

Students' Perception of the Effectiveness of College Opportunity Programs

by

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ABSTRACT

Researchers, policymakers, and administrators have shown great concern over the efficacy of college opportunity programs. Yet, research suggests these programs are essential in providing college access and opportunity for underrepresented college students. This study explores the perspectives and experiences of 12 students enrolled in the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program at a small, public, 4-year institution in Northeastern New Jersey. The findings illuminate the importance of college opportunity programs to promoting access for underprepared, first-generation students. Opportunity programs increase self-efficacy, academic and social belonging, and persistence.

Keywords: college opportunity programs, EOF, self-efficacy, social belonging, persistence, intrusive advising

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Access to and graduation from post-secondary institutions for all populations is imperative to creating a more equitable and democratic society (Banks & Dohy, 2019). National data suggests a disparity among graduation rates of students of color and their counterparts. Moreover, students living in the United States who identify as African-American or Latino/a and come from low-income backgrounds and/or a household without a parent who holds a bachelor's degree have lower enrollment rates in post-secondary institutions (Winograd et al., 2018). With the rising political pressure for college students to graduate, the lack of preparation of high school graduates, mounting student attrition, and the unfortunate circumstances surrounding state funding, post-secondary institutions are exploring effective ways to diminish attrition among underrepresented college students (Levinstein, 2018). Various programs and initiatives have been implemented at colleges and universities to address this problem.

One such initiative is the state-funded, Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF), a college opportunity program providing access to higher education for underserved and underrepresented students attending two- and four-year colleges and universities in New Jersey. EOF ensures students have a sustainable opportunity to attend, succeed, and graduate college by offering financial support for an array of campus-based adaptive and academic support services (New Jersey State Commission on Higher Education, 1997). Further, EOF provides support in the form of intrusive academic, personal, and financial advisement, along with tutoring services and developmental coursework. Programs advisement strategies are designed to facilitate strong relationships between advisors and students while proactively providing underprepared students with the necessary academic and personal support (Levinstein, 2018). Moreover, the program

offers referrals to other campus partners that provide further support in areas such as accessibility support and mental health counseling. Such referrals can be critical to the success of the student population of that EOF serves (Kimball & Campbell, 2013; Kuh et al., 2005; Tinto, 1975; Young-Jones et al., 2012). This study analyzed and examined the EOF program's effectiveness through an examination of students' perceptions. Additionally, the emphasis of this research study contributed to the existing data, which is minimal, related to EOF students' perceptions of their academic and social success because of their enrollment and involvement in a college opportunity program.

A phenomenological methodology aims to describe, understand, and interpret the meanings of experiences of human life. For this study, EOF students were interviewed to assess the effectiveness of the program. The students' responses were analyzed individually and comparatively.

Statement of the Problem

Advising is a crucial component to increase student retention, especially for first-year, low-income, first-generation, racially underrepresented college students (Reader, 2018). According to Tinto (2006), there is significant literature on college student retention. However, little attention is paid to pragmatic institutional solutions with relevance to policy (Longden, 2006). Many years of effort to provide them with access have opened doors to an increasing number of underprepared, underrepresented, and non-traditional students (Levinstein, 2018). The motivation, performance, and persistence of students who are enrolled in provisional admission or opportunity programs that include an intrusive advising model increase (Reader, 2018). Underrepresented students—who struggle with writing, computer literacy, time management,

and study skills— report being inadequately prepared for college-level work (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

Opportunity programs provide access for underprepared, underrepresented, at-risk, disadvantaged, racially underrepresented, and/or first-generation college students. There are significant research findings that show that these programs and the use of intrusive advising are highly effective for academically at-risk students (Reader, 2018). However, this research focused specifically on the influences of college opportunity programs and the impact these programs have on student retention and persistence. However, an extensive review of the literature showed that the components of a successful college opportunity program have not been examined to showcase the qualitative effectiveness of these programs at supporting students' retention, persistence rates, grade point averages, and motivation.

Researcher's Relationship to the Problem

As a first-generation student who came from a single-parent household, with low socioeconomic status, the researcher was able to relate to and understand the struggles that EOF students face. However, when applying for colleges, the researcher was not informed about opportunity programs. With dismal S.A.T. scores, few math skills, and no immediate family members who attended a 4-year institution, the researcher had to navigate the collegiate terrain alone as a regularly admitted student.

A chief component of the researcher's role is to support underrepresented students with the intent to improve retention and persistence for this student population. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of college opportunity programs through the lens of its students. Hearing participants explain their experiences and insights allowed the researcher to gain a better

understanding of the students' perceptions related to whether they believe that opportunity programs are beneficial to their academic and social success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to build upon the current research surrounding college opportunity programs. It specifically examined students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program at a small, public, four-year institution in Northeastern New Jersey by analyzing the effects that the program had on its student population. The institution that served as the study site had an enrollment of approximately 6,120 students, while its EOF program had 291 students enrolled. The research also briefly explored the program's intrusive advising model and its relationship with such student outcomes as semester-to-semester persistence, retention rates, and student self-efficacy. Findings from this study may be helpful to colleges and universities within the state of New Jersey interested in managing, improving, and/or implementing their own opportunity programs.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to examine the perceived effectiveness of the EOF program:

RQ1: What impact do students believe their involvement in the EOF program has on their persistence?

RQ2: Do EOF students believe they will perform better academically than students with the same academic background who are regularly admitted to the college?

Significance of the Study

Results from this research will inform higher education professionals within and beyond New Jersey of the extent to which opportunity programs similar to EOF have on student

retention and degree completion. More clarity on the effectiveness of college opportunity programs will foster a deeper understanding of the benefits of these programs, while also justifying the necessity of the continued development and expansion of college opportunity programs in America. This study took a closer look into the EOF program at a small, public, 4-year institution in Northeastern New Jersey, examining students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the program's initiatives on student retention and persistence. Higher education persistence and retention programs, like EOF, are critical to avoiding the negative consequences of attrition by offering the support that students need (Habley et al., 2012; Tinto, 2006). As a White House report noted, college access and attainment are still unequal. However, increasing college opportunity is critical to promoting social mobility for future generations (Wu, 2014). This research also explored the outcomes of intrusive advising for underprepared, underrepresented, and/or first-generation college students.

Limitations

The most significant limitations noted in this study are the population and the setting utilized. The participants interviewed for this study knew the researcher, which may have influenced participant responses. Further, the researcher was a staff member (student development specialist) in the EOF program with his own caseload of students. Moreover, when examining statistical differences with small sample sizes, it is essential to exercise caution when interpreting the results because a small sample size can lead to inferential errors. Having a small sample size may reveal statistical differences due to inferential errors. Since there are a plethora of institution types (i.e., private, public, and community colleges), each campus may have its own culture. One study cannot tease out the nuances of an EOF program in totality. However, it

does highlight the commonalities which provide a view of the program and what it does structurally to promote persistence.

Another limitation regards how specific terms were defined. For example, the term “retention” may be defined differently at various post-secondary institutions. Some institutions may consider a student retained if the student is waiting to return for an academic semester while serving a term of probation (Reader, 2018). For this study, however, retention was defined as year-to-year retention. It occurs when a student completes one full academic year (fall and spring) and returns for the following academic year.

Definitions of Key Terms

The following terms were referenced and utilized throughout this study.

Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF)

The New Jersey Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) was instituted by law to ensure access to higher education for those burdened by economic and educational disadvantages. EOF is a statewide program that provides access to higher education for highly motivated students who exhibit the potential for success, but because of extreme circumstances may be unlikely to flourish without the services and support of the program. The initiative provides supplemental financial aid to defray the costs of attendance (i.e., tuition, textbooks, and on-campus housing fees). Additionally, EOF ensures that students have a viable opportunity to succeed and graduate by providing funds for an array of campus-based adaptive and academic support services (New Jersey State Commission on Higher Education, 1997).

Retention

Retention measures how many students persist on a full-time basis each semester until graduation (Reader, 2018). There are numerous ways to measure college retention. These include

program retention (the number of students who complete a specific program), course retention (the percentage of students who complete a course with a passing grade), and student retention (the percentage of students enrolled for two consecutive academic terms). For this study, student retention referred to students who persist from year to year, completing two successive semesters and returning the next academic year.

Intrusive Advising

Thomas (2017) defined intrusive advising as an effective strategy to help challenged and at-risk students, such as those taking developmental college courses. Professionals who use an intrusive advising model are known to help students recognize and adopt the outside-of-class behaviors associated with success in college-level courses. Rodgers et al. (2014) noted that intrusive advising is a proactive approach that aids in motivating and involving students in their collegiate experience.

At-risk Student

According to a report by the National Center for Education Statistics, an “at-risk” student is “generally defined as a student who is likely to fail at school” (Kaufman & MPR Associates, 1992, p. 2). In this context, school failure is defined as poor academic performance and dropping out of school before graduation. In this study, the researcher did not use the term “at-risk” often. Instead, “at-risk” referred to students who have a high probability of failing academically and who also come from low-socioeconomic status familial backgrounds.

First-Generation College Student (FGCS)

A first-generation college student typically refers to a student attending a post-secondary institution who comes from a family where neither parent nor guardian has earned a baccalaureate degree (Levinstein, 2018). Often, first-generation college students’ identities

overlap with populations that can include minorities, immigrants, and/or individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds. For this study, first-generation college students referred to students who were the first in their immediate family to attend a four-year post-secondary institution.

Underrepresented/Underserved Student

Underrepresented/underserved student populations typically encompass low-income, first-generation, LGBTQ+, minorities, and students from non-traditional ages and backgrounds, and students with characteristics that may be underrepresented within a college or university setting (Perna & Jones, 2013).

Student Development Specialist (SDS)

At the research site, the student development specialist (SDS) is a professional staff member who possesses a master's degree in counseling, higher education, or a related field. The SDS provides counseling and advising to a caseload of approximately 100 college students throughout the students' college career. The SDS conducts individual and group advisement sessions that serve to monitor the students' academic and social adjustments to the institution, while providing opportunities to address personal, financial, career, and academic concerns (Ramapo College of New Jersey, 2017).

Plan of Development

Chapter 1 presents an introduction to opportunity programs and explains the importance of provisional admission and opportunity programs for underrepresented and underprepared students in higher education. The introductory chapter also provides the study's statement of the problem, purpose, research questions, significance, limitations, and definitions of key terms.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature related to collegiate opportunity programs while exploring various theoretical based and practical advising approaches and examines how these

programs and their advising strategies support and increase student retention and persistence to graduation.

Chapter 3 introduces the study's research methodology and design. It includes a restatement of the problem and a review of the importance of opportunity programs, including an overview of the intrusive advising approach. Chapter 3 also discloses the participant population, data collection methods, used instrumentation, and how the analytic data procedures and processes. Chapter 4 presents the findings. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the study's findings and conclusions, implications, and recommendations for higher education professionals.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review includes five components: (a) the history of the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF), (b) critical aspects of effective intrusive advising, (c) the characteristics of campus EOF programs, (d) student academic self-efficacy, and (e) a theoretical framework for the study. The review examines the importance and effectiveness of EOF programs as a method of positively impacting EOF students' perception of academic success, persistence, belonging, and motivation.

History of the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF)

The creation of EOF is “rooted in the civil rights movement of the 1960s,” said Dr. Glenn Lang, former Statewide EOF Executive Director and Assistant Secretary of Higher Education for Academic Affairs and Student Programs (U.S. Federal News Service, 2018). In the city of Newark, New Jersey, turmoil ensued because minorities were not afforded the same educational opportunities as White students. On July 12, 1967, the Newark riots began and lasted 4 days. After the summer riots, Ralph A. Dungan, New Jersey's newly-appointed Chancellor of Higher Education, sent a memorandum to all college and university presidents. The letter proposed that something be done to assist young men and women from economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds (State of New Jersey, 2013; Williams, 2017). Subsequently, in 1968, freshman Republican Assemblyman Thomas Kean introduced legislation to enact the New Jersey Educational Opportunity Fund, which became law on July 12, 1968. The bill consisted of a \$2 million appropriation for 1,600 students to enroll at 34 colleges and universities that had previously excluded those students (U.S. Federal News Service, 2018).

Since its inception in 1968, more than 13,000 students have received support from EOF to fulfill their educational aspirations (Lai, 2016; Lowe, 2017; U.S. Federal News Service, 2018).

