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Trapped in Transition: Examining first-semester college students' discursive struggles about home and school

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TRAPPED IN TRANSITION: EXAMINING FIRST-SEMESTER COLLEGE
STUDENTS' DISCURSIVE STRUGGLES ABOUT HOME AND SCHOOL

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Communications and Information Studies at the
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By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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Lexington, Kentucky

2013

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

TRAPPED IN TRANSITION: EXAMINING FIRST-SEMESTER COLLEGE
STUDENTS' DISCURSIVE STRUGGLES ABOUT HOME AND SCHOOL

The study examines how messages to, from, and concerning home may impact first-semester college student retention. The current study extends previous retention research in several ways. Rather than collect data regarding retention after students drop out, this study analyzed free write responses of 135 participants while they were enrolled in 15 sections of CIS 110 (Composition and Communication I) throughout the course of the Fall 2010 semester. Using relational dialectics theory (RDT) (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) as a sensitizing framework, this study identified three discursive struggles and associated radiants of meaning present in the free write responses of these 135 first semester college students. Specifically, students identified experiencing the discursive struggles of independence, integration, and expression during the first semester of college. Non-returning students also identified these same three discursive struggles. However, non-returning students identified the discursive struggle of expression much more than did the returning students. Ultimately, this dissertation study proposed practical implications for students, parents, and the academy regarding how messages to, from, and about home might impact the transition of first-semester students from high school to college.

KEYWORDS: first-semester students, transition, retention, Relational dialectics theory (RDT), discursive struggles,

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Student's Signature

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Date

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By

Molly A. Reynolds

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Director of Dissertation

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Date

DEDICATION

To Jason Reynolds, my husband. Thank you for your constant support. You have been the best partner and best friend a girl could ask for. You cheered me on when I needed it the most and you turned any feelings of doubt into encouragement, humor, love, and kindness. These last 12 years have been full of wonder, laughter, and love. I am so thankful to have you by my side.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

When I entered college in 1998, I was excited to move out of the small town where I grew up to start meeting new people and experiencing new opportunities. The college I attended was only a two hour drive from my hometown. This close proximity made it easy for me to visit family members and friends frequently, which reduced my anxiety about being away from home for the first time. Despite the fact that I was an only child, I was not homesick at all during my first semester of college.

As I started acclimating to college living and began spending more time with new friends, I also began to feel increasing pressure from my roommate Jess, a girl from my hometown, to come home with her on the weekends. Unlike me, Jess did not make efforts to meet new people or to get involved in social events. I knew it was only a matter of time until she would drop out of college. What I did not realize at the time, however, is that first-semester students are at a higher risk for early departure. Research reveals that first-semester students may experience social and academic struggles that make a successful adjustment to college difficult.

Seeing Jess unhappy made me feel guilty about being excited to be away from home. She, her mom, and her boyfriend all pressured me to come home with her on the weekends. I succumbed to the pressure and began going home with her on the weekends. However, in spending more time away from school, I ended up neglecting some of the new friendships I had been forging. Also, coming home more often sent some misleading messages to my family, high school friends, and hometown boyfriend. For example, it seemed to them that coming home so often was both easy and what I wanted to do. Consequently, they started making more demands for me to come home even

more frequently. I began getting more calls and emails reminding me of upcoming birthdays, weddings, high school events, and the like. Although the messages were not explicitly meant to pressure me, they did make me feel torn and stuck in the middle, straddling the spheres of college and home.

I now realize that most students experience a plethora of similar emotions during their first semester at college. Like many first-semester students, I experienced conflicting emotions of excitement, guilt, happiness, shame, eagerness, tension, elation, turmoil, pleasure, and sadness. Balancing the flurry of emotions was not easy and at times I questioned my role and identity at college. Although I stayed in college and graduated on time, Jess did not return after the first semester. I feel lucky that I was able to manage my tensions and surround myself with individuals who bolstered my self-concept and burgeoning identity.

For many students like Jess, the pressures of balancing competing demands can lead to transferring to another college or university closer to home or to dropping out altogether and never earning a degree. I am not entirely sure what set me apart from my roommate during the first semester of college, but I do know that Jess dropped out based on social factors, not academic ones. In fact, based on grades, Jess would have not been labeled an at-risk student. Given that she did not return after the first semester, however, she was one. Jess and I were similar in many ways. We were friends who came from the same small town and roomed together. We were both good students. What went on during that first semester that contributed to Jess's decision to leave and my decision to return?

The goal of this study is to identify the discursive struggles students experience during the first semester as they attempt to make the transition to college and determine how these struggles might influence one's decision to drop out or return for a second semester. This study is part of a larger funded exploratory study designed to increase understanding about the impact of messages to, from, and about home on first-year student retention. Members of the research team include Drs. Deanna Sellnow, Laura Stafford, Brandi Frisby, Deborah Chung, and Lisa O'Connor, as well as several graduate students (Brittany Lash, Jason Martin, Rachel Price, Molly Reynolds).

