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**Alice Dupuy Walker and Life in the Colony:
An Institutional Biography**

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Abstract

The life of Alice Dupuy Walker provides a microcosm of the history of American institutions for persons with disabilities. This biography details her childhood, her subsequent commitment to the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded in 1925, her life in the institution (later known as the Lynchburg Training School and Hospital and the Central Virginia Training Center) for 60 years, and her discharge into the community in 1985. It offers a personal view of the nature of residential facilities in 20th century America.

Key Words: Commitment, institution, Alice Walker, epilepsy, Training School, Colony, seizures

Alice Walker and Life in the Colony: An Institutional Biography

Alice Dupuy Walker was born on August 5, 1906. She lived a quiet, early life in North Carolina and subsequently in Western Virginia with many siblings. However, at the age of nineteen, Alice left her family in Millboro, Virginia when she was committed to the Lynchburg Colony for the Epileptic and Feeble-minded, a new facility that was only in its second decade of existence. Alice would remain at that institution for six decades. Her life became a case study of the practice of institutionalization in this country.

Childhood

Alice's father was William Walker III, born in 1865. Ordained a Presbyterian minister, his assignments included churches throughout Virginia and North Carolina, including First Presbyterian of Lynchburg. Rev. Walker married Lottie Arey in 1904. Lottie was a teacher who had completed her training at the North Carolina Normal School (Polloway, 2024). Rev. Walker assumed the position of superintendent of the Barium Springs Home for Children where the family had housing.

William and Lottie had ten children. Alice Dupuy Walker was the third child, born in 1906 with her middle name reflecting the history of the family from Count and Countess Dupuy, her great-great-great-great grandparents (James, 1991).

Alice was in line with childhood milestones in terms of walking and talking by 15 months. She had good expressive and receptive language skills. Alice was able to take care of herself with all basic self-help skills intact (e.g., bathing, feeding, dressing) (Official Interrogatories, 1925).

Socially, Alice had good relationships with family members and friends within the communities in which she lived. She was described as having a pleasant personality and being cooperative and friendly (James, 1991).

Alice completed sixth grade (Official Interrogatories, 1925). One can ponder why her formal education did not continue. While it is possible that this may have been related to her ongoing health problems, it is also possible that it reflected the times in which many students, and more often girls, were not encouraged to persevere through secondary school.

What is clear is that Alice was literate. She was an avid reader and her interest in reading consequently made her knowledgeable about many topics. Related skills in writing were also apparent, and she maintained correspondence with family and friends.

Not present in any analysis of Alice's development is any indication of intellectual disability or, as was termed at that time, feeble-mindedness. Alice was described as having "fair intelligence," a vague term that aligns with the fact that subsequent IQ tests indicated scores inconsistent with the diagnosis of mental deficiency (Official Interrogatories, 1925; Polloway et al., 2021).

What became most significant was that at age three, Alice had a health event that resulted in her having epilepsy with grand mal seizures (now referred to as tonic-clonic) (Dougherty, 2010).

Because of a lack of motor control and a possible rapid fall, injury can occur. No doubt the recurrence of seizures would have been of great concern to the family.

Also of significance during her teenage years was the loss of her mother in 1920. Alice, then 14, would have been challenged to deal with the reality of the perpetual absence of her mother and the resulting changes within the family structure.

In 1925, William received a new church assignment at the Millboro (Virginia) Presbyterian Church. Alice, age 19, now living in Bath County, was a Virginia resident (James, 1991).

Commitment

Alice's difficulties became more challenging for the family. Her father had a modest income and could not afford to pay for her care (James, 1991). Her time in Millboro would last only six months.

Dr. John Walker, William's brother, began the process of arranging with the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded to provide residential care for Alice. Dr. Walker had connections because he served as a consulting physician (James, 1991). The plan for movement to the Colony included the assumption that she would receive lifetime care.

The formal commitment papers offer guidance into the rationale for placement (Official Interrogatories, 1925; Proceedings, 1925). These forms were designed for use for white persons being committed to the Virginia Colony; segregation was the reality for the Commonwealth of Virginia.

A core consideration was the verification of epilepsy. The following questions "must be answered in the case of every epileptic." The responses were as follows (Official Interrogatories, 1925):

1. At what age did epilepsy first appear? *3 years of age*
2. Did the patient have fits of any kind that time? *Yes, severe convulsions.*
3. If no fits or spasms, how was it first manifested? *Seizures*
4. How long since the first attack? *16 years*
5. Seizures occur in the day or night, or both times. *Mostly day*
6. What mental change has taken place? *Mental stagnation*
7. Are the seizures grand or petit mal? *Grand mal and petit mal*
8. Has the patient been injured during seizures? *No*
9. Has the patient ever attempted to harm himself or others? *No*
10. Is the patient incapable of protecting himself against ordinary dangers without an attendant? ~~No.~~ *Yes*

Of special note was the question of feeble-mindedness. The first consideration would be intellectual functioning. Intelligence tests were new at the time and had only been introduced into the United States less than 20 years before (Polloway et al., 2021). The subsequent data on IQ scores consistently showed that Alice did not meet the standard for "mental deficiency," given that those scores were above seventy. She was said to have "fair intelligence," which

might correspond to the historical term of “borderline intelligence.” (Bell, 1926; Official Interrogatories, 1925)

Alice was much later administered the *Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale* (WAIS). Her full-scale score was 77. This would indicate the individual was “without mental deficiency” (Lynchburg Training School, 1977). Based on her abilities, and her level of literacy, it would seem quite likely that her test scores significantly underestimated her level of functioning.

The second consideration was adaptive behavior, now considered to include conceptual, practical, and social adaptive behavior. Evidence of skills in terms of school performance and literacy would argue against feeble-mindedness in conceptual adaptive behavior. In the practical domain, basic self-help skills were affirmed. Some concerns about social adaptive behavior could be implied from the information summarized, but did not reach a level of prominence as presented within these initial evaluations. In 1983, her precise scores on the *Adaptive Behavior Scale* were not reported, but the indication was that Alice might have a mild impairment (Central Virginia Training Center (CVTC), 1985a).

The document concluded as follows: “George T Harris, physician in Amherst County hereby certify that I’ve examined Alice Walker and find that she is feeble-minded (crossed out, with xxxxxxxs to show *not* feeble-minded) or epileptic (confirmed) and is a suitable subject for an institution for the care and treatment of epileptics. The patient’s bodily health is good, and she has no contagious disorder”(Official Interrogatories, 1925).

Alice was committed solely because she was ‘an epileptic.’ The implicit assumption was that she would receive treatment for that. Alice was about to begin her life as a resident of the Colony.

Years later institutional reports clouded the reality of why Alice was committed. A 1977 report indicated that her admission was due to mental deficiency, which of course was not the case. Further, the report noted that “the exact details on why Alice was admitted to this institution is not known” but it should have been clearly known (Lynchburg Colony, 1977). The commitment process was well-defined; it was all in the records.



Alice was 19 years old when she was committed to the Virginia Colony for Epileptic and Feeble-minded in 1925. The suitcases transported her personal possessions to this new home. For the next 60 years, that institution was her home and, to make it her home, she collected many artifacts as she went through life. The suitcases now became collections of six decades of her life in the Colony,

which frame many of the observations about her life within this paper. The content of the suitcases complements the information found, as cited within the paper including extensive source material from the archives of the Jones Memorial Library and the Amherst Historical Museum, and the University of Lynchburg archives of J. David Smith.

The Colony

The Virginia Colony was established in Amherst County in 1910. It was designed initially to serve 100 patients and staffed by 33 employees. By 1914, the name was changed to the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded. With this change, men and women deemed to be feeble-minded would also be housed within the facility (Sidener, 2019). With Virginia practicing segregation, the Colony would only serve individuals who were white for over 50 years. By 1926, there were 845 people in residence. Among them would be Alice Walker.

In the 1920s, Superintendent Dr. Albert Priddy spearheaded the eugenics movement in Virginia, seeking to halt the reproduction of future generations of children under the hypothesis that it would eliminate the birth of undesirables and enhance genetic purity in the nation. Priddy himself was reported to have performed about 80 sterilizations in the first decade (Virginia State Colony, n.d.).

Concerned about the legality of these procedures, Priddy and others established a test case in the courts for sterilization. A resident, Carrie Buck, was identified as the perfect test case. Her mother, Emma, had previously been institutionalized and Carrie joined her mother after being determined to be feeble-minded. Her daughter was also purported, without proof, to have an intellectual disability (Smith & Nelson, 1989).

On April 13, 1925, the Amherst Circuit Court upheld the order that Carrie could be sterilized¹⁰. The new superintendent, Dr. John Bell, became the namesake of the case,⁹ *Buck v. Bell* (Smith & Nelson, 1989). It was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court for resolution. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes delivered the majority opinion, indicating that “three generations of imbeciles were enough.” Further, he elaborated: “it is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime <and> to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit continuing their kind.” After this decision, on October 19, 1927, Dr. Bell performed the surgery on Carrie (Bell, 1933; Smith & Nelson, 1989; Pegram, 1980). Within a decade after *Buck v. Bell*, in Lynchburg 1097 individuals had been sterilized (Arnold, 1938; Virginia State Colony, 1937). A total of over 4000 persons would eventually be sterilized at the Colony (Smith & Nelson, 1989; Smith & Polloway, 1993).

In 1940, the name was changed to the Lynchburg State Colony and by 1948, there were over 1700 patients in residence. The rapid growth outstripped the facilities,¹ and individuals commonly were placed on a ward with 100 others, with bedrooms shared with numerous others. Day halls provided large group daytime surroundings. Private showers were typically not provided; many buildings were outfitted with rooms where up to ten people might be bathing at the same time (Mattox, 2023). Institutional warehousing had come to the Colony.

As returns to the community became more limited, as admissions continued to grow, and as the facility became larger, concerns for cost became significant. The surplus of land allowed for the development of a farm; the opportunity to move toward self-sufficiency could be at least entertained. The farm grew soybeans and vegetables, and dairy cows and pigs complemented the agricultural endeavors. While the farm provided some residents with an opportunity for

work, working without compensation was a form of peonage, virtual slave labor. Given that problematic concern along with diminished financial benefits, the farm was disbanded around 1957 (Merryman, 2023; Polloway, 2026).

In 1954, the facility was now called the Lynchburg Training School and Hospital. There were 2299 residents and 560 staff members (the resident/staff ratio was now 4:1) (Commonwealth of Virginia, 1955). While the hospital notation confirmed the fact that it would retain a significant medical focus, the name change was an initial harbinger of the gradual movement toward a developmental and educational model.

For 60 years, the facility grew on an annual basis. Its highest census was in 1972 with 3686 residents. Lynchburg Training School had become the largest institution in the United States (CVYC closes, 2020; Virginia State Epileptic Colony, 2022; Polloway & Smith, 2024).

In 1973, Dr. K. Ray Nelson, the new superintendent, sought to make major changes. There was an increasing emphasis on trying to achieve normalization within the context of what admittedly was a non-normalized environment. Normalization took many forms including normal daily rhythms, life routines, yearly rhythms, and efforts to enable residents to have choices and preferences (Nirje, 1969; Perske, 2004). All residents had their own beds; no longer were some having to sleep on mattresses on the floor (Polloway & Smith, 2024).

Activities were expanded. Weekly dances were a highlight. Special Olympics engaged many in sports, on campus or at Lynchburg College. Passages of time were now reflected in seasonal celebrations, which broke up the long seasons of residential living. The annual Christmas parade provided a significant time for community celebration (Mattox, 2023; Merryman, 2023).



There was an effort to decentralize the institution into individual centers. Now residents would be living, for example, in the Child Development Center, Adult Training Center, and the Community Adjustment Center, with differentiation reflecting considerations such as age, degree of independence, mobility, and medical considerations (Merryman, 2023). The photo is from the Adult Training Center (Mattox, 1958).

Education became a primary focus. A school building served many residents-now students-and offered relevant curriculum, certified teachers, and formal individualized educational programs (IEPs) for every individual under 21. For those over 21, goals and objectives were also expected to be part of a habilitation plan (Polloway et al., 2021).

The use of applied behavior analysis had a dramatic impact on daily lives. For example, the implementation of the Foxx-Azrin toilet training procedures (“an effective, rapid, enduring, and feasible solution to the problem of incontinence of the institutionalized retarded”) resulted in individuals learning how to take responsibility for self-help skills and alleviated the amount of time and cleanup effort provided by caregivers (Azrin & Foxx, 1971).

