FGS are defined by most studies as the highest level of education that one or both parents obtained is a high school diploma or some college. General characteristics that describe FGS include they are more likely to be older, married, have dependents, less likely to be white or non-Hispanic, more likely to be Hispanic, or minority, have lower family incomes, more likely to attend public 2-year institutions, attend part-
time, delay entry, finance their education differently, less academically prepared, and more likely to be working full time (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

**Traditional College Student (TCS):** Generally defined as those individuals for whom at least one parent has earned a post-secondary college credential (Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme & Alpert, 2011). The rationale for using one parent is that those students may have an advantage due to the parent familiarity with the college experience, transition, stress etc.

**Phenomenology:** Research philosophy based on the detailed words, meanings, and voices or lived experiences of the participants in the study.

**Sense of Place:** How student interactions with the physical and social environment interact together to form how a student perceives his or her subjective emotional attachment and belonging to the place.

**Sense of Belonging:** Whether a student feels an attachment to the college through social interactions which depend on student demographic characteristics.

**Dissertation Organization**

This study aimed to contribute to literature on community college students and their sense of place. The research was conducted with first-generation community college students who have been an increasing college population. Research was conducted at a Midwest community college. Exploring these experiences of community college students provided a deeper understanding and perspective that can impact how community colleges are viewed which in turn could lead to better student experiences designed for them. The organization of this study consists of five chapters: Chapter 1 is the introductory chapter that presents a statement of a problem, purpose of the study, significance of the study and guiding research questions. Chapter 2 provides a literature review featuring studies related to first-generation college
students, and a discussion of the theoretical perspective and methodological approach. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological research design of this study including research questions, setting, data collection methods, and data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the major findings of this study from the results of the data. Lastly, Chapter 5 contains a discussion of findings and implications for future research, methods, and practice.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of community college students in regard to their perceptions of the community college as a place. This study explored the perceptions and preferences of students at MCC to gain a deeper understanding of how they experience sense of place. This literature review features studies related to first-generation college students and issues related to the social and cultural factors that play a role in their sense of belonging and sense of place. Exploring these experiences of community college students provided a deeper understanding that can impact how community colleges are viewed which in turn can lead to better student experiences. Admissions, recruiting, and marketing departments might benefit from increased knowledge when assisting prospective students with students’ decision to attend as well as during the transition and assimilation periods. Furthermore, this study has the potential to provide college administrators with a deeper understanding of the overall student experience related to the sense of place.

First-Generation Community College Students

The changing demographics and landscape of the community college have been in the works for some time which has highlighted the division between first-and second-generation college students (Pike & Kuh, 2005). The definition of first-generation students (FGS) traditionally refers to having parents who do not have a college experience (McConnell, 2000, p.76). However, various definitions exist that have ranged from at least one parent with/without a bachelor’s degree to parents with some college or an associate degree. FGS have many more barriers and challenges over students who are not first-generation in the pathway to completing a degree. FGS are typically over the age of 24 years old and are considered adult students who are found to make up the highest percentage of the student population (Choy, 2001). This study
defines first-generation status as a student with at least one parent with a high school diploma or less; particularly with the increase of single-parent households in society today.

FGS and adult students have considerably more life circumstances that interfere along the way such as working full-time to pay bills and support a family (Orbe, 2004). Because of this, FGS historically have high drop-out rates, attend college part-time, and remain academically unprepared (Orbe, 2004). These disadvantages affect retention and completion which largely stems from the lack of cultural capital that educated parents provide in the college process (Bourdieu, 1986). Minorities and underrepresented students make up a large portion of FGS whom all traditionally come from families in the lowest income quartile which generally is reported as less than $25,000/year (Choy, 2001). It is also reported that these students are also the least likely to complete a degree (Thayer, 2000).

More than half of all college students begin at a 2-year community college however, community colleges tend to be made up of more FGS from low income backgrounds than their four-year counterparts (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Thayer, 2000). The community college has been a crucial educational source for FGS over the decades being in the position to add built-support systems to counter their issues (Karp & Bork, 2012). Interventions such as academic advising, tutoring and development, career counseling and navigation and informational outreach and recruitment programs have been common types of support systems that are designed to help (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). Additionally, career programs and vocational certificates designed to increase job skills have been an increasing presence on the community college campus (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). While there have been many improvements attendance at a two-year community college is not associated with completion (Karp & Bork, 2012).
**First-Generation Community College Students by the Numbers**

For FGS, enrollment at a community college has been shown to be their first choice mainly due to lower tuition costs and the availability of career and vocational programs. FGS are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic family incomes and are more likely to be ethnic minorities (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Students who received financial aid at community colleges have increased since 2008. The American Association of Community Colleges (2017) reported that between 2011-2012, 58% of community college students received financial aid to pay tuition and 35% were eligible for Pell Grants during 2014-2015. The American Association of Community Colleges (2017) report also showed that 36% of community college students were first-generation with 23% Hispanic students and 13% African American students. This report also shows that 22% of community college students who attended full-time also work full-time and 41% work full-time attend part-time with the average age of students at 28 years old. If students are spending a majority of their time at work rather than at college, this can impact their sense of belonging and sense of place on the community college campus.

**First-Generation Students and Sense of Belonging**

Strayhorn (2012) presents his definition of “sense of belonging” (SOB) as a “basic human need and motivation sufficient to influence behavior regarding a feeling of connectedness or mattering on campus” (p.3). Sense of belonging as a human need is influenced by cultural and social student characteristics along with the college environment. According to Strayhorn (2012), FGS experience sense of belonging differently than traditional college students in that the need to belong can be greater for underrepresented minority and FGS. Many students feel their working class identities do not match that of the institution and expectations are not conducive to their values (Stephens, et al., 2012). Stephens and colleagues (2012) found
institutions of higher education adhere to individualistic standards which require students to work and achieve independently which oftentimes can bring feelings of competitiveness. This study found that working-class collectivist cultures can be in direct conflict with this type of environment which tends to value more togetherness, sense of belonging, and family first. Where Strayhorn (2012) has identified these feelings as a lack of sense of belonging, students usually voice these concerns as culture shock (Crozier & Clayton, 2009). To describe the culture shock experienced by FGS, Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) used Bourdieu’s (2002) notion of habitus and field described as an “out-of-habitus” or “out of field” experience (p.1110). Gardner and Holley’s (2011) study reported FGS felt like an “imposter” that will be “found out” (p. 87).

The importance of “fitting” became a theme in Strayhorn’s (2012) findings that he found was connected to optimal functioning and retention (p. 4). This can be connected to Maslow’s theory of basic needs and how the impact of sense of belonging can have on college students: when basic needs are not being met, students will have a hard time moving to self-actualize or achieve academic goals. A sense of belonging can impact all levels of the college experience starting with something as simple as the basic idea of going to college for some students. These students may feel that they do not belong in college culture and therefore would not be able to move past the basic physiological stage to explore the possibility of attending college. This can be seen in some of Strayhorn’s (2012) findings that many Latino students, commonly first-generation, are working to support their families back home. This decreases time and energy spent engaging and being involved with many opportunities they will miss and interfere with overall involvement and class attendance. Strayhorn (2012) points out that money used to satisfy basic food, shelter, and safety needs of the family could have been used to pay tuition and
decrease the use of student loans. Moreover, the lack of involvement can be detrimental to all nontraditional student populations such as adult students who typically do not expend time in campus activities anyway.

Also related to Maslow’s basic needs is a finding from Ostrove and Long’s (2007) study that social-class does matter. These authors posit that “class background structures the sense of who belongs and who does not” which has “crucial implications for the college experience and performance” (Ostrove & Long, 2007, p. 381). The study’s hypothesis was based on Astin’s (1993) results that reported socioeconomic status (SES) strongly related to all of their measures of student satisfaction. The Student Adjustment to College Questionnaire (SACQ) Ostrove and Long (2007) used to assess sense of belonging and social adjustment in college found background variables significant over college variables. The major predictor was “a life of ease” (concerns about time/money/friends, status comparisons) which is negatively associated for FGS (Ostrove & Long, 2007, p. 378). Fitting, belonging, involvement, culture, social class, academic performance, etc., are all factors that can have positive or negative effects on the college experience, particularly for FGS.

**First-Generation Students and the College Experience**

The college experience plays different roles for students depending on generation status. For example, the social aspect of college tends to be more important to traditional college students and has also found to be a positive contributor to their persistence (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). CGS have been found to value and participate more in social activities on campus, school clubs, organizations, and campus life involvement. Hertel (2010) reported that CGS put more emphasis on college attendance as a social process that involved looking at extracurricular activities, social life, and independence as rewards (p. 14). Also found was CGS students
received more social support from friends on-campus who share the value of “intellectual pursuits for their own sake rather than as a means to an end (i.e., employment and income)” (Hertel, 2010, p. 15). This finding rings true for other studies with similar findings of how social activities predict college adjustment for CGS while academic activities as more important for FGS (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Hertel, 2010). The importance of academic integration for FGS that Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found may provide the means to the end for employment. On the other hand, the college experience for FGS could be looked at as a mechanism that fuels the lack of belonging which in turn promotes the off-campus socialization with non-college friends. Either way, off-campus friends can be part of a pull factor that FGS experience when leaving family and friends to attend college (Fernandez, Trenor, Zerda & Cortes, 2008; Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn & Pascarella, 1996).

Snyder (2014) called the pull factor: Working-class family rhetoric which can range from simple pleas to come home more often to outright discouragement of attending college (p. 116). To make matters worse, FGS report feelings of “inadequacy, inferiority and intimidation” on campus which can make it easier to go home (Aries & Seider, 2005, p. 426). The college experience for students in this study focused on the stress and worry of their “inadequacies of linguistic competence, (e.g., their inability to articulate ideas clearly, deficiencies in grammar, and regional accents)” and the fear of speaking up in class “marking them as less intelligent” (p. 426) or “deaf and dumb” (Aries & Seider, 2005, p. 428). Many of these feelings stem from observations that point to the fact that social-class backgrounds shape educational and college experiences (Ostrove & Long, 2007). At the same time however, the Ostrove and Long (2007) study revealed that disadvantaged students were found to experience college “as significantly more boring, dull, and snobbish” with difficulty adjusting and forming attachments to their
institution (Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004, p. 431). Further, London’s (1992) study observed that while FGS feel alienated at college, they were not as aware of social-class and did not view it as important as CGS in this study.

Researchers in higher education have long recognized the “interactive relationship between class identity and the college experience” but continue to find disappointing results regardless of positive attempts at improvement (Aries & Seider, 2005, p. 441). For example, Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn and Pascarella’s (1996) study did not find any positive effects from social and academic experiences that could compensate for family pull factors. Another study found a summer career program increased positive perceptions of college in disadvantaged students. This study found “high hopes for school were not enough” because they still experienced “alienation, marginalization, and frustration” (cited in Ostrove & Long, 2007, p. 838). And lastly, the Somers and colleagues (2004) study wrote that generation status had a negative effect even for FGS with high SES, test scores, and high GPAs. The positive factors did not influence the persistence of FGS students in this study (p. 431). Aries and Seider (2005) argue that it is important that FGS find other FGS for socialization and call for working-class-based clubs and organizations similar to gender specific, sexual orientation, race or religion-based clubs (p.441). However, even that idea and recommendation may prove to be unfruitful based on literature that finds clubs involving academics have a more powerful influence over socialization for FGS (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Hertel, 2010).

Theoretical Perspective

Campelo and colleagues’ (2013) sense of place model is made up of four interconnecting components: 1) Time, 2) Ancestry, 3) Landscape, and 4) Community (see Figure 2.). These
components make up a person’s habitus connected by physical, historical, social, and culture which in turn influences sense of place and thus, the college experience (p. 158).

**Time**

Campelo and colleagues’ (2013) model relates *Time* to past, present, and future aspects of social and natural factors in terms of the “how-of-being-in-the-world” (p. 159). This study posits that time for FGS include work and enrollment status which shape identities, attitudes, and perceptions of the college experience. Conway and Briner (2002) found differences between full-time and part-time employees in work status and affect-related attitudes and behaviors (commitment, satisfaction, well-being, etc.). Similarly, students that identify as a full-time employee and part-time student would most likely have higher commitment levels to the job over college. Prioritizing and balancing college classes were found to be issues for FGS related to time. Collier and Morgan (2008) reported that FGS tend to spend only the amount of time they had available on coursework rather than the time necessary prioritizing work and personal problems. Faculty members interviewed in Collier and Morgan’s (2008) study reported that prioritization was “one of the expectations that were hardest for FGS they were advised to be more realistic about time commitments, but then still tended to over commit” (p.438). Improper time management and prioritization have also become barriers for FGS. Delayed enrollment, stop outs, swirling, and remedial work extend the time that students spend in college which influence perceptions.

**Delayers.** Bozick and DeLuca (2005) found that students, who do not enroll in college immediately after high school (delayers), have several common characteristics with part-time students such as coming from a lower socioeconomic background. Many of those characteristics have been associated with delayed enrollment in college which increases the risk of permanent
departure (Johnson & Muse, 2012). Delayers, who postpone enrollment for as little as seven months, have a higher tendency to attend college part-time. FGS short-change themselves by delaying and enrolling part-time and should be helped to find ways to attend full-time (Bahr, 2007).

**Stop outs and swirling.** Students who drop-out of college and do not have intentions of reenrolling are referred to as stay outs or drop-outs (Johnson & Muse, 2012). Students who withdraw for a semester or more and reenroll have been referred to in the literature as stop outs (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973). Swirling consists of swirling around to different colleges with non-concurrent enrollment, which can affect transferability of credits. For non-traditional students, swirling and other multi-institution attendance patterns has been found to be triggered by stressors. Wang and Pilarzyk (2009) found the stressors commonly associated with first generation status such as financial problems or family obligations, to play a large part in their irregular enrollment patterns (p. 154).

**Remedial education.** To complicate matters even further, FGS are more likely to need remedial education in basic skills or English as a second language acquisition which prolongs entering credit classes (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013). This can increase the risk of not completing because FGS are significantly more likely to leave (Bahr, 2010).

**Ancestry**

According to Campelo and colleagues’ (2013) model, “Ancestry defines history, constrains values, and imbues culture with social capital, informs behavior in the reproduction of social relations, sense of self, family identity, and the sense of belonging to the place” (p. 160). In this study, ancestry consisted of different aspects and influences of culture which originate from working-class collectivist cultural norms, family, values, and beliefs. For that reason, first-
generation status is interpreted using the ancestry component in the model. Many studies find that FGS have a lack of cultural capital in navigating college. Cultural capital is as “a proficiency in and familiarity with dominant cultural codes and practices (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p.428). Many FGS find themselves code switching and struggling to decipher unwritten social norms that they are not familiar with. Code switching consists of speaking proper grammar in one situation then moving back to slang in another such as avoiding the word ain’t in the classroom. Oftentimes they are assimilating into a new culture in which students feel there are barriers and feel “the invisible barriers are real, people can’t see them, but they’re real” (p.77). This lack of knowledge appeared as a barrier theme that Gardner and Holly (2011) labeled as knowing the rules. They found that “not knowing the correct pathway to take brought confusion” to FGS and felt they needed to be self-reliant and “learn as they go” (p. 84).

**Parental and family influences.** Culture of parents and families influence how students experience college where students of college-educated parents are found to fare better in college. Specifically, differences between the individualistic and collectivist cultures bring challenges for FGS in themes of parental absenteeism in the college process. Messages in working-class households that emphasize “it’s not just about you” or “you can’t always get what you want” may explain some differences between student cultures (Stephens et al., 2012, p.1181). Studies have been conducted on the overall lack of parental involvement which is found to positively contribute to how a student feels and performs in different cultural environments. Wolf, Sax and Harper’s (2009) study on parental engagement and contact reported differences in the academic lives of students by race/ethnicity and social-class. High levels of both parental contact and engagement were found in upper and middle-class students whereas working-class students reported lower levels. By race, above-average levels of parental contact were found, but below-
average levels of parental engagement were reported for minority races (Wolf et al., 2009). Another study by Cabrera and associates (2005) reported that although low-income parents have high hopes for their children, they are “less likely to take action to increase chances of college-going” (p.177).

Cultural differences exist in beliefs about prioritizing the student role which includes full-time enrollment. An individualistic household may prioritize student achievement and believe schoolwork is the priority. This student may spend a larger amount of time dedicated to schoolwork whereas a student from an interdependent-collectivist background may focus time on personal issues (Wolverton & Guillory, 2008; Gardner & Holley, 2011). Guillory and Wolverton (2008) reported cultural differences that effect self-identity in their study with Native American students. The major themes that helped these students persist in college were close-knit and extended family, and giving back to the Indian community. Authors stated that this is only a reflection of the “Indigenous philosophy of putting community before individualism” and that “Native American children are taught to “stand in” versus “stand out” (p. 74). Fitting and blending in can be difficult in which London (1992) states that FGS are “never fully accepted, because of prejudice in the culture where they seek a place” (p. 7).

**History.** Blue-collar and working-class families have a long history of identifying with the world of work, look at college as a piece of paper to get a job, prioritize work first, feel they have to work, and look at a white-collar job as not an honest days’ work (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Gardner and Holley’s (2011) study also found that many FGS receive pressure from their families to choose a field that is more practical. The meaning of college is more about getting the “piece of paper” in order to get a job. Others are found to struggle with the “family rhetoric”
that says “you need to get a job and get out of college” (p.85). With manufacturing jobs disappearing, this outdated world view has backfired and can affect sense of place.

**Community**

Habitus and community can be looked at as interconnected constructs in which Bourdieu (1989) states consists of “sense of one’s place” and “sense of the place of others” (p. 19). Campelo and colleagues (2013) say that the construct of habitus helps us “understand different behaviors in similar places” (p. 162). Campelo and colleagues (2013) go further with “The experience of shared cultural and social relations creates a communal sense of belonging, mutual understanding and provides the characteristics of a community which “transform groups of individuals into a community” (Campelo et al., 2013, p.160). Similar to how culture informs feelings of sense of place, first-generation and underrepresented students typically share many tight-knit communities such as a heightened sense of belonging, learning communities, SES, ethnic/race, religion, gender identity, region, etc., (Strayhorn 2012; Snyder, 2014; Wolverton & Guillory, 2008; Jehangir, 2010). Another form of community can be seen in students from the *Seekers, Achievers, Returners and Stayers* in Carr and Kefalas’ (2009) book on rural Middle America. These students belong to rural communities and first-generation blue-collar backgrounds which also informs one’s sense of place.

**Landscape**

Landscape involves different aspects of the tangible physical setting, and intangible social, and geographic environments which are intertwined with historical factors, people, and the land. According to Campelo and colleagues (2013) physical environment and landscape are important social constructions and that “through the landscape, people experience history of the place and their place in the history” (p. 160).
**Type of landscape.** The type of landscape for FGS is usually the community college that offers general education and career/vocation courses. FGS are overrepresented at community colleges and generally take more career-focused course work (Gardner & Holley, 2011). The community college has a culture of part-time attendance which decreases the chances of students actually completing a credential (Johnson, 2006). While FGS participate more in community college attendance, they are constrained by the norms of this type of institution.

**Physical environment.** The physical environment can include common areas as hallways, studios, student lounges, classrooms, outdoor gathering and rehearsal areas, and study centers (Fisher, Landry & Naumer, 2006). A study by Fisher and colleagues (2006) that surveyed where students prefer to get their information found that “creature comforts” were the most important ambience factor as shown in Figure 2 of the Fisher and associates (2006) model of information ground people-place-information trichotomy. The top environmental factors found in this study were “shelter, comfortable chairs and sofas, lighting, music, bathrooms, scenic qualities such as views or art, and temperature create a relaxing climate for information exchange” (Fisher, et al., 2006, p. 4). Comfort factors found important to the university attenders may look different to FGS who experience trouble navigating the physical environment of the community college. Starting as early as the admissions process, a lack of college knowledge can bring confusion and frustration from not knowing physical pathways (Gardner & Holley, 2011, p. 84). Shoffner (2004) stated that applying to college is a “daunting task” for FGS due to lack of parental knowledge (p.92).
Figure 2. Information ground people-place-information trichotomy (Fisher, et al., 2006).
(Reprinted with permission)

**Geographic location.** Research studies have shown that FGS choose inferior ways in the college choice process. Snyder (2014) found that college choice for FGS was typically not an academic choice and that geographic location was the largest influence followed by the attendance of a significant other. However, another study by Nomi (2005) found cost of attending college the most frequent factor in the college choice process for FGS. This usually leads to attending the community college which has resulted in low completion rates for FGS. Another study who interviewed rural Iowa students in the Carr and Kefalas (2009) study found different views of their sense of place. For example, the *seekers*, wanted to leave their geographic communities, *achievers* head toward the university, *returners* may graduate college then return to the hometown, and *stayers* never leave. If stayers decide to attend college, they may choose vocational programs at a community college that train them for careers such as welding, culinary arts, building trades, computer technician programs, and accounting.