More specifically, this study applies relational dialectics theory (RDT) (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) to uncover first-semester students' discursive struggles concerning messages to, from, and about home. RDT has been used effectively to study the complexities of stepfamilies (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006), in-laws (e.g., Prentice, 2009), adoptive families (e.g., Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010), first-generation students and their families (e.g., Orbe, 2004, 2008), and the classroom experience (e.g., Prentice & Kramer, 2006). This project extends the literature by applying RDT to first-semester college student reflections as they attempt to make a successful transition. This chapter provides a statement of the problem, rationale for the study, and organizational structure of the dissertation.

Statement of the Problem

Student retention research is becoming ever more important as universities across the country attempt to discover strategies to prevent students from departing before earning a four-year degree (e.g., Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Hunter, 2006; Tinto, 2006). The desire to retain college students is not a new one. In fact, a deliberate focus

on first-year student retention can be traced back to the 1970s when retention efforts at the University of South Carolina created national interest (Hunter, 2006, pp. 8-9).

During the 1980s, retention efforts focused on "front loading" strategies during the first semester to help students successfully transition to college (Hunter, 2006, p. 8). Ewell (1984) argued, for example, that "maintaining enrollments through increased recruitment and retention has held an escalating level of priority" (p. 10). Despite recognizing this need to focus on the first semester, fewer than 40% of colleges and universities actually took steps to improve first-year student retention (El-Khawas, 1987).

In the 1990s, retention efforts focused on "the assessment of student learning" and "experiential learning through community service and service-learning" (Nuss, 2003, p. 65). In addition to this focus on academic performance and overcoming challenges within the classroom came a deliberate intention to examine challenges beyond the classroom related to family, identity, health, sexuality, and autonomy (Damush, Hays, & Dimatteo, 1997).

Despite nearly 50 years of research efforts focused on college student retention, the "departure puzzle" continues to perplex researchers (e.g., Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997). In fact, approximately 50% of college students depart from college before earning a degree (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Why? Tinto (2006) argues that "most institutions have not yet been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation" (p. 6). Braxton (2008) echoes Tinto by contending that research conclusions and implications must be translated into a scholarship of practice among higher education institutions for student retention to improve. Moving toward a

scholarship of practice is important because improving retention benefits both universities and students. Although the departure puzzle may not ever be able to fully understood or solved, Braxton et al. (2004) argue that "we can become as informed as possible and make evidence-based decisions for improving campus environments and meeting our obligations to individuals and the nation" (p. 4).

Successful retention efforts benefit colleges and universities. More specifically, doing so improves college and university rankings among benchmarks, Carnegie classifications, and economic solvency (Fike & Fike, 2008). Seidman (2005) discusses the financial implications of early student departure stating, "when a student leaves college prematurely, any debt incurred must be repaid, despite the failure to graduate, and the college loses future funding in the form of tuition and fees and auxiliary services (e.g., bookstore, food service) generated over time" (p. 8).

Successful retention efforts also benefit students by helping them integrate academically and socially into the university culture (Tinto, 1993; Coll & Stewart, 2008). Pizzolato (2008) contends that helping students successfully navigate and make a smooth transition to college is a responsibility of colleges and universities. Richman, Rosenfeld and Bowen (1998) maintain that "supporting students and enhancing academic success are critical steps toward promoting more competent adult role performance" (p. 311). Furthermore, students who persist and graduate "earn more money over a lifetime, incur fewer health problems, suffer less penal involvement, and live longer than non-college graduates" (Seidman, 2005, p. 8).

The costs of early departure are great both for students and institutions, as are the rewards for staying to complete a four-year degree. To further enhance retention efforts,

colleges and universities must better understand the needs of students who enter their doors.

Rationale

Much retention research published to date focuses on identifying how individual differences may impact retention. Copeland and Levesque-Bristol (2011) explain that retention research has narrowly focused on individual differences in order to predict the type of student who will successfully persist. In other words, "the very nature of these studies suggest that if a university could find the right students, then retention rates would surely improve" (p. 486). Singell and Waddell (2010) point out, however, that "retention is a difficult outcome to predict, in the sense that there is much variation that is not explained by the list of student determinants in the model" (p. 556). Rather than focus only on individual differences, Ewell (1984) calls for each college or university to address three questions related to retention: "the degree to which it [the college or university] has a retention problem, the particular student populations among which the problem is occurring, and some of the reasons why the problem is occurring" (p. 10). Understanding how to address these questions remains essential today because the percentage of students leaving school before earning a degree continues to grow. In fact, "nearly one half of all first time freshmen who begin college at a four year institution will not complete their degree in the institution they first enroll and nearly 40% will never graduate" (Goenner, Harris, & Pauls, 2013, p. 1).

Recent research reveals that a growing percentage of freshmen are choosing not to come back for a second year, thereby identifying the need to specifically focus on the retention of first-year students (Adams, 2011). In fact, more than 50% of all college

students from four-year institutions depart college before the start of the second year (Tinto, 1993). Students may decide not to return because they entered college with differing goals, values, and expectations (Sandler, 2000). Thus, "attention to student characteristics, needs, behaviors, and experiences is central to creating and sustaining successful transition initiatives" during this critical first year (Hunter, 2006, p. 9).