Day halls that previously were populated by individuals who might have engaged in minimal self-care activities and defaulted to self-stimulatory behaviors (e.g., rocking, twirling objects) and might have engaged in self-injurious behaviors, were gradually being transformed into environments where a more normalized daily life might be obtained (Polloway, & Smith, 2024).

In 1983 the Colony was renamed the Central Virginia Training Center, signaling a more pronounced change away from the medical model. Nevertheless, the on-campus hospital remained a major component of the services provided, and the percentage of the population with complex health needs increased as individuals perceived as “higher functioning” were increasingly returned to the community. The census was 1724 with 2400 employees; 1.5 staff members for every resident presented a radical change from the 4:1 ratio 33 years earlier. With an annual budget of \$52 million, costs per resident were now over \$33,000. CVTC had become a major regional employer. Finally, in 2020, the last resident from CVTC was moved to another setting (Central Virginia Training Center closes, 2020; Polloway & Smith, 2024).

It was into this institution that Alice Walker would be relocating to make her new home in 1925. Alice would enter as a patient, then live as a resident, and eventually depart as a client, and an individual. A constant was that it would remain her home from age 19 until 79.

Institutional Life

Alice began her new life in the Colony in November 1925, her home for the next sixty years. Alice was registered as patient #1901. During her six decades at the institution, the Colony changed its name four times. Some of those changes might have been meaningful while others were semantic twists without significant implications. What did not change was that it remained a segregated residential facility serving a phenomenal number of Virginians. And of course, what else would not change was that Alice would be one of these people.

Despite the radical change in her life, subsequent records noted that she had made “a fairly good adjustment to the Colony since the beginning.” At the same time, it was also later concluded in that report that “this patient could never make a successful adjustment living outside of the institution” (Lynchburg Colony, 1946). (Photo is of Alice in 1930).



For Alice, there could have been potential advantages of living in a facility that adhered to a medical model, *if* effective treatment were to be provided. But her seizures would continue to be a major element of her institutional life. Twenty-one years after admissions, there was noted to be “little abatement in severity and incidence of her seizures” (Lynchburg Colony, 1946). It appears that only around age 60 were her seizures being treated successfully (James, 1991). Although epilepsy was the presenting problem basis for her commitment, successful treatment came much later.

Alice experienced other health difficulties that required treatment. Records detail a litany of challenges including bone fractures, coronary artery disease, bacterial infection,

upper respiratory infection, cataracts, and ‘confusion.’ The continued presence of seizures placed her at risk of sustaining injuries when she fell. After multiple injuries and a later falling accident, Alice had limitations in mobility, using a cane or walker (Lynchburg Colony, 1946; Lynchburg Training School, 1977).

During her school years Alice had developed core academic skills. There is ample affirmation that these skills remained intact and were used in her daily life. She read well and widely, and she was knowledgeable based on what she had learned. Her skills would have been unique among her peers within the Colony, many of whom received limited education (Polloway, 2024).

Alice was effective at writing and was a regular correspondent with others. She collected numerous letters and cards that she had received over decades. Her literacy skills were apparent in the long letters that she had received, retained, and responded to. Correspondence was catalogued, with detailed records of, for example, the number of cards received and the appropriate responses sent (Polloway, 2024).

Alice received regular cards from staff recalling “all the good times we had” and “I think of the good years together.... I miss all my girls” ... a common expression of the relationships between the adult women and staff. Another correspondent sent multiple letters to Alice to be shared with all the other ‘girls’ in the Center wishing them well, encouraging Alice to read Bible stories to them, and planning future get-togethers. Alice’s former social worker corresponded with a long letter: “We hope your health is good and you are enjoying life as best you can. Do you still have plants and flowers? If I remember correctly, you had some plants that you loved very much.” Overall, there seems little doubt that staff liked and appreciated Alice and sustained contact after they had moved on from the Colony while Alice remained (James, 2023; Polloway, 2024).

By the 1970s, the trend in institutions was referred to as *normalization*. For Alice, ‘normalized’ life included being an involved member of this cloistered community. Alice was an active participant in “all of our programs” as one report indicated and enjoyed the opportunity to be involved (Lynchburg Colony, 1946; Lynchburg Training School, 1977).

Normalization reflected owning personal belongings, having control over one’s clothing, and so forth. In Alice’s case, she had full responsibility and ability in terms of bathing and selecting clothes and dressing. She wore what might have been referred to as “house dresses” and was always neat and clean (Lynchburg Training School, 1977), taking pride in how she looked.

Records were often retained of shopping trips for clothing or sundries. For example, a saved document related to a trip to Winn-Dixie reflecting that \$0.99 had been spent to buy 100 packages of Sweet & Low, \$0.52 to buy a quart of buttermilk, \$.06 was paid in tax, and \$0.43 was provided in change. A 1977 list detailed purchases that included soap, shampoo, Polydent, and hairnet. “I gave the lady \$4.50 to get these things and I got \$1.73 back”. We can trust that individuals working the register needed to be careful; they were being closely monitored (Polloway, 2024).

It was consistently noted that Alice had a very pleasant personality, was friendly, and was cooperative. She was enthusiastic much of the time and socially involved. As her niece noted: "Alice required so little to be happy... I remember feeling amazed that Alice could be happy there. And yet, I think, for the most part, she was." (James, 1991).

By the 1970s, Alice was living in the Adult Training Center within the Training School, which served individuals above twenty-two and not thus participating in school programs. Alice's time was spent in multiple buildings labeled, as they all were at the Colony, by numbers: 16, 18, 19, and 20. Alice would always be on A (e.g., 19A), on the first floor, given her difficulties with mobility and her periodic falls. It does not seem like these consistent moves were something done at the request of the residents (Lynchburg Colony, 1946; Lynchburg Training School, 1977). (Note photo of Adult Training Center from Mattox, 1958).

Daily life in the Adult Training Center reflected a consistent schedule. Included would be early morning wake up, getting dressed, taking medication as needed, and going to breakfast, independently unless assistance was needed. They would typically walk as a group to an adjacent building where meals were served. Later, Alice and her fellow residents were commonly served on the ward with meals brought in by rolling cart from a central preparation area (Dyke, 2023; Saunders, 2023).

Morning activities might include laundry, daily living skill activities, and in some instances training activities that might have been vocationally oriented or in the form of crafts activities. Alice's special interest and skill was handiwork (e.g., tatting). The afternoon might often be watching television, particularly soap operas or afternoon talk shows (Pletke, 2023). After dinner, there might be shared time on the ward in the social area. News of family and friends, goings-on in the small world of the Colony, and religion dominated her areas of discussion when she interacted with others (James, 1991, 2023).

One part of normalization should have been the opportunity to make choices, to make important decisions about your own life. Alice had difficulty making decisions, but it was observed that she was allowed to make so few that she did not have much opportunity for practice (James, 1991). Her limited experience presages more contemporary times in which people with disabilities would have the opportunity to learn self-determination skills.

Normalization can be seen as reflected in money management. Alice managed her own finances. Of course, facetiously, it could be noted that this institution, in exchange for you giving your life to it, provided "free room and board." But Alice had expenses and managed her own funds.

While previously the institution was run entirely on state funds, the facility also began to receive Medicaid and Supplemental Social Security (SSI) for residents. In a 1977 report, it was noted that she received \$9.02 monthly in SSI benefits, as an individual with a disability. Further, she had \$366 in her private account. Consistent with her commitment to record-keeping, in 1977, Alice recorded seven Christmas gifts ranging from \$1.00-\$5.00 (Polloway, 2024).

A cornerstone of Alice's life was her deep faith. She was described as a "fine Christian woman" (James, 2023). Her activities included participation in weekly services in the chapel on the campus and involvement in the choir. The Training School was blessed with a series of chaplains who created an inclusive welcoming environment for members of the community, (Mattox, 2023; Merryman, 2023; Vogel et al., 2006).

Records do not speak to whether Alice was a victim of involuntary sterilization. However, epilepsy could automatically have made her a candidate because of the perception then of heritability. The default assumption is that most of the women had been sterilized (Smith & Nelson, 1989; Smith & Polloway, 1993).

Another, too frequent, procedure was individuals having their teeth pulled, to reduce problems with biting (Pletke, 2023). While there is no reference ever to any aggressive behaviors on Alice's part, her records indicated a procedure for teeth removal in 1954, with a full denture confirmed to be in place (CVTC, 1985a). The dental care that had been provided to her over multiple decades may have been a contributing factor.

When Alice Walker was committed, the Colony policy was for family contact to be actively discouraged. Individuals were state inmates and parents were not encouraged to visit (Merryman, 2023). Over time, most residents were not in ongoing contact with families and were disconnected (Dyke, 2023). Alice's experience, however, was quite different.

Alice's archives reflect the phenomenal amount of mail she received and retained. It was important for the family to be regular with their communication given that Alice kept detailed records of incoming and outgoing mail. In December 1977, she tallied 37 Christmas cards (Polloway, 2024). She also received family visits up to 25 times per year (James, 2023).

Family ties were also reinforced by trips away. Without any apparent awareness of the irony of such a statement, a 1946 report indicated that Alice "has had several *paroles* in the care of her sister, all of which were relatively successful" (Lynchburg Colony, 1946). Major summer family reunions were held, for example, on the campus of Lynchburg College, where the Walkers took over a residence hall (Lynchburg Training School, 1977; Polloway, 2024).

By the late 1970s, Alice tended to spend more time in her own room, reading and writing letters, reading the Bible, and listening to religious music. One report indicated that, although she had good conversational skills, interacted in a socially appropriate manner, and got along well with everyone, as time went on, she was content to remain alone a good part of the time. Staff noticed she had become more withdrawn and seemed depressed (Lynchburg Training School, 1977).

Discharge

The national trend of deinstitutionalization became the reality for the Lynchburg Training School. From a peak population of over 3600 in 1972, the Colony would dramatically diminish in size over the next several decades. Discharges significantly exceeded new admissions and thus the annual census would be reduced. In addition, some individuals simply never left; over 1100 persons were buried on the grounds (Polloway & Smith, 2025).

With deinstitutionalization, persons who were less significantly impaired were targeted for movement back into the community and, with Alice not having an intellectual disability, it was finally apparent that she should be a candidate. The report of April 1985 indicated that “she has received maximum benefits from programs” (CVTC, 1985a). The nature of the maximum benefits obtained was not defined.

Ruth Walker Dunn, Alice’s sister, had been supportive for decades. As next-of-kin, she was notified that it was time for Alice to move out. Ruth began the process of making the change, consulting with Alice’s social worker and an attorney. The April 1985 report supported the concept of nursing home placement in Fredericksburg to provide opportunities for family members to maintain contact (CVTC, 1985a). Ultimately chosen was the Woodmont Nursing Home. Alice had arrived in 1925 and now, 60 years later, she would be leaving.

The practice at the time was to arrange for temporary leave, which would then be evaluated and, if all went well, it would become a permanent placement. Thus, Alice was transferred to Woodmont on April 19, 1985, to begin a six-month review of her new placement (CVTC, 1985a).

The October 1985 report indicated that Alice’s condition had improved since placement (CVTC, 1985b). However, contrary to that, she was described as lethargic and needing to be fed by staff at the nursing home and her health declined (James, 2023). In any case, the final discharge papers were filed, and Alice, now age 79, was no longer affiliated with the Colony, with CVTC.

There is a sad irony that played out thousands of times related to institutionalization. Initial commitment would typically not be voluntary and would not reflect personal choice, individual decision-making, and self-determination. However, for individuals leaving institutions, it might be argued that these persons who had made the facilities their homes -in the case of Alice, for 60 years- that personal choice was not reflected in the decision to leave. In the end Alice could no longer have the institution, which had become her “home” over six decades. As a result, the move was distressing and sad (James, 2023; Polloway, 2024).

Life in the community would be brief for Alice. She became more withdrawn, and her health declined. Less than eight months after being moved and only two months after being formally discharged, Alice died on December 6, 1985. Her death certificate reported the cause as sudden cardiac arrest related to atherosclerosis with complications of seizure disorders and dementia, the first time that the latter had been mentioned (Walker, 1985). Had her condition deteriorated so quickly or was this simply an oversight in the completion of this official document?

The *Fredericksburg Lance-Star* (1985) published her obituary on December 9, 1985:

Miss Alice D. Walker, 79, died Friday at the Woodmont Nursing Home. Miss Walker was the daughter of William and Lottie Walker. She was descended from Count Bartholomew and Countess Susanna DuPuy, French Huguenots who escaped from France due to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV. She is survived by one brother, three sisters, and a number of nieces and nephews. The family requests that expressions of sympathy take the form of contributions to the Epilepsy Foundation, Barium Home for Children, or Billy Graham Crusade.