**Social Environment**

**People.** The college campus has many intangible norms in the form of online classes and social media. An interesting study by Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) looked at college student Facebook photo galleries and found what they called “collective narcissism” (p. 30). These photos were attached to college-identity, community, and group culture (p. 30). The
authors find that these scenes represent how students experience real college-life, “articulate individual autonomy and signal independence from family and affiliation with peer groups” (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010, p. 30).

**Further Discussion of Theoretical Perspective**

Use of theory in qualitative research is conflicted. McLeod (2001) points out “phenomenology requires a kind of withdrawal from the world and a willingness to lay aside existing theories and beliefs” (p. 37). However, Tavallai and Abutalib (2010) state that the “richness of theoretical frameworks can give the researcher a valuable opportunity to see what could seem familiar through a new and distinct perspective” (p. 573) which certainly applied in this study. That said—social constructivism was the most relevant method for this study because of the importance of understanding the lived experiences that students give to their sense of place. Research has indicated that all students need a sense of belonging while Strayhorn (2012) points to a heightened need for some populations.

The following are not research questions but questions retained by the researcher: what type of sense of belonging? Is lack of sense of belonging just a reflection of differences between collectivist and individualist cultures which Stephens, and associates (2012) state is a cultural mismatch? How is sense of belonging related to sense of place? Does one need both? The overall theoretical stance of this research sits in the interpretivist camp which allows interpretation of the data to be used as a backdrop to understand participant experiences. Participant experiences, in this view are socially constructed by the world and the cultures that humans live in, are dynamic, and in constant change with interaction. This however, can be a slippery slope when using Heidegger’s (1962) hermeneutics phenomenology which also could be
said to show hints of pre-determinism. This is similar to what Bostrom (2004) called an escapable theory–data interaction.

Creswell (2013) refers to phenomenology as a method of inquiry to investigate the meaning and lived experiences of individuals who have experienced a common phenomenon. Various types of participant interviews are an appropriate method of data collection that uses open and/or closed type questions to hear the essence of participant experiences. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) founded the philosophy in opposition to the objectiveness of quantitative study in the hard sciences. Different schools of thought exist on what phenomenology actually is and how it can be achieved which have resulted in two major approaches: Husserl’s Transcendental Phenomenology which is based on pure consciousness, and Heidegger’s (1962) Hermeneutics Phenomenology which was utilized in this study. Heidegger (1962) takes a more realistic stance that assumes human beings are circular and cannot clear themselves of their shared humanness and culture as with Husserl’s interpretation. This idea is what Heidegger (1962) refers to in his “circle of understanding” (p. 195) used in this study.

The hermeneutic circle is known for moving from the parts of experience, to the whole and back and forth again similar to the constant comparative method in grounded theory. Further, Heidegger (1962) explains that all interpretations are grounded in three fore-structures: 1) fore-having; 2) foresight; and 3) fore-conception. These are taken-for-granted interpretations because of our shared backgrounds as humans and our familiarity (p. 192). However, one must not be fooled: Hermeneutics phenomenology still has an “interpretive attitude” which allows phenomenon to “show themselves” in an intelligible manner to mankind (Plager, 1994 p. 72). This study elected to have students “show themselves” while having the underlying understanding that those experiences will also show the world.
Summary

This chapter included a review of literature that pertains to the topics in this study. The literature summarized in this chapter pertains to the following: 1) first-generation community college students; 2) first-generation community college students and their college experiences; and (3) a further discussion of the theoretical perspective of the study. The next chapter will highlight methodology which will include research design of the study: research questions, setting, data collection methods, data analysis, ethical considerations, as well as limitations and delimitations of this research study.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of community college students in regard to their perceptions of the community college as a place. Specific needs of community colleges can vary based on the communities in which they serve. Efforts made to enhance the college experience and belonging in higher education may not always align with first-generation student perspectives. Research has found social engagement and sense of belonging are important factors in improving retention and advances have been made toward improving the institution in response to student needs. However, combining sense of place with sense of belonging can provide a more holistic view of the college experience for FGS. When FGS quietly leave the university or stop attending class at the community college, oftentimes it can be traced back to a lack of fit beyond involvement in activities.

This study used phenomenology as the overall methodological approach and utilized data analysis procedures outlined by Corbin and Strauss (1990). The following chapter outlines: research questions, data sources, data collection methods, data analysis, ethical considerations, as well as limitations and delimitations of this research study. This phenomenological study collected data using interviews to answer three research questions:

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to identify, describe, and understand first generation community college students’ perception on a sense of place. The following open-ended research questions guided this study:

1. What are first-generation students overall perceptions of the community college?
2. What role does the community college play in the perceptions of first-generation students?
3. How do first-generation students perceive a sense of place related to the community college?

**Research Methodology**

The study’s theoretical perspective used a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to position the researcher in the naturalistic place with participants to allow knowledge creation through shared experiences. Phenomenology is placed in the qualitative research arena due to the subjective nature of interpretation over quantitative measurement (Keyton, 2015). Using subjectivity over objectivity can “ evoke objections from mainstream social science” (Kvale, 1983, p. 1) or worse, be labeled as “ social fiction” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Kvale (1983) suggests using phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions as “ alternative conceptions of qualitative research” to increase perception of validity (p.1). A hermeneutic circle was simulated through “ studying the historical, cultural, and social background of the research setting and co-constituting the research process and data collection with participants to validate findings” (Campelo et al., 2013, p. 156). Qualitative research allowed participants to share their perceptions while they were in the place of study which provided emerging stories and rich narratives. The rich data from this study can be useful to community colleges not only to help in comprehension of a sense of place, but also to contribute to the student college experience, sense of belonging, recruitment, retention, and success.

**Role and Positionality of the Researcher**

Since qualitative research is based on human experiences and not quantitative data, it is commonly accepted that the researcher provide a personal statement positioning herself/himself in an effort to disclose personal background, attitudes, and beliefs that can play a part of bias in any study (Ganga & Scott, 2006). Growing up as a first-generation student positions this
researcher as an insider in which “social interviews are conducted between researchers and
participants who share similar cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national, or religious heritage” (Ganga
& Scott, 2006, p.3). There can be many benefits to sharing cultural characteristics that can make
us “accepted with the group” and at the same time it can also bias the perception within
ourselves and “how they perceive us” (p.3). I am a first-generation student (FGS) who has
carried around many of the same disadvantages held today by current FGS. Blue-collar
beginnings did not prepare me for college in high school. I did not realize that I was once part of
a “sub-class” of students who were not college-going until I worked as a recruiter in a for-profit
college in Chicago. This experience opened my eyes and the research work for this dissertation
has allowed the study of FGS at a higher level. Working in a for-profit college has given me
first-hand experience that Rendon’s (1994) validation works for FGS. This type of validation
compensates for lack of parental knowledge and involvement that FGS must over-compensate
for; oftentimes by themselves. In my role as an adjunct instructor at the community college, I
have seen first-hand how validation in the classroom contributes to a positive sense of belonging
and sense of place for FGS.

**Research Setting**

This study was conducted at a Midwestern community college. Student interviews took
place in a private room on the MCC campus. This allowed for deeper insight into the diverse
lived experiences of the students. The campus setting is situated in a large metropolitan suburb
that serves over 23,000 students in which approximately 15,000 attend part-time. Breakdowns
for race/ethnicity percentages reflect that of the state as a whole with 75% representing White
students and 79% 24 years of age and under.
Data Sources

Sampling Strategies and Participant Selection

The sampling methodology used for participant selection was purposeful sampling that utilized a homogeneous sampling technique. This technique focused on a specific sample pool of students at a Midwest community college. Purposive sampling methods place primary emphasis on saturation (i.e., obtaining a comprehensive understanding by continuing to sample until no new substantive information is acquired) Participants were chosen based on their status as (a) first-generation, and (b) currently enrolled at the Midwest community college selection site. Approval from the Iowa State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was sought and approved before contacting the research site (Appendix A). After approval was obtained, the researcher contacted the Institutional Research department and administrative management at the site to explain the study and obtained official permission from the college to solicit students for interviews in a private room within the student center food court (Appendix F). All protocol and ethical standards were followed and based on the guidelines from the Institutional Review Board at a Midwest State University and MCC. The researcher had access to the site and could offer an incentive of a free sandwich for anyone who voluntarily wants to participate in the study as shown in recruitment flyer (Appendix E). The next step consisted of the researcher approaching potential participants at the food court establishment to explain how to participate in the study and receive a free sandwich. Students that responded/agreed to the in-person solicitation were provided with the complete description protocol, what to expect from the study, as well as where to provide their signature on the informed consent form immediately prior to the interview (Appendix D). The researcher explained the definition of first-generation status in the prescreening questionnaire (Appendix B) and explained that the study is seeking participants
who are FGS. Participants were also told that their participation is completely voluntary regardless of the free sandwich they receive and are under no obligation of any kind (see Appendix C).

**Data Collection Methods**

This study utilized steps in the grounded theory approach as a guide in the data collection and analysis process to provide future research an opportunity to extend into possible theory generation.

**Interviewing**

In-depth interviews were conducted to collect the data for this study. Using semi-structured interviews in qualitative studies allow researchers the opportunity to gain deeper insights and understandings of participant perspectives (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). Understanding the lived experiences of community college students and their sense of place is an important component in this study. During the spring semester in February, 2017, voluntary interviews took place in a private room inside of the Student Center in building (#) at MCC. All interviews lasted the within the recommended time of 30 minutes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). Interviews were recorded on an electronic recording device with participant permission and knowledge of the recording per the consent form. Interview numbers were replaced with a respective pseudonym. Ultimately, interviews were professionally transcribed by Rev.com, an outside transcription service using verbatim student voices heard on the electronic recording device. Student identities were protected by not collecting or using student names. Students were assigned by interview number 1-12 according to the order of interview. The rationale for using this method is based on setting the stage for going beyond description of the phenomenon. Strayhorn (2012) went beyond student voices heard in the need to belong which culminated into
the construct of sense of belonging. The sense of belonging construct has given rise to practical solutions that promote student involvement strategies such as on-campus cultural activities or clubs.

*Interview Protocol*

The following is a summary of steps taken in the interview process:

**Step 1.** Recruitment Flyer posted in various locations (Appendix E).

**Step 2.** Researcher offered participation in the study, in addition to the free incentive to random students passing by in the student center food court (Appendix B).

**Step 3.** Students were brought in and seated in private conference room inside of the student center food court one at a time. Then the study was explained along with what rights they have as voluntary participants and were shown the recording device (Appendix D).

**Step 4.** Students who agreed to participate signed informed consent form (Appendix D).

**Step 5.** An interview guide was followed that asked various open-ended questions related to the study’s theoretical perspective (Appendix C).

**Step 6.** At the conclusion of the interview, students were briefed on what took place again, how the interview data were to be used, confirmed agreement, and thanked for participating.

The interview guide (Appendix C) was developed in conjunction with the study’s theoretical perspective (Campelo et al., 2013) and literature cited in Chapter 2 of this study related to first-generation community college students. The interview guide in Appendix C was also based on answering the study’s three research questions. For example, research question three asks: What role does the community college play in the perceptions of FGS? The background questions in the Ancestry and History section helped to answer the question. Literature states that FGS have different views compared to continuing generation students on all aspects of the college process. Many have not been brought up to view college as an immediate step after high school and do not get high levels of parental involvement and encouragement.
Many times they attend college to overcome or overcompensate for their backgrounds in which can include interventions from outside authority figures. Besides demographic questions that ask “Tell me a little about you such as your background” or “Do you attend full-time or part-time?” specific questions that go beyond description were asked based on first-generation student literature such as:

✔ “Has there ever been a time that you were unsure about attending college? Why/not?”
✔ “What motivated you to attend college?”
✔ “What type of encouragement or support did you get from your parents?”
✔ “Who influenced you the most?”
✔ “What are your family expectations in regards to education and college attendance?”

Another example of questions in the interview guide shown in Appendix C was related to answering research question one: What are FGS overall perceptions of the community college? The sense of belonging and place in the Community section contributed to answering this question with specifics that tried to pinpoint the lack of sense of belonging commonly found for FGS (Strayhorn, 2012). Whether students feel they belong or not belong is directly related to how they perceive the community college as a place. Some of these specific questions in Appendix C included:

✔ “What is the lifestyle here? What type of community exists here?”
✔ “What are the benefits of attending this college? Why do you like/dislike this college?”
✔ “Do you know any particular myths or beliefs?”
✔ “How could this community college increase your or others sense of belongingness?”

Other questions were asked such as:

✔ “How does your enrollment and work status make you feel as far as your sense of time and your community college? What are your top priorities?”
✔ “In what ways do you think your enrollment status (swirling, or delaying, bad start, etc.) decisions have influenced your sense of time and how you view your community college?”
✔ “How do you view this community college as far as sense of time and what should change?”
The social environment-landscape and place section of the interview framework focused on the physical and people factors formed third research question: How do FGS perceive a sense of place related to the community college? Literature states that FGS do not get involved in college activities, have a difficult time in the college admission process and prioritize relationships and connections. Further, they also have been found to do not feel they fit in or feel comfortable on a college campus. These are a few examples of questions found in Appendix C:

✓ “How important are social relationships with students on campus to you?”
✓ “In what ways are you socially involved with your college?”
✓ “What was the college admission and application process like for you?”
✓ “Where are some of your favorite places on campus?” Do you feel comfortable here?”
✓ “Tell me about your experiences in the classroom.”
✓ “Which elements best represent this community college for you? Why?

Data Analysis

Data analysis uses a systematic approach to organize and arrange data collected in sources such as interview transcripts, field notes or written documents (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). Participants were recruited and asked the pre-screening questions from Appendix B then, twelve, 30-minute in-depth interviews were conducted in a private room as per the interview guide in Appendix C. Field notes and memos were used after each student interview in which the researcher wrote down additional insights that included emotions, body language, impressions, and any other detail that a verbal recording may not include. According to founders Glaser and Strauss (1967), using a constant comparative methodology has four stages: (1) Comparing incidents applicable to each category; (2) Integrating categories; (3) Delimiting the theory; and (4) Writing the theory (p. 105). This study utilized the first two steps by comparing all incidents applicable to the initial fifty categories generated before integrating categories in step two.

Documents were made from the transcriptions of interview recordings which were then used as the initial sources of data along with the field notes and memos. Each transcript was
given a number then field notes and memos were assigned and stapled to the respective interview. Lindlof and Taylor’s (2002) “influential model for coding qualitative data” (p.218) was followed for the first stage. This involved coding as many categories as possible by constantly comparing each piece of data using “open” or “in vivo” coding (p.219). This required the researcher to continually sort through the data while analyzing and coding the student information (Kolb, 2012). Each transcript was analyzed by circling and highlighting words, answers, and phrases that connected to or were relevant to the theoretical perspective. For example, based on the literature, socioeconomic status constrains community college attendance for FGS. When a response was given that referred to their family situation related to financial aid, paying tuition or affordability, it was circled and highlighted as an open category. These initial categories were viewed as low categories because they were grouped very specifically.

Next, “integration” and “dimensionalization” axial coding procedures were used to link categories together until becoming “theoretically saturated” (p. 222). Using the same financial aid example, this happened by linking categories that originated from responses that implied they were attending the community college because it was less expensive or the family could not afford tuition. Each similar response was put in their respective category which started to form patterns. Theoretically saturated data status is reached when there are no new insights generated from the data (Keyton, 2015). This was kept this in mind when simultaneously comparing any meanings, similarities, and differences (Keyton, 2015, p. 294). All twelve participants generated responses related to a financial category which were combined into a theme that meant they were attending for financial reasons. The lower categories that were combined to form the higher concept of attending for financial reasons were necessary to reduce the data into manageable units.
Analyzing Data for Concepts

Data reduction. It is necessary to reduce data into manageable units which continues throughout the study and involves “selection, simplification, abstraction and transformation of the raw data” (Kolb, 2012, p.84). The higher concept theme of attending for financial reasons turned into a subtheme of the even higher concept of the major theme of second choice. So while the university may have been their first choice, they had to attend the community college because of financial reasons. The high concept of second choice also included other subthemes or reasons the community college was not their first choice such as a low GPA. The field notes and memos used from each interview were used in the strategy to combine and form themes and subthemes and were used in the overall systematic approach. If a researcher used only verbatim words of a transcript some of the meaning could be lost. For example, three female students had responses that meant different things for the word independent. One student said her parents did not pay for tuition because they wanted her to be independent. Another student said that she admired college-degreed women in this country because they are independent and she wanted to be independent. The last student said she wanted to be free to decide what I want to decide.

Based on the field notes and personal memos that the researcher wrote down after the interviews, the first student showed a sense of pride that her parents were not paying for college. Her voice revealed an impression that while other affluent kids may get handed things such as college tuition, she worked hard for it and therefore earned it—an honest day’s work. FGS literature on the other hand may call it a lack of parental involvement or support. Admiration was heard in the next student’s voice when talking about how education can make her independent and strong-- she sounded like she was describing her fairy tale. This could be related to no role models in the family. Finally, the student who wanted to be free to decide sounded
slightly rebellious to the rules that college has. Could this be consistent with the literature in response to growing up with less structure in a first-generation household? These theoretical personal notes contributed to placing obscure comments in categories that related to various first-generation status themes and subthemes.

**Coding.** According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), coding should have three levels to the analyses: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding. The first step in open coding involves using the constant comparative strategy to examine and form different categories in the beginning of the research process. Data were coded and analyzed using this preliminary step constantly comparing emerging patterns in the data which formed fifty initial categories. Each emerging theme was manually circled and highlighted then organized into similar responses by the students. The next step is to use the axial coding procedure to piece together and connect the categories to each other while asking questions and comparing the whole to the pieces and the pieces to the whole. The verbatim transcripts were electronically cut and pasted into these same categories using the computer as an organization tool reducing the fifty categories to twenty five. Lastly, selective coding allows the researcher to choose the major category or theme, analyzing similarities, connecting relationships, and settling on the final category. Corbin and Strauss (2008) call this the process of category refinement and development. This process generated six final themes: (1) *Second Choice*; (2) *Fighting Forces*; (3) *Student Growth*; (4) *I Belong*; (5) *Breaktime*; and (6) *Rave Reviews*.

**Ethical Considerations**

**Confidentiality and Consent**

Prior to starting the interview, students signed the consent form which as previously mentioned, included all pertinent information of the study such as purpose, description of
procedures, protocol, potential benefits/risks, contact information, confidentiality, and voluntary participation statements. All data was kept in Iowa State University’s password-protected Cybox system with other materials being stored in a locking file drawer in the researcher’s private office. Tapes will be destroyed after transcription and transcription files will be kept for no longer than 5 years before shredding.

**Credibility and Trustworthiness**

To increase credibility and trustworthiness this study used triangulation when possible. The researcher compared and checked multiple forms of evidence, sources, and methods because participants have multiple realities. This was accomplished by comparing transcripts, field notes, personal memos, multiple sources of literature, and observation of the physical college campus itself. For example, the researcher noticed that the age range of students in the student center appeared to favor students age 24 and under. Realities and attitudes can be different for adult students who may not be as accustomed to making personal ratings and reviews that younger students participate in social media. This study was guided by three tests that Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggest to decide when the researcher has conducted enough interviews and data collection. The first step was *taken-for-grantedness* in which the researcher was no longer surprised with results. Every interview started to reveal a surprising reaction where students expressed an overly enthusiastic laundry list of great attributes of the campus. After twelve interviews, it was no longer surprising and those reactions were taken for granted. The second test was *theoretical saturation* where the researcher finds no new results to add, and the third step was called *heightened confidence* (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 224). These tests attempted to prove the credibility of results which used the standard checks for reliability and validity (tests of consistency and truth value of data, which included the above applications). The twelve
interviews showed many similarities of words, categories, and reactions which started to feel redundant or theoretically saturated after about 5 interviews. Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) state this typically happens and finds that twelve interviews is usually enough. As predicted, the twelfth interview produced no new results which signaled that this would be the final interview.

**Institutional Review Board**

Prior to starting the qualitative research interviews, approval from the Institutional Review Board was requested and approved (see Appendix A). Interview questions and all procedures were provided to the Board. A secondary approval was requested and approved from the research site of MCC (in Appendix F).

**Limitations**

As with any research study, limitations always exist. The following are a few limitations of the study that could have changed final results. Gender, race, and socioeconomic status can produce different perspectives on how FGS experience college. Some FGS may have friends or relatives with college degrees that have influenced their perspectives. Qualitative research is typically not generalizable and not all FGS have the same experiences. Also not collected in this study were students that represent all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (African American, students of Middle-Eastern decent, etc., and students from upper middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds). These student groups were not excluded by design. Typically FGS have lower family socioeconomic backgrounds and at the time of the study, the two black students recruited to participate ended up being African-born rather than American-born. This perspective may be different from the African-American perspective. Another limitation includes students who participated did not fall into the over 24 years of age category and cannot be generalized to the
first-generation adult student perspective. However, this researcher does not feel these are limitations but in fact, formed the study.