Since the 1980s, retention research and strategies have focused primarily on increasing various forms of academic and social support provided to first-year students by colleges and universities (e.g., Bean, 1980, 1983, 1985; Keels, 2004; Tinto, 1987, 1993). Similarly, Singell and Waddell (2010) suggest that "the academic track is influenced by the quality of student's interactions with the academic elements of the institution, including faculty and other students, and the social track is refined by the quality of student's social interactions, including friends and social activities" (p. 548). According to Bean (1985), student satisfaction and, consequently, student retention, is linked to the courses students enroll in and their affiliation with student organizations. Thus, many colleges and universities have developed or augmented first-year advising initiatives and academic programs, as well as social activities and organizations.

Although these strategies may be critical to a successful transition process, both fail to consider how off-campus experiences may affect a student's transition to college. Astin (1984), for instance, encourages universities "to focus less on what they do and more on what the student does" (p. 522). Astin defines student involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). To that end, Bean (2005) proposes nine student-centered themes relevant to retention. Off-campus experiences are central in his themes. To clarify, Bean

(2005) explains that influences from family, friends, and romantic partners can significantly influence student decisions to transfer to an institution closer to home or to leave and never complete a college degree at all. In other words, competing demands to, from, and about friends and family at home may influence a student's decision to drop out. Bean (2005) concludes that when external factors influence students to leave the college or university, there is little that colleges and universities can do to affect change.

The rationale for this dissertation project is based on the assumption that there may, in fact, be things colleges and universities can do to help first-year students transition successfully even when external factors such as competing messages to, from, and about home are at work in their lives. Moreover, if colleges and universities can discover what these competing messages are, effective intervention strategies can be derived to address them. If first-year college student retention percentages increase as a result, students and institutions will reap the benefits.

RDT is used as a sensitizing framework for this study focused on student reflections regarding messages to, from, and about home during their first semester on campus. Using RDT, competing tensions may surface that work to influence a student's successful transition to college. This dissertation extends RDT by going beyond the examination of communication in a single dyad or group to explore the various discursive struggles that emerge from a complex network of relationships in which first-semester college students find themselves. Included in this complex network are new relationships formed at college and existing relationships from home (e.g., hometown friends, new friends, family members, professors, advisors, roommates, romantic partners, teammates, coworkers, classmates). As the number of relationships first-semester students engage in

grows, so do the desires, goals, wants, and needs of the individuals involved. These relationships may create a "knot of contradictions" (Cornforth, 1968, p. 11) within which students must negotiate both at school and at home.

To understand the knot of contradictions experienced by first-semester students, it is prudent to hear from the students themselves while they are experiencing them throughout the first semester. This dissertation study does so by examining student narratives collected in the form of in-class reflective writing assignments. These in-class "free writes" prompted students to write about any discursive struggles related to the college transition they may have been experiencing at the time. Thus, this study extends retention literature by focusing on both internal and external relational struggles impacting students during the first semester while attending college.

Moreover, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argue that the goal of RDT is not merely to recognize the struggles and tensions present. Rather, the goal is to contribute to our understanding of the processes people undergo as they "create, realize, and deal with the dialectical tensions" (p. 44). Thus, this study is framed around the eight strategies Baxter and Montgomery claim people use when negotiating tensions.

Ultimately, Palmer, O'Kane, and Owens (2009) contend that managing the first-year transition is "not a unilateral activity" (p. 52). Thus, this dissertation study intends to discover strategies college advisors, instructors, staff, and administrators might employ to help students manage these discursive struggles effectively as they transition from home to college. This study also intends to discover communication strategies family members and hometown friends might employ, as well as for the students themselves as a means to successfully navigate the transition from high school to college.

Organization

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The first chapter identifies the problem and rationale for the study, as well as a justification for the theoretical framework selected. The second chapter reviews related literature and poses two research questions. The third chapter describes and justifies the methods utilized and the fourth chapter offers the results. The final chapter identifies conclusions, proposes practical implications, and provides directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of related literature informing this dissertation. First, a comprehensive summary of what is known to date about the first-year college student transition is provided. Second, research on relational dialectics theory (RDT; Baxter, 2004a, 2004b; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) is reviewed and a rationale for using RDT to ground this study provided. Finally, based on the literature, the chapter concludes by posing the research questions guiding the present study.

Exploring the College Transition

Individuals experience many transition periods over the course of a lifetime. Paul and Brier (2001) explain that one critical transition point occurs when one moves from their childhood home to attend college. Pope, Miklitsch, and Weigand (2005) acknowledge that even for students who live close enough to commute or return home frequently, "venturing temporarily outside of their familiar community of family and friends" is challenging (p. 51). Whether students live on or off campus, this transition period is filled with many "firsts," for example, "independent living, learning to manage finances, and developing decision-making skills" (Darling, McWey, Howard, & Holmstead, 2007, p. 216).

Thompson, Orr, Thompson, and Grover (2007) discuss the important role universities and colleges ought to play in addressing the transitional issues first-semester students face. In fact, Thompson et al. argue that universities have the obligation to regularly assess student perceptions in order to identify transitional issues and help students deal appropriately with them (p. 641). Unfortunately, however, first-year students do not always get the attention they need from the academy. Palmer et al.

(2009) explain, "it is fair to say that the actual experiences of students entering the university have somehow failed to attract the level of academic scrutiny that is necessary to appreciate this transition" (p. 38). Finding ways to connect university faculty and first-semester students from the outset is essential because "initial encounters between first-year students and other students, faculty, student affairs, and university personnel often set the tone for how well or how soon first-year students adjust to their new environments" (Pope et al., 2005, p. 52).