Alice Walker's life became a direct reflection on institutions in 20th-century America. Her story became the story of why such facilities were established, what they became, how they changed, and how they were virtually eliminated.

Alice's return to the community had not occurred because of her choice, her preference, but rather because of changes in philosophy. Societal philosophy had begun with a commitment to educate and treat persons with disabilities, had morphed into an effort to provide asylum and protect people from society, and then changed to protect society from their inclusion. All of this was to occur by placement in locations where security was achieved through isolation and segregation. The philosophy then changed so that individuals with disabilities should return to their home communities-or some facsimile- and no longer need to be sheltered and segregated. That of course would be what once unfortunately had been called "normalization." In Alice's case, life would have included appropriate medical interventions for her seizure disorder and extensive participation in special education programs, delivered within an inclusive school environment, and focused on transition to independence in adulthood.

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**A Phenomenology Examining the Lived Experiences of College Students who Identify as
Neurodivergent**

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of college students ($N = 14$) from universities in the southeastern United States who identified as neurodivergent. Participants were eligible to participate if they self-identified as having received a formal medical or educational diagnosis of a documented disability (e.g., ADHD, learning disabilities, ASD, Tourette syndrome, etc.), were over the age of 18, and in college or graduated within one year. Data from a questionnaire, interviews, and focus groups were analyzed and triangulated in accordance with procedures for conducting a transcendental phenomenological study. Findings demonstrate the transition into higher education was challenging, but students developed an array of highly personalized strategies to cope and adjust inside and outside the classroom. Apprehension about the future beyond higher education was a prominent theme. Findings have implications for higher education recruitment and retention efforts and provide invaluable information for students who identify as neurodivergent regarding strategies for integrating into the academic and social fabric of the university and persisting to completion.

Keywords: neurodivergent, college student, persistence, retention, higher education, transition, phenomenology

A Phenomenology Examining the Lived Experiences of College Students who Identify as Neurodivergent

Students with disabilities (SWD) and those who identify as neurodivergent are enrolling in post-secondary educational institutions in the United States at higher rates (Scott, 2019). Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990, 2008) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (2012), institutions must ensure SWD are “not denied the benefits of, excluded from participation in, or otherwise subjected to discrimination under the education program . . . because of the absence of educational auxiliary aids” (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 2012, Para 4). To be eligible for these aids and services, students must request accommodations and provide supporting documentation of the disability for the university representative.

Despite these academic supports, SWDs are at greater risk for dropping out (Holzberg et al., 2019), graduating at a rate of 34% compared to 56% for students without disabilities (Weis et al., 2016). Only one out of three incoming SWD disclose their status (Madaus et al., 2019), underscoring the need for the requisite self-determination and self-advocacy skills to request accommodations (Toutain, 2019). Further, while the ADA (1990) and Section 504 (1973) address academic support, research suggests SWD experience more mental health symptoms and social challenges than their neurotypical peers (Gurbuz et al., 2019). Given the well-established associations between social and academic integration and student retention and persistence (Tinto, 2017), it is crucial to examine the social and academic experiences of SWD persisting in higher education.

Review of the Literature

The theoretical underpinnings for study include Tinto’s (2017) model of student motivation and persistence and Schlossberg’s (1995) transition theory. Tinto (2017) defines persistence as “the interaction among student goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceived worth or relevance of the curriculum” (p. 255), noting:

For years, our prevailing view of student retention has been shaped by theories that view student retention through the lens of institutional action and ask what institutions can do to retain their students. Students, however, do not seek to be retained. They seek to persist. The two perspectives, though necessarily related, are not the same. (p. 254).

Transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg et al., 1995) provides another helpful framework for examining the persistence experiences of neurodivergent college students. This theory defines transition as events altering routines, roles, and relationships (Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg et al., 1995). Central to transition theory is the proposition that *how* an individual perceives the transition and derives meaning from it is more important than the actual transition (Schlossberg, 1981). An aim of this phenomenology was to describe the meaning students ascribe to their persistence *moving in*, *moving through*, and *moving out* (Schlossberg et al., 1995) of higher education in light of their neurodivergence.

Transition from High School to College

The transition from high school to college is challenging for neurodivergent students due to multiple factors (Conley et al. 2014). SWD may struggle to transition from a highly structured high school environment in which parents, guardians, or special educators are the primary advocate (ADA, 1990, 2008) to a less structured college environment that requires students to self-advocate and employ self-determination and executive functioning skills (Toutain, 2019; Wallace et al., 2016). The support services students are accustomed to receiving in high school are either no longer available or must be requested by the student (Hotez et al., 2018). Without familiar support services and structure, neurodivergent students may experience stress and anxiety, which can produce poor academic outcomes and an external locus of control (Clouder et al., 2020). Although neurodivergent students are eager to be independent, most require support to successfully navigate the transition from high school to college.

College transition programs may contribute to positive outcomes for neurodivergent students. Hotez et al. (2018) found reduced self-reports of “anxiety and autism symptoms . . . and increased academic self-efficacy, self-advocacy knowledge, and perceived social support” (p. 3) among students who participated in a summer transition program. Similarly, Kim et al. (2021) found transition programs “provided opportunities to meet peers, develop schedules, and practice navigating college campuses” (p. 8).

Social Integration into Higher Education

The complexities of a highly social post-secondary environment can be difficult for neurodivergent students to manage. Social demands are a common concern among students with ASD (Accardo, 2017; Gurbuz et al., 2019; Lambe et al., 2019). While students with ASD may thrive academically, the adjustment to college can be challenging socially (Gurbuz et al., 2019). However, strengths like “sincerity, impartiality, and the willingness to listen to others” (Van Hees et al. 2015, p. 1682) foster friendship, while support groups provide connection over shared experiences and opportunities to collaboratively problem-solve (Van Hees et al., 2015).

Academic Integration into Higher Education

Neurodivergent students may experience academic challenges due to how they process information, deficits in executive functioning skills, sensory overload, learning differences, and lack of awareness of support (Van Hees, 2015). Students cite appropriate academic accommodations as “imperative for their academic success and wellbeing at university or college” (Van Hees, 2015, p. 1682). According to Gurbuz et al. (2019), students with ASD may possess strengths such as strong memory, focus on detail, passionate interests, and adherence to rules that can be leveraged to positively impact academic outcomes.

Transition from Higher Education to Employment

Individuals who are neurodivergent bring many unique strengths to their place of employment

including increased productivity and greater creativity in the problem-solving process (Coplan et al., 2021). Despite these strengths, up to 85% of college graduates with ASD are unemployed, significantly higher than the general population of neurotypical peers (Griffiths et al., 2016). Furthermore, the employment transition is a significant source of stress for individuals who identify as neurodivergent (Vincent, 2019). This raises the question of how universities can prepare and facilitate workforce self-advocacy and independence skills prior to and during the transition.

Methods

This phenomenology was designed to shed light on student experiences and student-led initiatives to foster social connection, leadership, and self-advocacy opportunities for students who identify as neurodivergent on college campuses.

Research Design

We chose Moustakas' (1994) procedures for a transcendental phenomenology given its emphasis on bracketing preconceptions and presuppositions, refraining from judgment, and perceiving the phenomenon with a fresh perspective (Moustakas, 1994). We chose this design given our lived experiences as a professor in the field of special education, a high school special education teacher, and university dean and mother of a young adult on the autism spectrum. While these professional and personal experiences informed our motivation to conduct this research and enhanced our roles as the human instruments in this qualitative inquiry, we embraced the concept of *epoche* to “stay away from the everyday, commonplace way of perceiving things” (Dowling, 2007, p. 132).

Setting and Participants

We used convenience and snowball sampling procedures to recruit a purposeful criterion sample ($N = 14$) of college students (18 years or older) who identified as neurodivergent from two institutions in central Virginia - a small private university (Institution A) and a large private university (Institution B). Before recruiting participants, we gained IRB approval from Institution A (Approval #LHS2122126), submitted this approval to Institution B, and received an IRB authorization agreement from Institution B. To be considered *neurodivergent* for the study, participants needed to self-identify as having received a formal medical or educational diagnosis of a documented “disability” (e.g., ADHD, dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder, etc.). A second criterion was participants must be college students or to have graduated within one year. Given requirements for college admission, we assumed participants had the cognitive capability to understand the purpose of the research and give informed consent. College student was operationally defined as any individual accessing post-secondary education via a four-year program or community college. Dual enrolled high school students were excluded.

A recruitment email with a link to the informed consent and questionnaire was sent to all students receiving accessibility and disability support services at Institution A and to a student

affinity group for students with ASD at Institution B. The final sample consisted of 14 students (9 female, 5 male). All completed the questionnaire and interview and 11 participated in focus groups. Eleven students identified as White, one as White/Asian American, one Latina, and one preferred not to answer. The sample included 4 freshmen, 1 sophomore, 4 juniors, and 5 seniors. The youngest participant was 18 and the oldest 25 ($M = 20.6$ years old). Over half ($n = 8$) of participants reported multiple disabilities, with the most common comorbidities being ASD, ADHD, and anxiety.

Table 1

Participant Demographics (N = 14)

Gender	Age	Ethnicity	University	Rank	Major	Diagnosis
Female	21	White	A	Junior	Health Promotions	ADHD
Male	22	White	A	Senior	Marketing	Non-verbal Learning Disability
Female	18	Latina	A	Freshman	Intelligence Studies & Criminology-Philosophy	ADHD
Female	24	White	A	Junior	Intelligence Studies	Epilepsy & Executive Function Disorder
Male	18	White	A	Freshman	Psychology	ADHD
Female	18	White	B	Freshman	Biochemistry	ASD, Anxiety, & Sensory Processing Disorder
Male	22	White	B	Senior	History	ASD, ADHD, Anxiety, & Depression
Female	25	White	B	Junior	American Sign Language and Interpreting	Asperger's (ASD)
Male	22	White/Asian American	B	Senior	Computer Science	ASD
Female	22	White	B	Senior	Commercial Music--Film Scoring	ASD

NEURODIVERGENT COLLEGE STUDENTS

Male	20	Prefer not to answer	B	Senior	Mathematics & Interdisciplinary Studies, with foci in Physical Sciences & Computational Sciences	ASD & ADHD
Female	19	White	B	Sophomore	Psychology	ASD, Generalized Anxiety Disorder
Female	18	White	B	Freshman	Developmental Psychology	ADHD and in the process of getting an ASD diagnosis
Female	19	White	B	Junior	Religious Studies	ADHD and in the process of getting an ASD diagnosis

Data Collection

We collected data via a questionnaire, interviews, and focus groups. The 18-item questionnaire allowed us to verify participants met participation criteria and to gather demographic information. Next, participants were invited to participate in a semi-structured individual interview with a researcher. The interview included 21 questions generated from a review of the literature and researcher experiences teaching, advising, and parenting students who are neurodivergent. Open-ended questions were designed to elicit understanding of participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The final data collection method was focus groups, one with participants from Institution A and the second with participants from Institution B. Framed by four guiding questions, focus groups allowed us to member-check preliminary findings and probe for deeper understanding of lived experiences.

Data Analysis

Questionnaires were analyzed prior to interviews with follow-up questions prepared in light of responses. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim by a researcher. In accordance with transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), we conducted repeated readings, coded significant statements, removed overlapping statements, aggregated remaining statements into categories, and finally, reduced categories into overarching themes. Data across sources and participants were triangulated to increase the credibility and dependability of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout this iterative process we engaged in *epoché* to intentionally suspend our presuppositions and assumptions to minimize the effect of researcher bias on findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus groups allowed for member checking, providing participants opportunity to clarify, refine, corroborate, and validate findings from interviews.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

IRB approval was granted from both institutions before beginning participant recruitment. We excluded minors and students we taught. Informed consent was gained before any data were collected. Pseudonyms were given to each site and participant to protect confidentiality. Participants were informed that identities would be known to other focus group participants, though participants were asked to keep all comments made during the focus group confidential. Data were stored on password protected computers and secure online collaborative workspaces.

Findings

Findings describing the lived experiences of college students who identify as neurodivergent are organized around Schlossberg et al's. (1995) stages of moving in, moving through, and moving out of transition.