More than 50 years later, the New Jersey Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) was founded. It is one of the nation's most comprehensive and successful state-supported efforts to provide disadvantaged students with access to higher education and has a budget of approximately \$47.6 million (New Jersey State Commission on Higher Education, 1997; State of New Jersey, 2019). According to Clauss-Ehlers and Wibrowski (2007), the EOF program is a critical resource in helping provide the necessary orientation and skill-base to help first- and second-generation college students learn what Cabrera and Padilla (2004) called the culture of college. Winograd et al. (2017) claimed that the goal of the provisional admission and educational support program is to improve access to post-secondary education and promote retention among historically underrepresented students. According to the N.J. Office of the Secretary of Higher Education website: (State of New Jersey, 2013), there are more than 42 colleges and universities in New Jersey with a campus EOF program. Each program is responsible for student recruitment, selection, services, and the support programs it offers.

Key Aspects of Effective Intrusive Advising

In the first decade of the early twenty-first century, higher education changed. There was a demand for enhanced enrollment, which meant that more students had to be advised, but with fewer funds (Cook, 2009). Meeting the learning needs of underprepared students has become more challenging with such budget declines (Jenkins, 2006; Rhodes, 2001). Currently, academic advising plays a pivotal role in increasing student retention rates, the completion of undergraduate studies, and graduations. To increase college student retention rates, many colleges and universities have begun to use intrusive advising methods (Reader, 2018).

The use of intrusive or proactive advising requires high-impact outreach aimed at providing proactive intervention strategies targeting academically underprepared and first-

generation students (Fricker, 2015; Leach & Wang, 2015; Rodgers et al., 2014; Schwebel et al., 2012; Vander Schee, 2007; Varney, 2013; Vianden, 2016; Webb et al., 2016). In higher education, it has become one of the most effective ways to increase student retention and graduation rates. Intrusive advising may be defined in various ways; however, it typically involves mandatory advisement sessions with a professional advisor that incorporates intensive and personalized approaches (Bailey et al., 2015; Reader, 2018). The goal of intrusive advising is to increase student motivation and retention from year to year. According to Vander Schee (2007), an intrusive advising model focuses on addressing nonacademic factors that may prevent students from realizing their academic potential. Additionally, advisors and students can work together to examine learning styles, study skills, and time management, which encourage students to consider their financial, family, and social situations helping them move closer to resolving major and career-related issues (Bailey et al., 2015; Vander Schee, 2007). Further, theorists have suggested that academic advising helps students to work through continuing and structured goals and career exploration (Bailey et al., 2015).

Although each campus EOF program may have a unique mission, culture, organizational structure, and student population, they all incorporate intrusive support services that include educational advisement, student leadership development, holistic counseling services, developmental advisement, and tutoring and supplemental instruction that improves the success of college students (State of New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education, 2015). Intrusive advising tries to benefit both advisors and students by creating a student-advisor relationship that is more than just a meeting; rather, the relationship spans a student's entire academic process from beginning to end. According to Reader (2018), several key aspects to effective intrusive advising and building effective relationships between the advisor and their

caseload of students include: having a sense of trust, an advisor that is knowledgeable about higher education, an advisor that is readily available to their students, and incorporating a proactive summer-bridge program. Additional studies have shown that intrusive advising is more efficient when combined with summer programs involving learners in proactive planning and counseling (Barnett et al., 2012).

Characteristics of Campus EOF Programs

Each campus EOF program has unique characteristics: However, for this study, three major components were introduced and described: (a) EOF students, (b) campus EOF program personnel, and (c) a summer bridge program.

EOF Student

Opportunity programs like EOF exist in educational institutions across the U.S., providing access to higher education to students who have demonstrated outstanding educational capacity but lack the educational preparedness needed for admission to post-secondary schools (Pulliam, 2014). Additionally, most opportunity program students are the first in their immediate families to go to college. This population faces unique stressors as they relate to college transitions, adding to the already existing stressors that college students face. Such stressors may include feelings of alienation and isolation among students of color (Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). A typical EOF student may also be facing stressors surrounding finances, work-family conflict, and mental health issues (Hurst et al., 2013). To help alleviate these stressors, advisors and administrators who work within opportunity programs help to provide academic, personal, and financial support throughout a student's college career (Engle et al., 2008; Winograd & Shick Tryon, 2009).

For example, at a large, state, post-secondary institution in the Northeast, approximately 32,000 low-income students were admitted to college through the EOF program over 8 years (2000–2008), with 41% of students identifying as African American, 31% Latino or Puerto Rican descent, 13% White, 8% Asian, and 7% identifying as other. Of participants, 68% were females and 32% were males (Pulliam, 2014). This literature exemplifies the fact that underrepresented groups are numerically and systematically underrepresented. Further, studies claim that students from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds perform better than students with a lower socioeconomic status (Bidwell & Friedkin, 1988).

Eligibility Criteria

To be admitted into the EOF program for the 2019-2020 academic year, the New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education provided an income eligibility requirement scale. The household incomes ranged based on the number of individuals in the household. For example, the annual household income for a one-person household could not exceed \$24,280, two-person household, \$32,920, three-person household, \$41,560, and so forth, adding \$8,640 for each additional family member (State of New Jersey, 2019). The 2019–2020 EOF Income Eligibility Scale with Asset Cap Calculation is shown in Table 1:

Table 1

Eligibility Scale with Asset Cap Calculation

2019-2020 EOF Income Eligibility Scale with Asset Cap Calculation		
Applicants with a Household Size of	Gross Income Not to Exceed	Asset Cap Calculation (Not to exceed*) *Based on Household Size for ALL Students
1	\$24,280.00	\$4,856.00
2	\$32,920.00	\$6,584.00
3	\$41,560.00	\$8,312.00
4	\$50,200.00	\$10,040.00
5	\$58,840.00	\$11,768.00
6	\$67,480.00	\$13,496.00
7	\$76,120.00	\$15,224.00
8	\$84,760.00	\$16,952.00
***	Add \$8,640 for each additional family member	Add \$1,728 for each additional family member

Source: State of New Jersey, 2019

Other eligibility requirements for an undergraduate student interested in being admitted to an institution through an EOF program include the following:

1. Must demonstrate an educationally and economically disadvantaged background
2. Must be a New Jersey resident 12 consecutive months before receiving the award
3. Must apply and be accepted to a participating New Jersey college or university
4. Must meet the academic criteria as set by the institution of choice
5. Must file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the New Jersey Alternative Financial Aid Application (State of New Jersey, 2019).

EOF is not an entitlement program. It is, however, a program that provides academic support linked to financial assistance (New Jersey State Commission on Higher Education, 1997).

Campus EOF Program Personnel

All participating colleges and universities that operate an EOF program are typically led by an EOF director (or administrator) and staffed by a variety of full and part-time professional

staff, faculty, administrative staff, and student employees. Staffing depends heavily upon the size and availability of funding at the specific institution. This literature review describes the personnel structure of a small, 4-year, public, institution in Northeastern New Jersey that employed six full-time professional staff members.

The campus EOF director is responsible for all aspects of program planning. Budget development and administration requires the selection, training, and supervision of program staff; monitoring program students' academic progress; the development and implementation of policies and procedures that facilitate the retention, transfer, and graduation of the target EOF population; the supervision and/or coordination of recruitment and enrollment management activities; reviewing EOF students' financial aid packages; and assessing and evaluating all program components. The EOF director usually reports to a senior officer of the institution, such as the president, provost, or vice president for student affairs (State of New Jersey, 2018). At the study site, the EOF director reports to the Assistant Vice President for Student Success.

Under the direct leadership of the EOF director is an associate director who assists with program management, staff supervision, assessment practices, and other duties. The associate director also supervises three student development specialists responsible for advising a caseload of approximately 115 EOF students each.

Student development specialists, or EOF advisors, (as they are more commonly known) are professional staff members who hold advanced degrees in a variety of educational fields. The EOF advisor helps students to develop academic plans that complement students' life goals and advises them on how to adjust to the academic and social demands of college. Students can expect their EOF advisor to be a good listener who can establish a genuine and unique rapport and use an assortment of intrusive advising strategies to promote their personal growth and

development. The EOF advisor engages the total student, working with them on multiple academic, career, financial, and personal/social goals. Their work involves short-term and long-range planning and the identification of options for handling issues that require immediate attention (Ramapo College of New Jersey, n.d.).

Additionally, a campus program also has an office coordinator (typically known as an administrative assistant). This individual, who serves as an integral member of the EOF team, manages the front office, including the student clerical staff for the entire campus program. The office coordinator usually reports directly to the EOF director. Although the professional staff members have distinct roles and responsibilities, all are involved in the planning, implementation, execution, and assessment of the summer bridge program. Typically, part-time faculty and student employees also assist in various aspects of the summer bridge program.

Summer Bridge Program

Traditionally, students from economically and educationally disadvantaged circumstances are unlikely to take college preparatory courses in high school (Winograd et al., 2017). Therefore, many campus EOF programs require incoming students to participate in a rigorous residential summer bridge program before the start of their first semester. Research has found that summer bridge programs have potentially positive effects on the post-secondary attainment of college students (Institute of Education Sciences, 2016). This pre-college program aids students with a successful academic and social transition to the post-secondary experience (Pulliam, 2014). During this 3-to-6-week summer program (EOF programs' summer bridge programs vary in length depending on funding and other factors specific to an institution), students typically take college courses (for credit and/or remedial courses or preparatory workshops). Students also receive academic support, which includes a structured tutoring

program and a residential program that meets the psychosocial needs of traditionally-aged college students (Pulliam, 2014). Practices beyond the classroom can result in meaningful engagement, which can include extracurricular activities and residence hall programming. The summer bridge student staff is tasked with planning and hosting events for the summer bridge students to give them a break from studying to socialize with their peers. Some examples of residential programming include a dance party, game night, ice cream social, and movie night.

In many EOF programs, student placement in summer courses is based upon how they perform on the ACCUPLACER. The institution's placement exam, the ACCUPLACER is an integrated system of computer-adaptive assessments designed to evaluate students' reading, writing, and mathematics skills (The College Board, 2016). Some academic components of the summer program may include introductory courses in English, math, and strategies for academic success (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007). During the summer program, trained instructors teach the classes, while EOF advisors may teach an academic success course. A student supplemental instructor or tutor accompanies each instructor to provide additional support to faculty and students.

During the summer program, students are introduced to the academic and social demands of college life, as well as get prepared for their transition into the fall semester. This concept of "early-on advising" (Reader, 2018) may encourage the student to take advantage of the variety of preventative services campus EOF programs provide for their students. When racially underrepresented students are encouraged and thoroughly supported by intrusive advisors, who are experts in the field of higher education, the students are more likely to absorb and listen to the advisor's recommendations and complete the summer bridge program (Reader, 2018). The pre-college experience has shown to be successful by helping to improve issues surrounding

college transition, including leaving home and family members for the first time, developing a sense of independence, and students becoming comfortable with the culture of their new campus (Pulliam, 2014).

Students who successfully complete the summer program are then admitted to the college or university and assigned to an EOF advisor for the remainder of their college career. Students are required to meet with their advisor regularly (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007). During these meetings, students receive advising in areas that include personal, academic, and financial aid matters. Knowing a student's risk factors can help advisors use their knowledge regarding retention rates to implement effective intrusive advising tools to provide additional support to those students who need it (Reader, 2018). Strayhorn found that summer bridge programs "increase students' college readiness by promoting critical skills development, acclimating them to the campus environment, and nurturing their sense of belonging in college" (Strayhorn, 2010, p. 148).

Academic Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy has a positive connection to academic achievement and the attainment of a college education for university students (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016). Many studies have examined the association between academic self-efficacy and student accomplishment, and a multitude of researchers have observed a connection between student self-efficacy and academic achievement (Reader, 2018). According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy is an individual's beliefs about their ability to exercise influence over the events that affect their lives. Often seen as more important than other variables, such as class size, success objectives, or consequence thinking, academic self-efficacy is critical to college achievement (Reader, 2018). Since academic self-efficacy is a predictor of retention and influences how well a college student

transitions from high school to college, Nelson and Cooper (2014) were proponents of better academic self-efficacy assessment measures. When assessments are coupled with intrusive advising, colleges and universities should be able to increase a student's academic self-efficacy, retention, and graduation by taking proactive measures such as intrusive advising (Reader, 2018) and EOF.