Other limitations that exist could be that this study was conducted at one community college. Results could have been different if students were interviewed at various campuses. Part of this limitation includes the fact that the institution had recently been remodeled. Students at older community colleges that need remodeling may not show as much enthusiasm as students who have access to newer amenities. Another limitation could be that student interviews were conducted inside of the newly remodeled building. The beautiful atmosphere could have influenced how students felt at that moment versus conducting interviews in an old hallway.

Another factor related to that is both recruitment and interviewing took place in the remodeled building which could have limited this sample. Most students who make time for lounging are more likely to be non-commuters, younger aged, and attend full-time. None of the students in this sample had family and childcare obligations nor were the head of a household. The study was originally set up to recruit FGS randomly without any other particular demographics. This study is pleased with the end results that represented full-time students ages 18-23 from various race and ethnicity groups. This outcome is not viewed as a limitation but as a contribution to the literature to the study of FGS who are not at-risk students. Students in this group showed no chance of drop-out or non-completion. It would be worth the investment for funds to be spent toward keeping their momentum going.

**Delimitations**

This study is focused on the perceptions and experiences of first-generation community college students at MCC. Not included in this study were students that do not represent FGS who were excluded from the study and can delimit results in this study.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of this study. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of community college students in regard to their perceptions of the community college as a place. This chapter contains findings and results by the presentation of participant profiles, major themes and subthemes which are organized by the research questions asked in this study. Two theoretical perspectives were used in the design and analysis of this study: (1) Strayhorn’s (2012) concept of sense of belonging; and Hay’s (1988) theory of sense of place. The combination of sense of place and sense of belonging provided a more holistic view of the college experience, particularly for FGS. The holistic view that sense of place provides extended the perspective of belonging to include other components that should be used to improve the college experience. When FGS quietly leave the university or stop attending the community college, it can commonly be traced back to a lack of fit that goes beyond involvement in activities.

The research questions were designed to dig deeper into how students feel at MCC. A total of twelve first-generation community college students at MCC participated in this study. All participants were between the ages of 18-23 years-old, all attended the community college full-time, and were either majoring in a community college career program or planning to transfer to the local university. Each student had already attended at least one or more semesters and was representative of a diverse cultural and gender sample. All participants were introduced to the idea of attending college between 16-17 years old which is consistent with the literature. Other relevant data from the participant profile was also incorporated using quotations from the interview data to highlight their experiences below. An interview protocol was developed to guide the interview and answer the following three research questions:
1. What are first-generation students overall perceptions of the community college?

2. What role does the community college play in the perceptions of first-generation students?

3. How do first-generation students perceive a sense of place related to the community college?

**Participant Profiles**

The following student profiles provide general demographic information, a brief discussion for understanding their first-generation backgrounds, reasons for attending MCC, and other pertinent information related to the study. Table 1 provides a brief description of participant data collected during the interview process.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym Name</th>
<th>Cultural Background</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Intent to Transfer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Digital Marketing</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barb</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Culinary</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deb</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Health Care Sciences</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Computer Sciences</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Tool &amp; Die/Adv. Mach.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Engineering/Architect.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Animal Science/Vet M.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle (International)</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>Respiratory Therapy</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Caucasian-Disabled</td>
<td>Biotechnology</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lou</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 includes gender, age, cultural background, major and transfer status. A total of seven (7) female and five (5) male students participated with cultural backgrounds ranging from Caucasian, Asian, to Hispanic. A little over half of the students planned to transfer to the local university, all of the students were attending the community college due to finances, and four
students were actually accepted into universities but chose otherwise. Many of the students emphasized this point and talked about how they came from poor or lower income families.

Ann
Ann was age 20 and started college immediately after high school at the local university and changed her major six times before finally settling on a digital marketing associate degree at the community college. She talked about the financial aspect of why she was here: “We weren't on the poverty level, but we still struggled at times. With my finances, that's what I have to do.” Ann’s father attended a trade school and her mother was currently attending the same community college. Ann expressed that she “needed to prevent that for my future” and “my parents said I should attend college but did not care where; but just the fact that I did. They didn’t have the means for me to go.” Even though Ann spent one whole year at the university, she still continued to struggle with the discipline of attending every class.

Barb
Barb was a 20 year old culinary student with high energy and a positive attitude. Her father worked two jobs and she made a point to tell me about a past boyfriend that also worked as well. She was passionate about not see herself following that path, “I don’t want to hate going to work the rest of my life and not go to college, I can’t do that, I see myself as someone being successful.” Barb also commented on how that boyfriend “wants to sit at home and not do anything. I can’t be with someone who isn’t successful.” Barb looked at success as, “being in my career.”

Carl
Carl was an 18 year old future mechanical engineering student from a country in Africa who was accepted to a university but not realizing the cost, decided the community college was a
better fit. “I got admissions to a university. I was scheduled and everything, I got the admission. I only needed to make the payment for admission fee or some fee. I had to make that to actually start.” Carl did not start. However, in Carl’s family they valued education so his father attended a trade institute school for skills. Attendance to this type of school was looked at as higher education stating his father attended “because they hold education to be in the highest esteem.”

He also explained sheepishly that his father “spoke to me a lot about getting off my butt and getting to college” a year after he graduated high school. Later in this paper, Carl also will show his cultural conflict between leisure time and the discipline of good attendance commonly found in first-generation student literature.

*Deb*

Deb was age 18 and enrolled at the community college immediately after high school. She made no mention of attending a university and was very excited about her future in the healthcare sciences field and loved attending this college and everything that came with it. During her interview she used the word “incredible” often and displayed such a great attitude about everything. Deb also stated that her father completed an apprenticeship for his job skills and eagerly shared personal information and details about her mother and siblings.

*Ed*

Ed wanted to major in computer science and is age 18. He enrolled immediately after high school and revealed that he could not attend the university right away. Ed reflected on his family beginnings and the effects on him:

*My parents, they didn't finish high school, just because ... They went through high school, started to finish, but then my mom got pregnant with my sister, so then she couldn't finish up there, so she ended up getting a GED and that was it. My parents used to live in an area called “Dog Patch” in the [Midwest] area. It's kinda the rougher area.*
His beginnings also affected the time he started thinking about college with his father, "He was kinda more focused on making sure I got through those early years 'cause those were kinda hard. Then once I got through those, then we started talking about college." But only after one semester, Ed’s grandfather told him that he needed to get a job rather than attend college. He described his situation as attending the community college because:

> It was cheaper, we’ve been living on the poorer side; but it’s been helpful in a way to for me to be able to get through college for them, really. I get by with my FAFSA so I haven’t taken any student loans out yet because of that. I would love to go to [Midwest] State, but unfortunately, I just can’t afford it yet. I’m hoping that working hard here maybe could help get some scholarships or something like that.

Ed was a serious student with high grades but often used cautious words to describe his situation commonly found for FGS and their self-esteem. For example, when he talked about graduation and transferring to the university, he said “if I hopefully graduate” rather than when he graduates.

> Frank

20-year-old Frank tried to enroll at the local community college at his hometown in California after high school but faced waiting times and high enrollment. Instead, he decided to move with his grandparents in the [Midwest] and attend right away because he did not want to be “the low man on the totem pole” here. He liked hands-on work and enjoyed the freedom of making things and explained, “I like making stuff. My preferred area of employment would be prototype foundry which is basically just a bunch of guys in a warehouse making whatever comes in their head.” Tool and die in the advanced manufacturing field was a perfect major for him and when asked why he attends this college the first words out of his mouth were, “Cheap; very cheap…. and they have my program.” Frank seemed like he might be more of a well-read
philosophy professor than a tradesman but nevertheless, it was where he belonged. Frank was aware of the conflict between his new career focus and his family ties as he put it:

*When I go home, it's like, "Oh yeah, I'm in college and my dad can't relate to it. Grandpa thinks, "Why are you wasting your time on school and stuff, just go get a job." And it's like, "I will. All right, I will."*

*Greg*

Greg was an 18 year old Hispanic engineering or architecture student who was planning on transferring and taking as many general education classes as he could, “*so I can just get those out of the way without spending large amounts of money.*” Greg talked about how his family moved from Mexico to California then to the [Midwest] and how he has the opportunity to break the cycle of working hard labor jobs:

*My parents were working this labor intensive job. Everybody working and then sending some money back to Mexico because ... my parents' parents, or my grandparents, or my great grandparents, they all lived down there while they were up here working, and they were sending them down money.*

Because Greg’s parents did not want him to just work, he said during his childhood his parents would say he needed to go to college, “*they were like, "you need to go to school, you need to go to school” so that kind of pushed me and was like ... I want to work, I like working, it's not bad. It's pretty fun where I work. So I'm like, I can go to work and go to school, it's no big deal.*” Greg had the great fortune of growing up in a nice suburb and attended a top high school in the state. This impacted his attitude of the community college. He talked with high self-confidence and did not see himself as a community college student. He said these students were the “*unpopular*” ones in high school.

*Helen*

Helen was age 19 and planned on transferring to the local university to major in animal sciences. She grew up in a small rural town in which her father had two jobs and explained, “*My
mom went to college, but she ended up dropping out for family reasons.” She pays for college by herself because her parents do not have the money and want her to be as “independent” as possible. Helen showed pride that her parents wanted her to be independent with no financial help from them as she explained:

They like it. They just want me to have as much independence as I can throughout college. They’re kind of up in the air. They don’t really want to help out, they want me to have as much independence as I can, so I’m paying for everything I need except for insurance. I’m just working to get enough money to get me through college. I’m trying to pay as I go, so I don’t have any debts.”

Independence for Helen and her family meant success. Helen also prided herself on the fact that she did not use financial aid and pays for college with her two jobs. She talked about how she picked her major and that making money right away was her priority, a response consistent with the world of work literature: “I just volunteered at vet clinics and animal shelters, and I figured I want to do my career as soon as possible, and try to make money. More money than I am now, as fast as I can.”

Isabelle

Isabelle was a 23 year old African student in her second year at MCC in the respiratory therapy program. Her family legacy was to go into nursing like her sisters and talked with pride how she broke that mold and chose a different healthcare path, which she shared, was stressful to do. Her father did not actually attend college however, she considered him an educated man:

My dad was a very educated man. Well, I think the reason why he didn’t go to college because when he was growing up, high school was kind of the highest level of education. I grew up in a not like rich, but wealthy enough for all my sisters to go to school.

Isabelle came across as a world-class traveler who considered herself shy but loved to meet new people always striving for new conversations. She showed an extreme amount of enthusiasm when talking about how she discovered MCC:
When I was reading the application, I was like, "Oh! They have people coming all over the world like Africa and Iraq and all these countries." I was like, "It might be a good place for me. Especially, English is my third language, so I might find other people coming elsewhere speaking the same languages that I do and I can communicate with them, so that's why we ... The main reason that excited me to come.

Julie

Julie was a 19-year-old undecided student with high grades who will most likely transfer to the local university. She always had good grades and loved learning new things. She mentioned that it was the elementary school that created the college-going culture for her so college was a natural transition, but not so much for her family:

My mom went to community college for I think about a year, maybe a year and a half and then she dropped out. My dad never went to college; he went to [trade] school. My older brother graduated from high school in 2014 and went straight to work; he didn’t do anything with college or school or anything. And my younger brother, he’s not really looking to go to college. He might, but he wants to go straight to work. I’ve always been pretty good at school I guess.

Since she did not have college knowledge help from her family, she found herself in a stressful situation at a private college:

But attending here was super last minute. I was supposed to go to a different college. This fall I was supposed to go to [private liberal arts] college in [city] but then I don’t know, I guess orientation day it just really hit me how much it was going to cost and so I withdrew my admission status and so I came here last minute and it’s close to home so I saved money from living in a dorm. So that’s pretty much the only reason why I came here.

Later in the interview she revealed that this was a better choice for her anyway because she would feel intimidation and judgement from the more affluent students who did not have work and have financial aid. Julie did not feel judgement at this college and discussed her financial aid in a matter of fact manner:

Well I have the financial aid but there’s still like the extra costs that aren’t always covered. And I chose [MCC] since it’s less expensive than a university; I didn't choose to take any federal loans. I just did the grants. So there was still some left over money.
**Karen**

Karen was an optimistic and courageous student not influenced by her upbringing or her cognitive disability. She loved having conversations with anyone she can talk to. She mentioned several times how she loved to talk to other students, “about being in college.” Her father dropped out of school after the eight-grade and her troubles started as well. Karen was bullied and picked on by the, “teachers and kids.” and reflects back about being, “slapped in the face so hard it left fingerprints.” She was 20 years old now and was diagnosed with medulloblastoma (brain tumor) in her sophomore year of high school and almost did not finish. One would not be able to recognize that she has a cognitive issue unless asked to remember certain things. This left her with trouble remembering information and had to change her plans to go to the local university but the fact that she was there showed how determined she was:

> And I was gonna go to [Midwest] State afterwards, but ... Because I wanted to go in like the science and the animal field. But I found out that they have a biotechnology program now and I can go right in the workforce right afterwards. I'm just gonna stick with that.

**Lou**

18 year-old Lou came to the United States from Asia when he was six and talked about how he got caught up in the American culture. School was not his priority and he “didn’t plan too much” which resulted in low grades:

> I didn't really have the qualifications or actually good enough grades to go to just any college, so I thought of going here first and then transferring to [Midwest] State. I mean, my family also doesn't make too much money, so actually a lot of it is just already covered by FAFSA.

His family spoke little to no English when they came to the United States and college attendance for the next generation was expected. Lou would be majoring in business ready to work in the family business when he graduates. He prided himself on working 35 hours a week and attending college full-time but could use more leisure days to relax. He reflected on how things are now
by saying, “There is a family pressure to attend college but I’ve realized that my mindset was wrong and what I need to do….I mean, sometimes I still slack off, but it’s a lot less now.” Even though he had come to realize that he needed to put a plan in place to transfer to the university, he stated, “I haven’t contacted the registrar, I haven’t gotten myself an advisor yet. I think I should do it pretty soon, though.”

Summary of Participant Profiles

All of these students shared many of the same issues commonly found in the first-generation student background even though they represented diverse backgrounds. For example, all participants were attending MCC because it was cost effective for their family. Barb, Carl, Greg, and Julie were accepted and planned to attend a university before deciding to attend the community college. With the exception of a couple of students, most all of these students would have been accepted right out of high school due to their good grades. All of the participants had a rocky start whether it was coming from a poorer family, not having qualifications to get into a university, not making it at the university, or being bullied in school; these participants all shared that they had some type of a rocky start. This theme set the stage for how these students experienced their place at MCC. A few students talked about how their families told them to get a job and not attend college. However, all of these participants shared a positive attitude toward attending college and were extremely determined and enthusiastic about life in general. The researcher discovered that none of the participants in this study showed any of the risk factors commonly found in FGS such as not attending class or taking semesters off.

Themes

Six major themes emerged from the interview data shown in Table 2: (1) Second Choice; (2) Fighting Forces; (3) Student Growth; (4) I Belong!; (5) Breaktime; and (6) Rave Reviews.
The subthemes that emerged to form major themes are discussed in each section below and organized by research question. Themes highlight student quotes which are joined with Strayhorn’s (2012) concept of sense of belonging and Hay’s (1988) sense of place presented in Campelo’s (2013) framework. A sense of belongingness is connected to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs which implies the lower level needs must be satisfied before higher-order needs can influence behavior. Belongingness is at level 3 out of 5 levels on his pyramid. Results below are presented by each research question.

**Themes from the Research Questions**

This section presents results and findings by themes and begins with a discussion of each major theme to answer the coinciding research question. Each subtheme is discussed in relation
to its major theme and also displayed in Tables by themes. Table 3 summarizes the themes that answered each research question:

*Table 3. Themes from Research Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theme Name</th>
<th>Theme #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| *Research Question 1:*  
*What are FGS overall perceptions of the CC?*  
Second Choice          | 1                     |
| Fighting Forces     | 2                     |
| *Research Question 2:*  
*What role does the CC play in the perception of FGS?*  
Student Growth        | 3                     |
| Breaktime           | 6                     |
| *Research Question 3:*  
*How do FGS perceive a sense of place related to the CC?*  
I Belong!             | 9                     |
| Rave Reviews        | 7                     |

**Research Question 1: What are first-generation students overall perceptions of the community college?**

- Theme 1 – Second Choice
- Theme 2 – Fighting Forces

**Theme 1: Second Choice**

The first theme that answered research question one was named second choice. The responses that formed the following subthemes below shared a similar story that pointed to their attendance at the community college was for a specific reason; not by choice. Table 4 summarizes the subthemes for the second choice theme. Participants did not directly respond that MCC was a second choice for them, however, their responses were categorized into a four subthemes that implied second choice shown in Table 4.1.
Table 4. Theme 1: Second Choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Here for financial reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepted at a university first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rocky start</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second chance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Second Choice defines student perception of attending MCC and describes feelings mainly affiliated with not beginning ones postsecondary experience at a university. Data from the second choice theme provided evidence that suggests first-generation college students perceive the community college as a runner-up to the university, or a second choice. Subthemes for second choice were: here for financial reasons, accepted into a university first, and had a rocky start. The community college was a second choice because all students attended due to the lower cost and socioeconomic status of their family (Choy, 2001), or were only here for financial reasons. Attending MCC first allowed Julie to pay as she goes: “I’m trying to pay as I go, so I don’t have any debts.” She plans to transfer to the local university next. Four students were accepted into a university first, three students made it to the orientation, and one student completed a year before surrendering to MCC. Ann, who was “overwhelmed and not ready” fits the description of a Returner or Boomerang who leave home to attend the university and find themselves overwhelmed and returns home (Kefalas & Carr, 2009). Julie knew right away that she was in over her head and went straight to MCC. The other eight students talked about how they wish they were attending the university or were planning on eventually transferring—but the community college was not their first choice.

This also contributed to some of the rocky starts. Those not accepted into universities had other examples of a rocky start such as low grades or last minute decisions amongst others (Orbe, 2004). But having a rough start meant they were not attending their first choice. Two
students failed classes, one student came in with a low GPA, two students enrolled after a year off and another conceded the university saying “I wasn't ready for four years.” This evidence is consistent with the literature that states FGS have rough beginnings and oftentimes rough endings. Students also felt it was their second chance and second opportunity to succeed.

*Table 4.1. Second Choice Subthemes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Here for Financial Reasons</td>
<td><em>I'm just trying to pay as I go so I don't have any debts</em></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepted at a University First</td>
<td>* Attending here was super last minute*</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rocky Start</td>
<td><em>I failed because I expected too much of the instructor</em></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Chance</td>
<td><em>Here I can get a second chance</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1 lists the subthemes for the second choice major theme and they are presented below in discussion form as well. For this group of 18-23 year-old FGS the community college was not their first choice which in-turn affected how they view their place. Even though participants were directly asked why they attended MCC, they all seemed to justify why they were not attending a university. This is a surprising result because many FGS tend not question attending a community college as a first step or for a terminal career degree program. Additionally, this type of response was consistent with the justification process people go through in Festinger’s (1957) cognitive dissonance theory to reduce dissonance. When an individual’s actions do not align with their beliefs this theory states that one may talk themselves into or justify the action that is dissonant with their belief. All four subthemes contributed to how students viewed MCC as not the first choice--but their second. Also, an individual’s second choice over their first could accompany lower expectations. The following were subthemes.

**Here for financial reasons.** All participants attended MCC because it was the most cost effective. First-generation families have been found to look at college as a cost rather than an
investment and lack financial aid knowledge. Many do not understand that a degree can allow a career to move up in rather than staying in a dead-end job. It can be very difficult when students like Frank have family telling them that they are wasting their time in college and should get a job. This could have influenced Frank’s decision to enter a short cost-effective program such as tool and die so he can start making money right away and please his grandfather. Additionally, many FGS do not have a clear idea of what a realistic starting salary is for a college graduate so they compare it to the money they are currently making in their high school level jobs. Helen shared how she chose her major: “I just volunteered at vet clinics and animal shelters, and I figured I want to do my career as soon as possible, and try to make money. More money than I am now; as fast as I can.”

Viewing college as a cost can also constrain how they pay for college. Julie proudly explained what she is doing to be debt free: “I'm trying to- I'm just working to get enough money to get me through college. I'm trying to pay as I go, so I don't have any debts.” This view can encourage part-time attendance to allow for full-time work which increases chances of drop-out. Julie also explains how she avoids student loans: “Since [MCC] is less expensive than a university, I didn't choose to take any federal loans. I just did the grants. And so there was still some left over money for me to pay out of pocket.” She would not be able to pay the difference out of her pocket at a university which has housing and meal plans to pay. Just like the other students, Helen would rather attend the university but told herself that there is no difference in the classes she had to take: “I mean, I'm not gonna take anything different there than I am here, so I might as well just take it here” (less expensive). So I don't really know; I feel like everybody here is pretty cool” (even though they are not university students).
Accepted into a university first. While all students attended this community college for financial reasons, many were supposed to attend a university first. Consistent with literature, these students experienced what Lehmann (2007) found was a lack of fit. Ann actually attended a university for an entire year before switching over to MCC. During that time she switched majors six times and was “overwhelmed and not ready.” Other students described their experiences in switching to the community college at the last minute. Greg, Carl and Julie had everything in place including class schedules and attended orientation—only to experience sticker shock. Greg expressed how stressful and hectic it was to switch everything over to MCC after realizing the cost:

“I was originally planning to go to straight [Midwest] State right out of high school, but then I just didn’t have any idea what I was doing so it caused like ...stress. “I’ll just go to [MCC], it’s no problem. So once I started doing that it just kind of got hectic because I had everything done for [Midwest] State.”