Understanding how students experience the transition to college is critical because not all students transition in the same way. For many new students, this transition is a welcomed opportunity to engage in new experiences (Bernier, Larose, & Whipple, 2005). During the transition, students may see new encounters as opportunities for exploration and mastery (Kenny, 1994). Tinto (1987, 1993) notes that students are better able to transition academically and socially when they navigate through three stages of development; separation, transition, and identification. The separation period is defined as the time during which students separate from their pre-college identities (Elkins et al., 2000). During this stage, students negotiate their self-identities and self-concepts in order to distance themselves from home to begin transitioning into the college culture (Smith, Carmack, & Titsworth, 2006). Elkins et al. (2000) explain that "this separation constitutes the first stage of passage into the college career and may require some personal transformation and possibly some rejection of the norms of past communities" (p. 253). During the transition, students get to experiment with new roles, relationships, and challenge existing beliefs and ideologies (Smith et al., 2006).

Research efforts have identified that student involvement and academic and social integration are factors for success (e.g., Astin, 1984, 1993; Pope et al., 2005; Tinto, 1993). Astin (1984) recognizes students who attend four-year colleges, live in dorms, work part-time, are involved with honors programs, develop relationships with faculty members, and have positive roommate relationships are more likely to persist in college.

Several stressors have also been identified that can impede students' attempts to successfully separate from their pre-college identities. These stressors stem from financial responsibilities, work, and balancing family and interpersonal relationships (Darling et al., 2007, p. 216). Shanley and Johnson (2007) also note that students worry about college expenses, meeting new people, making friends, missing hometown family and friends, and handling new experiences (e.g., parties, sex, living with a roommate). In addition, Credé and Niehorster (2012) explain that students often stress over being able to:

> navigate a new social environment, develop an orientation toward the institution of which they are now a member, become productive members of the university community, adapt to new roles and responsibilities (e.g., managing own finances), manage the separation from friends and family, and engage in the process of making career decisions. (p. 133)

Students may also feel stress about being stuck in a relational limbo between initiating new relationships and maintaining existing ones. Students struggle as they experience conflicting emotions when separating from their familiar childhood support systems for the first time (e.g., Larose & Boivin, 1998; Mounts, 2004).

Students are not the only ones who grapple with emotions associated with this transition period. Parents and other family members, friends, as well as significant others also often experience struggles over holding on and letting go. According to Darling et al. (2007), "families struggling with conflicts may be related to an increase in stress of both children leaving for college and feelings of failure associated with an inability to adequately cope with stressor pile-up often associated with college life" (p. 228). Tinto (1987; 1993) points out that if students are not encouraged by family members to adopt more independent practices, they will be less likely to succeed in college.

The following paragraphs provide more comprehensive details about the experiences of the college student in transition. First is a section describing some general characteristics of the majority of first-year college students today, as well as some unique stressors for target populations. Second is a section explaining what is known about social support as it relates to the college student in transition.

First-Semester Student Characteristics

According to Hunter (2006), understanding what it means to be a student in transition is key to targeting retention efforts. Today's college students are classified by numerous monikers, such as "Gen-Xers," "Baby Boomers," and "Millennials." The majority of college students today are classified as millennials (Keup & Kinzie, 2007). A new group of students of students born in the mid-1990s or later, however, will soon replace them. This new group is being dubbed "digital natives" because they have grown up with technological devices such as smart phones, computers, laptops, and notebooks and that is influencing how they perceive and interact in the world (Prensky, 2001). With that disclaimer in mind, DeBard (2004) explains that millennial students have numerous

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qualities and characteristics that set them apart from other generations of students. As DeBard concludes, "there is no denying that millennial students have the numbers to dominate both the educational scene and economic reality for the preceding generations, as Gen Xers move into midlife, and Boomers into elderhood" (p. 43).

Millennial students tend to view college, communication, and support needs in particular ways. For instance, they tend to view college as a business and themselves as the consumers (Propp & Rhodes, 2006, p. 45). Millennial students have distinctive learning style and technology use preferences, as well as a desire to engage in teamwork and team based activities (Laanan, 2006). Today's students also have keen media awareness, heightened sophistication, and engage in sarcastic humor (El-Khawas, 2003, p. 59). DeBard (2004) identifies seven specific traits millennial college students have in common: being special, sheltered, confident, conventional, team-oriented, achieving, and pressuring.

"Being special" has both positive and negative consequences for millennial students and colleges alike. First, students feel empowered to accomplish personal successes. However, the accomplishment may be simply attempting college as opposed to completing college successfully. DeBard (2004) explains that students have received accolades their whole lives just for participating rather than for crossing the finish line and gaining personal victories (p. 35). Thus, "it follows that students are to be considered special by those who would provide for their student service needs because of the high expectations placed on them but also that they would perceive themselves as special and highly expectant" (p. 35).