Social and Academic Belonging

A sense of belonging is related to college students' engagement and persistence, course grades, and academic motivation. According to Walton and Cohen (2011), an important question facing society concerns the origins of inequalities between socially marginalized and non-marginalized groups. Oyserman and Lewis (2017) state that providing public support for a variety of school programs will help provide students with the necessary support and motivation needed to attain their college dreams. Although research shows many structural factors that contribute to these inequalities, the psychological factor, concern about social belonging, is the most pertinent for this study. Walton and Cohen (2011) defined a sense of belonging as "a sense of having positive relationships with others, which is a fundamental human need. Being socially isolated, feeling lonely, and being from a low socioeconomic background are not only detrimental to a student's well-being but also disturb their intellectual achievement and immune function and health (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

For example, African American students, who can be classified as members of a socially stigmatized group, are more likely to feel uncertain about their social belonging within a mainstream post-secondary institution (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Davis (2015) pointed out that racial disparities and social inequities are prevalent categories, including healthcare, salaries, and education. Because African Americans and other racially underrepresented groups are often

negatively stereotyped and marginalized, they may be unsure whether they will forge positive campus relationships. When these disparities are entwined and compounded through a student's first 18 years of life, it can potentially have an adverse influence on how the student does in college (Davis, 2015). Therefore, social affiliation as a targeted intervention produces immense advantages (Walton & Cohen, 2011), and this is where campus EOF programs can help.

Further, many students enter college without guidance from parents or guardians (Pitman & Richmond, 2007), mainly because their parent(s) or guardian(s) have not attended college. Therefore, these students are not always adequately equipped to deal with issues surrounding belonging and/or motivation. The limited empirical research on first-generation college students proposes that, although they may be capable of doing well in college, they begin their college careers with some form of disadvantage (Pitman & Richmond, 2007). Although 80 to 100% of students desire to attend college, only 63% of students with low- and middle- socioeconomic status enroll, compared to the 83% of students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Oyserman & Lewis, 2017).

As Pitman and Richmond (2007) explained, experts suggest that attachment to college, defined as the degree of affiliation the student feels toward the institution, is linked to better social adjustment, lower levels of depression, higher academic motivation, and lower attrition rates (Pitman & Richmond, 2007). Since having a sense of belonging is critical in college, it is crucial to understand why students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have a lower sense of belonging in college than high socioeconomic status students (Jury et al., 2019). Not feeling a connection to the college or a university can negatively impact students in a variety of ways, especially their motivation to learn and succeed academically.

Motivation to Learn

Motivation has proved to be a factor in students' persistence and retention. Allen (1999) found that there was a relationship between motivation and persistence for underrepresented students. Motivation has also been identified as an important contributor to student success that influences whether a first-year student will continue the following year. Research has also shown that the transition into college is a period that affects a student's well-being. The ability to identify those at-risk students early may assist in their transition to higher education (Edgar et al., 2019). This is especially important for EOF students, and EOF administrators and staff must work diligently to ensure that students have the skills and tools necessary to succeed, which is why intrusive advising and preemptive intervention strategies are central components of EOF.

According to Hernandez et al. (2013), "the study of motivation has a long and rich history in psychology, with numerous paradigms attempting to define and explain the internal and external forces that push or pull individuals into action" (p. 90). Non-White students, specifically African-Americans and Latinos, are less likely to complete college, so these students must possess the motivation to perform well academically. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), when students are intrinsically motivated, they "engage in activities that interest them and, in so doing, help them to learn, develop, and expand their capacities." It is essential to explore how motivation to learn impacts a student's first year of college and is key to understanding the contribution of motivation to student transition, achievement, and retention (Edgar et al., 2019). For EOF students, it is even more critical that they are engaged and encouraged to remain focused on their schoolwork. Often, EOF students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are subjected to stressors and other unhealthy risk factors while growing up that students from affluent backgrounds typically do not endure (Oreopoulos et al., 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Eisenhart (1991) defined a theoretical framework as “a structure that guides research by relying on a formal theory . . . constructed by using an established, coherent explanation of certain phenomena and relationships” (p. 205). Beyond the transition to college, retention involved the integration of the student as a competent affiliate of the academic and social aspects of college life. Tinto’s (1987) theory was that the process of retention was noticeable in the passage of students from previous forms of association to new types of membership in the social and academic communities of a college (Watson, 2015). It was the interaction someone had formally and informally with the academic and social communities on their campus and person’s perceptions of those interactions that impacted their decision to stay or leave college (Tinto, 1987). Tinto believed the growing interaction over time of categories of variables that included backgrounds, initial commitments to college study, and interactions with peers and faculty that contributed to both social integration and academic integration (Watson, 2015). Therefore, a student’s commitment either increased or decreased based on the quality and quantity of their educational and social experiences. Typically, when students have meaningful academic and social experiences, which EOF can support, they become integrated into the institution. Thus, Tinto believed that better integration would lead to higher college retention rates.

Cabrera et al.’s (1992) theory of student persistence merged the essentials of Tinto’s (1987) student integration model and the Bean (1980) student attrition model (Watson, 2015). Both models regarded persistence as the result of a multifaceted set of interactions over time. The two models also suggested that an individual’s characteristics before college affects how well that individual will adjust to a post-secondary institution. Cabrera et al., for example, argued that college persistence was affected by the decisive match between a student and the institution.

The EOF program sometimes connects the student to the institution. The incorporation of Tinto's (1987) student integration model, Bean's (1980) student attrition model, and Cabrera et al.'s (1992) models more accurately identified the variables behind attrition. Collectively, the models suggest that academic integration, intellectual development, encouragement from significant others, financial aid, financial attitudes, and social integration all affect institutional commitment (Watson, 2015).

Self-determination theory (SDT) defines the intrinsic and various extrinsic sources of motivation, as well as the intellectual and social implications of the intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Starrett, 2018). Though the initial work that led to SDT can be traced to the 1970s, with the first comprehensive statement about SDT surfacing in the mid-1980s, the research on SDT has only blossomed during the past decade (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The SDT model further suggests that when a student's need for autonomy is met, that student is more likely to become engaged in college, which increases their ability to learn (Starrett, 2018). For a college student, having autonomy is critical for increasing perceived competence and performance. Additionally, perceived autonomy is a direct predictor of students' persistence, positive emotionality, conceptual understanding and competence, self-direction, and self-confidence (Starrett, 2018).

Summary

Chapter 2 provided a historical overview of EOF and addressed the importance of campus EOF programs for underprepared college students. This literature review has also provided a comprehensive review of EOF and the characteristics that affect a students' college career. Cabrera et al.'s (1992) theory of student persistence, Tinto's (1987) student integration model, and Bean's (1980) student attrition model and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) all

suggest that campus EOF programs may help underprepared college students feel more equipped to succeed academically and socially. This study provided additional insight into the unique relationships between EOF program staff and their students while suggesting implications for college administrators and educators internal and external to EOF.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of Chapter 3 is to introduce the research methodology for this qualitative phenomenological study regarding EOF students' perceptions of the effectiveness and importance of campus EOF programs. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the experiences of college students enrolled and involved in an EOF program. It also provided a way to develop a data-grounded theory to understand what motivates EOF students to perform well academically and socially. The present chapter discusses the applicability of phenomenology to this study. The research questions, methodology, researcher's relationship with study participants, study setting, study participants, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and summary are also primary components of this chapter.

Research and Interview Questions

The following two research questions, and their accompanying interview questions, guided this study:

RQ1: What impact do students believe their involvement in the EOF program has on their persistence?

Interview questions/prompts:

- a. What EOF sponsored activities/programs have you participated in?
- b. Do you feel the EOF program has contributed positively to your academic performance?

RQ2: Do EOF students believe they will perform better academically than students with the same academic background who are regularly admitted to the college?

Interview question/prompt:

- a. Do you feel that you are better prepared academically and/or socially than a non-EOF student at Ramapo?

Methodology

When conducting research, a qualitative study is suitable when the objective is to explain a phenomenon by relying on the perception of an individual's experience in a circumstance (Stake, 2010). As Creswell (2009) outlined, a quantitative approach is applicable when a researcher seeks to understand relationships between variables. For this study, the experiences, and perceptions of EOF students were examined. Therefore, a qualitative method will be the most appropriate.

This qualitative study employed an interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology approach. Hermeneutic phenomenology studies people's narratives to understand what they experience in their daily lives (Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenology typically uses a variety of methods such as interviews, conversations, participant observations, action research, focus groups, and the analysis of diaries and other personal writings. The relatively unstructured and fluid nature of the approach encourages participants to share specifics regarding their experience. The structured surveys and questionnaires used in other research methods to collect information do not allow participants to share their views freely. By comparison, phenomenology emphasizes subjectivity. Therefore, conducting semi-structured interviews was the most appropriate data collection method for this study since it maximized the depth of the information collected.

Study Setting

The research site for this study was a small, public, 4-year institution in Northeastern New Jersey during the spring semester of 2020. The institution had a student population of 6,120

(5,618 undergraduates, 502 graduate students). In the 2018 edition of *U.S. News & World Report's* "America's Best Colleges," the institution was named among the top schools in the Best Regional Universities (North category, ranked in 28th place in 2018-2019). The institution was also recognized for such accolades as "2019 Best Colleges: Region by Region" for the Northeast in the Princeton Review, "Best College for Your Money" in *Money* magazine, "Military Friendly School," by Victory Media, in the *2019 Guide to Military Friendly Schools* and featured in *CollegesofDistinction.com*, a website devoted to honoring schools across the county for their excellence in student-focused higher education.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in fall 2017, the undergraduate race/ethnicity statistics for the institution were as follows: White 64%, Hispanic/Latino 15%, Asian 8%, Black or African American 5%, Race/ethnicity unknown 5%, Non-resident alien 2%, and American Indian 1% (Institute of Education Sciences) These statistics are useful when discussing support from the EOF program and the institution collectively, as it relates to interventions for EOF students. The institution's EOF program consisted of 291 undergraduate students, enrolling approximately 90 first-year students each year.

Researcher's Relationship with Participants

At the time of the study, the researcher had been working in higher education professionally for 10 years (4 years directly with EOF) and held a Bachelor of Science in Management and a Master's of Public Administration from Kean University. The researcher was proficient in the skills necessary to carry out the designed study. During the researcher's career, he interviewed several people with intent to hire. This skill demonstrates the ability to interview individuals effectively. Since the study participants were EOF students, the researcher had some familiarity with the participants. The relationship between students and the researcher created an

easy rapport among all involved in the study. However, the researcher made a point to minimize any bias. Yin (2011) suggested setting clear rules and following them to help reduce bias in research. Therefore, the researcher set clear rules and expectations and put several controls in place to help ensure that all participants followed them.

Participants

The sample for this study came from a population of EOF students enrolled at a small public 4-year institution in Northeastern New Jersey. Although there were 291 students enrolled in the EOF program at the time of the study, the researcher had the EOF Office Coordinator email only students who were not on the researcher's caseload. This measure reduced the potential for bias. The Office Coordinator sent the email to 186 full-time undergraduate EOF students with a brief description of the study and a request for their assistance (see Appendix A). In that email, students were notified that the researcher would send a brief demographic questionnaire to interested parties (Appendix B), which helped the researcher to select participants and document the level of diversity among the participants. Diversity included class status, gender, ethnicity, campus involvement, and grade point average (GPA).

The sampling technique helped ensure there was a healthy assortment of students from different EOF advisors' caseloads, grade levels, race, gender, etc. The researcher projected having between 10 and 20 participants for this study. The final number of participants was 12 full-time undergraduate students. All participants were required to complete an informed consent form. The participating students were from a variety of diverse communities within the state of New Jersey and offered varied perspectives. Three were freshmen, three sophomores, two juniors, and four seniors, as determined by saturation, the point at which no new information

would be obtained from further data. For this study, the data received from the 12 participants' interviews was adequate to complete a detailed analysis.

Data Collection

This study consisted of a semi-structured interviewing method, where both the interviewer and the interview questions were the instruments used. Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to ask questions that aided in defining the specific areas explored and permitted the interviewer or interviewee to pursue an idea or respond in further detail (Gill et al., 2008). Notes were used to capture the researcher's thoughts during and after each interview. Each interview was also recorded electronically using a digital voice recorder for later replay and transcription.

The interviews began with closed-ended questions to ascertain the participants' initial knowledge of the EOF program. Next, the interviewer asked more thorough open-ended questions with the intent to gather in-depth data on students' experiences and perceptions of the effectiveness of the EOF program.

All interviews were conducted in-person, in a private office or classroom on campus. None of the interviews were conducted without written and verbal consent from each participant. Each interview was conducted individually in one session that lasted less than one hour. The researcher typed detailed notes and "preliminary jottings" (Saldaña, 2008, p. 496) on a personal, password- and-fingerprint protected laptop.