Being faced with making a large payment to the university, Carl explained how his uncle attended MCC and thought it could be a good fit for Carl without making a huge commitment:

“So my dad was on the phone with my uncle who attended [MCC] and they were discussing that I was now going to school at [MCC]; so it was something we could try.” As previously mentioned, Julie also experienced sticker shock and withdrew her application during orientation at the private college saying it was “super last minute.” However, later in the interview she disclosed how she was better off attending MCC anyway:

“I feel like if I would have gone to [private liberal arts college] I don’t feel like I would have fit in because it was a private college. A lot of the people were better off and I have to work... and go to school.... at the same time and I feel like I wouldn't have been able to have a social life or fit in with the people who didn't have to do those same things.”

Rocky start. A rocky start for all of these students meant different things. For Lou, his lack qualifications meant not getting accepted into the university. Interestingly, he justified his
social calendar for not getting in: “I mean, I feel like I could do a lot better, but honestly senior year, I had stuff going on, you know.” Many FGS tend to prioritize their personal problems or social life which can lead to lower grades. Lou admitted that school was not a priority saying “It was not really priorities, more like a lack of one.” Frank got a little more detailed about his rocky start:

“One thing falls behind, the other thing falls behind, and I'm over there actively avoiding my work, playing video games. “No. No.” I did that in high school, and, by the skin of my teeth, just sort of cruised right on by. Not the way to go.

Two other students failed a required class. Barb failed Field Prep Two Lab and Carl failed Classical Physics 1—a six credit hour class. Barb’s chicken dish in the culinary lab was cold every time. She said, “I just forgot to ... follow the instructions.” After that experience, she said she “practiced following the instructions.” Carl on the other hand, reasoned, “Why did I fail? That's a good question. I think I would say I failed because I expected too much of the instructor.” FGS have been found to rely more on actual words of a teacher over written material such as a syllabus. Unfortunately, teacher expectations and instructions usually are found on the syllabus. Lastly, Ann’s other explanation for leaving the university in favor of MCC was simply: “I wasn't ready for four years.”

Second chance. The following sub-question for research question one was asked at the end of the interview to delve deeper into student’s overall perceptions: “Based on everything that we have talked about, overall, what does this community college campus mean to you?” Student’s responded positively and expressed how this community college means so much to them because of the opportunities it will provide for them to advance their lifestyles in response to their family backgrounds. So while students felt the community college was their second choice, the theme of “second chance” rang true for all students because they all felt very
appreciative that they were given a chance to succeed. In other words, because of the baggage they carried from their ancestry, these FGS felt like they did not belong on a college campus; but at this college they belonged therefore it was a second chance. The last interview question brought out a sentimental side and a sense of gratitude that went beyond their words. It seemed to genuinely come from the heart which was seen in both their body language and in their eyes. Students seemed to almost transpose their feelings of belonging onto that of the school. Even though their words were short, most students appeared very sentimental when answering this final question.

[MCC] is really just a second chance for me, 'cause in high school I didn't do enough, I don't have enough qualifications, but over here I can get a second chance and go on to whatever I want to do!

Theme 2: Fighting Forces

The second theme that came from research question one was fighting forces. Fighting forces describes the push and pull of balancing contradictory values related to structure and challenges they have to push through. Fighting forces was formed out of these two subthemes: Conforming and feeling forced which had everything to do with being first-generation which are summarized in Table 5. Students had trouble being pinned down and were “not a huge fan of rigid order.” Moreover, students did not like the idea of attending class every day.

Table 5. Theme 2: Fighting Forces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Forced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many expressed the need for more leisure time, time off, and free from constraints being forced on them. This theme was named fighting forces because it was found to stem directly from the first-generation background where students experienced conflict related to their expectations of
how things should be and how things actually are. Repelling forces of structural rules, hard work, and accountability that caused stress and influenced how students viewed the community college. The fighting forces theme subthemes are show in Table 5.1 and discussed in detail below.

Table 5.1. Fighting Forces Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conforming</td>
<td>I need to be free to decide what I want to decide.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Forced</td>
<td>My parents never forced me.</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conforming.** FGS have been notorious for low attendance rates not showing up for class on many occasions. Words from these participants show a struggle with the college student role which requires class attendance, being focused and organized, and doing the hard work it takes to be successful. Most put leisure time in a high priority category and most viewed college as burden without it. For example, Carl came right out and said that “I'm trying to struggle with adding some order to my life without making it terrible for me so it becomes more of a burden.”

Carl said he is too “spontaneous” and “not a huge fan of rigid order and stuff. Monotony doesn't work well with me. It makes me easily bored and distracted.” Carl was also known to oversleep for his 8:00 class as heard in his conflicting feelings about that:

> Sometimes, my Calc 3 and Differential Equations class were in the evening and I would go to take a nap and oversleep. When I was tired, I'll just oversleep. I don't know why this happened, but I always used to wake up at 8pm when the class ends. I'm like what's the use? Yeah, I'll just wake up and I'm like, oh my god, why didn't I hear the alarm? Whatever caused me to not wake up? And I'll just look and it's like eight [o’clock], and suddenly all that rush just goes away and I just feel the disappointment.

Other students struggled with a fast pace work load. Deb made a point to mention how her summer was going to be spent: “16 weeks crammed into 8 weeks. I’m nervous about that. It will be a sacrifice! I don’t know why they wouldn’t just create it as an 8 week program instead of
trying to make it this way.” Ed preferred a slow and easy pace and could not understand why everything moved so fast: “Not necessarily in the student center, but when you're like towards the building [#] where I go a lot and you see people running in and out, drinking energy drinks, in a rush, it's crazy!” Stephen et al.’s (2012) cultural mismatch exists between being independent as seen in individualistic cultures and being interdependent in collectivist cultures. Similar to Carl’s need for more direct help from an instructor, Frank also showed trouble with the needing more from the instructor rather than being told to go study on your own. Carl also rated their teaching abilities from more of a collectivist viewpoint similar to high school:

*I would say that the one who doesn't care if you learn or not, their lesson quality is a lot lower. It's just read right off the PowerPoint, videos. You fall behind; it's like, "Just go to the Academic Achievement Center." And I stop by during office hours, and they say, "I'm busy.*

Of all the students, Ann seemed to have the most trouble conforming to the rules and systematic structures of a college. She said she needed to be “free to decide what I want to decide” and felt like “a little leeway would be a little better.” These words revealed her conflict:

*One thing that I have kind of a problem with here is that attendance is a huge thing. At [Midwest] State, there are a lot of lectures and they don't base a lot of things on attendance points. So if you need to take the day for yourself, you can do that. But with here, you have to be in the classroom every single day to get full points and be successful. There is a lot of group work and participation points here that make me feel a little anxious when I have to miss class.*

Time off and missing class started to be a theme with Ann. After experiencing a year of independence at a large four-year university, perhaps her expectations were lowered:

*But I feel like I'm here. I'm kind of paying for my education. I feel like I should be able to control when I'm here and when I'm not; Just the sense of responsibility and individuality and that aspect. If I'm sick, I just wanna be able to take the day to myself without having to worry, "Oh my gosh; I'm gonna fall behind."

**Feeling forced.** Similar to having trouble conforming the structure and rules in college, many students expressed words that imply college was a thing that is “forced” upon them. Using
Ann as another example, she talked about how she changed her major six times and how there comes a point when you just need to decide on a major: “because you're gonna need to get out of here sometime.” Barb on the other hand, boasted that “My parents never forced me” and explained that “I feel like I belong in culinary arts. I'm doing what I love instead of being forced to actually take classes you don't want to do” and that “I feel like if you really don’t want to be here, you don't have to be here. I was like ….. I want to.” Carl felt the same way. He said his father “pressured” him into the math and sciences field but seemed to enjoy those subjects. Carl’s previous reflection on conforming shows a little more detail in this next explanation of how college could become a problem for him if he was overloaded or did not like his major:

_I don't want to ever think of school as a burden. Once I start doing that, it just has a negative toll. I think it's going to have a negative toll on my college experience because then it's more of a job for me and I don't do it with passion. I think passion is a big deal because if you do have passion, if you have a why, then you'll be able to keep on pushing through obstacles. If it's just a job for you, you hit a really stubborn road block or something, you're just like eh, I guess I can't get through this one—let's just quit._

**Research Question 2: What role does the community college play in the perception of first-generation students?**

- Theme 3 – Student growth
- Theme 5 – Breaktime

**Theme 3: Student Growth**

The first theme that came from research question two was student growth which represented how students benefitted by either overcoming personal roadblocks or learning new skills and responsibilities since attending MCC. While participants did not perceive MCC as their first choice they were very aware of student growth that took place. Subthemes of student growth were _lessons learned, this college has taught me something, and I want to be successful_ (aware of the alternative) shown in Table 6. Evidence of some lessons learned were “My mindset was wrong” (Lou), and “I cannot procrastinate” (Frank).
Table 6. Theme 3: Student Growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lessons learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This college has taught me something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to be successful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other students stated that college directly taught them something. Helen stated that “I've gotten more out of my shell” and Isabelle said “It took me not a real long time, but quite a long time to get out of my shell, and be as I am now.” Student growth could also be seen their awareness of what college will provide them. Ed said “It's like a chance to get out of being poor kind of thing” and Barb said “I'm trying to be successful.” The student growth category revealed more themes consistent with literature that finds higher gains in learning and self-growth for FGS. Many of these basic lessons learned are absent in working-class homes and taken-for-granted in professional-class homes, but nevertheless, all of these students seemed to be very aware of the growth-spurt. Perhaps this growth fueled their sense of gratitude and appreciation heard in their voices. Subthemes of the student growth theme are displayed in Table 6.1 and a more detailed discussion with student quotes from each subtheme follows.

Table 6.1. Student Growth Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lessons Learned</td>
<td>I think that contributed to the depletion of my GPA....</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This College has Taught me.....</td>
<td>It's basically shown me how to take opportunities given...</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Want to be Successful</td>
<td>I can't be with someone who isn't successful. I want to be successful.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Lessons learned.** Student growth took place for many students in how they learned from past mistakes whether it stemmed from their experiences or someone else’s. For example, Greg learned from his parent’s situation when they first arrived from Mexico:
My parents ... I've seen them go through what they went through and having difficulty not speaking English, not knowing how to do this, not knowing how to do that, it just kind of made me feel obligated to be like, "you know what, my parents gave me this opportunity to come to a great place, the United States, to basically have a better opportunity of life," so I won't take that for granted.

Apparently so did his parents when they told him to go to school and not straight to work. They surrounded him with the rare support that usually does not come in first-generation backgrounds.

Lou realized that he also would not take things for granted as shown in his explanation which pointed out that he was not perfect: “My mindset was wrong and what I need to do ... I mean, sometimes I still slack off, but it's a lot less now; 'cause I'm paying for this, so there's a personal investment in this.”

Ann’s experience was a little different than Greg and Lou’s. Ann seemed to be very conflicted about her past attendance at the university. After spending a year on the campus she found herself college shopping at a for-profit school and the MCC. Her mother was attending the for-profit school at that time before switching to MCC. Coincidently, the researcher from this study worked for a short time in the admissions department at that same for-profit school and remembers talking with this exact student. This student expressed how she wanted to leave the university and attend the for-profit school. At that time, the researcher gave strong advice to stay at the university or attend the community college—but not the for-profit school. The student did not recognize this past incident in the interview and disclosed, “When I got to [Midwest] State, I was overwhelmed; I should have went to [MCC] before. It probably would have been a little smarter of a decision, but I learned from that and I’m still working towards the degree.” Ann also admitted that she was never “super involved” with anything and reflected on her social short-comings:

*I wasn't necessarily there to make a bunch of friends and be a part of a huge thing. But if I might have, maybe it could have helped if I maybe socialized a little bit more and got*
involved and put myself in situations where I focused on my work and being there. Like put myself all there, if that makes sense.

Other students learned from mistakes as well. While Ann realized that her lack of involvement could have played a part in her leaving the university, Carl found that his over-involvement got him in trouble. Early on at MCC he was “super involved” with the international club and said that “although relationships are important, I'm trying to balance things out. I don't want to make it too important because I think that that contributed to the depletion in my GPA last semester.” Many FGS struggle with simple things that can interfere with any student’s success. After failing a food lab for not following instructions, Barb proudly announced that she will do things differently: “I try to cook at home more so that helps me there. I did not practice for it. That was a big problem I did not do. But now I'm like, "I'm going to practice for that." It's going to be helpful that I practice what to do right this time on everything.” Barb also discovered that you must obey signs in the parking lot: “People don't want to look and say, oh there's a parking sign, you can't park there. I learned from that, from the ticket incident.”

Frank on the other hand, now understood he cannot repeat his behavior from high school and stated, “I cannot procrastinate.” Because if I do procrastinate, it's a stack of dominoes. One thing falls behind, the other thing falls behind, and I'm over there actively avoiding my work, playing video games.”

**This college has taught me something.** Not only did these students learn lessons from past mistakes, they all realized that attendance at this college had taught them something. Similar to lessons learned, many of these students were keenly aware of their newly discovered mindset. Most talked about how important organization and time management skills were for them. Ann, for example, realized that transferring to MCC taught her to make decisions: *It's basically shown me how to take opportunities that are given to me and make a decision because I found that I*
was kind of abusing my opportunities and privileges with education” [after changing her major six times]. Ann was 20 years old and has learned that she needs to multitask to get things done, and does not want to be “going and going and going” like other people:

It's really showed me ... Having almost a full-time job while I'm going to school full-time, has taught me how to juggle my responsibilities. I have to figure out when I can study, when I can do my homework, and then I have to go to work as well.

Frank described his new routines and how he learned how structure has helped him:

So I knew sort of what college was like. Very independent-- it's on the student for their responsibility. It's not on the parents; it's not on the teachers. But actually coming here, taking my first semester now, I'm getting into every day; you've got class. Every day you've got to wake up at about the same time. You've got to drive a long distance, you've got to do a lot of homework; A lot more homework. One of my classes is just write essays. We turn in one essay, the next class period was, "Here's your next essay. It's due in two weeks." "Great." I don't know how many more essays I'll have to be writing, but having a class that's just writing essays, always knowing, "I've got to do this, I've got to do that. I cannot procrastinate."

Julie talked about how she compartmentalized everything to get through a day:

It's hard. But it really makes you budget your time. Like you have to make a plan of this is when I work, this is when I go to school, and this is the time I have outside to do homework and stuff. And so you got, it's really pressed for time sometimes. It might be a little better because I have more stuff to balance now so like I have even more determination to get this much stuff done in this amount of time.

Lou’s response stated:

I feel like mainly it's just focusing on passing the qualifications to go onto the next step, and then I'll see what I can do from there. So it's like a step by step thing. The way my schedule works out is there's no like split.

For these students, this college got them out of their comfort zone. Barb, Julie, Isabelle, and Helen all realized that they were on the shy side. At first Barb had a negative attitude about the classroom telling herself, "I don't think I'm ever going to be friends with any of these people."

After teachers pushed them to sit in different seats, she realized how easy it was:

I actually came close to a few people that weren't in the culinary with them. I was like, "Yeah I like you." We clicked instantly and just made friends, the teachers pushed us.
Like, ‘you need to not sit in the same seat. You need to change seats’ and so I just talked to people. That helped me get close to people that aren’t in my program.

Helen’s reflection revealed her metamorphosis: “When I first came, I thought I was on my own, but I started talking to people in class, and then I met with them after and started getting in their groups. So, I’ve gotten more out of my shell.” Earlier in the interview, Helen talked about her negative feelings toward growing up in a small town and noted how she felt like she was different from the rest and did not fit in and how people do not talk to her. Her next reflection described how she has advanced: “I’m able to talk with people that I’ve never met, never thought I would talk to. I’m able to ask them questions and joke around with them, and just feel welcome with people.” Isabelle talked about how she loved to talk to people and not radiology machines and was an extremely bubbly and outgoing girl. She shared how being an extrovert was new for her, “It took me not a real long time, but quite a long time to get out of my shell, and be as I am now.” Lastly, Julie disclosed just how cautious she still is:

I used to play softball. I still feel like I kind of fit in with athletic type of people every now and then. I can talk about that, and I can go into those groups and feel fine but I’m very introverted. I don’t like putting myself into the community but if I need to I will.

**I want to be successful** (Aware of the alternative). The different types of lessons learned and student growth that participants experienced all seemed to point to the fact that they all wanted to be successful and were very aware of those who were not. Being successful also led to student growth. Many participants talked about how college improved them and their situations. Ed shared that:

*It’s like a chance to get out of being poor kind of thing….. As long as I graduate, I feel like then they put me in a position that I can succeed in, and so hopefully everything works out in the way I want it to, and I can get a better job because of this place.*

Ann experienced a taste of success from the dean’s list:
The people that are older like me [Ann is 20] and kind of middle-aged, they really care about how they're doing. I'm on the dean's list and I know that I'll be fine if I'm not on the dean's list, but now that I am, I really want to strive to stay there because now that I've gotten to a point where I know that I can be successful, I want to keep going with that.

Karen, Julie, Barb, and Isabelle all expressed in different ways what success meant for them.

Karen saw herself as a hard working student when she explained what she is not doing: “I mean I'm not just staying at home, sitting there, watching TV; playing games. I'm on campus all day.” In other words, Karen was going to be successful. Julie knew that going to college would help her be successful when she shared: “It would help me in life if I do this.” Karen wanted to be successful. Barb also wanted to be successful and so did her mother: You need to like what you do. Because she [mom] wanted to see me be successful instead of be like working and all that.”

Isabelle described how she wanted to be successful in quite a bit of detail:

I've always wanted to be independent [successful]. Growing up, I watched a lot of TV shows, and movies, and I was always amazed by the confidence and power of women leading, being able to do everything they've always wanted to do. And I grew up with that in my mind, saying that I'm going to go to college, and I'm going to get my degree, and I'm going to be independent. Yeah, I know I've always wanted to go to college that's because I like being independent.

Barb talked about an old boyfriend and success and how she had better plans for herself:

I had a boyfriend. He was like, "No, I don't want to go to college." "There's nothing for me to do." I say it's because you don't want to do anything with your life. I'm here like, "I would love to go to college." He never went. I'm like, "Well I would, I'm trying to be successful." They're just wanting to sit at home and not do anything. Like, I can't be with someone who isn't successful. I want to be successful. I want to be in my career doing what I want to do.

Theme 5: Breaktime This theme explains forces that contributed to the stress of student desires for relaxation and leisure time in the face of the demands of college. This theme was unusual and was born out of subthemes quiet time, leisure time, and relaxation shown in Table 7. Sense of time for the students was found to revolve around relaxation and break time.
Table 7. Theme 5: Breaktime

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Juggling time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Time had different facets for students which impacted student perception of place differently. Students were very aware of scheduling, attending classes and how they lacked time which left no time for recreation. Respondents talked about how time effects everything from being stressed, always being aware of time, not having enough time, having to plan everything, not liking being constrained to time, drive time, being on time, balancing work, homework, and finding relaxation and leisure time. Students stressed the need for more breaks and also felt they were not getting enough. Some students felt they needed a break to relax after only two hours of study time. Having a place that was quiet and plenty of relaxation were important priorities which many participants were not willing to sacrifice.

The Breaktime theme was formed particularly when students talked about their favorite places. Students talked about the differences between the lively student center and the quietness of other buildings that they needed. Some talked about how they move back in forth between the noisy student center and a quiet place such as the library or the academic achievement center depending on if they need a break. Others talked about how these places gave them a dose of much needed relaxation. Besides needing a separate place for quiet time and relaxation, the physical space had to have things that promoted relaxation such as “comfy chairs.” Moreover, study rooms could not double as relaxation space; everything needed to be compartmentalized. Relaxation for students could also be a place of excitement and buzz which promotes a place of
low stress and hanging out. Table 7.1 shows Juggling Time, Quiet Time and Relaxation as subthemes of the breaktime theme. Next, each subtheme display detailed results and quotes.