Moving In

The transition into higher education is significant for individuals who identify as neurodivergent as they adjust to more rigorous academic demands, a new social environment, and increased freedom and responsibility. Themes associated with transitioning into college centered around (a) college choice, (b) selecting a major, and (c) challenges adjusting.

College Choice

Choosing where to study was a significant decision for participants, with one participant describing it as "decision overload." He went on to explain there were,

a lot of different factors to weigh and I didn't know how to weigh those. It wasn't like there was some function I can just put them in and go "oh wow that's the best school for me okay that's fine." I just was never exposed to those kind of decisions . . . that sort of space wasn't familiar.

Students ($n = 9$) attending the larger university (Institution B) chose it primarily due to proximity to home and family, because it was faith-based, or because a larger school afforded more academic majors and clubs. While scholarships and tuition rates were mentioned, every student ($n = 5$) attending the smaller university (Institution A) selected it for smaller class sizes and opportunity to build deeper relationships with faculty due to lower student-faculty ratios. Whether attending Institution A or B, all participants enjoyed their underclassmen courses when there were lower student-faculty ratios.

Difficulty Selecting a Major

Selecting a major was a challenge for many. Multiple participants reported changing majors at

some point in their college tenure or stopping out for a period of time. The choice to switch majors often reflected participants' growth of understanding of self as they transitioned into college. Reflecting on her decision to switch majors, one participant related, "why am I trying to be a hero and push myself with this thing that's obviously uncomfortable for me when I could be a hero and go do things that my brain is actually, like not trying to go [against] the grain of my brain's wiring."

Challenges Adjusting

Adjusting to college was generally difficult and overwhelming. For one participant, "there was a lot of crying, there were a lot of really depressive episodes. I had to start counseling here, which I'm grateful for . . . But, my mom had to fly over here. I was just really, really distressed." The majority of participants experienced challenges adjusting to shared living spaces with a roommate:

If you have to have a roommate and you get really overloaded from having to be around a person all the time. . . . I was so incredibly stressed, I could never relax. I've always felt like if I was in the room alone, she might come in and then I'd be stressed, or I'd be stressed going back to my room because she might be in there. It had nothing to do with her and the fact that there was just some person in the room that's supposed to be mine, I feel like a lot of neurodivergent people need a space to themselves. . . . It was probably the most depressed and stressed that I've been in my life. . . . it kind of feels like performing all the time.

This same feeling was echoed by another participant who struggled with, "not being able to find any time alone because, you know, you're in your dorm you have roommates and then when you're out, you're constantly in public. So I was constantly running on empty."

Overstimulation

Adding to the feeling of "running on empty," participants experienced sound sensitivity, sensory issues, or overstimulation that impacted their ability to focus in class or study in communal spaces on campus. One participant "had a panic attack in class, I was losing my mind cause I was overstimulated, so I left and literally had a meltdown." Overstimulation could result from anything from flickering fluorescent lights, professors playing background music during group work, or a video played at a high volume.

Time Management

Time management and developing routines in the face of the more unstructured nature of higher education was a challenge mentioned by every participant. One participant described the pressure to keep up academically as "I'm being slammed with a truck all the time." Another related the pressure to drowning; "you're sinking and then the fact that you can't even get back up sinks you even more. And then you start panicking." It seemed impossible to proactively

manage stress *and* dedicate the time needed to keep up academically: “Like if I did manage my stress, then I would get backed on time; but if I got backed on time, I would experience stress.” Challenges were exacerbated by separation from parents: “when I first went away to college, it was just like culture shock, no longer being with my parents took me a long time to get used to.”

Moving Through

Transitions can alter an individual’s routines, assumptions, roles, and relationships and require new patterns of behavior (Schlossberg et al., 1995). In the face of challenges experienced transitioning into new routines and relationships in higher education, participants developed a deeper understanding of self and this understanding led to the development and adoption of personal coping mechanisms and strategies to persist and integrate into the university within and outside the classroom.

Understanding of Self

For five participants, the challenges they experienced in their first year in college served as an impetus to seek deeper understanding of self by advocating for an evaluation leading to a disability diagnosis. For some the decision to self-advocate related to increased autonomy and independence from parents. For others it was prompted by self-study, often on social media, that led them to understand they experienced and perceived the world in a different way than others. Participants with late diagnoses experienced what others experienced earlier in their childhood or adolescence, that a diagnosis of ADHD or ASD is “not a label – it’s an answer.” For most, a diagnosis provided validation and deeper understanding of self. One participant related: “this isn’t me thinking about something the wrong way, no I’m just thinking about it differently.” Another echoed the revelation that, “I’m not messed up or anything, it’s just because I am different, and I function in a different way. It was very, very validating and that’s one of the main reasons I wanted the diagnosis.”

Academic Integration

As they developed a deeper understanding of self, participants began to develop and implement a range of highly personalized strategies to persist academically. Strategies included but are not limited to (a) visiting faculty during office hours, (b) using noise canceling headphones, (c) sitting in the front of the classroom to minimize visual distractions or to sit in the back to minimize auditory distractions, (d) looking for auditory and visual cues from professors when taking notes (i.e., statements like “this is important,” (e) using a calendar/planner and blocking out time for “pretty much every major area,” (f) creating lists and making notes of tasks to complete, (g) avoiding procrastination by “getting started right away,” (h) taking medication ($n = 4$), and (i) accessing university resources (writing center, tutoring center, counseling, and disability support services). Some noted value in “switching up systems” every now and then to avoid boredom and to keep their organization system novel.

Social Integration

Strategies employed to integrate socially with peers included (a) rehearsing and planning what to say, (b) positive self-talk, (c) using humor to connect, (d) creating a book club, and (e) self-study and research on aspects of their disability (i.e., reading social cues). An interesting finding across multiple participants was the use of social media or online gaming as a tool to develop deeper understanding of their diagnosis(es) and in turn, deeper understanding of self. As they developed deeper understanding and found online and on-campus communities of peers who identify as neurodivergent, participants developed an acceptance and understanding of self that gave them greater confidence to self-disclose and self-advocate. For students from Institution B, joining the campus' Autism Advocates affinity group was a catalyst for processing their identity and growing agency as individuals who are neurodivergent. One participant related, "I was finally able to talk about that aspect of my personality more. I was able to learn more from other people and I just learned more about myself during that process." Another shared, "we have something to bond over, we have a club culture to bond over and autism we bond over."

Moving Out

Uncertainty was a dominant theme when examining plans beyond graduation. Participants from both institutions had extremely limited understanding of the rights of PWD under the ADA (1990, 2008). During the focus group at Institution B one participant shared, "this club is really the first place I've gone to that even speaks about that topic and I mean it's, it's more like I don't really expect anything else to, but I really haven't been taught anything about that." Uncertainty about the future and the pressure to begin applying for jobs left participants feeling overwhelmed and anxious. One participant explained, "there are about 100 different factors that I've never had to think about before and now all the sudden, I have to think about them. That kind of thing makes me shut down a bit."

Thinking about transitioning from higher education to the workplace one participant explained, "It really scares me because I know that people are not going to be as understanding." While parents, specifically mothers, provided instrumental support for students as they transitioned into college, one participant voiced his fear about the transition into the workplace where family might not be nearby: "So it's kinda unfamiliar territory as to what would happen if I were to go somewhere else. Outside of Virginia, away from my family, what would happen next. Could I accommodate it, could I live with it, or would I crumble and need to come back?"

Discussion and Implications

Findings have implications for neurodivergent students and the faculty, staff, and university administrators who strive to increase their social and academic integration into the college campus community.

Implications for Students

“Learn About Yourself.” It is essential for students to *know themselves*. While participants struggled upon their initial transition into higher education, a finding mirroring prior research (Clouder et al., 2020; Toutain, 2019; Wallace et al., 2016), over time, each developed personalized systems and strategies to employ in academic and social environments. For some, it meant sitting at the front of the room to minimize visual distraction; for others, it meant sitting at the back to minimize auditory distraction. Using a calendar or planner and scheduling blocks of time for study, rest, recreation, and socializing is important, including finding or creating distraction free zones. If quiet spaces are hard to find, strategies like using noise canceling headphones and putting tents on beds in shared dorms are helpful.

The most important skill for students to develop is the ability to self-advocate. Self-advocacy is knowing “what you do well, and what you have difficulty doing. It includes knowing your legal rights, your needs, and telling that information to the appropriate person. Effective self-advocacy empowers people and gives them access to reasonable accommodations and strategies” (Learning Disabilities Association of America, 2023). Students need to understand that in order to receive accommodations, they must disclose their disability (ADA, 1990, 2008) and be familiar with the accommodations available to them. As one participant acknowledged, to assume professors know how to accommodate students who are neurodivergent “would require professors to become mind readers and that's just not going to happen.” Students need to self-determine to self-advocate by communicating their needs with professors and supervisors, for example, background music is distracting, flashing lights may cause seizures, or they focus best when multitasking.

“Know Your Resources.” In the words of one participant, “it's really important to know your resources *before* you're in a moment of crisis.” Students should research campus services including academic supports like writing centers, math centers, tutoring services, and disability support services, as well as supports for emotional health and wellbeing (i.e., counseling). Affinity and special interest groups provide a powerful community for students to grow in their understanding and acceptance of self, confidence to disclose, and ability to advocate. They also provide formal and informal networks for upperclassmen to mentor underclassmen about the resources, supports, and accommodations available on campus.

Emerging research demonstrates participation in summer transition programs is associated with positive outcomes for SWD including lower anxiety, increased self-efficacy, and greater social support on campus (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Hotez et al., 2018; Kim et al. 2021). When researching and applying to universities, students should inquire about summer transition programs designed to orient them to the campus, develop relationships with peers, and connect them with the range of supports and services available on campus (e.g., academic advisors, disability support services, counseling center, affinity groups, etc.). No students in this study referenced participating in a summer transition program designed to meet their unique needs and a program of this nature may have facilitated a smoother transition into higher education.

Implications for Institutions

Institutional support is crucial to student persistence and retention in higher education (Tinto, 2017). In addition to academic supports like writing, math, and tutoring centers, counseling and disability support services play a significant role supporting SWD on college campuses (Keenan et al., 2019). Though higher than the national average of one out of three college freshmen disclosing their disability status (Madaus et al., 2019), just a little over one out of two study participants (57%; $n = 8$) chose to disclose and receive academic accommodations from their university. One student described these supports as “passive supports,” as they needed to seek them out rather than the supports being brought to the student. This finding indicates students struggle with the transition from K-12 where the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) mandates an individualized education with specially designed instruction, unlike higher education where students must self-disclose and provide documentation of their disability status to be eligible for accommodations (ADA, 1990; Section 504, 1973). Institutions should examine their admissions process to ensure students are aware of the resources available on campus.

Notably, 33% ($n = 5$) of the participants received an initial or additional diagnosis *after* beginning college, with most of these students being female. This finding aligns with research indicating that females are diagnosed with ASD and ADHD later than males due to greater masking of symptoms, inattentive presentations, and diagnostic criteria based primarily on male characteristics (Chronis-Tuscano 2022; Hinshaw et al., 2022; Klefsjö et al., 2021).

In addition to developing summer transition programs, universities should develop affinity groups and mentoring networks for students who identify as neurodivergent. Findings from this study affirm previous research that identified several positive outcomes from these support groups (Van Hees et al., 2015). Students from the institution with the established affinity group reported a deep sense of belonging and community among peers, greater understanding of self, and having opportunities to develop leadership and self-advocacy skills. Students from the smaller institution strongly advocated for a peer-to-peer mentoring program, asserting that it may be particularly beneficial for students with ASD who primarily need support with social integration to campus life.

Faculty play a significant role in student persistence and retention (Tinto, 2017). Faculty attributes can impact students’ decisions to self-disclose and self-advocate. Favorite professors were described as “approachable,” “helpful,” “understanding,” “flexible,” and “calm.” Participants appreciated professors who listened and accepted multiple means of action and expression on assignments, a key principle of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2008). Participants valued faculty who were engaging, passionate, and responsive to their needs. They particularly appreciated faculty who remembered sensory-related accommodation requests and provided clear verbal cues about important course content, which facilitated good note-taking and academic success. Institutions should provide ongoing training for faculty and staff to increase understanding of neurodiversity, including concepts like stimming and masking, equipping faculty with methods (i.e., UDL) for supporting neurodivergent students across campus.