Before each interview, participants were asked if they could be reached for additional questions. After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher did not find that it was necessary to contact the participants for additional questions or clarifications. Participants did not play a

role in the process of writing or editing the actual analysis and results. Further, no participant had access to any other interview.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological research typically generates a significant amount of data that can include notes from interviews, transcripts, recordings, and other records that the researcher must analyze (Creswell, 2013; Grand Canyon University, n.d.; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher read all the collected material to get a feeling for what the participants said about the research phenomenon. The researcher then began a thorough analysis of the data to organize the information, concentrate on a more in-depth understanding, and identify developing themes, which were then coded (Grand Canyon University, n.d.).

Coding interview transcripts—or breaking them down into meaningful and manageable pieces of data—is an important aspect of the data analysis process in phenomenology that focuses on interview analysis. In qualitative research, a code “is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2008, p. 3). Coding helps to prevent overemphasizing the importance of a theme early in the study and ensure a systematic review of the entire collection of interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Stake, 2010).

Interview transcripts were coded based upon when the interview was conducted, sometimes in batches, but mostly after each interview. Coding in this order allowed the researcher to reflect on and slightly alter interview questions as theories began to develop from the data. The coding process was helpful for the researcher in understanding the perceptions of the participants and in examining their shared experiences. Codes were formed during the research process, based on the data, to analyze the data (Urquhart, 2013). For this study, coding

was conducted in Microsoft Word and the data analysis software ATLAS.ti. Manually coding the interviews using the phenomenological methodology helped to ensure an objective interpretation of the data, which also helped to diminish bias.

Ethical Considerations

The risks to human participants associated with this study were minimal. Federal regulations and American Educational Research Association (AERA) guidelines require that all research participants give informed consent before participating in a study (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Therefore, each participant had the opportunity to read the informed consent form before beginning the interview. Also, the researcher gave each participant a description of the study's features that might influence their willingness to be interviewed (p. 132) and informed them that they could stop the interview at any time.

All participants were 18 years of age or older and without any impaired mental capacity, as determined by their ability to complete a high school degree, enroll in college, and actively pursue their academic achievements. Consequently, all 12 participants were qualified to participate in this study. Each participant had the opportunity to choose a pseudonym from a list provided by the researcher before beginning the interview, and these were used throughout the study to ensure anonymity. To further minimize potential bias, students from the researcher's caseload were not permitted to participate in this study. Additionally, all data and materials related to this study will be destroyed 5 years following the dissertation committee's approval of the final report.

Summary

The intent of Chapter 3 was to outline the research method used to answer the two research questions posed in this study. A discussion of the recruitment process, study participants, data collection, and interview questions outlined how this qualitative study was conducted and who participated. A phenomenological methodology was used to develop a theory on EOF students' perceptions of the effectiveness of an EOF program. All participants contributed to the theory by sharing their experiences and perceptions of what contributed to their academic and social success at a small, public 4-year institution in Northeastern New Jersey. Next, the goal of Chapter 4 is to provide the results of the study and establish that the phenomenological methodology outlined in Chapter 3 was followed.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the effectiveness of opportunity programs from the students' perspective. Chapter 4 contains the results and analysis of the qualitative phenomenological study conducted to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What impact do students believe their involvement in the EOF program has on their persistence?

RQ2: Do EOF students believe they will perform better academically than students with the same academic background who are regularly admitted to the college?

Chapter 4 also focuses on the experiences and perceptions of 12 full-time college students enrolled in the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program at a small, public, 4-year institution in Northeastern New Jersey. How the phenomenological analysis was conducted and how the results relate to the research questions will be discussed. Additionally, this chapter describes participants' demographics and an overview of their recommendations for enhancing EOF.

Sample

Twelve EOF students participated in individual, semi-structured interviews in February of 2020. The group included three freshmen, four sophomores, two juniors, and three seniors. Seven were male-identified and five were female-identified. All were from underrepresented groups, were undergraduate students, and had different majors. All 12 participants shared their hometown and ethnicity information (see Table 2). Seven identified as Hispanic or Latinx, four identified as African-American, and one identified as Afro-Latinx or mixed race. As shown in Table 2, all participants met the criteria outlined in Chapter 3.

Table 2

Participants' Characteristics

Name	Gender	County	Class Status	Race/Ethnicity
Atticus	Male	Middlesex	Junior	Hispanic/Latino
Bella	Female	Bergen	Sophomore	Latina
Daniel	Male	Essex	Senior	African-American
Ella	Female	Hudson	Sophomore	African-American
Frida	Female	Passaic	Senior	Hispanic
Lamar	Male	Monmouth	Freshman	African-American
Lionel	Male	Monmouth	Sophomore	Latino
Martin	Male	Hudson	Junior	Afro-Latino
Maya	Female	Bergen	Freshman	African-American
Ralph	Male	Hudson	Freshman	Hispanic
Ricky	Male	Passaic	Senior	Hispanic
Samantha	Female	Bergen	Sophomore	Hispanic

About the Participants

Atticus is a junior majoring in Business Administration with a concentration in Marketing and a minor in International Business. His campus involvement includes being a resident assistant and serving on the executive board of a national honor society and fraternity. At the time of this study, Atticus' cumulative grade point average (GPA) was 2.89.

Bella is a sophomore majoring in Psychology. As an extracurricular activity, she participates in the culture club. Bella's cumulative GPA at the time of this study was 2.94.

Daniel is a senior majoring in Visual Arts who is involved with the animation production club. At the time of this study, Daniel's cumulative GPA was 3.04.

Ella is a sophomore majoring in Business Administration with a concentration in Management. When she is not studying, Ella is one of the student leaders of the culture club. At the time of this study, her cumulative GPA was 2.91.

Frida is a senior majoring in Digital Filmmaking. She is also a part of a multicultural sorority. At the time of this study, Frida's cumulative GPA was 2.54.

Lamar is a freshman who is majoring in Visual Arts. He also participates in the animation club in his free time. Lamar's GPA at the time of this study was 2.26.

Lionel is a junior majoring in Mathematics. Beyond the classroom, Lionel is involved with the peer facilitation program, a member of the indoor soccer, rock climbing, and math clubs. At the time of this study, Lionel's cumulative GPA was 2.60.

Martin is a junior who majors in Global Communication and Media. He is also the president of his fraternity. Martin's cumulative GPA at the time of this study was 2.39.

Maya is a freshman, Nursing major. She is an active member of the Black Student Union (BSU) and a student ambassador for Admissions. At the time of this study, Maya's recorded GPA was 3.57.

Ralph is a freshman who is majoring in Social Work. When not in classes, Ralph can be found kicking around a soccer ball with his soccer club teammates. At the time of this study, Ralph's cumulative GPA was 3.14.

Ricky is a senior, double majoring in Acting and Directing Stage Management. Beyond the stage, Ricky is involved with the theater honor society and is a resident assistant. His GPA at the time of this study was 2.77.

Samantha is a sophomore who is majoring in Medical Imaging Sciences. When not in the classroom, Samantha can be found at a variety of commuter student affairs or EOF program events. At the time of this study, her GPA was 2.47.

About the Researcher

Nearly 16 years after entering college for the first time, the researcher is now a higher education professional. At the time of this study, the researcher had been working as a Student Development Specialist (SDS) for the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) campus program where this study was conducted for 4 years. The researcher was also serving on the executive board as Vice-President of the Educational Opportunity Fund Professional Association of New Jersey (EOFPANJ). This non-profit organization acts as the official liaison between EOF campus-based programs and the New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education. EOFPANJ advocates on behalf of the statewide EOF programs and monitors legislation and policy decisions that may affect the EOF constituency.

Before working in EOF, the researcher worked in campus and residential life as a Campus Life Coordinator and Student Center Building Manager for 6 years at a University in Northeastern New Jersey. The researcher's primary responsibilities as an EOF Student Development Specialist (SDS) included providing academic, financial, career, and personal advisement to a caseload of 100+ EOF students, managing the program's instructional support services and staff (tutoring and supplemental instruction) and co-advising the department's male mentoring initiative, Men Achieving Success Together (MAST). As an SDS, the researcher aimed to support EOF students by enhancing retention and persistence to graduation. To reiterate, the purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of students' perceptions of whether they believe the EOF program is beneficial to their academic and social success.

Data Collection

Initially, 15 students expressed interest in assisting the researcher with the study by responding to the initial email sent to 186 full-time EOF students. From there, the researcher contacted those students directly by email and requested them to complete the brief demographic questionnaire and choose a convenient date and time for the interview. Participants had the opportunity to complete the brief demographic questionnaire electronically or in person. The questionnaire provided supporting research data such as class status, gender, ethnicity, grade point average, and campus involvement. The researcher verified grade point averages by using Ellucian Banner, a higher education resource planning (ERP) system. Of the 15 students who expressed interest in the study, two never replied to the researchers' attempt to arrange an interview or send the brief questionnaire. A total of 13 interviews were scheduled over 3 weeks in February of 2020. One of the 13 students did not show up for an individual interview. The remaining 12 students all followed through with scheduling and showing up for their interviews.

All interviews took place on campus in the researcher's office or a reserved classroom. Before each interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participant and allowed that participant to read and sign the Informed Consent Form. Each participant also had the opportunity to ask the researcher any questions before the interview began. Further, to help with anonymity, each student was instructed to choose a pseudonym from a list provided by the researcher to act as an additional identity protection measure. The researcher also clarified that none of the information discussed during the interview would be shared with other EOF staff or college administrators. Additionally, participants were informed that the name of the institution where the study was conducted would be omitted from any public results. All 12 participants

agreed to the parameters outlined in the Informed Consent Form, agreed to be recorded, and willingly contributed to the study.

The atmosphere was relaxed, and the participants appeared comfortable sharing their perspectives and experiences with the researcher. After completing the interviews, the researcher replayed each recorded interview and manually transcribed them using Microsoft Word on the researcher's personal, password- and fingerprint-protected laptop. The coding process was done using manual notes, ATLAS.ti, and Microsoft Excel. The coding process revealed the emerging themes. The researcher embedded the phenomenological methodology throughout the data collection and analysis process. The interview protocol and questions are provided in Appendix D.

The data and analysis section in this chapter focuses on central themes, commonalities, and differences discovered during the interviews. The subsections further explain the participants' experiences and perceptions. The first section, "The Purpose of the EOF Program," examines students' perceptions of what they believe to be the purpose of the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF). The section also explored students' current understanding of program services and initiatives.

The second section, "Summer-Bridge Program," examines participants' experiences during their particular pre-freshmen summer program. Although all students were required to participate in a pre-freshmen summer-bridge program before officially starting college, some students' lived experiences may have been different based on the year they entered college. Nevertheless, there were many shared experiences among the participants.

Third, the "Academic Performance" segment includes students' insight into how they perceived their academic performance at the time of the interview. The fourth section,

“Involvement in EOF Program,” delves into the participants’ interactions and involvement with the program. It examined which students were actively involved and engaged and how that played a role in their experience not only in the EOF program but also at the institution.

Lastly, the “Academic and Social Preparation” section, focused on how the participants conceptualized their academic and social preparation compared to students who were regularly admitted into the college and not enrolled in the EOF program. Further, it provided direct data regarding whether participants felt more prepared academically and socially than their peers. The latter were also admitted to the institution but not in the EOF program. Participants articulated whether being in the EOF program contributed to success in both areas, just one, or neither.

Data and Analysis

The researcher read over the data multiple times to get an understanding of each interview. Next, key words and phrases were highlighted and underlined to begin to identify commonalities and themes. The computer software program ATLAS.ti and a manual tally system were used to count repeated words or phrases to determine which themes were mentioned more than five times. The researcher identified common themes across the 12 interviews. Six categories (associated with interview questions 5, 7, 8b, 9, 10, and 12) were identified as critical to answering the research questions. These categories were purpose, summer bridge program, academic performance, involvement in EOF, relationship with EOF advisor, and academic and social preparation.

Further, a total of six data codes gleaned from the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts from the interviews. In qualitative research, a code is a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a collective, prominent, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute to linguistic or visual data (Saldana, 2008). The identified codes are then ranked from highest to

lowest. The number next to each code indicates how many times study participants mentioned that word or phrase during the interviews: help/support (28); resources (11); financial/money (11); positive (10); connect/connection and (7); and transition (6). The codes that emerged related to important aspects of EOF. Identifying these codes required multiple reviews of the data, in which the researcher read many times and dissected each interview for keywords and phrases that identified the six categories or themes. Other themes identified during further data compilation are discussed later in this chapter. The interpretation of the data further delineated the correlation between the themes and the research questions.