Table 7.1. Breaktime Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Juggling Time</td>
<td>A lot of people you'll see just rushing and drinking energy drinks.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet Time</td>
<td>I feel very relaxed there. I know I have a place to go if I need quiet time.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation</td>
<td>I just feel like being relaxed when I'm not in class.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sense of time for these students ended up revolving around relaxation and break time. Literature typically finds that remedial work for FGS is common. Many students work full-time which impacts their sense of time differently by extending time in school and part-time attendance. This study did not find any evidence of students fitting into this literature.

**Juggling time.** Students had many comments about how they divide their time.

Julie was optimistic of how time impacts her and laid out how everything goes:

_Sometimes it gets kind of stressful. There's like some days where I have multiple tests on the same day so I need to fit studying for multiple tests, or writing multiple papers into the same time that I'm usually at work and it gets kind of stressful then because I feel I don't have enough time to get stuff done and done well, but I've managed to make it work usually._

Ann realized how much time she had lost from changing her major six times at the university, “When I was going to take the semester off, I thought to myself, “Well, I need to take this time to think about that. But I don't have much time left to do that.” For Ed, Isabelle, and Helen, their sense of time was straight forward when thinking about how they juggle everything. Ed said he just has to worry about “Getting to class on time and then making sure I have enough time for homework and then studying for tests.” For Isabelle, there was never enough time because she “likes to take in everything” as much as she can so she stays on top of everything. Isabelle
explained that she was very organized with her time and if she is rushed, it is due to a deadline and not because she slacked off. When asked her secret, she stated, “When I'm at school, I'm in school. When I'm at work, I'm at work.”

Like her father, Helen had to work two jobs to pay for school in cash. She could easily give up due to the stress that it sometimes causes her, but she makes it work. Helen was matter-of-fact with her response: “I don't spend as much time on campus just because I have a busy work schedule. I have to try to make time for school and work, but sometimes it doesn’t always work out.” Even though Ed said he only worries about getting to class on time, he noticed a culture of everyone is in a rush and the following are some of his thoughts on that:

*It seems like the lifestyle’s pretty much, get in and get out and then we’re all in a rush in a way, it seems, because a lot of people here are working….. So a lot of people you'll see just rushing and drinking energy drinks and then it's kinda bad, it seems like.*

Ed also expressed that:

*I guess I've never really felt rushed, even though I-- ‘cause I love my job and I love my school, so it just like seems worth it to me and it just seems like a daily routine, then. I try to stay away from energy drinks and that's pretty much what I try and do, I guess.*

Earlier in Frank’s interview he talked about a stack of dominos pertaining to procrastination and these words revealed that while he is learning to start work right away, he continues to struggle. He was asked: What do you attribute to that wisdom?

*Stress. I don't want to be super stressed. Like, "Oh, man, I've got an essay to write, I've got a science project to do, I've got to do this, I've got to do that. And it's all due tomorrow!" Dad wakes up in the middle of the night, "You're still up?" "Yeah, I know it's like 11 o'clock, right?" "No, it's four in the morning. I realize--It's not due tomorrow--it's due today!"

**Quiet time.** These students shared the following on quietness:

*After two hours studying and I need a break, I just come here and sit down and I get something to eat, and I think a little bit, and I go back when I am done.*
But, when I am studying, I need quiet so I go over to the library. The library has the ... Well I still have my laptop, but they have computers, more computers, and printers, and books, and everything. We do have a computer and a printer in the honors lounge right there, but I don’t know. It's not really quiet. If people are coming, going, leaving, turning around, eating ... So it’s not really ... I cannot concentrate that much to study, so that's why I go to the library.

I really like building [#]. It's just super quiet and I like to study in there, basically just because it's quiet. If I need quiet I’ll go in there and it has all the stuff you need. It has a computer lab, it has the vending machines, it has ... It's a good place to just go get work done.

I feel very relaxed there. I know I have a place to go if I need to have quiet time.

They have like study rooms where you can study alone, which is pretty quiet in there at all times, too.

**Relaxation.** This next set of student responses revolved around a sense of relaxation they experienced in the student center when talking about physical aspects of this building. There was a clear sense of separation:

*Like here, I like when the buildings have comfy chairs and here, where we have all the sofas and stuff. I just really like when a college has that place to just relax, because when you're in class you’re in class, and it's so hard and you need to focus. But when I'm outside of that, I just want to work and be relaxed at the same time. The relaxation--I like that.*

*The coffee shop doesn't really have comfy seating (laughs). I'd like to sit in there and just be and just relax but it's not a place I can do that like here.*

*I like building [#]. I like sitting out under the little tent in between building [#] and [#]. When it’s really pretty out, and it's really warm, I like just sitting there, getting my work done.*

*I guess, it just makes me feel a little bit free of like not having to necessarily be with teachers and things like that. You’re just kinda with other students who are staying here, and so that’s really, really nice to have.*

*Building [#] there’s just the general sense of relaxation. I can't get much done. This is not a place of any particular urgency. It’s just open and relaxed.*

*I like the atmosphere of it and basically the whole vibe of it and just the sense of relaxation. So basically, I just liked being relaxed when I'm not in class.*
The AAC is set up in a manner that suggests to me business. We're here for business. You've always got teachers answering questions. It terms of the chatter, although a lot of times it's undistinguishable. You hear more laughter here, a more relaxed tone, and there you hear more a serious tone, explaining, confusion from the students—that sort of thing.

Outside of building [#] where the fountains are in the spring time and in the summer time, they're really, really cool just to sit around those and hang out relax.

Leisure time was a subtheme of relaxation because many participants talked about how they needed leisure time in order to relax. All students expressed the need for leisure time in different ways. To some students, leisure time meant time to themselves; for others, leisure time meant taking a lighter course load. And still others described a scenario without it. Frank’s lighter course load was extended an additional semester, but it allowed him to not get “absolutely bogged down.” Another example was Ann, who had the highest need to skip school. Ann said it was important for her to “get my work done before I go to work and relax, because that’s basically my time to have to myself. It's important to have time to yourself, obviously.” Ann did not appear willing to sacrifice her free time saying it also important “to manage my time and make time for myself and just be okay with it all and not feel stressed out about it.” Here was Ann’s mindset:

You can skip all you want at [Midwest] State a lot of the time. And you can definitely fall behind, but I didn’t worry too much if I did miss a class and on my whole success of what was going on, which I liked. I could take a day to myself if I needed to, mentally. Take a day to relax, which sometimes you just need.

Carl, Ann, and Lou were very cognizant of typical stresses that came along with being a student. Lou sounded as if he were in mourning: “Sometimes I do wish that some of my work days could be more like leisure days.” Both Ann and Carl talked about a place to go. Ann described the student center as “a place of letting off [steam] what you're experiencing in the classroom.” Similarly Carl said “when I feel the pressure beginning to build up, I go somewhere
Carl also proclaimed that he needed leisure time and explained what type of consequences would take place if he did not have enough:

*Monotony doesn’t work well with me so I really don’t like to be serious all the time. When I get serious all the time, for a long period of time, I can be cranky, and then I’m not a really nice person to be around.*

**Research Question 3: How do first-generation students perceive a sense of place related to the community college?**

- Theme 4 – I Belong!
- Theme 6 – Rave Reviews

**Theme 4: I Belong!** *I Belong* stands for how participants felt about their comfort level, sense of belonging, and fitting in to the campus and campus community. Together, the following subthemes formed an intense sense of belonging: *Common ground, open groups, diversity, sense of belonging and community, small size and myths and beliefs* in Table 8. This theme was named *Table 8. Theme 4: I Belong!*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Common Ground</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Open Groups</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Diversity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sense of Belonging and Community</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Small Size</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Myths and Beliefs</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*I Belong* because all participants strongly felt that they had a sense of belonging to MCC in one way or another. Interestingly, students stated that they were not involved in any activities and yet they still felt a strong sense of belonging. Belonging was so strong that, as one student put it

*“Sometimes you see two people that met here-- they plan a road trip together”* (Carl) and two students said they would look for another college if they did not belong. *Common ground* or commonality was the most important factor for students to feel they belonged. Common ground
mainly was due to seeing other students who were here for financial reasons. Several students left or did not start at universities because there was no common ground. Julie’s example is used: “I feel like I fit in with a lot of the people who are here.”

FGS are not typically at college to socialize as heard in Ed’s comment that “I just don’t really care that much about it.” Many university studies find engagement in clubs and organizations as an important component to belonging, however this student did not agree; “I don't even interact with the clubs and stuff that much and I still feel like I belong here!” Students had diverse ways of talking about how they belonged. Ann talked about how Starbucks was similar to how many students felt about MCC. She described Starbucks as a “place of inclusiveness. But we welcome everyone and I like that. It’s not a place of judgment. It’s not a place where you need to be just like this and do these things and that....” According to Ann, the absence of judgement comes with common ground. Even though students had an attitude about relationships on campus as not that important, they still wanted to be part of a group as Carl put it: “it provides several avenues for you to be a part of a group. You see something you like-- you can be part of it.” A small campus and class size compared to a university contributed to their sense of belonging as one another student put it: “here you have the more one-on-one.” The following subsections are shown below for subthemes of I Belong: Common ground, open groups, diversity, sense of belonging and community, small size and myths and beliefs. Table 8.1 summarizes subthemes of I Belong with brief student quotes. Detailed student quotes are shown below in each subtheme to provide deeper background into the I belong theme.
Table 8.1. I Belong! Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Common Ground</td>
<td>I like the fact that it is people in similar situations I feel like I fit in with a lot of the people who are here.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Groups</td>
<td>I feel here, everyone's invited to the group</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Everyone has their own different ways</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging</td>
<td>I feel like I belong, yes definitely!</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Size</td>
<td>People you see on Tuesday- You'll probably see them again the next Tuesday- not at a university!</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myths and Beliefs</td>
<td>I thought it would be a commuter college, but it's not!</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Common ground.** Common ground was an important component of whether students felt a sense of belongingness. Students talked about their similarities and how it contributed to their sense of belonging. For example, Julie described why she fits in with her softball team:

“*Its common ground and it’s something that I really enjoy doing so I feel comfortable there pretty much.*” Carl felt common ground in the International Club similar to Julie: “*I like the fact that it was a group of people in similar situations. ‘We definitely connect and all that, try to help each other survive.’*” Lou felt the same way: “*I feel like I fit in pretty well, yeah. I’m a student like everyone else. I think that really is the overreaching thing, we're all suffering together.*” Helen felt at home because “*I feel like I relate to a lot of the other students here. And, a lot of the problems I have, I think the other kids have.*” Common ground or commonality for Julie:

*Because they didn’t have the funds to do it before like me. It was kind of the situation that I was in, and I feel like I fit in with a lot of the people who are here.*” Karen’s common ground: “*Even if we don’t know specifically the person, we all can kind of get along with each other, we’re all students; we all have that struggle, so we can talk about it.*”
Open groups. Part of the diverse culture and lifestyle for students, were the groups. Many students mentioned that everyone was in similar situations such as working and struggling to pay; and they liked that. All students described commonality as open groups, no boundaries, you can be who you want to be, and according to Deb, all of the diverse groups are nonjudgmental and “anyone can go over and join in.” There are no high school cliques and as Helen said “everyone's accepting; and there are really no outcasts!” With the exception of Lou, all participants described the social structure as set up in groups that were very open. It is interesting how all of these students used open groups as their explanations. Deb’s explanation was very complex:

Groups that are connected but open. The best way I can explain it is......all groups but like own organisms not like cliques but groups that don’t hate each other or anything; like organisms floating; moving around on their own and every once in a while they intertwine together; merge together; but don’t shy away from each other, no clicks and everyone is open; no boundaries. Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn’t, but kind of float. Like the group that plays video games over there, they get really competitive sometimes; but anyone can go over and join in.

Another example was how Helen described the group-climate, “But I feel here, everyone's invited to every group.” Helen went a little further in defining these groups: “I just feel like everyone's accepting, and there's really no outcasts, I want to say. So, everyone's more accepting towards differences in people. There's a lot of different groups......But we all connect somehow.” Karen compared the climate to the closed groups notoriously seen in high schools: “But the acting and the clicks and the groups aren't as strong as they would be at a high school.” Carl seemed to have a similar perception of the campus climate: “Usually, there's groups of two or three whether you're in building [#] or [#], building [#]. Usually, people have groups I guess. Groups that connect on several different things....... We definitely connect and all that, try to help each other survive.”
Both Frank and Lou stated in their interview that they did not consider themselves very social. Frank defined himself as “not social, not anti-social--just a-social.” Lou’s description of the groups that the other students felt invited to had a different tone: “I mean, oh yeah, they’re friendly, but everybody’s more alone in a way, like they’re more in their social groups. You know, all students are like “my grades, my life, my social life, my everything. Me-oriented.” Lou commented on a social group of about 20 students who hang out in the game area. Here is Lou’s assessment of that group: “I think one of the members is like the president of the video game club. So that's why they have the authority to set those up, otherwise it's not allowed.” Frank, on the other hand, got technical with his description of the culture and lifestyle. Similar to the other students, he called the groups a concentric circle, which is defined as two or more circles which have the same center point:

I feel that there are different tiers. I've got my friends that I know in my class, I've got my classmates, and then I have people I attend college with. People I attend college with, they're students, they also go to [MCC], but I don't really know them. Classmates, I know them a little better. Some people I still don't know their names of. I can recognize them on sight, they can recognize me on sight, and then there's my friends, which are my friends. It's a concentric circle.

Diversity. Students talked about diversity in many different ways, but they all said how diverse MCC was and liked the diversity. Ann talked about how there was diversity in age, people who are still trying to “figure things out,” and “better themselves,” she stated, “There's different ethnic groups and different people with values and religious beliefs. I think that's awesome.” Barb seemed as if she could not pin point what the social climate was but stated “Honestly, I'm not sure; because everyone has their own different ways. So it's like everyone could be different.” Carl has attended both the suburban and urban campus at MCC and pointed out differences between the two: [suburban] “I see a lot more people that live in farms, farmers. Down in urban you see a lot more city folk. It's a little bit of a different feel.” He did not have
favoritism toward either campus and said he loved them both. Frank described diversity similar
to Ann and Barb: “I don't know how else to describe it, varied groups. Very wide age range, very
diverse. Everybody comes here.”

Greg and Karen just said that, “I feel like this is a very diverse college” and “I feel it's
very open.” Karen said it is diverse because the rules are not hard: This is a campus where you
can pretty much be whoever you want to be. It isn't strict.” Karen meant there are differences in
clothing styles: “there’s the country style. We got some people who like wear the dark colors....”
Lou’s response was: “Diversity would be one. There’re so many people from different
backgrounds; there’re working class people, there's new students, there's international students.
Oh my goodness, international students, like half their families are so rich, they just like go here
and go home.” Deb compared differences by clubs: “Diverse; very diverse. If you like----want
to play Star Wars Civil War, you’ll find people who want to play. If you like philosophy---
there’s the philosophy club...... very diverse- there’s no boundary.

Deb and Ed brought up transfer students and Ed expressed how he is missing out because
of the diverse transfer culture. Deb stated, “there’s a lot of people who are transfer students.
They come here and they're like ‘I'm just gonna get my credits and transfer.” Ed explained how
everyone seemed to leave after classes and he wished they would stick around to participate in
more clubs: “which I kinda wish ... That's one of the things I wish I was at [Midwest] State for,
because it seems like a lot of people stay on campus and like to hang out there and that's kinda
what I miss here.” Ed’s response revealed an extreme sadness about missing university dorm life
by attending MCC.

**Sense of belonging and community.** This section in the *I Belong* category was very
exciting because all twelve participants really felt they belonged to the community at MCC.
Although most students directly said that they felt comfortable and fit in, many had other things to add. Sense of belonging and community for these participants meant connecting with people. For example, Lou and Deb said “I feel like I fit in pretty well, yeah” and “I feel like I belong, yes definitely!” Then Deb compared groups to organisms that float and connect as previously mentioned. She had a sense of belonging and community due to openness of groups. Carl also referred to groups on campus: “Because it provides several avenues for you to be a part of a group. You see something you like-- you can be part of it. I feel comfortable because MCC provides a soft landing for you!” Carl also went a step farther and said that “pretty much every building I walk into, I'm going to see somebody I know.” Race did not play a factor and generation status did not play a factor-- it was all about being able to talk to other people. Another example came from Ed who thought familiarity was important, “you tend to see the people over and over and over again, so you feel a little bit more like you belong here” and “being able to pick my group out of the crowd.”

Greg said he has a lot of friends here and had also met a lot of people as well so he felt a sense of belonging, but at the same time, he stated that “people are more shy to go up to you and be like, "Hi what's up, my name is" and introduce themselves and make new friends kind of thing.” Isabelle would probably be one of those shy people Greg talked about because while she said “Yes, yes, yes I belong,” she also said that “I'm not outgoing sometimes, but MCC is the perfect size for me. With everything here ... My teachers are available. Everybody's available whenever I need them.” Julie and Karen on the other hand, both agreed that it would be hard for someone to feel uncomfortable or not fit in at MCC. Julie said that “I don't even interact with the clubs and stuff that much and I still feel like I belong here. For Karen: “I mean even if we
don't know specifically the person, we all can kind of get along with each other even though like say we don't really know each other.”

**Community and relationship ratings.** It is worth noting how these FGS rated on campus relationships. Having common ground with the other students was important for these students. However how they rated the importance of relationships was a little different. Actual tight relationships for Carl, Ed, Julie, Lou, Ann, and Frank did not seem at the top of their list of importance. Carl stated that they are important, “*but not as important anymore.*” Carl explains that “*Every once in a while, I'll see them. Pretty much every week, I'm guaranteed to see at least a couple of them.*” Ed said earlier that he felt comfortable because he attended with his friend Addison but then stated that relationships “*don’t matter a ton to me, just because I've always kinda been a loner, in a way. I just don't really care that much about it.*”

Lou and Frank seemed to share a similar outlook: “*it's more like solitary oriented, if that's a way to describe. I mean a few friends, a few close friends instead of like a lot of friends. I think education is a little more important that friendship right now.*” Frank, who earlier said he was a-social stated “*If I find somebody that I want to be friends with, I'll be friends with them, but not going to go out of my way.*” Ann’s indifference sounded like: “*I’m not here to make a bunch of friends.*” Ann qualified her response: “*Like I said, I don't get super involved but I feel like this is a place where I'm welcome.*” Similar to Ann, Julie feels strong belonging but does not make friends or get involved “*on campus, not so much.*” Alternately, relationships for Greg, Helen, and Barb were rated as “*very important*” to them. Similar to relationships is whether or not they are involved on campus. With the exception of Isabelle, all participants stated that they do not get “*super involved.*” Isabelle said that she is “*an honor student. I do the international club and Pi Beta Phi*” *This shows how students rate relationship in the campus community.*
**Small size.** Another aspect of the student sense of belonging was the physical size of the college itself. This theme was put in the sense of belonging rather than below in the physical aspects of the campus because it definitely contributed to belonging. In other words, according to some students their sense of belonging may not be possible without a small campus. For Deb, “people you see on Tuesday—you’ll probably see them the next Tuesday again---not at a university.” Karen liked that “here you have the more one-on-one.” Karen also stated that a benefit was, “we don’t have to work harder because we’ll understand the material more.” Isabelle thought MCC was the perfect size for her too, “The urban campus is smaller. Everybody knows everybody and everybody is around everybody.” According to Ann, who attended the state university for one academic year:

> With the community college, you have smaller class sizes. I like how the smaller campus, the smaller class sizes allows you to create more relationships. Say a larger university where you can see someone on the sidewalk-- you have not a clue who they are. Not saying that's bad, but I like it how small it is.

**Myths and Beliefs.** The following are the myths and beliefs question used in Campelo’s (2013) sense of place framework. Myths and beliefs can be viewed as college expectations that students enter college with based on their family background and ancestries. Myths and beliefs can be passed down by generations, taught by family members or perpetuated by peers. The myths and beliefs heard from these FGS participants are consistent with literature that finds negative rhetoric common toward college attendance. Negative attitudes and beliefs heard from friends and family impact student identities and expectations which in turn can influence whether a student feels they belong. This study found that the myths and beliefs about college were false expectations stemming from the first-generation status. Common myths and beliefs that FGS hold were debunked in this study. For example, Deb’s myth and beliefs were “it’s going to be awful.” And Ed, who was discouraged by classmates to attend MCC in lieu of the university,
said "Wow, you guys are dead wrong." Students were asked if there were any certain myths at MCC. Deb’s expectations were proven wrong:

“A myth would be I thought it would be a commuter college—but it’s not! It’s a lot more than I expected. It’s way more than that!”

Barb shared that her neighborhood friends discouraged her with first-generation rhetoric:

“Yeah like everyone said you’re going to hate college, you’re not going to like it at all. I’m like, not true: “This is so much better than high school.”

Deb also received discouragement from family rhetoric which was wrong:

“First day impressions: I was sitting in my apartment saying “this is going to be awful, I’m never going to talk to anybody. I’m just going to go in and out and go immediately home and do my homework and it’s going to be awful.”