While participants generally felt supported *moving through* university, each experienced apprehension about the prospect of *moving out* of university, confirming prior research (Anderson & Butt, 2017). Students were not well-versed in their rights in the workplace per ADA (1990; 2008) and struggled “just thinking about life after college.” Concerns centered around finding a job with the health coverage needed to address medical conditions (i.e., epilepsy) or prescriptions for ADHD, how to handle workplace stress, or if status as a PWD would factor in hiring decisions or result in stigmatization. It is crucial for disability support services to collaborate with campus career centers in addition to outside agencies such as the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) to coordinate stronger support for students as they transition from higher education into the workforce and into independent living in the community. Students must leave college equipped with a working understanding of their rights and the protections and provisions afforded by the ADA (1990), not only related to accommodations in the workplace, but also related to housing, transportation, and voting.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The students who volunteered to participate were predominantly white (79%) and all attended one of two private universities in the Southeastern United States. Future research should include a more diverse sample from different higher education institutions. Data collection captured the students’ lived experiences at just one point in time in their higher education career. A longitudinal study following students from freshman year in college through graduation and entry into the workforce would provide invaluable insight into the transition of moving out of university and into the workforce and independent living environments.

One participant withdrew from university after the study was completed. A study examining this student’s lived experiences and decision to depart as a negative case analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018) may provide needed insight into the factors impacting student decisions to dropout or stop out of higher education. Additionally, three of the participants were homeschooled at some point in their K-12 education and while this environment afforded a more individualized education, it may have masked some of the characteristics of their disability resulting in a later diagnosis. As homeschooling is the fastest growing form of education in the United States (Jamison et al., 2023), further research is needed in this area.

Over one out of two participants (57%) chose to disclose their diagnosis and receive academic accommodations from their university. This is significantly higher than one out of three reported in literature (Madaus et al., 2019). This higher rate of self-advocacy may be explained by the positive effects of participation in a campus affinity group for students who identify as neurodivergent. Conversely, results may be skewed due to the nature of volunteer bias in social science research and the students who volunteered to participate in this study may have been more extroverted or interested in the topic than peers who did not participate.

Finally, data were analyzed through the lenses of Tinto’s (2017) model of student motivation and persistence and Schlossberg’s (1995) transition theory with a central focus on moving in,

moving through, and moving out of college for individuals who identify as neurodivergent. Future research would benefit from a framework like intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991, 2017; Botha et al., 2021) to examine the interactions between neurodivergent identities and other salient identities including race and gender, specifically for female students with ASD and ADHD.

Conclusion

While the transition into higher education presented challenges and the impending transition into the workforce was daunting, the overall college experience for the 14 neurodivergent students who participated in this study was generally very positive. Participants found peers to be more accepting and “less judgmental” than peers in their younger years. There was a general feeling of hope, encapsulated by one participant’s observation:

I think we've discovered there are a lot of people interested in making this campus a better place and I think there are people outside our school who are clearly invested in coming up with better and better info all the time, and that's encouraging. So I think as long as everyone continues to do a little bit at a time, lots of interesting things could happen and I'm excited for that.

Nonetheless, findings underscore the need for neurodivergent students to understand the importance of self-disclosure and self-advocacy to access the supports and services available to them on their college campus from the inception of their college experience. Parents and high school teachers should support students in their understanding and acceptance of self and encourage them to select universities with established first year or summer transition programs, peer-mentoring programs, and affinity groups for students to find community and grow in their identity and agency as neurodivergent thinkers and leaders. Findings also provide a clear mandate to university faculty, staff, and administration to collaborate within the university and with outside agencies to provide services tailored to support students through their distinct phases of moving in, moving through, and moving out of university.

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Appendix A: Online Questionnaire (Administered via Google Forms)

Thank you for participating in this study. The purpose of this research study is to describe the lived experiences of college students who identify as neurodivergent. Neurodiversity is a term used to describe individuals who experience, interact with, and interpret the world in unique ways. While the neurodiversity movement was started by a sociologist on the autism spectrum, the term encompasses individuals with ADHD, learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia), and developmental disabilities.

1. Name:
2. Email:
3. Phone number:
4. Gender:
5. Ethnicity:
6. Preferred Pronouns:
7. Name of college you currently attend (or attended):
8. Status in college this fall:
 - a. Freshmen
 - b. Sophomore
 - c. Junior
 - d. Senior
 - e. Graduated
9. Major:
10. Minor(s):
11. Please list any extracurricular activities you participate in ON campus (e.g., sports, clubs, etc.):
12. Please list any extracurricular activities you participate in OFF campus (e.g., sports, clubs, etc.):
13. Do you work during the academic year?
14. If yes, how many hours a week do you work during a typical semester?
15. To be considered “neurodivergent” for the purpose of this study, you must have received a formal medical or educational diagnosis of a documented “disability” (e.g., ADHD, dyslexia, Autism Spectrum Disorder, etc.). Do you identify as neurodivergent?
16. Why do you identify as neurodivergent?
17. Do you receive academic accommodations on campus?
18. Please share the best way to contact you (e.g., text or email?) for an individual interview and some days and times that would be most convenient for you to meet virtually or in person.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

The interviews were semi-structured, meaning the researchers facilitating the interview followed the general interview guide below but asked additional questions to prompt for greater understanding or elaboration on what was shared.

1. Please tell me about yourself.
2. Why did you choose to participate in this study examining the experiences of college students who identify as neurodivergent?
3. What does being neurodivergent mean to you?
4. When did you first identify as neurodivergent (even if you didn't know the term then?). Or, when did you first receive a diagnosis that would be considered neurodivergent?
5. Can you describe your thoughts and feelings upon learning this?
6. Please describe your family and your experiences growing up.
7. Please describe your experiences in elementary, middle, and high school.
8. Please describe your experiences deciding what to study and where to go to college.
9. What have been your greatest accomplishments in college?
10. What have been your greatest challenges in college?
11. What internal or personal strategies have you employed to face these challenges?
12. What external supports have you received or sought?
13. Please describe your experiences with (The Center for Accessibility and Disability Resources OR Office of Disability Accommodations Support).
14. Please describe your decision to self-identify and request accommodations, or not?
15. Please describe your experiences in classes on campus.
 - a. What are things professors do and say that are particularly supportive? (Prompt for specific examples, how participants felt, etc.)
 - b. What are things professors do and say that are particularly unsupportive or even stigmatizing? (Prompt for examples, how participants felt, etc.)
16. Please describe your experiences with peers IN class.
17. Please describe your experiences with peers OUTSIDE of class.
18. How has/did COVID impact your college experience?
 - a. Prompt to ask about initial transition to campus if starting during COVID?
 - b. Impact of COVID on academic experiences?
 - c. Impact of COVID on social experiences?
19. Are you overall satisfied with your college experience to date? Is there anything you would change? Why or why not?
20. What do you hope to do after graduating from college, and why? What role, if any, does identifying as neurodivergent play in your future plans?
21. Is there anything else you would like to share about this topic? Anything else you suggest I ask future participants on the topic?

Appendix C: Focus Group Interview Protocol

The focus group was semi-structured, meaning the researchers facilitating the discussion followed the general script below but asked additional questions to prompt for greater understanding or elaboration on what was shared.

1. What advice do you all have for incoming freshmen who identify as neurodivergent?
 - a. What specific advice do you have for them when it comes to the academic side of college life?
 - b. What advice do you have for them when it comes to the social side of college life?
2. What advice do you have for university professors who seek to better support neurodivergent students in their classes?
3. What advice do you have for university offices dedicated to supporting neurodivergent students on campus?
4. What is one thing you would like people to understand about what it means to be neurodivergent?

Additional items added based on responses.

**A Phenomenology Examining Factors Influencing College Experience Among
First-Generation College Student Women**

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Abstract

First-generation college students (FGCS) often face unique challenges, including limited family experience with higher education, making college both difficult and isolating. Notably, most FGCS are women, yet research focusing specifically on FGCS women as a group remains limited. This transcendental phenomenological study explored the college experiences of 12 FGCS women in Central Virginia. Using self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Tinto's (2017) Model of Institutional Departure as frameworks, data was gathered via surveys, semi-structured interviews, and letters of advice. Findings revealed that FGCS women identified key influences on their college journey, including opportunities, personal aspirations, preparedness, integration, motivation, access to resources, support systems, accomplishments, and perseverance. This study highlights the importance of understanding FGCS women's unique experiences to better support their success in higher education.

Keywords: women, first-generation college students, higher education, persistence

A Phenomenology Examining Factors Influencing College Experience Among First-Generation College Student Women

The emphasis on having a college degree has risen in the United States (US). First-generation college students (FGCSs) are often considered unprepared for both the intensity and cost of college (Krieger et al., 2022). These students also struggle with utilizing resources related to attending and succeeding in college (Jeong et al., 2021). Many times, the families of these students have little background in higher education. As a result, earning a college degree can be extremely difficult and isolating for FGCSs (Kim et al., 2021). FGCSs differ from their traditional peers in entering characteristics and college experiences (Terenzini et al., 1996). The difficulties FGCSs encounter highlight the benefit of non-FGCS experiences and knowledge (Dumais & Ward, 2010). FGCSs remain at a disadvantage in terms of taking fewer credits and courses, earning lower grades, and requiring remedial assistance (Carroll & Chen, 2005). When observing this population, the majority of FGCSs are women (McConnell, 2000). The need for more research on FGCS women is growing, especially considering more FGCSs entering higher education (Kim et al., 2021). There is a deficit in research particularly regarding the experiences of these students while in college and, more specifically, that of FGCS women.

This qualitative phenomenological study was designed to explore the factors influencing college experience among FGCS women. This study is significant as it explores the experiences of a traditionally underrepresented group who face unique challenges in higher education. The findings aim to guide institutions, faculty, peers, and families in better supporting these students throughout their college journey. By amplifying the voices of FGCS women, the study empowers them to advocate for necessary resources and support.

.Review of Literature

This section explores the research of factors that influence college experience for first-generation college students (FGCSs) and FGCS women. A theoretical lens of self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2020) and the basic psychological needs theory is applied. The purpose is to provide a general overview of the topic, present what research has and has not been completed prior to the proposed study, and to investigate theoretical groundwork of the study. This section provides information regarding SDT, Tinto's (2017) Model of Institutional Departure, FGCS, FGCS women, and a summary.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2020) and informed by Tinto's (1993, 2017) Model of Institutional Departure. SDT explains the factors that support or hinder intrinsic motivation, autonomous extrinsic motivation, and psychological well-being in educational settings (Deci & Ryan, 2020). It emphasizes how the fulfillment of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness shapes students' motivation, engagement, and overall experiences (Prentice et al., 2019). Students with greater intrinsic motivation tend to demonstrate stronger engagement and

more positive emotional well-being (Sun et al., 2019). Accordingly, SDT provided the primary lens for examining the factors influencing the experiences of FGCS women.

Tinto's (2017) model complemented SDT by emphasizing the importance of academic and social integration alongside institutional responsibility for creating environments that support student success. Together, these frameworks provided a comprehensive understanding of how individual motivation and institutional conditions shape the experiences and persistence of FGCS women.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was selected as a framework for this study because it explains the factors influencing the college experiences of FGCS women. SDT provides a lens for understanding intrinsic motivation, autonomous extrinsic motivation, and psychological well-being within educational settings (Deci & Ryan, 2020). It emphasizes that motivation depends on the fulfillment of basic psychological needs; when these needs are unmet, students' motivation, experiences, and academic success may be negatively affected. Research has linked intrinsic motivation to academic success, school engagement, self-worth, confidence, well-being, and school satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2020). In contrast, extrinsic motivation varies in the degree to which it is externally controlled (e.g., avoiding punishment) or autonomously regulated (e.g., pursuing valued goals) (Deci & Ryan, 2017).

SDT includes six mini-theories: cognitive evaluation theory, organismic integration theory, causality orientations theory, basic psychological needs theory, goal contents theory, and relationships motivation theory. This study focuses on Basic Psychological Needs Theory, which proposes that motivation and well-being depend on satisfying three fundamental needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2017; Prentice et al., 2019).

Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure

Tinto's (1993) Model of Institutional Departure proposes that student persistence is largely influenced by academic and social integration within the institution. Academic integration includes classroom engagement, performance, and faculty interactions, while social integration involves peer relationships, extracurricular involvement, and a sense of belonging. Tinto (1993) also emphasized that students enter college with prior experiences and background characteristics that shape how they engage with the institution (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). Students who struggle to integrate academically or socially are more likely to depart, particularly when facing weak peer connections, academic difficulties, competing external commitments, or misalignment with institutional values (Tinto, 1973, 1993; Zomer, 2007).