Purpose of the EOF Program

It was essential to gain an understanding of how the participants perceived the purpose of EOF, and all were asked their current understanding of the program's purpose. The common theme among all participants regarded the financial assistance the program provides. While other interviewees provided more in-depth explanations and discussed such characteristics of the program as the college transition resources, guidance, and support provided. Daniel, Ralph, and Samantha offered simple but accurate portrayals in response to the question:

“the EOF program help[s] minority students to get into college in an affordable sense”
(Daniel),

“[EOF] gives low-income families a better opportunity to attend 4-year universities
(Ralph),” and

“[EOF] create[s] equal opportunities for minorities and people who might not initially
afford college with their own funding” (Samantha).

Even at distinct stages of their college careers, a senior, freshman, and sophomore, respectively, were able to speak to an essential aspect of the EOF program.

Frida and Martin offer more complex responses:

“The purpose of the EOF program is basically to, like, facilitate the college experience for students that don’t have any, like, awareness of how to maneuver. [It] give[s] you the resources and tools to really understand how everything works. Especially if no one in your family serves as a resource” (Frida);

“...basically, to provide financial needs...[helps] low-income students who come from either broken homes or just simply they have the education but don’t have money to go to school. Also, [EOF] provides us with tutoring” (Martin);

These two participants articulated how EOF helps first-generation, underrepresented, and underprepared college students to navigate the college terrain and provides the academic, personal, and financial support essential for these students to persist to graduation.

While the majority of participants focused on the financial assistance component of the program, Martin talked about the close relationship he formed with his EOF advisor: “I know that my advisor is here for me,” he said, “and has [provided] some form of counseling if I didn’t want to attend counseling services.” Martin’s responses showed he not only understands what EOF is, but he appreciates the services the program offers, especially the personal advising and relationship that he built with his EOF advisor over the years. Lamar shared his sentiments expressing that the EOF office was “somewhere I can go to ask questions. EOF will take care of me and do their best to help me out.” It is crucial for EOF students to have a healthy and strong rapport with the program staff since some of the students come from unstable or “broken homes,” as Martin mentioned. So, the necessity to feel safe and have a familial presence is vital to many EOF students. This need correlates with the sense of belonging that underrepresented college students often need to navigate the post-secondary experience successfully.

The students' understanding of why the EOF program exists was gratifying to hear. Though study participants did not address all facets of what EOF offers and provides its students, they covered the essence of the program and appeared to have a good sense of its purpose.

The remaining interview questions were asked to reveal participants' perspectives on the EOF summer-bridge program, their academic performance, their current involvement with the EOF program, and whether participants felt better prepared academically and/or socially than regularly admitted, non-EOF students. These topics all align with the two research questions.

Summer-Bridge Program

All incoming first-year students are required to complete the 6-week pre-freshman summer bridge program before the start of college. Though participants typically do not relish the idea of sacrificing their summer before beginning college to engage in the EOF pre-freshman summer bridge program, many explained that the program allowed them to enroll in college and pursue post-secondary education. When asked to describe their summer program experience, most participants chuckled as they reflected on that pivotal time in their life and quickly responded with a remark that described how rigorous and/or structured the summer program was. A common theme, one that eight of the participants mentioned, regarded the rigor of the summer program.

Atticus and Frida summarized most participants' thoughts about the summer program. Atticus' explained, "I would say it's like an educational boot camp. Definitely hard, and not for everyone. We were given a lot of resources, such as tutoring." Each summer, the EOF staff refer to the summer bridge program as an "academic boot camp for the mind" because the summer bridge program condenses a 15 week, four-credit college course into 6 weeks. This schedule can challenge first-generation, underrepresented, and underprepared students. However, EOF

provides extensive support and incorporates social programming when students are not studying, which gradually introduces students to a typical college atmosphere. Many EOF students complain about how hard the summer program can be when they are immersed in it.

Nevertheless, a sizable number of them realized its positive effects and were appreciative of its strict structure. To assist students during the summer further, EOF provides mandatory library hours, supplemental instruction, and additional evening tutoring each day. So, the students' days are long and rigorous. A typical summer schedule runs from 8 am until 10 pm, Monday through Thursday. Frida shares her experience during the summer program, "the main thing about . . . the 6 weeks is that it is very structured, so you have no option but to be disciplined. And, I feel like that is a very important skill to have when you come to college." Frida, too, discusses the rigorous structure of the EOF summer bridge program that helped her complete the summer program and make it to her senior year of college. Frida's experience speaks to the benefit of the summer bridge program and how it helped her persist to her senior year, which is the goal of EOF. Like many EOF students, if not for the summer program, they most likely would not have the capability to attend college and acquire the necessary skills to succeed.

Contrary to most study participants, two recounted different experiences. Daniel discussed how the transition from high school to college was smooth because he came from a high school that prepared him for the rigor. Others mentioned the fun and social aspects of the summer program. Of the 12 participants, Ricky was the only one who disclosed that he was a member of the Upward Bound Math/Science program. This federally funded TRIO program is designed to strengthen the math and science skills of participating students before enrolling in college (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). "It was a lot of fun. It definitely reminded me of

my Upward Bound Math & Science time but that it was a lot more work focused and [I] do appreciate it.” The Upward Bound program helped him to brush up on his math and science skills and allowed him to explore the campus before entering college, but Ricky still mentions the rigor of the EOF summer program and how appreciative he is of it. However, most incoming first-year EOF students do not enter the summer program with the same preparation as Daniel and Ricky as they come from high schools that do not prepare them for college adequately.

Academic Performance

Study participants were asked to describe their academic performance to date. One theme was that students were satisfied with their academic performance yet believed they could perform better. Most participants felt their academic performance was declining or less structured than when they were in the summer program, and a variety of new academic challenges arose as they advanced from their summer bridge program. Atticus mentioned that he spread himself too thin with extracurricular activities that impacted his academics. Bella talked about the ease of receiving support from supplemental instructors during the summer bridge program, but he now struggles with getting instructional support since supplemental instruction and tutoring are not mandated beyond the summer bridge program. Bella states, “now you have to sign up for tutoring[s] session or have to go to Professors’ office hours.” Bella also discussed how her “fall schedule was more flexible” than her rigorous summer program schedule.

Summer bridge program students often do well with the controlled schedule, but they may struggle to adjust to their newfound freedom during the fall and spring semesters. For example, many students struggle with time management, procrastination, and knowing when to seek additional instructional support. So, during monthly advisement meetings, EOF advisors offer recommendations and guide students to campus resources. Ella shared that her academics

progressed because of EOF and that she goes to tutoring for classes in which she struggles, one of which is macroeconomics.

Frida discussed how far she progressed from her freshmen year: “I was stubborn . . . I thought I knew what I was doing, but I really didn’t know until after [the] mistakes.” She praised her EOF advisor for not giving up on her and for providing her with the tools necessary for success. The researcher noticed that many EOF students describe performing better academically when in a structured environment like the EOF summer program. A significant theme was that students need support beyond the summer bridge program and rely on EOF to succeed academically, which is why EOF provides continual support.

It was thought-provoking to hear how students perceived their academic performance. The participants who were first-year students did not have much experience to reference since they were only in their second semester of college. However, Maya and Lamar said their academics improved over the months since entering college in the fall. Maya mentioned that she struggled a bit with class participation during her fall semester but stated that she was able to improve in that area because she “was able to form study groups . . . and talk to [my] professors, [which] helped me to participate in class.” With the advice and support of her EOF advisor, Maya indicated, she progressed. Lamar talked about how his academics improved tremendously from the summer program to now, stating his academics are “...definitely better [but] not perfect...[I’m] still working on time management and building on skill[s].” Time management is another area that many students struggle with, especially first-generation college students, so EOF hosts workshops on time management and encourages students to work on refining their skills.

Two participants, Ralph and Daniel, were outliers in this study. They each stated that their academics remained roughly the same from the summer bridge program to the present. Daniel, a senior, revealed that although his academic scores did not change, his work ethic improved. He specified, “I wouldn’t be in college without [EOF].” Since Daniel came from a high school that prepared him for collegiate work, his transition to college was smoother than many of his EOF peers. However, the financial and academic support from EOF boosted his experience.

Six participants detailed that their grades were higher during the summer bridge program because of the structure and mandatory supplemental instruction and tutoring the bridge program offered. Atticus and Martin both discussed how their grades fluctuated over the years because of how heavily involved they were on campus. According to Cooper et al., 1994, participation in clubs and organizations is known to have a positive correlation with many areas of psychosocial development. Specifically, students in their junior years who are members of student organizations, score higher than less involved students on such factors as educational involvement, career planning, lifestyle planning, cultural participation, and academic autonomy (Foubert & Grainger, 2006). Atticus and Martin, for example, were juniors and presidents of their respective fraternities. Students who are heavily involved in extracurricular activities and manage their time well can succeed academically and socially. Through town hall meetings and workshops, EOF students have opportunities to learn about time management, how to study effectively, and the importance of campus involvement. Further, when EOF advisors meet with students monthly, they can recommend additional resources to help students in these areas.

Involvement in the EOF Program

Each participant was asked two questions regarding their involvement in the EOF program. Although each participant was at a different stage in their college careers, when asked if they were currently in good standing with the EOF program, they all responded “yes.” For this campus-based program, being in good standing means that an EOF student meets with an assigned EOF Student Development Specialist (EOF advisor) at least once a month and attend at least one educational workshop per semester. Frida, Samantha, and Atticus shared, “I see my advisor on the regular” (Frida), “I always meet with my advisor” (Samantha), and “when it comes down to that, it’s the bare minimum . . . I always update [my advisor] on how I’m involved” (Atticus). When students are in good standing with the program, they retain their EOF state grant and program-specific scholarship. Again, good standing means that EOF students must meet with their EOF advisors at least once a month and attend one educational workshop each semester. (Other campus programs may have different or additional requirements for their students.)

When asked about his standing with the program, Martin laughed. He admitted that he meets with his advisor but does not attend the workshops. Martin explained that the workshops always occur when he has class or work. This response ties into Martin’s reflections about the purpose of the EOF program. While he does not attend the workshops, he values the relationship with his EOF advisor and sees the program as a place that he can go for advice and additional support. Atticus and Martin’s responses revealed that student support, coupled with a strong connection with their respective EOF advisors, is significant. It also demonstrated the students’ further understanding of the purpose of EOF. For Martin, the student support aspect appeared more significant than the academic element.

Participants were also asked in which EOF sponsored activities/programs they have participated. A significant theme identified from responses to this question is the familial and community feel that the EOF program provides its students. This theme is linked to the codes: connection, transition, and help/support. The students shared what activities and programs they attended and if those events contributed, positively or negatively, to their experience at the institution. Many mentioned that they attended the annual EOF Family Gathering, a Thanksgiving-themed luncheon held each November. This free event is popular because the EOF staff provide a catered lunch from a local restaurant, t-shirts, music, and games.

Bella and Frida shared their feelings about the EOF Family Gathering: “I feel like it definitely forces us to come back together and talk because we don’t get to see one another often,” Bella said. Frida expressed similar sentiments: “it helped me connect more with other EOF students. We are like a community of its own . . . it shows you who else is EOF. You get to meet other students.” These responses echo the significance of the familial and supportive environment that EOF provides to its students, which correlates with the help/support, connection, transition, and positive codes. Another participant enthusiastically shared his interests in partaking in EOF sponsored events, saying: “I try to come out and support any programs sponsored by EOF. I was also involved with MAST during my first and second year” (Atticus).

Men Achieving Success Together (MAST) is a male mentoring program that was instituted by the researcher and another EOF staff member in fall 2017. MAST provides a safe space for male-identified EOF students to engage in conversations and workshops bi-weekly to encourage retention and connection to the campus. According to Lamar, “MAST has helped with [my] transition to college.” Atticus and Lamar had attended multiple MAST sessions and were

active contributors to many conversations. Their consistent participation in this voluntary initiative highlights the students' willingness to invest in themselves to enhance their academic and social success while staying engaged with their peers and the EOF staff. Since the inception of the male mentoring program, there has been a noticeable improvement in male retention within the EOF program.

Relationship with EOF Advisor

Unlike typical college academic advisors, EOF advisors offer a variety of services and advisement that include but are not limited to personal, academic, career, and financial advising. Another theme is the security and comfort of knowing an advisor was available if needed, which relates to the help/support, resources, and connection codes. The relationships between students and their EOF advisors were robust, unique, and cherished. Frida stated that everything she does is to make sure she is making her EOF advisor proud." She was appreciative of what EOF had did for her and strives to do well academically to make her EOF family proud. The personal advising that EOF advisors help students navigate through both good and adverse times. Martin articulated, "I know that my advisor is here for me and has [provided] some form of counseling if I didn't want to attend counseling services." For this population of students, it is imperative they feel comfortable opening-up to their EOF advisor. In many instances, the EOF staff are the students' family, so that connection is critical to ensuring that students have the familial support necessary to be successful. Educationally, Bella explained, her EOF advisors "push[ed] me to take certain classes," and Lamar stated that his EOF advisor gave him "the idea to get a white board to help [him] with time management." Advisement sessions support an environment where a student feels comfortable and supported to share information, ask questions, and have the

opportunity for self-reflection (Hughey, 2011). The interviews revealed that the relationships between students and their EOF advisors support student success, retention, and persistence.