Carl explained that the teachers are good regardless of what Rate My Professor says:

“Rate My Professor. I think it would be a myth that the ratings always end you up with good teachers that you will enjoy. I’ve had teachers that got really terrible rates and enjoyed the class and it went okay for me. I think it just depends on your attitude towards teachers and authority. Some people don’t have a really good attitude and they react to that. Then they’re like “oh, he’s a terrible teacher.”

Similar to Carl, Ed said the teachers are amazing regardless of what others say:

“I guess what I’ve heard from a lot of people is that the teachers aren’t as good as you’ll see at other places, but I’ve actually loved my professors and what they’ve taught me has been amazing. I really enjoy it here and I have fun. I’ve learned a lot so far, I wish people wouldn’t think that it’s just a community college ’cause it feels like a lot more than that.”

Ed also added these same people who were going straight to the local university said:

“So a lot of people from my high school were just like, "Oh, you're going to MCC, like wow why would you want to do that kind of thing?" That was a little discouraging, but then once I got here, I was like, "Wow, you guys are dead wrong.”

Similar to the rhetoric Ed heard, Greg thought everything would be easy:

“That all the programs are easy, I would say it’s true in some cases, but in some cases it’s not because some of the programs here are very high level and very difficult to do and maintain there. Yeah, I could say it would be a myth.”

Julie had a very high GPA and attended MCC mainly for financial reasons:
“A myth people have about this college in general is that it’s because you either weren’t smart enough to go to a university.”

Similar to Carl, Ed, and Greg, Karen received wrong information from peers as well:

“I want to say I’ve heard a couple. Like when I was wanting to go here, that it was an old type of style of college teaching. But I knew it wasn’t because I knew MCC was very up to date with what they do. So I knew that could come here and be right with everybody else. That this wasn’t an old time school!”

**Theme 6: Rave Reviews.** The last theme from research question three was called *rave reviews* which was a culmination of student responses that were very enthusiastic. Subthemes that helped to name rave reviews shown in Table 9 were *Enthusiastic Comments* and *Extra Stuff-Amenities*. Rave reviews was a very interesting theme that stemmed from some of the

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<th>Table 9. Theme 6: Rave Reviews</th>
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<td><strong>Subthemes:</strong></td>
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<td><em>Enthusiastic Comments</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Extra Stuff-Amenities</em></td>
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various questions ranging from being asked what is special about this school to overall favorites. made up spontaneous and extremely positive comments from students on how they felt about MCC. Comments symbolized feelings of sentimentalism, gratitude, sense of pride, value, and importance. Because students had *rocky starts*, experienced *student growth*, sometimes by pushing through *fighting forces*, and felt an intense sense of belonging-- all participants gave over-the-top *rave reviews* about MCC. Sentimentalism, gratitude, pride, value, and importance were heard in those *rave reviews*. One student commented that “while it's affordable, they have such amazing staff....!” *Rave reviews* were made up of the subtheme--*extra stuff-amenities* which many times dominated the conversation.
The student’s reactions were very surprising. Not only did students have expansive answers, their communication behavior was larger than life. Students had so much excitement in their voice they almost sounded as if they were cheerleaders or were taping a live commercial for the school. They seemed especially proud and excited to have access to all of the amenities and extra things this college does to enhance the student experience. Negative rhetoric from friends and family that told them they were going to “hate” college. This study suggests that because MCC was not first choice, students came in with lower expectations. MCC exceeded those expectations with extra stuff that they did not expect. Deb stated: “there was live music today; they had a costume contest...!” Rave reviews like these helped form two subthemes Enthusiastic Comments and Extra Stuff-Amenities as shown in Table 9.1. Student quotes from each subtheme are reported in detail with corresponding student quotes.

Table 9.1. Rave Reviews Subthemes

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic Comments</td>
<td>I think it's a great place to start college!</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>While it's affordable, they have such amazing staff....!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra Stuff-Amenities</td>
<td>There was live music today; they had a costume contest!</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Enthusiastic Comments.** General enthusiastic comments and spontaneous comments were present through the interviews. The following student quotes represent some of those high energy responses about various topics.

Barb was happy she started at this college:

“I was like yeah. Go start there [MCC] and loved it ever since!”

Deb liked her building:

*There’s fresh flowers everywhere! But my section in building [#]—it’s really advanced-something you would find in real hospitals. Real dummies to practice on.....looks so real! Their advancement in health care... they’re really pushing health care forward; I think it’s absolutely incredible that they have that center!*
Ed loved it here:

*I've actually loved my professors and what they've taught me, it’s been amazing. I really enjoy it here and I have fun. I love that it’s affordable and that there are some extra things ... While it's affordable, they have such amazing staff, like the teachers. Even the janitorial staff, they're so nice. It's amazing. I've had a lot of fun talking to them and everybody here is so knowledgeable, it's amazing!*

Isabelle liked the high standards:

*I know [MCC] has a really high competency. And also I know I can get a job anywhere when I'm done, because they expect a lot from students, and to pass you have to get certain grades. If you come here, there is no way you going to stay out without a job, I know that for sure. Because when I was doing my clinical, for my advanced CNA at a hospital ... The CNA is a nursing school student and she told me, hospitals usually take [MCC] students first before anywhere else” I was like "Oh really!” Yeah, so I know [MCC] does a lot. And it's actually in the top, one of the ten best community colleges in the country. So, yay me!*

Julie stated her enthusiastic opinion:

*"I think it's a great place to start college!”*

Consistent with the second level in Maslow’s Pyramid, Karen noted the feeling of safety:

*I really like this college! It's really open and friendly, just the people, the experience, the atmosphere. I feel at home here. I don’t have to worry about leaving my bag for a couple minutes if I need to use the restroom. I can leave it out on the chair and then it's still when I come back!*

Lou felt he had a good opportunity ahead of him because of his attendance here:

*It's like opportunity is [MCC]! The professors are eager to help you, and I’d read a lot of complaints online about different schools across the US, it was like oh, the professors are not helpful, they haven't office hours, but I feel like that's not really a standing point over here at [MCC]. I feel like the best definition of this place is a place to give them a chance to learn something new about a profession or career they're interested in. Yes, opportunity is [MCC]!*

Barb felt right at home:

*I'm at home here. I feel like it’s a second home here, but pretty much, it's just like home. I was like, the culinary lab is GREAT, "well hey- I'm all for it.” this will help my future. So I was like, “I like being here!”*
Carl gave his high ratings:

The Bill Gates foundation, they invested a lot of money into research of all the commerce colleges in the United States and [MCC] came out as number 10 out of, was it 1,000 or 10,000? Some number of thousands, which I find to be very impressive. That shows a certain standard that [MCC] has a prestige. The nursing building, the dental program, business, fashion-- all that stuff, they seem to be all robust programs. I'm willing to bet money that all the programs here are accredited by relevant bodies. They've got nice staff that has helped me pick courses that could transfer... They're really helpful. The staff is always willing to help you with whatever issues. Whether it's a speech you're preparing for, it's a mathematical, physics problem you're having a little bit of difficulty with, and you're almost always guaranteed to find someone who can help with that!

Ann noticed the differences after a year at a university:

Oh yeah. I feel like [MCC] really cares about its students. I've noticed that here the instructors really care about what you're doing after you're done at [MCC]. And all of my classes have actually been preparing me for that. Getting my resume and being prepared for interviews and letting me know what they're expecting, how I need to act. Basically just making sure that you're ready. They really care!

Greg liked the attention:

The faculty's been pretty helpful. They always recommend if you don't get something, you meet them after class. They have enough time, they have enough student to teacher ratios here, so there's always a teacher ready to help you, they always have the academic achievement open. They always promote that. They always promote getting help if you don't understand it. They want to help you, they want you to succeed. And then also, while they are lecturing it's ... they're giving out really good information or they're teaching really well!

Isabelle noted the staff competency:

Yeah you just have to meet with the right people. The correct people to do it; But even if they are not, they will refer you to whoever is responsible for that thing!

Julie appreciated the reminders:

Transitioning, I guess coming here might have been easier than going straight to a university but the transition was still weird from high school to college and they were super helpful in reminders and if you're having troubles they're very open out of class time to come help or even just talking to you if you need the help!

Barb commented on how she liked the help:

I like the staff here! The advisors helped me a lot in building [#], she really helped a lot!
Greg saw the dedication in the faculty:

*They want to help you, they want you to succeed!*

Frank said his teachers say:

"I want to see you succeed. You're here for a reason!" (Career teachers)

Carl thought that:

*The curriculum was designed with the students in mind!*

Ed really liked the teachers here:

*I feel like the teachers here are amazing and they really care about their students!*

Lou also felt the commitment from teachers:

*The staff, they're like really hospitable is a way to describe them. I mean every professor's different, but the main thing they all have in common is that they're helpful. They're helpful. They want to help you in your education, and I think that's really important!*

**Extra stuff-amenities.** Students were very in touch with the extra amenities offered but these extra amenities exceeded their expectations.

Deb described fun events that she did not expect to be on a college campus:

*I love that they're trying to incorporate more things. There was live music today, they had a costume contest...!*

Barb went into more detail on the extra stuff provided by the college:

*I mean they do a lot of stuff that can involve everyone. Okay, it's college, you're already stressed. Well, they brought puppies and dogs, that's what I like about that. They have stuff that you could do. Like they had a blood drive, I'd love to do that. You can donate toys. I love that. Extra stuff for you and a lot of different things! Like having a gym that is actually great!*

Ed explained:

*They bring in the food trucks; that's a lot of fun. I notice they'll have some really cool clubs and then like other businesses will come into the student center and be able to talk to you, so that's really nice. I like how every single building, it seems like, has a place to sit with a table, and so you can put your computer on there. I also really, really like in*
building [#], [#], [#], they're all connected, you can kinda just travel between the buildings right away and that's really nice!

Greg commented:

“With all the new construction or all the new additions to the school it kind of makes it more like, "oh, it's a nice school!"

Julie liked the simple things:

I like all the little picnic areas outside where you can just sit!

Karen liked having everything in one place:

And it's great that building [#] opened up that fitness center, aquatic center. So I've also started using that. That's so incredible; so I don't have to go away on campus to use that. It's right here!

Lou liked the admission price to the gym:

The recently opened [smoothie bar]; they have a lot of physical equipment. The other gyms cost like way too much, and this is free admission for college students over six credits, so it's a great thing! Three pools! That's the main thing I'm focused there, the pools. Also over there, they have like a smoothie bar, and it's like a smoothie bar slash coffee shop, I mean they have a trail behind the culinary arts building which is a great walk in the summer time!

Rave reviews and the physical environment. Physical aspects of the landscape made up a large part of the sense of place framework and impacts how sense of place is experienced.

The following responses reflected the social aspects that students enjoyed about the physical campus. These responses are presented together in a general category that pertained to their rave reviews and the physical campus. The physical aspects of the campus provided a medium where students could describe the interaction between the physical and social.

Because I feel like that's just a place off letting steam; what you're experiencing in the classroom.

It’s like a refreshing environment just to get out of your book for about half an hour, even if you go back later.

That's where I meet new people.
It’s fun, open, music, together but not together, it’s the whole package.

I think it’s the openness of it and then just being able to sit down with my friend and then we can go get something to eat, but then we can work on all our stuff just all in one place was really nice, too.

This lunch room kind of thing, that’s where you kind of can interact with some friends and get something to eat. There’s more human interaction throughout those areas. Building [#]. I like that it’s just more open. It has booths and it’s not just all tables; and there are different food vendors.

It's a good place to talk to people and it's a good place to get to know people and then it's new and it just has all the cool, neat, fun stuff in it.

I mean I love the update they did to this building [#] the student lounge. That's one of my biggest likes about this area.

It's really open and friendly. Even though there's other conversations going on, you still feel like, like you're kind of part of it because it's a general conversation. It's not like a specific person they want to talk to. It's just all open. And if you wanted to, you could go over and talk to that person about that topic or whatever.

The tone changed dramatically when students had practical things to report when talking about other areas. This is quite the opposite tone when students talked about the social aspects of their favorite place. Interestingly, their words were uneventful and descriptive.

The classrooms, I think for me they're just strictly a place of learning. The hallways would just be a passing part of my day I guess.

The hallways are just basic hallways, it's just a bunch of chairs and tables; kind of all scattered all over the place.

This general area is a decent place. It's got decent internet, cuz I don't have internet at home.

I really liked how the room was set up and everything for him, because he could just grab his computer and then bring it up and he could do it on the PowerPoints and all that stuff. Then you had a lot of whiteboard space in there. Then the environment with like my classmates in there was also nice, because you were set up in a way where you can socialize with each other, like if there's ever a group project kind of thing and it was real easy to maneuver around it.
They are very good at keeping things clean. Also with the resource stuff that you need for the classroom, the library, whatever, they're always open, always available when you need them. I mean they're not closing too early. They're not opening late.

Some of the rooms might smell funky, but yeah, it's to be expected with aging rooms.

Everything's split up by section. You've got the Liberal Arts; you've got the Sciences, building [#] and [#]. You've got building [#], which is your management and fashion. You've got building [#] as the library and auditorium. Everything's split up, so it's in its own respective area. Everywhere has its own building, which is good, because you're not cramming different classes into classrooms they're not designed for. You're not going to have this tiny cramped computer lab that used to be just a normal classroom. And you’re not end up with some 12 person class in a giant auditorium. It’s set up in a pleasing manner. I do like the main drag, there. And then you've got the ring road. And you've got all the core classes inside, and all the specialized classes outside the ring road. It's an interesting design choice that you can understand, because the specialized buildings they don't need them yet. So they don't build them inside, they build them outside, where you need them.

Summary

This study was conducted to describe and understand the sense of place as perceived by FGS at MCC. This study also sought to understand whether FGS status might potentially come out as a factor that would explain students’ understanding of sense of place. Six themes emerged from an analysis of the data providing insight on how the twelve participants in this study made meaning of the sense of place phenomenon. These six themes and consequent subthemes—Second Choice, Fighting Forces, Student Growth, I Belong, Breaktime, and Rave Reviews—were presented in this chapter as shown above.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses findings and themes related to the research questions and implications of the findings in Chapter 4. The chapter starts with a summary of major themes in connection with the sense of place theoretical perspective and relevant literature organized as answers to the three research questions. Next, the chapter closes with implications and recommendations for future research, methodology, and policy and practice. Lastly, the chapter ends with the conclusion of the study.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the college experiences of FGS related to their “sense of place” (Hay, 1988) at a MCC. Understanding and describing FGS sense of place at the community college was another important goal. The two theoretical perspectives used in this study were: (1) Strayhorn’s (2012) concept of sense of belonging; and Hay’s (1988) theory of sense of place. Chapter 4 presented participant profiles and six themes that emerged from the data: Second Choice, Fighting Forces, Student Growth, I Belong, Breaktime, and Rave Reviews. Twelve first-generation community college students between the ages of 18-23 participated in this study with seven female and five male students. The sample was representative of an ethnically diverse group of students. Cultural backgrounds ranged from Caucasian, Hispanic, and Asian. Student majors were diverse ranging from university-bound to career-focused programs. Hometown backgrounds were made up of various locations from rural, small-town, urban, and international.

In-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed to reveal how participants made meaning of the sense of place phenomenon. Interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service and conducted in a private room at random inside of the student center at MCC. Six themes emerged as a result of the interview data which are discussed below.
Summary of Themes

The themes from this study represent a pattern of responses and meanings that emerged from the interview data. The constructs of Second Choice, Fighting Forces, Student Growth, I Belong, Breaktime, and Rave Reviews are determined by the interactions between the physical and social environments and characterize the participants’ attitudes and their habitus (Campelo et al., 2013). The contribution to the literature of this dissertation study can enhance and identify themes that may determine first-generation community college students and their sense of place. The interactions between these themes and the meanings related to them contributed to creating their sense of place which culminated into a second chance. Merriam-Webster defines second chance as an opportunity to try something again after failing one time with the hope they will succeed this time. Second chance was a subtheme for opportunity, thus sense of place for the first-generation community college students in this study was summed up as an opportunity for them as shown in Table 10. The six major themes are summarized below

Table 10. Sense of Place for First-Generation Community College Students - Opportunity

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<th>Subthemes for Second Chance</th>
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<tr>
<td>Theme 1: Second Choice</td>
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<td>Theme 2: Fighting Forces</td>
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<td>Theme 3: Student Growth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme 4: I Belong!</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme 5: Breaktime</td>
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<td>Theme 6: Rave Reviews</td>
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- **Theme One: Second Choice**—Defines student perception of attending MCC and describes feelings mainly affiliated with not beginning ones postsecondary experience at a university. Data from the second choice theme provided evidence that suggests first-generation college students perceive the community college as a runner-up to the university, or a second choice.
• **Theme Two: Fighting Forces**—Describes the push and pull of balancing contradictory values related to structure and challenges they have to push through.

• **Theme Three: Student Growth**—Represented how students benefitted by either overcoming personal roadblocks or learned new skills and responsibilities since attending MCC.

• **Theme Four: I Belong!**—Stands for how participants felt about their comfort level, sense of belonging, and fitting in to the campus and campus community.

• **Theme Five: Breaktime**—Explains some of the forces that contributed to the stress of their desires for relaxation and leisure time in the face of the demands of college.

• **Theme Six: Rave Reviews**—Made up spontaneous and enthusiastic comments from students on how they felt about MCC. Comments symbolized feelings of sentimentalism, gratitude, sense of pride, value, and importance.

• **Second Chance: Opportunity**—Taken together, all six themes made up a sense of place for first-generation community college students which means that the community college gives them the opportunity to succeed and belong.

**Theoretical Model**

This section highlights how the sense of place model by Campelo and associates (2013) provides a context to understand each component as it relates to these first-generation student participants. Strayhorn’s (2012) concept of sense of belonging also contributes to the social constructions and reproductions of college life in a physical setting. Campelo and associates (2013) identified four constructs that define an individual’s sense of place and find they are contextually and culturally bound constructs that rely on historical ties. This allowed the current study to apply this framework to the context of the community college and the culture of first-generation status. The framework’s constructs, time, ancestry, landscape, and community, helped
answer the research questions which generated the six themes found in this study (second choice, fighting forces, student growth, I belong, breaktime, and rave reviews).

Ancestry

First-generation. Ancestry in the current study was interpreted as a student being first in their family to attend college, or first-generation status. The ancestry component for participants in the Campelo et al. (2013) study was found to “create a powerful connection with history, land, rights, ownership, and belonging” (p. 159). Campelo et al. (2013) identified that:

- Ancestry defines history, constrains values, and imbibes culture with social capital.
- Ancestry informs people’s behavior in the reproduction of social relations and political affairs. It affects sense of self, family identity, and sense of belonging to the place (p. 159-160).

Their study found it was important to understand the nature and origin of their roots in order to pass on their genealogical knowledge to future generations. The current study on the other hand, found the “powerful connection with history and belonging” more of a liability for students who want to shed their past. For example, Ed stated that going to college for him is “like a chance to get out of being poor kind of thing….. As long as I graduate...” and comments from family members such as Frank’s grandfather, “Why are you wasting your time on school and stuff, just go get a job.” This formed the basis of the three components of student ancestries found to impact sense of self and purpose: Second choice, fighting forces, and student growth. Participants shared many stories that put attendance at this community college as a second choice. Greg shared that, “I was originally planning to go to straight [name of university] right out of high school, but then I just didn't have no idea what I was doing so it caused like ...stress. “I’ll just go to [name of this community college], it’s no problem.” Students in this study showed struggles of
fighting the forces of adhering to rules, structure, and the demands of college. Ann shared that “a little leeway would be a little better” and Carl revealed that he likes being spontaneous and is “not a huge fan of rigid order and stuff.” Despite their complaints, many of the participants overcame these ancestral barriers and experienced student growth as their responses stated.

**Time**

**Breaktime.** Campelo and associates’ (2013) concept of time refers to “the rhythm and pace of each place” which are “conceptualized and experienced differently by different societies” (p. 159). Findings from their study were based on the concepts of time from the “peculiar and localized” residents. According to their study, this is what “drives the rhythm of life” and impacts behavior, attitudes, and expectations of the people” (p. 159). Time for students in this study seemed to revolve around “getting to class on time and then making sure I have enough time for homework and then studying for tests (Ed.).” However, this study also found time had two dimensions for first-generation student participants in the breaktime category: Leisure time and relaxation. Leisure time related to a need for time off and relaxation was more about the functional aspects of the physical environment. The concept of time seemed to revolve around being able to either “take a day to relax” or have somewhere comfortable to go in order to relax. For Lou, he needed whole days off. He shared that, “Sometimes I do wish that some of my work days could be more like leisure days.” Ann on the other hand, was strategic about it and shared that it was important, “to manage my time and make time for myself.” If students could not take whole days off, it was important to have a place to go to let off steam. Carl stated “when I feel the pressure beginning to build up, I go somewhere to unwind and come here” [student center]. Not only was it important to have a place to go, the place must promote
relaxation as Ann put it in perspective, “I like when the buildings have comfy chairs and sofas and stuff. I just like when a college has a place to Relax.”