By 2017, Tinto expanded the model to emphasize institutional responsibility in fostering persistence. Rather than viewing departure primarily as a failure of student integration, the revised model highlights how institutions influence success through student-centered academic structures, support services, faculty engagement, guided pathways, and learning communities that promote connection from the outset.

Research supports the importance of both student integration and institutional support. Christie and Dinham (1990) found that on-campus living and extracurricular involvement strengthened social integration through increased peer interaction, while strong ties to family and high school friends sometimes limited campus engagement. These findings reinforce Tinto's framework by illustrating how institutional experiences and external commitments jointly influence persistence.

First-Generation College Students

First-generation college students (FGCSs) are generally defined as students whose parents did not complete college (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2020). They are more likely to be women, come from low-income backgrounds, attend part-time, delay enrollment, or begin at community colleges (Arch & Gilman, 2019; Engle, 2007). Although often academically prepared, FGCSs face greater barriers to college access, persistence, and success than their continuing-generation peers (Engle, 2007; Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

FGCSs frequently experience imposter syndrome, anxiety, loneliness, and difficulty developing a sense of belonging, particularly at less diverse institutions (Maryville University, 2021; NASPA, 2017). Limited parental familiarity with higher education often reduces guidance regarding college expectations and processes, contributing to academic and social isolation (Bettencourt, 2022; Maryville University, 2021). As a result, FGCSs often earn lower grades, repeat courses more frequently, and report greater difficulty balancing work, family, and academic responsibilities (Evans et al., 2020; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ricks & Warren, 2021).

Financial barriers also disproportionately affect FGCSs. Many come from low-income households, rely heavily on financial aid and loans, and experience financial stress that negatively affects academic performance, social engagement, and persistence (Bennett et al., 2021; Ishitani, 2016; Potter et al., 2020; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Extended financial aid has been shown to improve persistence (Evans et al., 2020).

Motivation among FGCSs is closely tied to autonomy, competence, and relatedness, consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Marshik et al., 2017). Self-efficacy, family encouragement, peer relationships, mentoring, and institutional support all contribute to persistence, despite many students having limited parental guidance regarding college (Dworkin, 2021; Evans et al., 2020; Hutchinson et al., 2012; Payne et al., 2023; Stansberry et al., 2020). Siblings with college experience and parental involvement may further enhance student engagement and achievement (Mitchell & Jaeger, 2018; Roksa et al., 2020). National organizations such as *I'm First*, the Center for First-Generation Student Success, and America Needs You also provide mentoring and support networks (America Needs You, 2021; Center for First-Generation Student Success, n.d.; I'm First, 2022).

Social engagement remains a key predictor of success. FGCSs often participate less in extracurricular activities and interact less frequently with faculty, limiting opportunities to build belonging and social capital (Demetriou et al., 2017; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Thayer, 2000). Living on campus, participating in pre-college readiness programs, and

developing grit and social capital have all been associated with stronger persistence and academic outcomes (Brookover et al., 2021; Schimschal et al., 2023; Wilson & Devereux, 2018). Although FGCS graduates are less likely to pursue graduate education, their early employment and earnings are generally comparable to those of continuing-generation graduates (Engle, 2007). However, lower campus connectedness is associated with poorer career expectations, while institutional support improves career outlook and long-term success (Ma & Shea, 2021).

First-Generation College Student Women

Women now comprise most college enrollments and degree completions in the United States at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023). FGCS women often balance academic demands with family responsibilities and traditional gender roles, including caregiving and household duties, creating stress and time management challenges (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Dennis et al., 2005; Kim et al., 2021; Leyva, 2011; Wang, 2014). Older and married FGCS women may also face family expectations and limited support from male relatives (Leyva, 2011). These competing roles shape their college experiences and underscore the need for targeted institutional support (O'Shea, 2011; Sy & Romero, 2008; Tate et al., 2015).

Research suggests FGCS women face challenges distinct from men, including identity negotiation and lower levels of familial support, making institutional support essential for persistence (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Leyva, 2011; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). Latino FGCS women often demonstrate optimism and resilience by drawing strength from peers with similar backgrounds (Gutierrez-Serrano et al., 2022). Across the literature, perseverance, gender role expectations, support systems, and structural barriers consistently shape academic and career experiences (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Rascon, 2012). Latina students frequently prioritize family needs over personal goals, while Black FGCS women navigate discrimination through supportive "counter spaces" at predominantly White institutions (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Williams et al., 2022). Kim et al. (2021) identified role expectations, support systems, and socioeconomic background as key influences on persistence, emphasizing the importance of an intersectional perspective.

FGCS women's experiences are shaped by intersecting identities, including race, gender, class, and religion (Arch & Gilman, 2019; Collins et al., 2021). Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how these identities influence college experiences (Wijeyesinghe, 2019). The Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Abes et al., 2007) further highlights identity as fluid and influenced by both personal and social factors. Minority FGCS women often report higher stress while balancing cultural expectations and academic environments (Leyva, 2011; Turner & Smith, 2015). Latina students may experience financial strain, stereotyping, and limited family support, while African American FGCS women continue to navigate identity challenges in predominantly White institutions (Gloria et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2022).

Religion also shapes many FGCS women's experiences. In Virginia, where this study was conducted, Christianity is the predominant faith, and many women report that religion plays an important role in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2016, 2024). Traditional religious contexts

may reinforce gender roles that influence women's self-perceptions and support systems (Lynette et al., 2016; Miller & Stark, 2002; Siordia, 2016). Considering these influences provides additional context for understanding FGCS women's college experiences.

Although the literature documents the challenges FGCS women face in balancing academic, family, cultural, and identity-related demands, few studies explore their lived experiences across diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds or institutional settings (Kim et al., 2021). Additional intersectional qualitative research is needed to inform institutional practices and better support FGCS women throughout college.

While research on first-generation college students is extensive, comparatively few studies focus specifically on women. As their representation continues to grow, addressing this gap becomes increasingly important. This study contributes to Self-Determination Theory by demonstrating how autonomy, competence, and relatedness shape FGCS women's motivation and well-being. It also extends Tinto's (2017) Model of Institutional Departure by highlighting the importance of social and academic integration and the institutional conditions that promote persistence. Practically, the findings provide faculty, staff, families, and peers with strategies to strengthen support, improve retention, and enhance the success of FGCS women.

Methods

Research Design

Qualitative research methods were used to study participants in a natural setting to make sense of the meanings they brought to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method allows for a study to be informed by addressing problems surrounding an individual or group. More specifically, a phenomenological design was selected to describe the lived experiences of FGCS women. This study sought to understand the factors influencing college experience among FGCS women enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate degree within Central Virginia. Convenience, snowball, and purposeful sampling was utilized to recruit participants who identified as FGCS, a woman, currently enrolled in a collegiate program, has been enrolled in a collegiate program for at least one year, and at least 18 years or older. A demographic survey, one-on-one interviews, and advice letters were used to collect data and report the stories of these women by revealing the factors that influenced their experience. Documents were collected and analyzed for common ideas and concepts, and themes were identified through coding to understand the lived experiences. Further, researcher memos and advice letters were conducted at the end of each participant interview.

Setting and Participants

Twelve participants were recruited using purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling. Eligible participants were women who identified as first-generation college students (FGCS), were at least 18 years old, currently enrolled in undergraduate or graduate programs, and had completed at least one year of college. Recruitment was conducted via FGCS initiative contacts

at local institutions, professional and personal networks, and participant referrals. Informed consent and demographic surveys were distributed through email.

All interviews and advice letters were conducted virtually, at the participants' request. The study took place in a city of approximately 79,000 residents, home to five colleges within a 50-square-mile area. Participants attended a range of institutions, four based in Central Virginia and one online in the Midwest and represented both undergraduate and graduate programs. Sampling ceased upon reaching thematic saturation, and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity. Participants varied in age, marital status, degree type, and program.

Table 1

Description of Participants

Pseudonym	Age Range	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Employment Status	Dependents	Degree Type
Nicki	18-24	White	Single	Part-Time	No	Bachelors
Nadia	18-24	Black or African American	Single	Part-Time	No	Bachelors
Gabby	18-24	White	Single	Part-Time	No	Bachelors
Jasmine	25-34	White	Domestic Partnership	Unemployed	No	Bachelors
Justice	45-54	White	Married	Full-Time	No	Doctorate
Brynn	18-24	White	Single	Part-Time	No	Bachelors
Brooke	18-24	White	Single	Part-Time	No	Masters
Kadence	18-24	White	Married	Full-Time	No	Bachelors
Bella	35-44	White	Domestic Partnership	Full-Time	Yes	Masters

FACTORS INFLUENCING COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

Ellie	25-34	White	Married	Full-Time	No	Masters
Jett	18-24	White	Single	Unemployed	No	Bachelors
Lily	18-24	White	Married	Full-Time	No	Bachelors

Data Collection

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, participants were recruited through emails sent to FGCS program contacts at local colleges, personal networks, and word-of-mouth referrals. Recruitment emails included an informed consent form and a link to a demographic survey, which served as the first phase of data collection.

The online survey collected background information to confirm eligibility and support purposeful maximum variation sampling. It concluded with two open-ended questions about participants' positive and negative college experiences, which informed the development of initial interview themes.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source. All 12 interviews were conducted virtually using 16 open-ended questions informed by Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2017) and Tinto's (2017) Model of Institutional Departure. Questions explored participants' backgrounds, motivations, academic experiences, sense of belonging, support systems, and persistence. Interviews were transcribed using Google transcription software.

As a final data source, participants submitted or dictated letters of advice for other FGCS women considering or attending college. Eight participants submitted written letters through Google Docs, while four dictated their responses during the interview.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach across the demographic surveys, interviews, and letters of advice. Responses were transcribed, reviewed repeatedly, and analyzed through horizontalization, with the researcher bracketing personal experiences to focus on participants' perspectives. Significant statements were identified, irrelevant or repetitive data were removed, and related statements were grouped into themes through imaginative variation. Researcher memos supported ongoing reflection and minimized bias. Textural descriptions captured what participants experienced, while structural descriptions explained how they experienced the phenomenon. Together, these descriptions were synthesized to identify the essential themes of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was established through methods to increase credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation across surveys, interviews, and letters of advice, as well as member checking in which participants reviewed transcripts and preliminary findings. Dependability was supported by detailed methodological documentation and an audit trail that included researcher memos and supporting excerpts. Confirmability was enhanced through peer debriefing and review by an external auditor. Transferability was supported through purposeful sampling of participants with diverse backgrounds, institutions, academic programs, employment status, and ethnicity, along with rich descriptions of the findings.

Ethical procedures included obtaining IRB approval before recruitment and data collection. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and secure data storage through pseudonyms and password-protected files. Because the researcher shared the study phenomenon, reflective memos were used throughout the study to bracket personal bias.

Findings

This study examining the college experiences of FGCS women was guided by one central research question and five sub-questions. Participants completed a demographic survey, semi-structured interview, and wrote a letter of advice to current and future FGCS women. Several overarching themes were identified through analysis and triangulation of data within and across participants. Each of these themes held subthemes that are displayed below and represent a journey beginning with deciding to attend college, then to persisting in college, and lastly, their overall cultivation of self-awareness for FGCS women (see table 2).

Table 2
Themes

Theme	Subtheme
Deciding to Attend College	Opportunity Aspirations College Preparedness
Persisting in College	Integration Motivation Resources Support System
Cultivating Self-Awareness	Accomplishment Grit

Deciding to Attend College

The transition from high school to college was unique for each participant. Their decisions to pursue higher education were shaped by opportunities, personal aspirations, and college preparedness.

Opportunity

Six of the 12 women identified financial aid or scholarships as a major influence on their decision to attend college. Kadence, Ellie, Jasmine, and Nadia emphasized that scholarships made higher education financially attainable. As Nadia explained, *“I wanted to be as debt-free as possible...they offered me an abundant amount of scholarships, so it made sense.”* Others faced limited opportunities. Bella delayed college until she could afford it and later advised students to consider whether a career justifies the cost: *“Is it worth the debt? Does the position pay for itself after you complete it?”* Beyond financial opportunities, several participants were motivated by broader life opportunities. Justice, Jett, and Brynn followed older siblings into college, while Gabby sought to leave her hometown and *“get out of her comfort zone.”*

Aspirations

All 12 women described personal passions and long-term goals as central to their decision to attend college. Lily pursued nursing after being inspired by colleagues in healthcare, Brynn viewed her degree as a pathway to full-time employment, and Brooke’s brain surgery inspired her interest in human development. Many associated higher education with stable, meaningful careers. As Gabby advised, *“Focus on your passions and interests...you may change your mind several times, and that is fine.”*

College Preparedness

Nine participants emphasized the importance of preparing for college through scholarships, career exploration, and guidance from counselors. Brooke credited her high school staff for helping her navigate the admissions process, while Lily encouraged future students to seek available resources: *“There are so many resources—be willing to ask.”* Ellie recommended researching career paths before selecting a major, and Bella encouraged students to weigh their educational goals against potential debt.