Academic and Social Preparation

Providing support that promotes social interaction and sustains the preparation and success of underserved students is critical to improving academic achievement and raising expectations (Pathways to College Network, n.d.). To determine whether participants perceived that they were better prepared academically, socially, or both because of their connection with the EOF program, the question was raised during each interview. Four participants agreed that being in the EOF program better prepared them academically and socially. Five participants stated that EOF helped them academically solely. Without mentioning academic preparation, one participant stated that EOF provided social preparation, and two participants did not feel that the program better prepared them academically or socially. Daniel stated, “academic is more of a mentality thing, and social is you.” A student’s academic ability, he believed, is based upon their mentality toward doing well academically while being social is more about one’s personality. He mentioned that he did not make many friends through EOF sponsored events. The researcher noticed from previous encounters with Daniel that he was a solitary individual with interests that were contrary to most of his peers.

The four participants who perceived they were more prepared both academically and socially than non-EOF students expressed the following:

I see the EOF program as an opportunity to broaden your perspective. You come in with a certain mindset and come out with a different one. [EOF] gives you the ingredients and formula you need to be successful. . . . EOF helps you become more well-rounded (Atticus).

I was able to be here with peers and meet people. Everybody explains what [college] is going to be like. [I] was able to explore the campus early. So, I knew where everything was located (Ella).

Socially, you always have someone to sit with at lunch or to go to an event with. Academically, [there is] always someone around to make sure you are doing the right thing (Ralph).

Being in the EOF program [has] a lot of different benefits. Especially socially because I know a lot of people (Samantha).

Samantha went on to mention how the Pathways Linking Academic and Career Experiences (PLACE) course that all first-year EOF students are required to take in their spring semester was helpful to her.

PLACE is a two-credit interdisciplinary studies course designed to introduce first-year EOF students to career exploration. The course incorporates a variety of activities, assessments, lectures, workshops, and class discussions that help students examine the basic components of a career. PLACE encourages retention and persistence because its curriculum focuses on students effectively researching and choosing a major to prepare for a career that suits their personalities and interests. When first-year students can sufficiently explore majors and career opportunities, they are more likely to persist in their decision, which saves money and time and, ideally, gets them to graduation.

This information, combined with prior data, paints the image that academic self-efficacy may be most impacted by academic performance. It was good to hear that four students believed EOF prepared them academically and socially. One of the goals of the program is to ensure students thrive academically and socially. However, there is no guarantee that all students will

succeed in both areas. Students have different personalities, varying aspirations, majors, etc. that are determining factors for how a student may interact and perform in a collegiate setting.

Only one participant perceived she was solely more prepared socially than non-EOF students. Bella expressed that she “. . . got to make a group of friends through the summer [program].” It is important to note that Bella is a reserved individual who may have been drawn more to social parts of the program and sought out ways to get more involved in campus life and was not necessarily concerned with the academic component. Before the interview, the researcher witnessed Bella become more confident and become more involved on campus since her first year, so her perspective was not surprising.

Five participants perceived they were more prepared academically, only, than non-EOF students. Referring to his summer bridge program, Ricky exclaims he “was able to meet different professors who were 1000% different than regular high school teachers. I was able to find out where my resources were if I needed help, I went and got the help I needed because of the EOF program.” The participants’ sentiments surrounding their academic preparedness were significant to the study. Moreover, Lamar mentions he feels he has “an edge on non-EOF students because of [the] summer program.” Lamar’s response was significant for the study because it provided a direct answer to the second research question and aligned with the researcher’s presumption on students’ experiences and perceptions about EOF.

Themes

An overview of the major themes is provided in Figure 1. The following sections discusses them in more detail.

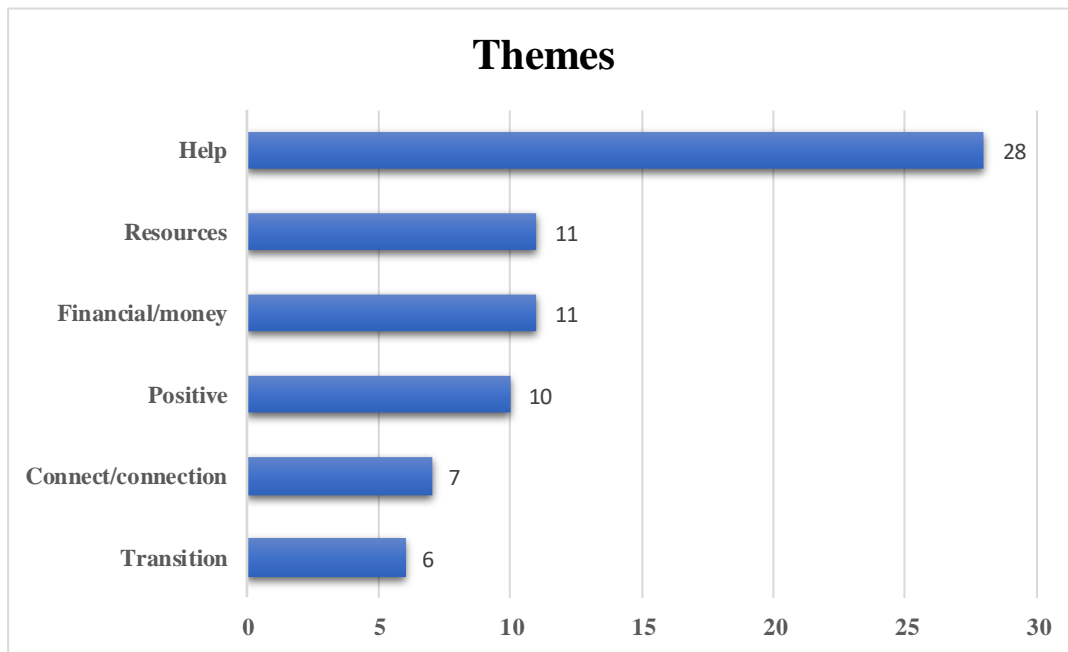


Figure 1. Themes

Help/Support (28)

The terms “help” or “support” was mentioned 28 times during the interviews. Most of the students enrolled in the EOF program are considered first-generation and/or come from underrepresented or underprepared backgrounds and need additional help and support to ensure they are making the right decisions, completing their academic requirements, and successfully earning their degrees. EOF helps students along the way and empowers students to excel academically and socially. Students who take advantage of the various support services are more inclined to have a richer, more productive college experience and do well personally and professionally (Slade, 2020). Support also plays a considerable role in semester-to- semester retention, which is another goal of the EOF program.

Resources (11)

The importance of available resources was raised 11 times in the data. The discussion of resources, whether direct from the EOF program or those that students were encouraged to explore outside of EOF, was significant to students’ academic success and persistence. The

monthly advisement meetings, according to the interview data, are also crucial to intrusive advisement, persistence, and student success.

Financial/Money (11)

Participants mentioned the phrase “financial” or “money” 11 times. Many mentioned the financial component of EOF when describing the purpose of the program. Although EOF is not a financial aid program, it does provide funding. The program’s financial support is imperative to students because, without it, many may not be able to afford college.

Positive (10)

The terms “positive” or “positively” were mentioned 10 times during the interviews, typically when referencing a participant’s experience at the institution and/or whether being involved in the EOF program positively or negatively influenced their college experience. Again, most of the students interviewed mentioned having a positive experience in college that contributed to their academic and/or social success.

Connect/connection (7)

Participants mentioned the phrase “connect” or “connection” seven times. Although it is important for college students to forge a connection with their institutions, doing so is especially vital for first-generation, underrepresented, and underprepared college students. Some study participants reference how significant and valuable the connections to resources, faculty/staff, and their peers can be and how it that impacts their academic and social experiences. This theme also correlates to the aspect of academic and social belonging and how important it is for college students, most specifically this population of students.

Transition (6)

The word “transition” was cited six times in the data, usually when participants were explaining how EOF helped them transition from high school to college. Navigating the terrain of college can be especially difficult for first-generation, underrepresented, and underprepared students. High school and college are set up differently, with distinct expressions of instruction, advisement, and student engagement. During the interviews, students disclosed their firsthand experiences on how they navigate the institution, as well as how they approach campus resources, such as tutoring, studying, and time management.

Connection to Research Questions

Examining how EOF students experience and perceive an EOF program at a small, 4-year, public institution in Northeastern New Jersey was at the core of this research study, which set out to make meaning of this unexplored gap in the scholarly literature. To accomplish this task, the researcher posed two research questions that served as a procedural map for the study and structurally searched for meaning through the lived experiences of the study participants.

RQ1: What impact do students believe their involvement in the EOF program has on their persistence?

This first research question cut to the core of the correlation between EOF students, their involvement in the program and how that involvement relates to academic and social persistence. The researcher left out his preconceived perceptions to encourage accuracy in the emerging representation of the phenomenon. By doing so, it helped the researcher obtain, analyze, and describe data to accurately represent the first-person participants’ point of view (Husserl, 1931).

Study participants demonstrate their understanding of the purpose of the EOF program by articulating their understanding and lived experiences. It is through these experiences that most

students grasp the essence of what EOF stands for and how the program functions to help college students. The participants describe varying aspects of EOF. Lionel's understanding of the purpose for EOF sums up most participants' thoughts and perceptions: "it give[s] an advantage to first-generation students in low-income families." Overall, the participants' descriptions were positive and showcased the all-encompassing reason and necessity for the EOF program.

The students described their individual experiences during the EOF summer bridge program. These experiences provided insight into how students perceived their experiences and how it impacted their persistence. Most students expressed that the program was challenging but beneficial to their academic and social success. Many of the participants revealed how the summer bridge program helped shape them to be the students they are today and how they value the experience. Students described being motivated to maintain the same rigor of the summer program during the fall and spring semesters to excel academically.

Students discussed their involvement in the EOF program and how that participation impacted their experiences. Having a dedicated outlet to have fun and mingle with your peers or the opportunity to attend and learn valuable information at an educational workshop was perceived to be beneficial. According to the students' stories, participating in EOF-sponsored events such as the Men Achieving Success Together bi-weekly meetings, holiday-themed socials, and the Pathways Linking Academic and Career Experiences course were all crucial in guiding students to do well and persist. Also, most participants shared how resourceful they found their EOF advisor. Further, actively partaking in the monthly advisement sessions appeared to contribute to student persistence.

The students' shared their depictions on the relationship with their EOF advisor. It was essential to hear the students' perceptions of the connection between student and EOF advisor

and how that bond contributed to the students' accomplishments thus far. From Bella mentioning how her advisor "pushes her to take certain classes" to Martin explaining how much he appreciates his advisor for stepping in with personal counseling when he needed it most, these stories are critical to ensure that opportunity programs like EOF continue to be financially supported and available for future first-generation, underprepared, underrepresented college students.

RQ2: Do EOF students believe they will perform better academically than students with the same academic background who are regularly admitted to the college?

The second question looked deeper into EOF students' perceptions surrounding their academic backgrounds and whether they believed they performed better than their peers who were regularly admitted to the institution and not in EOF. As represented previously, several participants described the positive effect that EOF had on their academic success and social well-being. Students reflected on influential memories and discussions with their EOF advisor, which indicated how those interactions impacted their college experiences.

The participants in this study described their current academic performance compared to when they entered college through the summer bridge program. Most mentioned how their academics began strong because of the rigor and extensive support provided during the summer program, but they added that their academics may have declined afterwards due to a variety of reasons and challenges. However, many stated their academics have since improved or noted they were seeking the necessary resources to get back on track. For one student, Frida, doing well academically "served as a source of motivation."

Participants described their academic and social preparation as it relates to their peers who are not enrolled in EOF. Some expressed that being in EOF contributed positively to both

their academic and social experiences. Other participants stated that enrollment in EOF contributed solely either to their academic or social preparation. Two participants did not identify a correlation between being in EOF and being more prepared academically and/or socially than non-EOF students.

Evaluation of the Findings

Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997) was a relevant factor for the participants in this study. The students were self-motivated (Deci et al., 2013; Maslow, 1943; Oliver et al., 2010; Ramlall, 2012) and completed the requirements set forth by the EOF program to be successful academically and socially. EOF aids in students' success and persistence to graduation. From the interviews, it appeared that students found their experience in the EOF program to be fruitful and rewarding.