By "sheltered," DeBard (2004) means millennial students are generally rule and law abiding individuals who require structure and enforcement of rules and laws. This dependence on rules produces a catch-22. Millennial students are not rule-oriented as a result of their own experiences or of their own volition. While growing up, their parents played a major role in planning and organizing their activities. Consequently, when millennials suddenly find themselves on their own without a parent to guide them, they may not know how to manage their newfound freedom. Despite uncertainty involved with handling independence, millennial students are confident and optimistic about their futures. This optimism and confidence can come at a cost. Due to a structured and sheltered upbringing, millennial students tend "to have high ambitions but no clear life plan" and tend to choose an "educational route with low odds of success" (p. 36).

Millennial students are also conventional and prefer to go with the flow because "one of the best ways of getting along, is going along" (DeBard, 2004, p. 37). This conventional view goes hand in hand with another trait DeBard recognizes in millennial students: teamwork. Millennial students enjoy engaging in teamwork in classroom settings and in their interpersonal relationships. Specifically, millennial students like to maintain constant contact with others and do so through computer-mediated communication (CMC) and face-to-face (FtF) interaction (p. 37). These preferences for conventionality and teamwork can have numerous benefits for college students. However, they also tend to produce students who do not know how to react to less structured assignments (i.e., ones without rubrics or specific rules) and who expect to be "saved" by authority figures (i.e., parents and instructors) when they encounter obstacles (p. 37).

Another primary characteristic of millennial students is their drive to achieve (DeBard, 2004). This characteristic is evident in both males and females (p. 38). According to Keup and Kinzie (2007), one of the greatest shifts taking place in higher education involves the number of females attending college. Females comprise approximately 55% of today's college students. Not only are more females choosing to attend college, but they are also finishing and going on to do graduate studies. In fact, nearly 75% of female first-year students also indicate aspirations to attain a graduate degree (Keup & Kinzie, 2007, p. 21).

In addition to the growing number of women attending college is the fact that "the racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual-orientation of college students is more diverse today than it was twenty years ago" (Pope et al., 2005, p. 52). Pope et al. discuss the myriad of cultures represented in today's college students and conclude that there cannot be only one singular approach to studying a "typical" college student (p. 53).

The final characteristic DeBard (2004) identifies is being pressured. This characteristic can lead both male and female students to feel stress and to struggle with anxiety concerning a "pressure to perform" (p. 38). Millennial students "feel enough pressure to conform to the expectations that have been codified for them through zero-policies and standardized performance measurements without also having to be creative" (p. 38). Although these characteristics do not describe every millennial, they do provide some insight into the struggles students might face during the first semester.

Fortunately, according to Upcraft and Gardner (1989), these millennials that comprise the majority of college students today can be successful if they are able to accomplish six tasks or milestones:

We believe freshmen succeed when they make progress toward fulfilling their

educational and personal goals: 1) developing academic and intellectual

competence; 2) establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; 3)

developing an identity; 4) deciding on a career and lifestyle; 5) maintaining

personal and health and wellness; and 6) developing an integrated philosophy of

life. (p. 2)

In sum, the characteristics of millennials as identified by DeBard (2004) may influence

their ability to transition successfully from high school to college. Upcraft and Gardner

provide more specific guidelines to follow in order to do so.

At-Risk Populations

Because millennial students are also diverse, several additional considerations

ought to be made regarding special populations (e.g., first-generation students (FGS),

community college transfers, minority students, and nontraditional students) that may be

at-risk for early departure. Stieha (2010) and Tinto (1993) clarify that these at-risk

students face additional barriers that can impede their successful transition into college.

In other words, having access to attend college is not enough (Kingston, 2008). At-risk

students tend to be filled with even more uncertainty and stress than their college

counterparts. Thompson et al. (2007) contend, for example, that:

students from families of lower socioeconomic status are possibly more likely to

be the first in their family to attend college, and cannot draw on parents'

knowledge of college life, either social or academic. They may also be working

more to finance their education and are focused on issues that differentiate them

from students who are not concerned with their financial situation, thus creating

more stress. (p. 641)

These stressors can make it difficult for students to separate from their pre-college

identities. Some research also distinguishes at-risk students as non-traditional.

Nontraditional students are defined as students over the age of 25 or as students who

were first in their families to attend college (p. 73). The National Center for Education

Statistics (2002) explain the term nontraditional students now refers to students who have

at least one of the following characteristics:

They do not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or

she finished high school, enroll part time, attends part time for at least part of the

academic year, works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled in

college courses, are considered financially independent for purposes of

determining eligibility for financial aid, have dependents other than a spouse, are

a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents, or

do not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other

high school completion certificate or did not finish high school). (pp.2-3)

Three groups of non-traditional at-risk students targeted in retention research and

strategies are first-generation students, minority students, and transfer students.

First-generation students. First-generation students (FGS) are those who come

from families where neither parent nor older sibling has attended college. FGS may find

it more difficult to transition from high school to college than other first-semester

students (Ishitani, 2006). Moreover, Kingston (2008) explains that FGS are also less

likely to graduate than other first-semester students due to a lack of interpersonal support,

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financial strains, and a lack of college readiness. According to Engel, Berneo, and O'Brien (2006), FGS have numerous obstacles such as "poor academic preparation, lower educational aspirations, less encouragement and support from family, less knowledge about the college application process, fewer resources to pay for college, and difficulties adjusting to the academic, social, and cultural norms or the academy" (pp. 14-15). FGS students may feel additional stress during the college transition because they cannot discuss their struggles with members from home because family members do not understand the college experience (Orbe, 2008).