Community

**Sense of belonging.** Campelo and associates conceptualized community as “the experience of shared cultural and social relations that create a communal sense of belonging and that mutual understanding provides the characteristics of a community” (p.160). They state further that it is the “meanings that underpin people’s attitudes and interactions between each other that transform groups of individuals into a community” (p. 161). For Campelo and associates’ (2013) participants that meant independent but a “big family” and “close knit” (p. 161). Similarly, meanings for students in this study meant that “I feel here, everyone's invited to the group” (Helen) and if “You see something you like-- you can be part of it” (Carl).

Components of the I belong theme was the basis that formed their sense of belonging and community. Students felt they belonged because of the unique diversity which meant there were students just like them: here for all the same reasons. Experiencing “common ground” and sharing the “same problems” (shared cultural and social relations) transformed these groups of students into a community. This study revealed the following attitudes about their perspectives on belongingness:

“Organisms [students] floating; moving around on their own and every once in a while they intertwine together; merge together; but don’t shy away from each other, no clicks and everyone is open; no boundaries” (Deb).

“There’s really no outcasts.....everyone's more accepting towards differences in people. There's a lot of different groups......But we all connect somehow” (Helen).

Landscape and Place

**Quiet time.** The Campelo et al. (2013) framework describes the physical environment as “linking past to present, personal history to ancestral, and to place history” and “the constructs of
landscape and ancestry interweave and overlap.” Landscape is also a vehicle where people can “experience the history of the place and their place in the history.” Lastly, the framework concludes that “Landscape becomes a meaningful social construction connecting and mediating relations between people, land, and nature” (p.160). This study found connections between landscape and ancestry which were interweaved with the student’s place in history as well.

Subthemes from the breaktime category, quiet time and relaxation were linked with the physical aspects of the campus that allowed them to “experience the history of the place and their place in the history.” Stresses of being a student in the classroom (ancestry) called for needing “a place of letting off steam” and a place where they “feel very relaxed.” This usually meant going to the student center where “You hear more laughter here” where students liked “the whole vibe of it” and “it’s where I meet new people.” On the other hand, students also thought it was important to “know I have a place to go if I need to have quiet time” (landscape). Interestingly, students were aware of places to avoid because there were not opportunities to get the quiet or relaxation time. One student said “The coffee shop doesn't really have comfy seating. I'd like to sit in there and just be and just relax, but it's not a place I can do that like here.” The landscape became a meaningful socially constructed place that connected students to the buildings and mediated their interactions within it.

**Rave reviews.** The rave reviews that students gave came from the extra stuff and amenities that they did not expect. Because this college was their second choice (ancestry/first-generation), that place in history created a meaningful connection for their student experience. These are a few examples of those rave reviews that could be viewed as the interweave and overlap of landscape and ancestry and the link from past to present:

- “It’s really advanced- something you would find in real hospitals.
- “There’s fresh flowers everywhere!”
• “The professors are eager to help you.”
• “A [nursing] school student and told me, hospitals usually take MCC students first before anywhere else.”
• “They do a lot of extra stuff that can involve everyone.”
• “There was live music today; they had a costume contest...!”

Discussion of Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are first-generation students overall perceptions of the community college?

Analysis of student responses uncovered four themes in relation to answering the first research question. Second Choice was the first theme which defines student perception of attending MCC and describes feelings mainly affiliated with not attending a university first or students experiencing a rocky start. The second theme to answer the first research question was Student Growth which represents how students overcome personal roadblocks, learned new skills or responsibilities since attending. The third theme was I Belong which stands for how participants felt about their comfort level and fitting in to the campus community. The last theme was Rave Reviews which were spontaneous and extremely positive comments about feelings toward MCC. This theme revealed sentimentalism, gratitude, pride, and importance. Evidence in this study suggests that first-generation community college students feel that even if it is their second choice, they experience growth and strongly feel that they belong. Their enthusiastic rave reviews reflected this evidence.

It is important to highlight meanings and responses from the subtheme of second choice which was named second chance. Students were asked the following question: Based on everything that we have talked about, overall, what does this community college campus mean to you? Responses were sentimental and had deeper meaning for the students: “A second home! A second chance!; A new beginning!; It means a lot!; It means the world!; Opportunity!” FGS are found to experience a pull factor when it comes to their home and family. The fact that one
student feels so connected to this place that it allowed her to call it a “second home” is a very important finding. The “second chance” factor suggests that FGS view attendance at a community college, whether for financial reasons or rocky start reasons, do not take for granted that they are there. Because it was never “a given” to attend college, they feel lucky for the chance to succeed this time which means a lot to them. The research also suggests that first-generation community college students between the ages of 18-24, who are not high risk students, feel thankful for this second chance and opportunity to have experienced the student growth and ownership that will take them into their future success. Finally, this evidence indicates that all six themes from this study played an important role in how FGS perceive a sense of place as it relates to this community college.

**Research Question 2: What role does the community college play in the perceptions of first-generation students?**

Student responses from all six themes answered the second research question. Literature states that most FGS attend a community college for various reasons related to first-generation status. However, the second choice theme was related to feelings about not being able to attend a university first were very surprising. Literature states that the community college is generally the first choice of first-generation college students and over half of all college students start out at a community college (Barreno & Traut, 2012). Even a large percent of high ability FGS tend to choose a community college (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006) however, most literature does not consider how students feel about this choice. Many studies report the enrollment statistic and assume it was a first choice because of cost and other reasons (Barreno & Traut, 2012). The fighting forces theme was related to being a first-generation student as well. There is much literature that documents the struggles of FGS when they enter college. One example is from Stephens and colleagues (2012) documenting a cultural mismatch that involves fighting forces of
cultures. This struggle takes place between the collectivist and interdependent cultures of the working-class and the individualistic nature of college.

The next theme to answer this research question was student growth which students clearly recognized and reflected on as overcoming personal roadblocks or newly learned skills and responsibilities gained since attending. It is well documented in the literature that because FGS typically enter the community college with lower social, academic, and soft skills, they experience the most growth (Ovink & Veazey, 2011). Many of these new skills they acquire are already present in students who are not first-generation such as basic understandings of expectations in college (Engle, et al., 2008). Ann reflected on her growth that “It's basically shown me how to take opportunities given to me and make decisions.” This theme revealed additional evidence that FGS experience substantial growth in college.

The I Belong theme answered research question two which explains how participants felt about their comfort level and fitting in to the campus community at MCC. Similar to other studies that report FGS do not get very involved on campus, this study also found they do not “get super involved.” The difference in findings for this study is that despite their lack of involvement and engagement, students felt an enthusiastic level of belonging. These students felt that they belonged mainly because the campus was made up of other FGS, which was a common ground factor for them. They felt like there were open opportunities to join in groups, as one student put it “You see something you like-- you can be part of it.” Keep in mind that the student population at a university does not consist of a majority of FGS. A few students had already found that out when they left the more individualistic and competitive culture of the university for the community college.
Common ground or commonality was an important subtheme related to first-generation status. Diversity was a word used by all participants to describe the culture and landscape of this campus which meant the majority of students were not affluent. Participants felt more comfortable fitting in because of the actual large presence of students from working-class backgrounds just like them. Common ground and open groups that made them feel welcome were the fuel of belongingness. The population of the student body reflected a large majority of FGS which helped students feel at groups were open and that “everyone’s invited to the group. This is a major finding for universities that struggle to find a sense of belonging for FGS on those campuses. The presence of FGS cannot be duplicated on a university campus and as this study found, being involved does not create a sense of belonging either. Research needs to look in other directions for belongingness on the university campus. However, FGS who transfer from a community college should be prepared by highlighting how they are ready to transfer.

The smaller campus and class size also helped students feel comfortable as they liked being able to recognize the same students around campus. Curiously, the majority of students did not rate campus relationships as important, but at the same time would say “the smaller class sizes allows you to create more relationships.” This study provides evidence that suggests attendance at a community college first may be in the best interest of FGS. This can give them the opportunity to experience student growth and feelings of belonging before attempting the university. Carl felt comfortable because MCC provided a “soft landing” for him.

The Breaktime theme was related to how FGS longed for more breaktime from the daily grind and hard work of attending class and meeting deadlines. The need for downtime is a normal human occurrence after working hard and would not stand out under other circumstances. However, the evidence suggests FGS have a heightened need for time off. Strayhorn (2012)
found that certain student populations have a heightened need to belong; this study suggests a heightened need for time off exists in FGS. Time off can be job or college related. Many students felt the need to hurry up and finish their work so they could relax and take a break. Some students shared: “I just feel like being relaxed when I’m not in class; I need to make time for myself; Take a day to relax; I wish that some of my work days could be more like leisure days.” This study also suggests participants were not willing to sacrifice that downtime.

Additionally, literature has found FGS fit in school work around their schedules rather than fitting their schedules around school work (Engle, et al., 2008). This may originate from the first-generation background that identifies more with the world of work which is well documented in the literature (Hirudayaraj, 2011). Perhaps seeing parents and family members working in low wage jobs that demand tough work, irregular and long hours and little advancement is considered a norm. Those jobs come with a culture of employee breaks and punching in. When an employee is off the clock--they are off the clock.

Another portion of the breaktime category revolved around needing separate places for quiet-time and break-time. Quiet time was meant for studying and break time was meant for relaxation and being off the clock. Students described how they loved quiet places of study such as the library or tutoring center and how they were a necessary part of success. This is also consistent with library literature that Regalado and Smale (2015) reported as important where preferred study places must be quiet. Authors found study atmospheres need to be flexible places of quiet where students can either focus independently or be able to study in small groups.

Responses from the breaktime and rave reviews themes focused on the physical aspects and amenities of the campus. All six themes however, were intertwined. As presented in Chapter 4, many student responses in the rave reviews theme were dedicated to how much students loved
the “hospitable” faculty and staff. These over-the-top comments were also some of the “extra stuff” they were not expecting. Students were not expecting instructors to “care” about their success as much as do at this college. Examples from the rave reviews theme that centered around physical characteristics of the campus pertained to “the fun and lively vibe of the student center; live music; costume contest; puppies and dogs; blood drive; food trucks; picnic areas; fresh flowers; fitness and aquatic center; outdoor fountain; smoothie bar; coffee shop; walking trail; state-of-the-art facilities; GREAT labs; prestige; comfy sofas and chairs; GREAT new food court; a place of quiet [AAC]; a place to unwind and relax.” Many of these extra amenities also coincided with students and their need and desires for breaktime, leisure time and places for relaxation. Remembering that Carl mentioned “monotony and being serious all the time doesn’t work well with [him]” attests to this point. If he did not have “somewhere to unwind” such as the student center, Carl recognized that he would be “cranky” and “not a nice person to be around.” Some of these places were able to serve that function.

The last theme that answered research question two was Rave Reviews. Subtheme, enthusiastic comments were also heavily related to a student’s first-generation status. The sentimentalism, gratitude, and pride heard in these comments provide evidence that suggests first-generation community college students feel MCC is top-rated. Students that are not FGS may not feel the same as many have a more taken-for-granted attitude towards college. These FGS were all pleasantly surprised of how they belong, how much they have learned, and how nice the facilities were. Their surprise fueled the enthusiastic comments which played a major role in exceeding their expectations.
Research Question 3: How do first-generation students perceive a sense of place related to the community college?

All six themes contributed to how students perceived the community college and their sense of place. However, only four of the six themes and one subtheme were chosen to answer this research question. Evidence found in this study seems to suggest that students had either negative or cautious expectations about attending the community college and that those expectations were proven wrong. Students did not expect the lifestyle and community to be as diverse nor as accepting as it was. As previously mentioned, all participants stated that their impression of the college was it is one big group but “groups that are connected but open.”

Because there were so many different types of students, they felt there were no cliques; no boundaries; no judgement; no outcasts; and everyone's invited to every group.” These pleasant surprises helped them identify with the student body and form an immediate sense of belonging. Furthermore, the myths and beliefs that students came in with were also proven wrong. Their comments that “everyone said you're going to hate college” and that “it’s going to be awful” were met with comments such as, “Wow, you guys are dead wrong.” These false expectations were defined by what they perceived the university as--and what the community college was not.

The critical mass of the student-body provided the common ground that students needed to feel a connection and a sense of belonging to this college. Therefore, the I belong category helped answer this research question because students felt they belonged to this place. More positive descriptions were heard again on what the community college was not. Ann’s comparison to how she is able to fit into the Starbucks culture summed it up: “We welcome everyone... It's not a place of judgment. It's not a place where you need to be just like this and do these things and that...” In other words--it’s not the university. This study provides evidence that shows this community college exceeded student expectations. Moreover, this in turn could
be viewed as a vehicle or mechanism responsible for providing the sense of belonging. The sense of belonging students felt gave rise to their rave reviews about this college. All themes culminated into rave reviews however, the overarching meaning of sense of place in this study is that students felt the community college was their opportunity for a second chance.

**Implications and Recommendations**

This section discusses potential implications and recommendations suggested from the findings in this study. Leading up to the conclusion, implications are discussed for research, methodology, and recommendations for policy and practice.

**Implications for Research**

Recommendations for future research should always start with a discussion on replicating the current study. This study could be replicated at other similar community colleges to compare results. Other types of comparison studies could also be conducted such as: At older facilities; interviewing in other building types, interviewing students who are not first-generation; at-risk students; adult students, etc.

Other future research could delve deeper into the important finding of the construct of second choice. Investigating dissonance reducing strategies in this realm and conducting studies that aim to decrease the second choice phenomenon could prove beneficial. Based on the cultural background of first-generation status, many subthemes that make up the second choice theme cannot be changed. Because education can lead to better paying jobs for parents, FGS will most likely continue to attend community college for financial reasons. The same could be said for lack of role models that fuel many of the rocky starts these students experience. Future practical research could focus on the previous suggestion of a seamless university transfer or career completion program take place at time of admission. Additionally, this study found that without
the perception of second choice, ratings and reviews could have differed. What about students who view community college as their first-choice; what type of reviews would these students report? Would there be any ratings at all?

Future research needs to be done on the heightened need for leisure time away from the college (place). While most individuals like time off, this sample of FGS were found to have a different perception of breaks and struggled with the need for even more breaks. As previously stated, no evidence was found that it interfered with their attendance records, however, interviewing FGS in other demographic groups could.

Lastly, research should be conducted into further investigating why sense of place is a better construct to gauge sense of belonging versus involvement for first-generation community college students. Comparison studies could be conducted between FGS that are involved and participate in on-campus activities and clubs and those who are not to measure their sense of belonging and sense of place.

**Methodological Implications**

While this study used qualitative methods, other methodologies could be used to further our understanding of sense of place for FGS as well as creating a more quantitative definition. Quantitative research that focuses on structural issues that keep FGS from attending class such as childcare could survey attitudes and beliefs about breaks, leisure time, and relaxation. There are many quantitative possibilities that could be done comparing attitudes and beliefs of FGS and their sense of engagement. The differences in attitudes and beliefs could be investigated further using frequencies, t-tests, correlation studies and more complex statistics for prediction studies. Surveys could be administered to FGS to create a measurement or scale of sense of place. Questions could be modified based on the findings of this study such as the fact that students did
not engage on the campus but felt they belonged. These areas are important because they have been shown to interfere with college attendance in the classroom as well as college completion.

The perception that community college is their second chance needs further study as well. It is a sad day when society has students entering college who feel as if this were their last-chance opportunity to succeed. There are many different forms of research that could be done to change this unproductive perception. Behavioral health studies that change attitudes could be conducted that are similar to stop smoking campaigns. Interviews and focus groups could drill down and identify cultural mechanisms that influence this perception. Family and identity studies could be conducted to trace back roots and causes and how they inform narratives. Following up with various statistical analyses that can find and test the effects of different influences would deliver informative results.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the college experiences of FGS related to describing and understanding how they perceive the community college in regards to their sense of place. Sense of place focuses not just on social aspects of sense of belonging, but a holistic view of aspects related to FGS. Findings in this study were categorized into six major themes that represented how first-generation community college students perceive sense of place: Second Choice, Fighting Forces, Student Growth, I Belong, Breaktime, and Rave Reviews. Results from this study do not intend to be generalized to the larger population of first-generation community college students. These results can be better applied to full-time, first-generation community college students between 18-23 years old with average to above average grade point averages; regardless of ethnicity or race. The following are implications and
recommendations from this study that higher educational professionals should consider when promoting success of FGS.

**Second choice.** This study showed that participants viewed the community college as their second choice, similar to a consolation prize. Many studies on college choice cite factors such as cost, financial aid, or location, etc., as main reasons FGS attend a community college. Furthermore, literature has shown a tendency to assume the community college is their first-choice. This study suggested this is not the case. Other components of how this decision effects student perceptions need to be taken into account. For example, Janczyk, Dambacher, Bieleke and Gollwitzer (2015) analyzed some of the underlying mechanisms responsible between free-choice and forced-choice alternatives in decision making. Differences were found in perceptual processing favoring forced-choice situations because it induced more action-oriented behavior. Perhaps the above factors that played a role in creating college choice as a forced-choice also increased their implementation intentions. Bell (1982) showed that the regret of a forgone alternative (university) influences how the chosen alternative (community college) is rated. Moreover, if the chosen alternative decision is made under uncertainty, the level of disappointment can increase. At the same time, students may also be experiencing post-decision dissonance in their decision to forgo attending the university. This may include generating dissonance reducing thoughts that lead to self-convincing justifications predicted in cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957).

It is important for college professionals to understand that these are not benign decisions particularly when it is their second and not first choice. One solution can be using dissonance reducing measures that can help students with their decision. Zameer and Devasagayam (2015) provided several forms of receipts to help consumers reduce the fear of not being able to return a
product. Students should be enrolled in a seamless university transfer program from the start such as the 2+2 programs currently in place. This can help students feel light at the end of the tunnel and that their situation is a productive decision. This should not be left to chance. Ed and Lou’s words showed evidence of doubt. It was alarming to hear Ed describe that process as “if I transfer” and “when I hopefully graduate.” Lou was surprised to hear about such programs when the researcher informed him and was on shaky ground when was asked about his plan: “I haven't contacted the registrar, I haven't gotten myself an advisor yet. I think I should do it pretty soon, though.” The implications of these types of comments could cause students to feel discouragement and uncertainty that could lead to unproductive enrollment patterns or worse, drop-out. That is why it is crucial to enroll students in transfer programs at time of admission.

Adjusting the image of a community college could also help students and staff perceive the experience as a stepping-stone rather than a terminal place. College completion at the community college has evolved into being defined as completion of an associate degree. This could contribute to the perception of community colleges being looked at as a stationary place rather than a fluid transition. It is crucial that university-bound FGS have this perception and college completion should really be viewed as a successful university transfer. FGS, regardless if they are university-bound, still have the cultural risks associated with lower retention rates. Keeping students locked-in by promoting the importance of an associate degree to FGS could possibly prove to backfire. Family pull or other life circumstances could stall successful university transfer if students get comfortable with the idea of an associate degree. Moreover, many first-generation families are not familiar with the higher education hierarchical degree system and the value of a bachelor’s degree. This could also deter the career program students from thinking about the importance of the possibility of a bachelor’s degree in their future.
Marketing messages can promote the community college as the first-choice and the right-choice; stepping-stones to a university; stepping-stones to their future. Creating more transferrable associate of applied science (AAS) degrees with an aggressive push toward the university could also benefit career students as some community colleges already are.

**Fighting forces, student growth, and breaktime.** Findings from this study were consistent with literature that shows FGS experience many obstacles in college and experience the most growth due to lower precollege characteristics. For example, obstacles commonly reported have range from persistence, lack of college knowledge, sense of belonging and engagement, remedial work, financial and social class barriers, work and family pull, to institutional barriers, and so on. Obstacles often lead to poor grades and drop-out for some students. Stephens et al., (2012) argue a culprit of the performance gap stems from regular exposure to “interdependent norms” from “local working-class contexts prior to college” (p.1192). These norms prepare students for jobs and not careers. Interventions that have a positive effect on success need to be put in place for FGS that address micro-barriers and help students with awareness of motivations, resilience, and self-efficacy. FGS may also be feeling what Covarrubias, Romero and Trivelli (2015) call *family achievement guilt* which can lead to depressive and self-esteem symptoms. Feelings of discomfort and guilt were found to be brought on by pursuing their own individual pursuits that conflicted with the needs of the collective family (p. 2032).