A common theme that emerged is that 10 of the 12 participants stated having a positive overall experience at the institution. The two participants, Martin, and Daniel, who expressed their college experience overall was not so positive, made sure to clarify that it was not correlated with their involvement in the EOF program, but it had more to do with personal, external factors. However, all 12 participants mentioned that being in the EOF program contributed positively to their college experience in some way. Social affiliation can be a psychological control where targeted intervention could produce immense advantages (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

A surprising finding in the data was that two participants believed EOF had no impact on their academic and social preparation when it relates to feeling more prepared than non-EOF students with similar academic backgrounds. However, the researcher was aware that both

participants came from high school environments that prepared them for college, which is likely why the participants responded to the question how they did.

Going into the interviews, the researcher presumed students would not open-up as much, fearing that if they said anything negative about the program or their experience would get them in trouble. Surprisingly, that was not the case for this study. All participants were honest and forthright with their opinions and experiences. Although some participants appeared shy or nervous when beginning the interview, as the researcher asked subsequent questions and they began recounting certain aspects of their college experience, they became more relaxed and offered further explanations to specific questions.

The results, based on the services and programs EOF offers and the program's intrusive advising approach, were consistent with studies that examined intrusive advising models and their effectiveness. The critical roles of intrusive support services include educational enrichment, student leadership development, holistic counseling services, developmental advisement, tutoring, and supplemental instruction to improve students' college success. These elements form the core of each EOF campus program's outreach and service delivery model (EOF Progress Report, 2015). The use of a phenomenological approach aimed to describe, understand, and interpret the meanings and experiences of the EOF participants in this study. The researcher focused on the research questions to reveal how students experienced a situation. In this case, that experience revolved around the Educational Opportunity Fund program. From the students' perspective, the EOF program increased their academic preparedness and helped ease their transition to college by facilitating their academic and social integration while exposing them to various support agents and campus resources (Palmer & Davis, 2012). Further, although the range of participants' academic performance was broad, none of the participants' cumulative

grade point averages were below 2.25 at the time of the interviews (Appendix E). The institutions' minimum GPA to retain federal financial aid and avoid academic probation is a 2.0. All study participants felt that their advising experience was adequate and beneficial, including those who were already performing exceptionally well academically. All expressed their appreciation for having an EOF advisor who was readily available. The role of advisors in providing structure and organization to help keep students on track to graduation was perceived to be valuable to students' overall college experience. Consequently, many participants described how they had an advantage over regularly admitted first-year students who did not come through the summer bridge program.

Participants' Recommendations to Enhance the EOF Program

After each interview, the researcher invited each participant to share suggestions for how the EOF program can improve its services and support for future EOF students. The researcher thought that sharing some of the students' ideas would be beneficial to readers and anyone interested in implementing and/or enhancing their own college opportunity programs. Additionally, current and aspiring EOF administrators may benefit from this study because it provides a unique perspective and glimpse into the experiences and perceptions of EOF students at various stages in their college careers. Therefore, it allows administrators to see firsthand what areas in EOF are working effectively and efficiently and where there is need for improvement. Similarly, this research is vital for New Jersey legislators because they are on the frontlines of advocating for additional funding for EOF. By gaining more attention, EOF will hopefully continuously receive budget increases that will serve and support thousands of students for years to come.

One participant shared that EOF administrators should research more creative ways to communicate and reach today's college students by incorporating social media. It was also suggested by two study participants that EOF should be targeted and marketed to more high schools throughout the state of New Jersey. Historically, EOF targets high schools in districts known to have low socioeconomic status, which aligns with the population of students that the program serves. However, there are first-generation, underserved, and underrepresented students in often overlooked wealthy districts. By increasing the awareness of EOF at all high schools in New Jersey, it gives that highly motivated student who may lack the academic preparation or have financial need, a fighting chance to attend college and graduate. From a broad perspective, getting the word out about EOF has most definitely been a priority and will continue to be if the need exists. Before this study, the researcher, and other colleagues on the executive board of the Educational Opportunity Fund Professional Association of New Jersey (EOF PANJ) and EOF Board of Directors have discussed how to improve recruitment efforts. A committee was formed to explore ways to best educate high school guidance counselors and students on the purpose of EOF and implement innovative ways to recruit students. The researcher intends to share the students' suggestions with his colleagues on the executive board and continue the discussion of how to increase and improve awareness about EOF.

Other participants mentioned that on the state-level, there is a need for additional funding for EOF. Though there is currently sufficient bi-partisan support for the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF), more funding is always essential to increase and enhance campus programs and services, which will further improve the students' experiences. Campus programs, the EOF PANJ, and the EOF Board of Directors all play an integral part in ensuring legislators understand how necessary EOF is to the thousands of students across the state of New Jersey.

However, legislators must hear it directly from the students. Every year, EOFPANJ encourages various advocacy efforts. For example, students, staff, and administrators are urged to host letter-writing campaigns to share their personal experiences with their legislators. It is one thing to hear how successful and valuable a program is from professionals, but to hear it from the individuals the program directly affects is powerful. Further, EOFPANJ hosts an annual Student Day at the New Jersey state capitol each spring semester (typically in March). Student Day at the Capitol is an occasion for state legislators, EOF students, staff, and administrators to meet, and it provides a platform for EOF students and alumni to share stories about how impactful EOF has been for them. The researcher will continue to encourage students to participate in advocacy initiatives so that future students at New Jersey colleges and universities can benefit from the EOF program. The researcher also feels that additional advocacy events will bring added attention to EOF and highlight how valuable its services and programs are for students.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an analysis of the findings from participant interviews, connected the analysis to the two research questions, and demonstrated the consistency of the phenomenological analysis. Twelve participants were recruited and interviewed for this phenomenological methodology study. Interview questions were structured to reveal students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program. Chapter 5 will provide a summary, a discussion of the study's limitations, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to reveal students' perspectives on the effectiveness of opportunity programs based on their individual experiences. The study referred most specifically to the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) campus program at a small, public 4-year institution in Northeastern New Jersey. Through the lens of Self-determination Theory (SDT), Tinto's (1987) student integration model, Cabrera et al.'s (1992) theory of student persistence, and the Bean (1980) student attrition model, the participants' lived experiences demonstrated the positive effects of college opportunity programs for first-generation, underrepresented, and underprepared students. The 12 participants revealed their understanding and perception of the effectiveness of the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program. This chapter includes a discussion of the findings related to the literature on college students enrolled in opportunity programs, academic self-efficacy, social and academic belonging, and motivation to learn. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 5 also contains a discussion of future research possibilities to help answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What impact do students believe their involvement in the EOF program has on their persistence?

RQ2: Do EOF students believe they will perform better academically than students with the same academic background who are regularly admitted to the college?

Major Findings

All participants in this study, in different ways, expressed that the EOF program had some form of positive influence on their ability to excel academically and/or socially. According

to Tinto (2003), effective retention programs do not take learning to chance. EOF programs, which are also retention programs, are proactive in their search for student learning and success. Similarly, significant, EOF professionals and administrators concern themselves with the nature of the learning settings in which students find themselves and the faculty's abilities to effectively educate this population of students.

From this study, it is safe to affirm that several students enrolled in the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program had a positive and satisfactory experience. However, the researcher learned that students' perceptions and experiences in colleges can vary based upon their high school experience and preparation. This finding is compatible to previous research showing that students' characteristics before entering college could affect their adjustment to college and their persistence based on whether they have a positive connection to the institution (Cabrera et al., 1992).

As first-generation students from underrepresented backgrounds, all participants in this study were successful in completing the rigorous 6-week pre-freshman summer bridge program, which aided in enhancing self-efficacy, which has a positive connection to academic achievement. Self-efficacy theory predicts that if students successfully participate in active engagement activities, students will ultimately gain skill development and self-efficacy towards that specific task (Schunk, 1981). This study revealed that most study participants were actively engaged with EOF and thus had a positive experience. Study participants were committed to the program, institution, and in most cases performing well both academically and socially. These results are similar to previous studies (Fenollar et al., 2007; Hseigh et al., 2007; Lent et al., 1987) that examined student self-efficacy and the influence it has on student retention. Students with

high self-efficacy were more likely to be retained than students who have low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994; Reader, 2018).

Further, all participants appear grateful for the diligent efforts and support of the EOF staff for their assistance with students' transition from high school to college. The study's results suggest that participants had meaningful academic and social experiences, which leads to seamless integration into the institution, higher retention rates, and, ideally, persistence to graduation (Watson, 2015). This finding is consistent with previous research on student persistence (Bean, 1980). Additionally, at the time of this project, all participants were performing above minimum academic standards, which can be attributed to their inner motivation as well as the support from the EOF program.

This study also touched upon a sense of belonging and connection. Having a sense of belonging was a vital component to increasing self-efficacy. Walton and Cohen defined a sense of belonging (2011) as "a sense of having positive relationships with others, which is a fundamental human need" (Walton & Cohen, 2011, p. 1447). Social isolation, feeling lonely, and being from a low socioeconomic background are not only detrimental to a student's well-being but also disturb their intellectual achievement, immune functioning, and physical health (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Therefore, it is critical for the EOF student population to have a connection to the program, the institution, and each other to succeed in their academic and social endeavors. According to the students' perceptions, the family environment that EOF inspires strongly contributes to students feeling welcomed and connected to the institution.

Noticeably, students who are more engaged and heavily involved with the EOF program were expected to have a better college experience overall. In the beginning, some students may have been resistant to the intrusiveness and structure of the EOF program, which a few

participants pointed out in this study. However, students were sure to explain that the structure and rigor they may have detested previously was necessary, beneficial, and effective to get them to a point where they consider themselves more prepared than students who are not in EOF. This finding was important as it relates to students feeling motivated to grow, change, learn, and persist to graduation. The students persevered and overcame (or were actively involved in overcoming) the struggles associated with attending college to achieve their goals. Studies have identified motivation as a significant contributor to student success. It also plays a role in determining whether a student will have a sense of competence, connection, and autonomy, which are associated with self-determination theory (SDT). When these universal needs are met, students can function and grow optimally in an environment that nurtures them (Allen, 1999; Deci & Ryan, 2008).

A core aspect of the EOF program is its application of an intrusive advising model. This action-oriented approach helps students navigate the college terrain by fostering a supportive collegiate environment that inspires personal, academic, and career achievement. Intrusive advising involves intentional contact with students with the intent to develop a caring and beneficial advisor-advisee relationship that encourages increased academic motivation and persistence (Varney, 2007). The results from this study suggest that from the students' perspective, EOF was effectively assisting students in achieving their academic, career, and personal goals. Additionally, study participants expressed how the mandatory monthly advisement sessions and rigorous and personalized approaches that EOF advisors used were beneficial in helping students feel more prepared than non-EOF students with similar academic backgrounds. These results coincide with Astin's (1997) study, which found high satisfaction among students enrolled in programs that use an intrusive advising model. The amount of time a

student spends in advising has an impact on increasing student retention, especially for underrepresented and first-generation students (Reyes, 1997). This study's findings were congruent with past research regarding the effects of intrusive advising.

Limitations of the Study

Some limitations may have impacted the results of this study. First, the sample population used was limited to one post-secondary institution in Northeastern New Jersey. Even though the demographics of the institution may be comparable to that of similar studies, results may have varied if the researcher had broadened the research to other EOF programs in New Jersey. Because of this, results may not be generalizable to other post-secondary institutions. Nevertheless, this project should serve as a useful starting point for researchers interested in students' perception of the effectiveness of EOF.

Second, the sample size may have impacted the data. As stated previously, only 12 students were interviewed out of the 291 EOF students enrolled at the institution at the time of this project. Again, of 291 potential participants, only 186 were eligible to participate because they did not have a direct relationship with the researcher. To avoid the potential for bias, the researcher decided not to interview the 105 students on his caseload. This decision helped to minimize the likelihood that participants would feel obligated to reflect positive perceptions and experiences because of their relationship with the researcher, who is also their EOF advisor. Further, not interviewing students from the researcher's caseload preserved his revered relationship with them and circumvented any likely awkwardness.

Third, all participants in this study self-identified as a student from a racially underrepresented group. Only one White student expressed interest in participating in the study; however, that student did not show up on the scheduled interview date. Although more than half

of the student population enrolled in the EOF program at the institution of this study identify as non-White, it would have been valuable to have the perspective of the programs' White students as well as those from other ethnic groups included in this study. Having the student perspective from an array of ethnic groups would have provided additional insight from a more diverse group of college students.