To combat these issues, some institutions place FGS in learning communities to help foster support and a sense of identity during the first semester (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Although doing so can provide a support network, doing so can also cause students to feel marginalized from the rest of the student population.

Minority students. According to Seidman (2005), "although minority students are entering college at a higher rate than in previous years, they continue to leave at a higher rate than nonminorities" (p. 8). Pope et al. (2005) explain that minority students may feel alone at predominately white universities and rely on "programs and services that designed to specifically meet their needs, actively supporting and advising cultural clubs and organizations on campus, and providing proactive advisement and feedback to students throughout their first years" (p. 59). Although these programs can help minority students integrate into the college community, minority students may not feel comfortable seeking assistance from faculty and peers (Patterson, Sedlacek, & Perry, 1984).

College transfers. Like FGS and minority students, students who transfer from a community college to a four-year institution or transfer back and forth between institutions can be at-risk of early withdrawal. Johnson and Muse (2012) examine how student attendance problems plague universities and retention rates. Specifically, the authors note that between 1999-2000, 59% of college graduates had attended more than one university (p. 153). When students "double dip" by taking courses at various universities, costs are incurred by both students and universities. For universities, the costs are financial. For students, the costs may be social, academic, and financial. According to Mullane (2005), transfer students take longer to complete their degrees and incur greater student debt than students who remain at a single college or university.

To ensure success, universities need to reach out and find ways to help transfer students persist and graduate (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Unfortunately, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) explain that universities tend to forget to target transfer students in their retention efforts.

This examination of the characteristics of millennial students (including various at-risk student populations) illustrates the fact that there cannot be a one-size fit all approach to addressing needs of first semester-students. Pope et al. (2005) expound that we have to be attuned to the "lens through which students view the world, affecting their understanding and interpretation of the environment (p. 61). One way to understand the experiences of today's first-semester students may be to explore from whom students seek support while at college and to what degree the messages are deemed supportive by students.

First-Semester Students and Social Support

Social support serves two essential functions for first-semester college students. Social support helps students adjust successfully to college and helps reduce stress (e.g., DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Fisher & Hood, 1987; Richmond, et al., 1998). Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) explain that successful student adjustment has to do with "becoming integrated into the social life of college, forming a support network, and managing social freedoms" (p. 281). Thus, having a strong support system can be crucial for student success.

First-semester students may experience a wide range of social support both on-campus and off-campus. Support can come from family, friends, romantic partners, peers, roommates, instructors, and advisors. Research has identified that parents (and mothers in particular) may provide a secure base of support for students (Smith & Zhang, 2009). When students feel as if they have no one to turn to at college, they can turn toward home and seek support from their parents.

Parental support. Huff (2001) states that parents should function as a stable unit, encouraging their college student's exploration. High parental support is correlated to high levels of psychological adjustment in college (Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1994; Mounts, 2004). For support to be effective, the receivers must perceive it as appropriate and not burdensome (Maurin & Boyd, 1990). Trice (2002) found that college students communicate with their parents as a means of establishing security about their decision-making, rather than as means of soliciting advice. Moreover, college student initiated communication appears to be the most desired. Parents should proceed with caution when making friend requests via social networks sites (e.g. Facebook, MySpace)

and do so in ways that abide by clear privacy boundaries (Bernstein, 2009). When boundaries are invaded or ignored, parents may be engaging in helicopter parenting, impeding their college child's successful transition.

Helicopter parenting. Coburn (2006) defines helicopter parents as "the baby boomer generation of parents who hover" (p. 9). Helicopter parents are used to being involved in their child's life from preschool through high school and still have a strong desire to maintain active involvement (Coburn, 2006). As a result, millennial students feel close to their parents and respect their values and opinions (Laanan, 2006). Although millennial students appreciate high parental support, a high level of involvement is not always desired once they arrive at college. Petronio (1994) explains that many college students seek to separate and gain independence from parents. Yet, many parents continue to hover and engage in invasive behaviors that "send a message to their children that indicates a reluctance of parents to let go" (p. 245).

Parental overprotection and involvement is linked to an increased influence of the external locus of control, which in turn influences social functioning and anxiety during the first semester in college (Spokas & Heimberg, 2009). Helicopter parents have high standards and expectations for their students, which can add to an already stressful time (Coburn, 2006). Katz and Nelson (2007) note these "specific critical comments or high parental standards may devalue youth and foster self-criticism" (p. 448). College students who perceive their parents to be critical tend to develop self-critical tendencies and personalities (p. 448). According to Coburn, the challenge with helicopter parents "is to figure out how to enlist these already involved parents in our *[sic]* mutual goal of helping students become engaged learners, competent and creative problem solvers, and

responsible and effective citizens—in essence, helping students grow up" (p. 11). Rather than encourage parents to reduce contact with their millennial students, interventions need to involve parents in more effective and constructive ways. Although parents have the opportunity to provide a base of support or stress for first-semester students, additional discourses occurring both at school and home may also affect the transition to college. Baxter (2011) proposes numerous discourses that permeate talk within and about relationships. These discourses that occur both at school and home can affect students' meaning making and identity construction.