Major obstacles found in this study included the perception of a scarcity in leisure time and deficiencies in organizational skills. The perception that an individual “*needs and deserves*” (Ann) more time off was found to interfere with their perception of college norms, particularly as it relates to class attendance. Students appeared to have difficulty understanding the importance
of not cutting class. Many students did not appear mentally prepared for the dedication and hard work that college requires. Literature has found lower attendance records for FGS that is usually traced back to work and family problems. Again, that was not the case in this study. The heightened need for relaxation and time off were the strongest forces students were fighting through and can be directly traced back to their interdependent working-class roots. This heightened need for break-time was not found as an obstacle because there was no evidence that it would become one. This study suspects if students are not educated on the demands and expectations of college upfront, the heightened need for break-time will persist as a theme for them. Because students were currently fighting through the unexpected forces of college, the majority of growth that students were very aware of took place in soft skills such as self-confidence and organization. These came from what Wang and Nuru (2017) call turning points which “reflect sites of developmental change that have potential to transform or alter interpersonal interaction positively or negatively” (p. 11). Many students experienced these turning points that transformed and altered their decisions. For example, Ann’s turning point came when she realized she “wasn’t ready for four years.” This realization caused her to leave the university and transfer to the community college where she is happy and feels she belongs.

Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) found a top reason for missing classes was to spend time with friends and peers. It is important for college professionals to understand the implications of how FGS view their need for time off and how it relates to classroom attendance. If students do not feel they are getting the time off, feelings of burn-out could cause them to take a semester off which could lead to stopping out altogether. Even though some of the students in this sample disagreed with current attendance policies such as the use of participation points, they also did not appear to be abusing it. One recommendation that could be viewed as a
preventative measure could be one that MCC already has in place: Capitalizing on physical
facilities that promote “relaxation.” Ann and the rest of the students said they like buildings that
have “comfy chairs and sofas” and “a place to just relax.” While all students would love more
places to relax, FGS could benefit even more if it satisfied their need for more relaxation time.
Perhaps additional places for relaxation could be in various buildings across campus rather than
in just one. This could help minimize the conflict and aid in increasing student perceptions that
they are getting “time off the clock” while still being on campus.

However, another important solution is to educate students on the types of expectations
required to succeed in college without using negative “institutional discourse about FGS that
portrays them as academically deficient and in need of cultural transformation” (Wildhagen,
2015, p. 285). Many colleges have mandatory success classes in place for remedial and FGS
that teach skills such as time management that have been shown to increase retention. However,
Wildhagen (2015) argues that “pushing them along an individualist pathway” denies their culture
and further discourages them by singling them out (p. 285). Perhaps Wang and Nuru’s (2017)
turning point framework could be used to mediate first-generation confidence. Actualizing the
dream for FGS students in this study happened when they “overcame initial obstacles and
established an infrastructure for continued success” (p. 11). Student success classes could focus
on thoroughly educating students on realistic college expectations and what it realistically takes
to graduate applying time management from the FGS perspective. This should be a research-

based agenda with milestones and student reflections in which students keep journals on
measured success and reflect on their accomplishments. Using this type of infrastructure for
continued success can also address and explain some of the social-class conflicts they are
experiencing and keep them on the right track.
**I belong.** Findings indicated a high level of sense of belonging from the first-generation community college students in this study. Results were consistent with literature that *common ground* was a major component responsible for sense of belonging. Many studies have shown how having common ground and a critical mass of a student body and faculty can benefit *all* students. For example, Maruyama, Moreno, Gudeman and Marin (2000) reinforced this notion by stating educational benefits from diversity could not be “duplicated in a racially and ethnically homogeneous setting” (p. 10). Other findings reflect Strayhorn’s (2008) conclusion that points to the importance of critical mass: “*Diversity of kind* may be more important than mere diversity of *mind* when it comes to sense of belonging” (p. 516). Another study by Castleman and Page (2015) found that peer mentors who shared similar racial/ethnic characteristics positively influenced rates of interactions with advising. Finally, Latino students in Hagedorn, Chi, Cepeda and McLain’s (2007) study found a positive relationship in academic success with the presence of a critical mass of Latino students and faculty on campus. This leads into findings from the present study, which found diversity for these students meant they were able to fit in. Moreover, it was comforting for them to see many other students attending for the exact same reasons as them. So while students said the campus was very diverse, the word *diversity* itself was found to reflect their perceptions of the concept of critical mass and common ground.

Race/ethnicity was not found to play a role or contribute to sense of belonging in this study. Students in this study already represented a diversity of race and ethnic cultures with the same results. Many community colleges and universities could be said to share similar race/ethnicity demographics; but not typically in the form of social-class. The strong sense of belonging found in this study was directly related to a critical mass represented by the presence
of lower socioeconomic and FGS on campus. This allowed validation of their cultural origins which increased their confidence. For Lou (Asian-American), seeing other students without “qualifications” to a university helped him not feel like an outcast. As previously mentioned, Julie (White) “wouldn't have been able to have a social life or fit in with the people who didn't have to do those same things” [work and school]. Ann, who “wasn't ready for four years.” Ann simply did not feel comfortable. Lastly, Helen’s statement suggests some these students may view themselves as Greg’s (Hispanic) comment that they are the “unpopular ones from high school” saying “there's really no outcasts.....everyone's more accepting towards differences.”

It is crucial to understand beyond idiosyncrasies of belonging and capitalize on the strong sense of belonging found in this study. This very exciting finding has serious implications for the success of FGS. First, this starts with assuming that the majority of FGS ages 18-23, who attend full-time, are going to transfer or finish a terminal career program. Using this assumptive approach can fuel deliberate structures that focus on enrollment over awareness. FGS who plan on attending a university need to be enrolled into a current university transfer program at the time of admission. It is important to emphasize to university-bound students that the community college is a stepping stone and not their final destination. This can help continue the momentum of the positive energy found in this study. Students in career programs need the same type of definite enrollment structure that could be packaged as a career completion program similar to the university transfer program. Each career package should have a university option pathway built into the system which also plant seeds that can encourage continuing their education. These researched-based solutions can easily be designed by simply adding this feature to the admission process. This leaves no room for chance with the right process in place that is built into the system.
Some of these recommendations are currently in place at community colleges; however, many are left to simply creating awareness that require students to seek them out. Simply creating an academic plan is not enough. Students in this study were not aware of how to go about transferring to a university and were not aware of any such program, or perhaps forgot the information. Moreover, current advising structures that artificially assign transfer and career program students to already overloaded advisors do not accomplish this goal. FGS have been a major research topic in the field of higher education for decades now in which most report negative findings. That was not the case for this study. Findings from this study show these FGS thriving; and they are very aware of it. Let the community college be a place where FGS gain confidence and feel a strong sense of belonging to. Let the community college better prepare them for the places they did have a chance to choose. Let the community college capitalize on their newfound sense of belonging by taking the necessary steps to exceed their expectations.

**Rave reviews and second chance.** This study also indicated that first-generation community college students felt thankful for the opportunity for this second chance to succeed. The second chance allowed students to experience growth and sense of belonging and in addition, exceed their expectations. The unexpected state-of-the-art facilities and amenities were found to provide the additional fuel that generated over-the-top positive ratings and reviews. There appears to be very few literature with this type of result and cannot be overlooked by college professionals. This study suspects that a beautiful remodel without the other components may not duplicate these same results in students. Quite possibly, a sense of belonging without amenities may not either. However, understanding each component shown in the revised sense of place model for FGS in Figure 3 could increase those chances. The model, presented in Figure 3,
“provides an illustration of how the attributes from the physical environment interact with attributes from the social environment to create constructs that determine the sense of place” for first-generation community college students (Campelo et al., 2013, p.161). So because this community college was the second choice and their second chance, “it seems appropriate to give the final words to the participants” (Campelo et al., 2013, p.163):

For me, I feel like this campus is the second chance for me. It's a second chance for a lot of people, I believe, because it's fairly easy to get in here. It's an opportunity for all. I think that's good. Telling people that, "Yes, you can come here to succeed and you don't need to meet all of these standards. You're going to work up to those." I think it's a second chance and a place to succeed (Ann).

First-Generation Student Sense of Place Model

Figure 3. Sense of place model for first-generation students - Opportunity.

Conclusions

The goal of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of first-generation community college students and their sense of place; and the influence of first-
generation status. The research questions were answered with a sense of place model for FGS. This model shows how components in the model interacted to reveal their sense of place. The interaction between components in the model appeared to start at the second choice construct which led into student rave reviews. Based on findings in this study, FGS perceive the community college as a second choice and a second chance. A second chance to succeed; a second chance to belong or opportunity. This chance allowed them to prosper with newfound growth and confidences needed to fight through cultural forces that historically have been obstacles. These findings can increase the knowledge for college professionals, admissions, recruiting, advising, administrators, and marketing departments with a deeper understanding of their student experience.

This study has contributed to literature related to sense of belonging and the college experience in community college students from the perspective of sense of place. Sense of belonging and involvement reflect an incomplete view of the college experience for FGS at the community college. Sense of place was found to be a more relevant perspective in which to view first-generation community college students as it takes into consideration specific factors that are important to them. Sense of place allowed a view into what sense of belonging looks like for FGS by a) introducing a sense of place model applicable to first-generation community college students; b) emphasizing the importance of a critical mass of FGS; c) providing a holistic view of sense of belonging; and d) focusing on how cultural forces influence sense of place and how to capitalize on them to best benefit FGS. The sense of place construct can be applied to future studies on various student populations to extend sense of belonging. The sense of place model that emerged from this study can provide deeper understandings of the college experience for FGS while attending the community college. This knowledge can contribute to helping FGS be
successful in the completion of their community college career programs or university graduation plans. Highlighting their new-found sense of belonging and confidence at the community college can help prepare FGS at their first or second attempt at university attendance.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A. COPY OF IRB APPROVAL LETTER

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
2420 Lincoln Way, Suite 202
Ames, Iowa 50014
515-294-4566

Date: 2/8/2017
To: Cheryl Williams
Lagomarcino Hall
Ames, IA

CC: Dr. Linda Serra Hagedom
E262 Lagomarcino Hall

Dr. Ran Li
2662 Lagomarcino

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: First-Generation Community College Students and their Sense of Place

IRB ID: 16-588

Approval Date: 2/7/2017
Date for Continuing Review: 2/6/2017
Submission Type: New
Review Type: Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.

- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.

- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.

- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.

- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 202 Kingland, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.
APPENDIX B. DETAILS OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

Hello!
I am seeking community college students to participate in a research study on the experiences of first-generation community college students. To participate, you must be over 18 years of age and be a first-generation student, which means the highest education level of one or both of your parents is at the high school level or lower. I am the researcher and will conduct an approximately 30 minute interview to talk about your experiences of being a first-generation community college student. All interviews will be transcribed word-for-word and you will be given a copy to confirm accuracy. Your name will remain completely anonymous and your identity will be protected with an assigned number. If you feel that the interview does not represent your views, you have the right to make changes and/or withdraw from the study at any time. You will be given instructions on how to withdraw participation in this study and all data is kept confidential and anonymous throughout the entire study. Additionally, participation in this study is also completely voluntary and you can withdraw your participation at any time.

Please answer the following Pre-Screening Questions to confirm you qualify for this study (age 18 or older and first-generation college student status)

1. Birthdate:__________ Grade/College Level:__________
2. What is your parent (s) highest educational level?
   a. High School Diploma/GED or less
   b. 2-Year Associate Degree
   c. College Graduate (4-Year Bachelor Degree or Higher)

All participants will receive a free Maid-Rite Basket lunch for their participation in the study after the brief interview. Thank you very much and please contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Williams
Iowa State University
E262 Lagomarcino Hall, School of Education
Ames, IA 50011
515-657-3330

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ISU IRB #</th>
<th>16-588</th>
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<tr>
<td>Approved Date:</td>
<td>07 February 2017</td>
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<td>Expiration Date:</td>
<td>06 February 2019</td>
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APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS GUIDE

**Purpose:** Identify and understand attributes that contribute to a sense of place for first generation community college students. The following open-ended research questions will guide this study:

1. What are first-generation students overall perceptions of the community college?
2. What role does first-generation status play in how students think about the community college?

Interview questions borrowed four interconnecting components of sense of place: 1) Time, 2) Ancestry, 3) Landscape, and 4) Community (see Figure 2.) not in this order. These components make up a person’s habitus connected by physical, historical, social, and culture which influence sense of place and thus, the college experience (Campelo, et al., 2013, p. 158).

*Introductory Statement:* I would like to hear about your personal experiences as a first-generation student in this college in your own words and will be asking you to talk about your experiences and feelings. Expected time: 30-60 minutes. Let’s start with your background.

**Part I: Background Questions**

**Ancestry and History**
1. Tell me a little about you such as your background.
2. Do you attend full-time or part-time? When did you start college? Why? Priorities?
3. Tell me about your experience as a first-generation student at your community college.
4. What did your parents think of you attending college? What are your family expectations in regards to education and college attendance? Do/did your siblings attend college? Who influenced you to attend college? Do you have any other members of your family who graduated college? Has there ever been a time that you were unsure about attending college? Why/not?
5. What motivated you to attend college? How old were you when you started thinking about attending college? When did you realize you wanted to go to college? Who did you have conversations about college with? Where did you want to go and what influenced your decision to attend this community college?
6. Did you get encouragement or support from parents, siblings, family, guidance counselors, friends, or teachers to attend college? Who influenced you the most?

*Transitional Statement:* Next we’ll talk about your sense of belonging and community.

**Part II: Sense of Belonging and Place**

**Community**
1. Describe some types of communities you feel you belong to. (Prompt: ethnic/race/religion, gender, neighborhood, country, etc.). Why do you belong to these communities? What about
them make you feel you belong?
2. How do you feel when you don’t belong? What are some communities that you feel you do not belong? Describe what it is about these communities that make you feel you do not belong?
3. As far as sense of belongingness, how do you feel in your community college? Why do you think you feel that way? In what ways do you think this affects how you feel about your community college?
4. Do you see other students belong or not belong in your community college? What do you see that either makes them belong or not belong? What types of college involvement, clubs, or organizations do you belong? Why/why not? How important are tight-knit relationships on campus to you?
5. Do you feel a sense of community at your college in the same ways you feel toward your other personal communities? Why/why not?
6. Tell me about this community college. What is the lifestyle here? What type of community exists here? What are the benefits of attending this college? Why do you like attending this college? What do you dislike here? Do you know any particular myths or beliefs?
7. What can you say about the culture of this college? Can you tell me any particular story related to the culture of this college? Can you recognize different kinds of heritage and culture on this campus? What do you think the mixture of cultures on this campus contributes to the identity of you as a student?
8. How could this community college increase your or others sense of belongingness?

**Transitional Statement:** Now we will talk a little about your feelings about time.

**Part III: Time and Place**

Enrollment Status, Remedial Education, and Work
1. How does your enrollment and work status make you feel as far as your sense of time and your community college? How do you prioritize your time as far as attending class and school work itself? What are your top priorities? How do you prioritize your personal problems? In what ways do you think your enrollment status (stopouts, swirling, or delaying, etc.) decisions have influenced your sense of time and how you view your community college?
2. (Remedial work?) How do you feel about remedial coursework and extended time in college? How long do you think it will take to reach your goals? How do you feel about that? In what ways does this influence your feelings about your community college?
3. How do you see yourself: student/employee/parent? How do you suppose this influences how much time you spend on campus and school work? How does this impact your view of your CC?
4. How do you view this community college as far as sense of time and what should change?

**Transitional Statement:** Now we will talk about social environment and people

**Part IV: Social Environment and Place**

People
1. How important are social relationships with students on campus to you? Describe the people on this community college campus. (students/staff/faculty)
3. Describe how students interact with each other.
4. Can you say an attribute or quality about the students and the staff here in this college?
5. What values are associated with other students and staff in this community college?
6. How do you feel about the social aspects of this college? In what ways are you socially involved with your college? What was the college admission and application process like for you? What type of experiences did you have with college staff? How should they change?
7. In what ways do you think relationships with this social environment and the people here influence your sense of how you view this community college?
8. How should this community college increase positive social aspects?

*Transitional Statement:* And lastly, we will talk about the physical aspects of this campus.

**Part V: Landscape and Place**

**Physical Environment and Geographic Location**
1. Where are some of your favorite places on campus? Top three favorite places? Why are they your favorite?
2. What do you think is special in this college? How would you compare this college to home? Your high school?
3. What is different and/or unique/special in this college as far as physical facilities (hallways, studios, student lounges, classrooms, administrative departments, outdoor gathering, study centers, eateries, etc.? Talk about likes and dislikes (positives/negatives) regarding these facilities. How do they make you feel? Do you feel comfortable here? Explain. Name two things that you have had trouble with and two things you had success with as far as these physical facilities.
4. Which elements best represent this community college for you? Why?
5. What do you think about the relationship between the students and the facilities here?
6. Talk about the geographic location of this college and what it means for you. How did it impact your decision to attend here? Why did you choose this college as far as location is concerned?
7. What are some physical attributes of this campus that need to change in order for you to feel comfortable and make you successful here? If you could change anything about the physical environment of this campus, what would you change it and why?
8. Tell me about your experiences in the classroom as a first-generation student here. What was your impression of the campus and classrooms on the first day of college?

*Transitional Statement:* To summarize and end this interview I’ll give you a chance to add anything else that you would like to add.

**Part VI: Conclusion and Wrap-Up**

1. Based on everything that we have talked about, overall, what does this community college campus mean to you?
2. What advice would you give to college administrators as far as making this campus appeal to you? Is there anything you would like to change or be done differently? Is there anything else you would like to add or share that we did not cover?
APPENDIX D. CONSENT FORM DOCUMENT

Title of Study: First-generation community college students and their sense of place

Investigator: Cheryl Williams-Student, Dr. Linda Serra-Hagedorn-Supervising Faculty

This is a research study. Please read carefully and decide if you are willing to participate.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of first-generation college students in regard to their perceptions of the community college as a place. This study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how those experiences can impact first-generation community college students and their sense of belonging and place. Exploring experiences of community college students could provide a deeper understanding that could impact how community colleges are viewed which in turn could lead to better student experiences designed for them. Admissions departments might benefit from increased knowledge when helping prospective students with enrollment decisions and assimilation. Furthermore, this study has the potential to provide college administrators and staff with a deeper understanding of the first-generation student experience. The research will be conducted with first-generation community college students at a Midwest community college. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please read the information carefully below and ask questions about anything that you do not understand before deciding to participate. You are being recruited to participate in this study because you are a first-generation college student attending a Midwestern community college.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate:

1. You will be interviewed by this researcher for approximately 30 minutes which consists of a series of questions that relate to your experience as a first-generation student at Midwestern community college. The use of semi-structured open-ended questions will allow you to have the opportunity to express how you feel about the questions being asked.
2. Your interview will be tape recorded for honesty and accuracy and transcribed afterwards.
3. All interviews are kept confidential and will be conducted in a private room on campus.

RISKS

While participating in this study you will not experience any pain, danger or be in any duress whatsoever. It is not expected that you would experience any inconveniences or discomforts. However, if any of those should arise, please inform me and you will be giving the option to drop out of the study at any time.

BENEFITS

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study except that data will be shared to find better ways enhance the community college experience for first-generation students. It can also
help the community colleges find better experiences that lead more community college students from first-generation backgrounds to graduation.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will be compensated with a free Basket Lunch at the MAID-RITE restaurant inside of the student center in building 5.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse or withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide to not participate or withdraw from the study, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you have already received. During the interview, you can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer or feel uncomfortable answering and you may break or stop the interview at any time.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Midwest Community College, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information. To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: Confidentiality will be maintained by means of a pseudonym for your name to let the principal investigator and supervising faculty know who you are. Your name will not be used in any of the information from this study or in any of the research reports. When the study is finished, the list that shows which code number goes with your name will be destroyed. Information that can identify you individually will not be released to anyone outside the study. Tape recordings and transcripts that we make will not be viewed or heard by anyone outside the study. Tapes and transcripts will be destroyed three years after the end of the study.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.
For further information about the study contact:

Cheryl Williams
515-657-3330

Dr. Linda Serra-Hagedorn
515-294-5746

ISU IRB #1
-Approved Date: 07 February 2017
-Expiration Date: 06 February 2019
APPENDIX E. RECRUITMENT POSTER

SIGN UP TO PARTICIPATE IN A BRIEF RESEARCH STUDY &

RECEIVE A FREE MAID-RITE Sandwich!!
February 8, 2017

Dr. Janet E. Emmerson
Director of Institutional Research
Des Moines Area Community College
2006 S. Ankeny Blvd., Bldg. 22-N
Ankeny, IA 50021

Ms. Cheryl Williams
Iowa State University, Ames IA

Dear Ms. Williams,

As a representative of Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC), I have reviewed your proposal for research at our institution entitled “FIRST-GENERATION COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS AND THEIR SENSE OF PLACE”. Based on the information provided by you, the project appears to meet the following federal requirements for approval described in 45 CFR 46.110(b):

You have approval from the DMACC IRB to begin your research. This approval is effective until February 28, 2018.

Use only the approved study materials in your research. All protocol amendments and changes to this approved research must be submitted to the DMACC IRB and not be implemented until approved by the DMACC IRB.

If you or other parties associated with this research have questions, please contact me at the information above or by phone at (515) 964-6476. I wish you well with your research.

Sincerely,

Janet Emmerson, PhD.