Implications for Practice

Results from this study potentially have implications for EOF personnel and college administrators who may be positioned to improve the services, initiatives, and appropriate interventions that help shape the experiences of underrepresented, underprepared, and first-generation college students, such as EOF students. Further, results may inform educational professionals that oversee curriculum development for student affairs and advising courses that causally relate to working with special college student populations. Though these results cannot be generalized because of the limited and small sample size, the findings may provide valuable insight into working with non-EOF students that may have similar demographic characteristics such as students that come from underrepresented backgrounds and/or first-generation college students.

EOF Personnel

EOF advisors and administrators can use the data gathered from this study to understand the firsthand impact and experiences of EOF students. Since the data yielded a strong connection between involvement in EOF and self-efficacy, these results are important to consider. Further, from a program and services standpoint, this data can better assist with the planning and/or enhancement of summer bridge programs and advisement interventions that can improve the college students' experiences. The use of intentional interventions directly affects the retention

and persistence of EOF students by helping them remain engaged with the program. This new commitment may, in turn, lead to a clearer understanding of the program's effectiveness for EOF students while increasing students' confidence and motivation levels as it relates to the navigation and adjustment to college. Developing a powerful sense of meaning and purpose in college is particularly imperative for EOF students since several of them are the first in their families to attend (Winograd & Shick Tryon, 2009).

College Administrators

Findings from this study may help inform the practices of higher education administrators, particularly at institutions with a commitment to either maintaining or increasing diversity at their institutions (Pulliam, 2014). As mentioned previously, funding is a critical part of ensuring EOF is available to support thousands of underrepresented, first-generation college students continuously. Senior administrators may want to allocate additional funding for EOF campus and other programs that work with special student populations such as the federal TRIO program, Upward Bound, which also focuses on helping low-income, first-generation college students to succeed. Further, higher education administrators in enrollment management, student success and academic advising could also benefit from this study's findings. Academic advisors and student success professionals can implement practices used in EOF to improve the services provided to non-EOF students. Butler (1999) found that intrusive advising was effective when students were encouraged by their advisors to seek tutoring and faculty for help. Academic advisors may want to integrate similar aspects of intrusive advising, which could increase the retention and persistence rates among regularly admitted students as it does for EOF students. Students who have a sense of belonging and a strong connection to their institution will make clear and informed decisions surrounding their academic and social endeavors, which can lead to

an increased level of student engagement while helping students develop a sense of meaning and purpose for remaining in college and persisting to graduation (Astin, 1993; Burton, 2006; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Gordon, 1995; Kuh, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1994; Tinto, 1993). This study's data and results provide post-secondary administrators with a better understanding of the role that EOF plays in student persistence to graduation. Consequently, the data can serve as a steppingstone for collaborative efforts between enrollment management, student success, academic advising, and EOF.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to delve into how students perceive EOF and provided the platform for participants to share their specific college experiences. The goal was to gain a greater understanding of the perceptions of EOF students and the effects that the college opportunity program had on its students. Many themes emerged, most important, the notion that students who take advantage of an opportunity programs' services can be successful academically and socially and persist to graduation. Most of the current research offers accounts of professionals in education. Hence, there has been a need for research that further examines the effects of college opportunity programs from both the student and professionals' perspectives.

It would be beneficial if further research further tested the theory that the researcher developed for this project. An in-depth exploration of the differences between first-generation and second-generation EOF students' experiences and perceptions about EOF would be helpful. Further research might compare differences between first- and second-generation students and their involvement and/or engagement with the EOF program. New studies could also explore how best to engage and inspire campus involvement among first- and second-generation students, especially generation Z students (young people born between 1996 and 2014).

Further research would also provide post-secondary institutions with a better understanding of how to retain students by providing opportunities to participate in campus clubs and organizations (Maslow, 1943; Wilder, 2016). As Walton and Cohen (2011) pointed out, being socially isolated or feeling lonely, coupled with being from a low socioeconomic background, can be damaging to a student's well-being and disrupt their intellectual achievement. College opportunity programs need to offer, and encourage students to participate in social activities. Community participation in college sets the stage for a lifetime of leaning in, reaching out, and building connections that bridge barriers.

Future research, furthermore, could capture qualitative data from EOF students who may have mixed or negative perceptions or experiences of EOF and be more likely to share their stories with a research study outside their institution. Similarly, further research might explore the experiences of EOF students who are not performing well academically and are not connected or fully engaged with the EOF program. Such research could reveal the gaps and examine ways to enhance involvement and improve the program's effectiveness for students that it may not be reaching. Although the majority of student participants in this project shared positive experiences, the researcher is well aware that there are EOF students who do not have the same experience, feel disconnected to the program and/or the institution, and could benefit from additional outreach and support. Lastly, if higher education professionals wanted to evaluate the effectiveness of other college opportunity programs, they could replicate this study using a larger sample size or different college opportunity programs since there are differences among regions.¹

¹ These various programs include the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), Higher Education Opportunity Program (H.E.O.P.), and Search for Education, Elevation & Knowledge (SEEK) opportunity programs throughout the state of New York (<https://www.suny.edu/attend/academics/eop/>), Act 101 programs in Pennsylvania (<http://www.pheaa.org/partner-access/schools/act-101.shtml>), Educational Opportunity Programs throughout the

As with most of the qualitative research conducted in educational settings, it could be challenging for other researchers to replicate this study since the involved participants and staff may not be the same. The ability to transfer results from a study is always a concern in qualitative research; however, in this study, the researcher does not believe that transferability presents limitations since college opportunity programs have commonalities in what they do structurally to promote persistence. This study highlighted EOF students' positive perceptions and experiences of the EOF program and the factors of the program that contributed to their success.

Conclusion

This study was significant because first-generation, low-income students are a part of the fastest-growing population of students enrolling in colleges and universities (Jost, 2018). Also, the intention of this project was to understand the deeper layers of human experience (Neubauer et al., 2019). This study explored participants' narratives to comprehend their unique experiences in the EOF program and reveal how students perceived the program's effectiveness while sharing their lived experiences in college. Most specifically, the interpretive approach of hermeneutic phenomenology gave voice to the everyday experience of educational practice, especially emotional, embodied, and empathic moments that may be easily overlooked with other research methods (Friesen et al., 2012).

The Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program is equipped to meet the needs of this student population, both academically and socially. Study participants shared perceptions and experiences that reaffirmed the benefits of college opportunity programs on student retention,

California State University school system (<https://secure.csumentor.edu/planning/eop/>), and the federally-funded TRIO programs throughout the United States (<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>).

persistence, and self-efficacy. The students also believed they were better prepared than regularly admitted students with the same academic background. The presented data are relevant to the existing qualitative research on the effectiveness of opportunity programs in furthering the success of first-generation, underprepared, and underrepresented college students.

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APPENDIX A

EMAIL REQUESTING PARTICIPATION IN INTERVIEW

February 6, 2020

Dear EOF Scholar:

As you may know, I am currently finishing up my doctorate in Educational Leadership with a concentration in Higher Education at Saint Peter's University. My research focuses on students' perception on the effectiveness of opportunity programs, most specifically the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program.

I am looking for at least 12 EOF students to interview individually, in-person in the EOF conference room during the weeks of February 17th and February 24th. The interview should take no longer than one hour of your time. Selected participants will receive \$5.00 in compensation.

If you are interested in participating, please feel free to respond to this email and I will follow up with you with a brief demographic survey. Also, should you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me via email (aturner2@ramapo.edu) or telephone (201-684-7546).

Thank you so much for your time.

Sincerely,

Andre Turner

APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Brief Demographic Questionnaire

This questionnaire will help the researcher choose 12 participants to interview for the study. Please answer the following questions truthfully and return to the researcher by [date].

Name: _____

Class Status: (please check one)

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior

Gender: (please check one)

- Male
- Female

Ethnicity: (please check one)

- American Indian
- Asian
- Black or African-American
- Hispanic or Latino
- White
- Two or more races please specify: _____
- Other please specify: _____

Grade point average (GPA):

Fall 2019 GPA: _____

Current cumulative GPA: _____

*Please keep in mind, your GPAs will be confirmed by the researcher.

Campus Involvement: _____

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM



Department of Caulfied School of Education

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

PROJECT TITLE: Students' Perception of the Effectiveness of College Opportunity Programs

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/RESEARCHER: Mr. Andre Turner

MENTOR: Dr. Brandi Stocker

INTRODUCTION: You are invited to participate in this research project. Please take as much time as you need to make your decision. Feel free to discuss your decision with whomever you wish, but remember that the decision to participate, or not to participate, is yours. If you decide to participate, please sign and date where indicated at the end of this form.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this research is to expand upon the current research on college opportunity programs. This study will specifically examine the effectiveness of the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program at a small, public four-year institution in Northeastern New Jersey by analyzing the positive affects the program has on its student population. This study will also look at the program's intrusive advising model, student outcomes such as semester-to-semester persistence, retention rates and student self-efficacy.

PROJECT PLAN: You are being asked to take part in this research because you are a college student, enrolled in the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) Program. The target population for this study is EOF students attending a small, public four-year institution in Northeastern New Jersey. Approximately 12 subjects will take part in this research.

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher, Mr. Andre Turner. During the interview, you will be asked a variety of questions about your experience and perceptions of the Ramapo College of New Jersey's Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) Program. The interview is expected to be conducted some time during the spring 2020 semester (January 2020 – May 2020). Participants will have the opportunity to choose a date and time that works best for their schedule. The research will be looking at participants' personal experiences and perceptions, of the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) Program. Participants in this study will be asked to describe how opportunity programs; most specifically the EOF program, has contributed to their academic and social activities. The interview session will take place sometime during the spring 2020 semester in a designated room on-campus at Ramapo College and take no more than one hour. Each interview will be recorded electronically using an audio recording tool (tape recorder/voice-to-text application), so the researcher can replay the interviews and transcribe interviewees' responses later.

RISKS: There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. However, it is possible, but highly unlikely, that this research could cause embarrassment for participants within the school and/or their social group since private information about participants may be accidentally disclosed to others through casual conversation with EOF colleagues. The researcher will try to reduce this risk by ensuring private, confidential information is not shared with anyone.

BENEFITS: If you agree to take part in this research, you will receive \$5.00 cash as reimbursement for your time. Beyond that, there may not be any additional direct benefits for you. However, information gathered in this research may benefit opportunity program students, staff, and administrators within New Jersey and beyond who may

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS

Researcher Preface: The purpose of this study is to hear and learn about your perception on the effectiveness of the EOF program and allow you the opportunity to explain how your experience has been in college so far. Please feel free to be honest. Nothing you say here whether positive or negative, will be used against you. Anything you share with me will be kept confidential. I will not disclose any information from this interview to your EOF advisor or other EOF staff members. Also, your name and the name of the institution will not be mentioned in this study.

Interview Questions:

1. What city and county are you from?
2. Do you identify as a first-generation college student (meaning you are the first one in your family to attend a 4-year college/university)?
3. Do you identify as a minority student?
 - a. If so, what is your ethnicity?
 - b. If not, what is your ethnicity?
4. When applying to Ramapo College, did you know about the EOF program?
 - a. If so, what did you know or hear about the program?
 - b. If you did not know about the program prior to coming to college, why do you think you were not told about the program?
5. What is your current understanding of the purpose for the EOF program?
6. How long have you been a part of the Ramapo College EOF program?
7. Are you currently in good standing with the EOF program (meaning you consistently meet with your EOF advisor at least once a month and have attended or plan to attend at least one workshop per semester)?
8. How has your overall experience at Ramapo College been since enrolling?
 - a. Would you say that being in the EOF program has contributed positively or negatively to that experience?
 - b. What EOF sponsored activities/programs have you participated in?
 - i. Do you feel these activities/programs helped connect you to the campus?
9. How would you describe your pre-freshman 6-week EOF summer program experience?
 - a. Do you feel the summer program adequately prepared you for your first fall semester?
 - b. If so, please describe how.
10. How would you describe your academic performance to date?
11. Do you feel the EOF program has contributed positively to your academic performance?
 - a. If so, in what ways?
 - b. If not, why do you feel the program has not positively impacted your academics?
12. Do you feel that you are better prepared academically and/or socially than a non-EOF student at Ramapo?
 - a. If so, why?
 - b. If not, why?
13. Do you have any suggestions for how the Ramapo College EOF program can improve or enhance the program to better serve future EOF scholars?
14. Thank you for all that valuable information, is there anything else you'd like to add before we conclude this interview?

APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT'S GRADE POINT AVERAGES