Peer relationships. First-semester students may get social support from peers (Astin, 1993). Astin states, "the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (p. 398). Paul and Brier (2001) explain that having strong peer relationships may ease the transition of moving away from one's childhood home.

Although establishing new peer relationships at college is critical to student retention and success, several barriers may impede such relationship formation. Paul and Brier (2001) explore the concept of *friendsickness*, which is the concern over the potential loss of pre-college friendships. When students fail to successfully negotiate the terms of moving away or moving on from pre-college relationships, college students may "experience difficulty in synthesizing and integrating their continuing attachments with their new relationships" (p. 78).

Facebook and other social networking sites now afford college students opportunities to stay in contact with pre-college relationships while also meeting new friends. Stephenson-Abetz and Holman (2012) explain that Facebook puts students in a

position of having to balance old and new identities and relationships simultaneously. Facebook can provide students with the support of seeing their friends go through the same experiences of being away from home. The authors state, "as they move into their dorm rooms and wave goodbye to their parents, many students are simultaneously connected to hundreds of "friends" from home, friends who are communicating their experiences, feelings, excitements, and struggles in the same situations through Facebook" (p. 177). Although students receive support from both old and new friends on Facebook, Orenstein (2009) questions whether constant communication to and from home encumbers students from successfully separating from their pre-college identities. Stephenson-Abetz and Holman (2012) refute this concern noting instead that Facebook affords students opportunities to enhance communication with their interpersonal relationships. The authors posit that "while students form relationships, make mistakes, negotiate life decisions, and communicate the social experience of college along with the old and new relationships in their lives, they simultaneously watch and respond to others as they navigate what and whom they want to be" (p. 189).

With Orenstein's (2009) skepticism in mind, several potential implications may arise from having too much access to information regarding home. If too much communication and involvement can create helicopter parents, can reliance on social media interactions through sites such as Facebook also create helicopter students who cling too much to the lives of individuals at home? Ling and Baron (2007) examine how technology creates both satisfaction and stress for college students. The authors contend that technology does afford students' opportunities to stay connected, however, students may also feel trapped by technology. Consequently, will students ever be able to

successfully form new relationships, identities, and institutional loyalty when they are maintaining strong (and in some cases stronger) connections with friends and family at home? Even with conflicting opinions on the positive and negative implications associated with Facebook and other social networks during the college transition, most researchers agree that first-semester students benefit from initiating on campus relationships with roommates, instructors, and advisors.

Roommate relationships. Astin (1984) explains that students who live in residence halls are more likely to persist. Research also indicates that the roommate relationship can impact successful college integration. As Hawken, Duran, and Kelly (1991) explain, "college students, particularly freshmen, should be matched with roommates of similar attitudes and personalities" (p. 298). Hawken et al. contend that similar communication skills can build rapport between roommates. Adversely, students who cannot connect with others, and with their roommates in particular, may develop a strong sense of loneliness or friendsickness. Extended periods of loneliness and friendsickness may prompt early departure (Hawken et al., 1991).

Not only can living in a college residence hall assist students in creating connections with peers and roommates, Schudde (2011) purports that students who live in residence halls may benefit from having access to additional social support from resident advisors and staff members. Having extra support is essential during the college transition. Students, especially at-risk students, may lack the desired support systems at home and may need to turn to on campus avenues of support to assist with the successful transition to college.

Student-teacher relationships. Levitz and Noel (1989) discuss the importance of first-year students having support from college faculty and personnel. Specifically, the authors explicate that first-year students who feel comfortable contacting a campus affiliated person for help are more than twice as likely to return for a sophomore year. Thompson et al. (2007) explain that first-semester students benefit from small class sizes, as well as from being in classes with other first-semester students. The authors also discuss the importance of students interacting with instructors inside and outside of the classroom. Although such student-instructor interaction is ideal, the authors also acknowledge that it is not always possible. This lack of interaction may be "due to faculty issues such as class size, faculty workloads, lack of rewards for such interaction, and the increasing existence of adjunct faculty. Issues that affect retention include the loss of a sense of community on campus, and lack of consensus about the primary mission or missions of the institutions" (Thompson, et al., 2007, p. 646). Although it may not always be possible for students to interact frequently with faculty during the first semester, students have additional opportunities to get support from academic advisors.

Student-advisor relationships. Although Darling et al. (2007) acknowledges that it is impossible to eliminate all stressors for college students lives, more should be done "preparing students to confront these *[sic]* issues and with more adaptive tools and stronger 'I can do this' attitudes" (p. 228). Students may get such support from their advisors. In fact, Black (2007) goes so far as to claim that "at no time in the college student's experience is the connection with an advisor more important than during and before the first semester" (p. 87). Unfortunately, however, Thompson (2008) found that more than half of first-semester students did not use formal academic support services.

Moreover, Schudde (2011) discovered that many at-risk students face additional

obstacles to establishing relationships with faculty and advisors due to the fact that they

may have transferred from a community college and may live at home and commute to

campus. As such, they have less time to fully engage, integrate, and feel a sense of

belongingness to the university.