Persisting in College

As participants progressed through college, four subthemes emerged: integration, motivation, resources, and support systems. Together, these factors shaped persistence by fostering belonging, sustaining motivation, providing access to assistance, and reinforcing resilience throughout their educational journeys.

Integration

Eight participants highlighted the importance of belonging. Involvement in clubs, athletics, honor societies, and Greek Life strengthened their connection to campus. As Brynn advised, *“Get involved...It’s important to feel part of the school community.”* Others initially struggled to connect. Gabby felt isolated as the only FGCS in some classes, while Brooke found commuting limited her social involvement. Over time, however, campus engagement helped many participants develop a stronger sense of belonging.

Motivation

Motivation refers to being moved to act and includes both intrinsic motivation, driven by personal interest, and extrinsic motivation, driven by desired outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000). All participants described motivation as essential to persistence. Many combined personal passions with practical goals such as career stability and financial independence. Lily and Jasmine pursued careers aligned with their interests, while Gabby reflected, *“In the end, I do want to be proud of myself.”* Support systems also reinforced motivation. Kadence encouraged students to find *“people in your life to help push and motivate you,”* Nadia credited her family responsibilities and faith, and Brooke and Ellie emphasized self-determination and long-term goals.

Resources

Participants described varying experiences accessing campus resources. Some, including Lily and Jett, actively sought support, while others discovered resources gradually. Most eventually utilized tutoring centers, writing support, or faculty mentorship. As Gabby advised, *“Use every tool to your advantage—professors, faculty, fellow students...you are by no means alone.”* Many also described professors as instrumental in their success. Kadence noted that faculty availability through office hours and individualized assistance significantly enhanced her experience.

Support System

Support systems, including family, peers, mentors, coworkers, professors, and faith communities were essential to persistence. Families often provided encouragement despite having limited knowledge of the college experience. Brooke emphasized her parents’ unwavering support, while Ellie shared, *“My support person is the reason I am graduating this May.”* Kadence similarly stressed surrounding oneself with encouraging people, and Nadia found mentorship and guidance through her church.

Cultivating Self-Awareness

As participants navigated college, they developed greater self-awareness, confidence, and resilience. Their accomplishments and perseverance strengthened their sense of identity and fueled continued persistence.

Accomplishment

All participants expressed pride in achieving personal goals. Jasmine and Bella described accomplishment as a source of motivation, while Ellie reflected, *“I feel like I actually truly achieved something in my life, and I didn’t feel like that before.”* Jasmine valued becoming the first in her family to graduate, and Nadia explained that college helped her *“figure out who I am and what I want.”* Jett similarly described college as an opportunity for personal growth and self-reflection.

Grit

Grit is defined as passion and sustained perseverance toward long-term goals despite challenges (Duckworth, 2016; Schimschal et al., 2023). Every participant demonstrated grit throughout her college journey. Ten of the 12 women balanced employment with school, and one also cared for dependents. Justice emphasized prioritization and avoiding procrastination, while Lily and Brynn described balancing full-time work with coursework. Bella navigated parenting, employment, and school simultaneously, and Ellie discussed the difficulty of managing limited family time.

Several participants overcame significant personal hardships. Brooke persisted despite serious health challenges, viewing her degree as evidence of her strength. Ellie overcame early struggles with reading and a speech impediment, while Lily continued pursuing her education despite experiencing homelessness. Nadia encouraged future students by reminding them, *“Your walk is not going to look the same as everybody else. Don’t compare yourself and keep going.”*

Discussion and Implications

The study identified three central themes that shaped the lived experiences of FGCS women. First, the decision to attend college reflected the motivations and aspirations that guided participants toward higher education. Second, persisting despite obstacles highlighted the resilience required to balance academic, social, and personal demands. Finally, developing self-awareness illustrated how identity and personal growth influenced their college experiences. Together, these themes demonstrate the interconnected factors shaping FGCS women’s educational journeys.

Consistent with prior research, the findings affirm that FGCS women often balance employment, family responsibilities, and academic demands while pursuing higher education (Engle, 2007; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). As women comprise most undergraduate and graduate students, understanding their experiences is essential for strengthening institutional support (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023). Participants reflected challenges identified in the literature, particularly managing competing responsibilities while developing a sense of belonging.

Participants expressed confidence in their academic abilities despite external demands. Many balanced work, family, childcare, and extracurricular involvement while maintaining academic progress. This aligns with research showing FGCS women demonstrate resilience and grit when facing competing responsibilities (Duckworth, 2016).

Experiences of belonging varied across participants. Some initially struggled to form connections, but involvement in clubs, athletics, honor societies, and Greek life strengthened their sense of belonging over time. These findings reinforce the importance of social integration in student persistence, as described by Tinto (2017).

Despite early challenges, all participants achieved their educational goals. Their decisions to attend college were rooted in personal passions and long-term aspirations, which remained strong sources of motivation. Participants also described a strong sense of agency, with accomplishments reinforcing their persistence.

Persistence was influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic factors included personal passions, aspirations, and self-improvement, while extrinsic factors included degree completion, family support, financial stability, and career advancement. Support from family, mentors, and campus networks also sustained motivation throughout their college journeys (Brookover et al., 2021; Dworkin, 2021).

The findings also highlight ongoing financial and structural barriers, particularly in accessing institutional resources. Participants often navigated these challenges independently, emphasizing the need for more proactive and accessible support (Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Evans et al., 2020). When available, institutional resources and engagement opportunities positively influenced persistence.

Overall, the experiences of FGCS women reflect the interaction of decision-making, persistence, and self-awareness. Grounded in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2017) and Tinto's (2017) model, the findings suggest that supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness promotes persistence and success. The study underscores the importance of accessible resources, meaningful engagement opportunities, mentoring, and strong family and peer support in fostering FGCS women's success.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on FGCS who identify as women, enrolled at four-year institutions for at least one year, within a small geographic area in Central Virginia. This group was chosen due to limited research on FGCS women lived experiences. Limitations include a largely homogeneous sample: eight of 12 participants attended the same university, nine attended private institutions, and 11 identified as White, limiting racial and institutional diversity and transferability.

Recommendations for future research include deeper exploration of integration's positive and negative effects on FGCS women's college experience, as integration was both beneficial and

challenging. Further study on persistence and grit could reveal how FGCS women sustain motivation. Research focused on women in specific degree programs or academic levels (undergraduate vs. graduate) could provide more detailed insights. Longitudinal or case studies following students over time would also enhance understanding. Expanding the geographic scope and including more diverse demographics would improve generalizability. Finally, applying similar research approaches to other gender identities could broaden support for all FGCS.

Conclusion

This transcendental phenomenological study gave FGCS women a voice to describe the factors influencing their college experiences and persistence. Through demographic surveys, interviews, and advice letters, participants shared their lived experiences, which were interpreted through the lenses of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2017) and Tinto's (2017) Model of Institutional Departure.

The findings contribute to the literature by highlighting the experiences of FGCS women. Participants described how educational opportunities, career aspirations, and personal goals motivated their decisions to attend college. Many emphasized pursuing careers that aligned with their passions and stressed the importance of college preparedness, noting that being informed before enrollment contributed to a more positive college experience.

The findings also underscored the importance of integration and motivation in persistence. Participants reported that involvement in campus activities enhanced their experiences, while strong personal motivators and support systems sustained their commitment to completing their degrees. Family, peers, and mentors served as important sources of encouragement. Although campus resources were beneficial, participants often located them independently or by chance, suggesting that greater awareness and accessibility could better support FGCS students.

As participants progressed through college, they developed greater self-awareness, confidence, and resilience. A growing sense of accomplishment strengthened their persistence, while grit enabled them to balance work, family, and other responsibilities without losing sight of their educational goals. Ultimately, their self-awareness, determination, and perseverance empowered them to overcome challenges and successfully complete their degrees.

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Appendix A: Demographic Survey

Thank you for your interest. The following demographic survey will obtain information for the recruitment purposes of this research study. The researcher will contact you if you meet the research criteria.

1. What is your name? *Please enter below.*
2. How can you best be contacted? *Please enter below and include telephone number or email address.*
3. What is your current gender identity? *Select one.*
 1. Woman
 2. Man
 3. Non-binary
 4. A gender identity not listed here (please specify)
 5. Prefer not to state
4. Do you identify yourself as a first-generation college student? *Select one.*

Definition: Someone whose parents did not complete a four-year college or university degree.

 1. Yes
 2. No
5. Have you completed at least one year of a college degree? *Select one.*
 1. Yes
 2. No
6. If you are currently enrolled, what collegiate institution are you currently enrolled in? *Please enter below.*
7. If you are currently enrolled, what undergraduate or graduate program are you currently enrolled in? *Please enter below.*
8. Do you currently take courses: *Select one.*
 1. In-person
 2. On-line
 3. Hybrid

FACTORS INFLUENCING COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

9. What is your age? *Select one.*

1. Under 18
2. 18-24
3. 25-34
4. 35-44
5. 45-54
6. Over 55

10. Please indicate how you identify yourself: *Select one.*

1. American Indian or Alaska Native
2. Asian
3. Black or African American
4. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
5. White
6. Other (that is not listed)

11. What is your marital status? *Select one.*

1. Single
2. Married
3. In a domestic partnership
4. Divorced
5. Widowed

12. Do you have dependents? *Select one.*

1. Yes
2. No

13. What is your current employment status? *Select one.*

1. Full-Time
2. Part-Time
3. Limbo/PRN
4. I am currently unemployed

14. To further grasp your experience as a first-generation college student woman, what would you say negatively influences your college experience? *Please explain.*

15. To further grasp your experience as a first-generation college student woman, what would you say positively influences your college experience? *Please explain.*

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

FACTORS INFLUENCING COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

1. Please tell me about yourself. Can you tell me about your childhood and how you viewed college growing up?
2. Let's discuss your college choice. What influenced you to choose the college you currently attend?
3. As we talk about your college choice, what influenced you to choose your major?
4. When you think about being a FGCS woman, why was obtaining a college degree important to you?
5. I am going to shift a little to talk about your experience in college. While in college, what factors have influenced your ability to do your course-work?
6. Do you feel confident in your ability to perform well in college? Please explain.
7. So far in your college experience, can you describe your feelings of belonging as a FGCS woman?
8. Do you feel integrated in your college community and/or program? Please talk about what you are involved in on campus.
9. Can you tell me about some of your personal goals as it relates to your college education?
10. With this, do you feel like you have control of meeting those personal goals? Please explain.
11. What motivates you to finish your college education?
12. How do you maintain your motivation to persist in college?
13. Do you feel as though you have been given the tools to be successful in college as a FGCS woman? Please explain.
14. As we are preparing to close, let's talk about your support system. Who has made up your support system while persisting in your degree? Did you have any mentors who helped you? How did they help you?
15. Overall, how would you describe your experience in college thus far as a FGCS woman?
16. Thank you for the time you have taken to share your story. Is there anything else you'd like to share or that you anticipated I might ask relating to this topic?

**Marketing Education Pedagogy:
How Can We Educate the Next Generation of Marketers?**

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Abstract

Various methodologies and pedagogical approaches are used to prepare marketing students for careers in the field. Methods such as project-based assessments, marketing simulations, and flipped classrooms help students gain skills. Undergraduate marketing students must develop both meta-skills (communication and critical thinking) and technical skills (industry-specific knowledge) through learning experiences. Marketing educators play a vital role in their students' career readiness. To assess how marketing professors educate their students, current marketing professors at institutions accredited by the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) were surveyed. Survey questions explored the instructional methodologies and the skills students acquired from them. It was found that ACBSP marketing professors use a combination of lectures with slides and flipped classrooms.

Keywords: Marketing Education, Pedagogy, Digital Marketing Education, Higher Education, Undergraduate Students

Marketing Education Pedagogy: How Can We Educate the Next Generation of Marketers?

The field of marketing is ever-changing, with new technologies being introduced and new best practices being shared each day. Most marketing professors' backgrounds are typically drawn from prior industry experience or scholarly research rather than from training in pedagogy. This research aims to examine marketing education pedagogy to determine which methods are effective in preparing undergraduate marketing students for the profession. Research indicates that various methods and outcomes have been effective; however, as in the field of marketing, the marketing education field is growing and changing as well. Therefore, methods used in marketing education need to be constantly examined and evaluated under current conditions.

Statement of the Problem

Undergraduate students entering the workforce upon graduation are entering a highly competitive job market due to the number of graduates relative to the number of available entry-level marketing positions. Students need to be prepared for the demands they will encounter as marketing professionals and the competitive nature involved in securing an entry-level marketing position. Students' preparation can be enhanced by how effectively professors teach the next generation of marketers in an ever-evolving marketing landscape. Many marketing faculty members are not trained educators, so we need to study how they currently prepare their students for the workforce.

Purpose of the Study

This research reviewed marketing education pedagogy and the methods in which professors shared related topics with their students, and how those students gained the skills necessary to work within the field. The purpose of this study was to identify how marketing professors from Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) business programs prepare their students. This research aimed to investigate marketing education pedagogy and the methods used to teach marketing, to inform necessary updates to develop and strengthen marketing students' skills and experiences prior to entering the field.

Definition of Terms

Marketing Education Pedagogy: Marketing education is a program of courses that teach marketing and its subfields under the broader umbrella of marketing. Pedagogy refers to "the art, science, or profession of teaching" (Merriam-Webster, 2025, para. 1). Therefore, marketing education pedagogy refers to the methodology of teaching marketing courses.

Review of Literature

Marketing education has used a wide array of pedagogical methods to prepare marketing students for careers in marketing, from lectures to project-based assignments. Research in this area has examined the advantages and outcomes of a digital marketing simulation compared

with client-based projects, a student-run digital marketing agency, and gamification within a marketing course (Beachum & Krallman, 2023; Gruen, Niman, & Chagnon, 2024; Jaskari & Syrjälä, 2022).

Beachum and Krallman's (2023) study examined two methods, the first being a client-based project that enabled students to develop skills and engage in real-world interactions with clients. The second method was a marketing simulation, which was used as an alternative to the client-based project. The client-based project was a group project, while the simulation was individually completed with assignments. Both project types received positive survey responses, with the client-based project showing higher response rates among students. A key finding was that "meta-skills" were reported to be significantly higher in the client-based project than in the simulation, aside from the "critical thinking skills" category (Beachum & Krallman, 2023, p. 68).

Another study conducted included a student-run digital marketing agency within an undergraduate-level course as a learning experience for students (Gruen et al., 2024). Students were left in charge of the agency throughout the development and establishment of the agency, resulting in alumni and current students being surveyed over the course of two years. This was then examined to gain insights into the effects of the student experience, potential challenges students faced, and, in turn, the skills they gained through the experience (Gruen et al., 2024).

Overall, instructional methods presented in previous research span various approaches to engaging students in applying lessons learned in the classroom to develop skills they can take forward in their careers.

Analysis of Existing Research and Gaps Identified

The majority of studies used surveys to collect data on student outcomes, as well as on faculty, alumni, and employer opinions. Often, these surveys asked questions about the skills entry-level marketing jobs sought and analyzed how instructional methods helped students gain those skills. Students were asked for their insights and provided the researchers with a perspective on which "meta-skills" and "technical-skills" they felt prepared to use in the workforce (Beachum & Krallman, 2023, p. 58).

One limitation of the referenced studies was that they focused on a single university and its marketing program. Not every university's marketing program functions the same way or incorporates the level of marketing education needed in the workforce; however, the strength of the research was the framework and opportunities it provided for other marketing programs to adapt, apply, and examine for their own programs.

Another limitation observed within existing marketing education research was that current research was not focused on universities that were not accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) but rather accredited by the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP). AACSB is the top accrediting body for business schools and the most common accreditation (AACSB, 2025). The AACSB accreditation focuses on the accreditation of academic research universities, whereas ACBSP was founded

with the goal of accrediting programs at two-year institutions with a focus on teaching rather than research. Most of the existing research looked at business programs accredited by the AACSB. In fact, one study used surveys completed solely by marketing faculty from AACSB business schools and, as a result, excluded marketing faculty from ACBSP schools (Keiper et al., 2023).

Marketing Education Research

Overview of Research Project

It was found that marketing students and employers were looking for a combination of “meta-skills,” “technical-skills,” “soft skills,” and “hard skills” for newly graduated marketers entering entry-level marketing positions (Beachum & Krallman, 2023, p. 58; Gruen et al., 2024, p. 2). Marketing educators need to develop educational pedagogy to help further develop their students as they prepare to enter the workforce. To do this, the study used existing frameworks to further develop best practices for preparing future marketers with the skills and experiences they need. This research focused on marketing education pedagogy and the methods that were currently being used to teach marketing to help inform necessary updates to pedagogy to develop and strengthen skills and experiences for students prior to entering the field. Due to the gap previously indicated, this research study focused on ACBSP schools rather than AACSB schools in order to provide information to help further their marketing programs.

Questions and/or Hypotheses

Research Question: How do marketing professors report creating learning experiences for undergraduate marketing students that they feel will adequately prepare them for current and future demands of marketing professionals?

Methods and Procedures

Research Design

To address the research question, this study employed a quantitative approach. Data were collected through an open-ended survey to determine how current ACBSP marketing professors were instructing their students. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality of the participants and their responses.

Participants

The participants in this study were marketing professors from ACBSP business programs who were identified as being from an ACBSP business school and were listed as business faculty on the university/college website. A spreadsheet was developed of faculty email addresses of faculty listed on ACBSP university/college websites. Potential participants were contacted regarding their interest in completing a short survey. If they were interested, they were asked to

complete a consent form. Once they completed the consent form, the participating faculty member continued to the survey questions.

Data Collection

The data collection procedures involved completing a survey via a Google Form. The initial survey questions asked for general and non-identifiable information, such as confirming the participant is a current marketing professor at an ACBSP university or college. The survey continued with 20 multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Responses to the survey were coded as “Professor #X” and the names and assigned pseudonyms were put in a file separate from survey data.

Data Analysis & Discussion

Instructional Methods

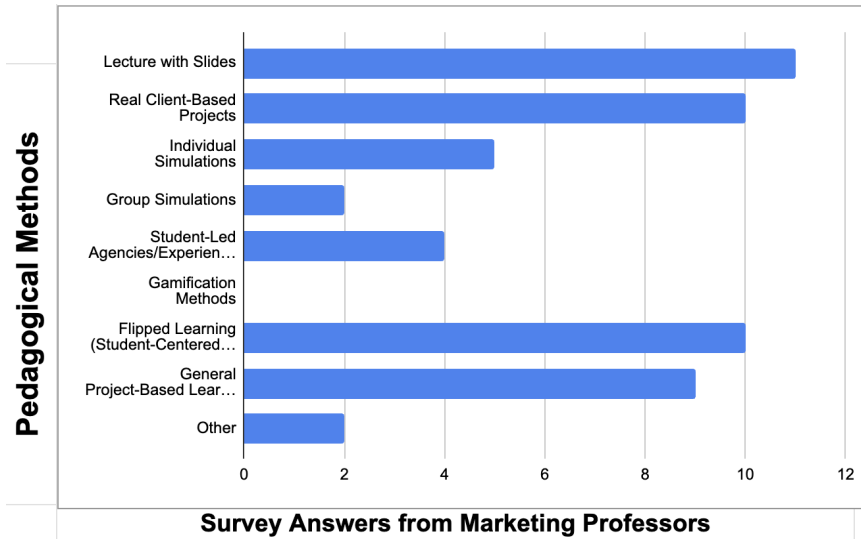
The survey yielded a total of 14 responses; two responses were from professors who were excluded from the survey as they responded “no” to the question of whether or not they had taught undergraduate marketing classes during the 2025-2026 academic year. As a result, the research focused on the remaining 12 survey responses.

The first question in the survey asked participants to select all instructional methods that applied to their classrooms from the list of the following options: lectures with slides, real client-based projects, individual simulations, group simulations, student-led agencies/experiences, gamification methods, flipped learning (student-centered), general project-based learning, or other. Respondents selected each instructional method that applied to their classroom. See Figure 2 for a visualization of the survey results.

Figure 1:

Graph of Survey Question #1 Results

MARKETING EDUCATION PEDAGOGY



Note. This figure displays the results of the survey question regarding instructional methods used by marketing professors at ACBSP-accredited universities.

Upon selecting their instructional methods, respondents were also asked to give written feedback regarding how they used the instructional methods. Professor #10 was the only respondent to not select lectures with slides as an instructional method, citing “I lecture very little. I use a lot of in-class assignments and a couple of big projects.” Professor #10 did, however, select flipped-learning/student-centered learning and general project-based learning as their marketing education pedagogy of choice. Their insights continued with stating the use of platforms such as MindTap to introduce material initially to students and then have them complete in-class assignments to reinforce concepts learned via MindTap. They also have article review assignments where students then discuss their findings as a class. To aid in the article review assignments, Professor #10 shared articles from sources such as “Marketing Dive, Retail Dive, American Marketing Association, etc.”

A commonality among professors surveyed is to dedicate the beginning of class to lectures with slides and then use the remaining class time to reinforce material with in-class assignments to apply knowledge learned. Professor #8 said, “I teach both strategies and tactics, and will lecture on something for 15-20 minutes, then have students do an application assignment, then review.” Professor #7 also concurred, saying, “I typically cover the core concepts with a combination of lecture and slides. Then we work into project or experiential-based learning to be able to apply the concepts and see it in play in a real-world setting.” While Professor #11 stated that they used slides at the beginning of class and as an introduction to concepts. Therefore, students are not learning skills specifically from lectures with slides but rather background information about key topics. Another good point made for using lectures with slides was made by Professor #13, slides are used by students as a resource to go back and review post-class.

The second most popular instructional method was a flipped classroom. Most professors used this method in conjunction with lecture slides, splitting class time so the latter half focused on students applying concepts, or on flipped-class days. Professor #2 stated that they use one course meeting time as a content day and the second as an application day. Additionally, for upper-level marketing courses, a flipped classroom instructional method is more applicable to help students gain skills to enter the workforce upon their upcoming graduation. Professor #3 stated, "I have switched to this style in my upper-division classes where students are responsible for reading the chapter and coming to class for in-class assignments and a chance to work on different skills. I find that students don't really want to listen to a 50-minute lecture anymore and like [to] use class time to work on different tasks for more hands-on learning." A combination of lectures with slides and a flipped classroom were used separately and in conjunction with one another to educate marketing students.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was limited by the timeframe of the researcher, as this was a capstone project and, therefore, constrained to a short turnaround time. Due to this restriction, the reasonable sample size of interview participants was limited to 14 responses, with 12 usable for insights. Consequently, the findings were also limited by inherent personal bias in that interviewees self-reported the data and may have over- or understated their methods. Since the respondents were evaluated via survey questions, another limitation was how much each respondent wished to share or the time they had to complete and provide details to the open-ended questions. If the questions had been asked in an interview format, respondents might have provided further insights. A delimitation of the research was the focus on Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) business programs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Marketing is an ever-evolving field. Students need to be prepared in the college classroom to enter the professional world with the skills and knowledge necessary for success. Instructional methods play a significant role in how marketing students learn key marketing concepts and gain experience and skills that make them marketable upon entering the workforce. Due to the impact of learning experiences on students, marketing professors also need to stay current with instructional methods that reflect what students can expect within an entry-level job and throughout their careers.

Marketing professors in this study helped their students develop with a combination of lectures with slides and flipped classrooms. Professors used flipped classrooms to both share content and give their students the opportunity to gain experience through hands-on work.

While the literature review introduced several instructional methods, the respondents did give students the opportunity to apply what they learned, similar to how marketing professors surveyed in their research use a flipped classroom to allow students to apply previously taught concepts. The accreditation gap identified in the literature review did not seem to have as much of an impact. Further research regarding accreditation differences in instructional methods

would need to take place in order to determine a strong relationship between accreditation and instructional methods.

Key Takeaways

The biggest takeaway from this research is that students need learning experiences that help them grow and develop skills that prepare them for the workforce. There is importance in using lectures with slides to communicate key topics and terminology; however, equal importance is placed on instructional methods that give students opportunities to apply what they have previously learned.

As Professor #11 shared, “Marketing education is a balance between the old and the new. It's up to professors to help students understand this.” Marketing professors are the guides in creating learning experiences for undergraduate students that prepare them for the current and future demands of marketing.

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