Of importance to this dissertation study are the communication processes college

students engage in during the first semester since individuals construct their personal

identities through communication (Baxter, 2004a). To date, relatively little is known

about the discourses first-semester students engage in with hometown family and friends

during the college transition. Thus, this dissertation study intends to add to such

understanding by examining student interpretations of messages to, from, and about

home from the perspective of relational dialectics theory (RDT).

Relational Dialectics Theory

Since its inception, relational dialectics theory (RDT) has been applied to

understand the complexities that occur within interpersonal relationships, specifically the

complexities that exist within family and romantic relationships. Despite the abundance

of research in interpersonal communication and family communication, research that

applies RDT in other contexts is limited. RDT is particularly appropriate for this study

because it may highlight the conflicting needs and desires college students must manage

during the college transition. The following paragraphs summarize the tenets and

assumptions of RDT as it grounds and informs this study of first-semester college

students as they manage messages to, from, and about home. Ultimately, doing so may

reveal insight into how such messages influence decisions to return to college after the first semester.

Foundations of Relational Dialectics Theory

Relational dialectics theory (RDT) focuses on "meaning-making between relationship parties that emerges from the interplay of competing discourses" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 349). Further clarifying the core principles of RDT, Baxter (2011) explains that meaning does not result from singular, isolated discourses, but through competing discourses "when the meanings they advance negate one another in a zero-sum manner" (p. 2). These discourses serve as "systems of meaning" (Baxter, 2011, p. 2). By examining these systems of meaning, communication may be problematized in relationships in order to gain understanding about its role in them.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) contend that dialectical tensions emerge as a result of competing discourses. Therefore, "dialectical tension is thus jointly 'owned' by the relationship parties by the very fact of their union" (p. 15). Furthermore, "dialogue can fruitfully be used to pursue how it is that relationship parties jointly conduct their interactional life in such a way that some voices (whether verbal-ideological or the literal, embodied kind) are silenced while others are heard" (Baxter, 2004a, p. 17). RDT examines how relationships are in constant flux, where there is both stability and change that punctuate the communication and the relational exchanges. Tracy (2004) explains that such contradictions are inherent in all relationships and that they continually vary throughout the duration of a relationship. The majority of RDT research has focused on identifying the contradictions that exist within relationships. However, Baxter (1988) argues that it is equally important to focus on the actual process. In other words, how

partners negotiate dialectical tensions is as important if not more important than merely

identifying what those tensions center on. The focus on both the process and the

contradiction becomes evident when exploring the shared assumptions of RDT.

Shared Assumptions of RDT

RDT looks to communication as a bridge that brings individuals together. It does

so by managing dialectical tensions inherent in relationships. Dialectical tensions can

actually serve as both bridges and barriers. When thinking about the complex nature of

relationships, it essential to explore the notion of relational praxis, "which posits that

relationship parties communicatively react to dialectical exigencies that have been

produced from their past interactions, and in doing so, they recreate the dialectical

circumstances that they will face in the future" (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998, p. 162).

Relational spirals or recurring patterns are recreated and individuals must

negotiate how they frame the contradictions. These patterns include: *denial,*

disorientation, recalibration, spiraling inversion, balance, integration, and reaffirmation.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) discuss *denial and disorientation* are less practical

strategies for managing tensions because they involve rejection of a tension or a belief

that a tension is only negative, without any positive attributes.

The other six strategies provide individuals with better strategies for management.

Spiraling inversion involves the management strategy of moving back and forth between

the tensions over time. *Segmentation* is similar to spiraling inversion, only this

management technique involves individuals choosing a tension depending on the

appropriate situation or context. *Balance* involves only partially choosing each of the

tensions, while integration involves individuals attempting to completely satisfy both

tensions completely. *Integration* is a rare management strategy, according to Baxter and Montgomery (1996). *Recalibration* and *reaffirmation* are strategies that involve viewing the tension as either not existing or a positive relational attribute.

Taken together, these eight strategies offer a helpful landscape for examining the possible strategies first-semester students use to manage competing discourses within discursive struggles. Specifically, this study examines how college students and relational partners negotiate spiraling inversion and segmentation. This inclusion is important, as Baxter (2011) criticizes previous RDT research for not prioritizing such negotiation in research efforts (p. 128). Although these patterns provide insight into understanding relational praxis, additional constructs must also be considered.

Communication occurs in a variety of contexts. Thus, it is difficult to predict how relational partners will engage within these situated occurrences. Hence, Montgomery and Baxter (1998) are "suspicious of teleological approaches that privilege dialectical synthesis; instead we view relationship change as fundamentally indeterminant *[sic]"* (p. 164). These views reflect the notion of totality. Therefore, communication and relational events are seen as interdependent processes. Within RDT, it is essential to view communication occurrences as unique, as are the individuals who constantly negotiate their roles within relationships and communication exchanges. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) note, "constructions do not exist in social vacuums. Their influence flows through the social structure demarcated by selves, relationships, and cultures" (p. 165). The contradictory nature of relationships is deeply rooted in several methatheoretical assumptions.

Methatheoretical Assumptions

According to Baxter and Montgomery (1996), relational dialectics is deeply rooted in ontology. Specifically, dialectics-as-ontology refers to "a view of reality as the dynamic interplay of opposing forces, whereas the dialectics-as-epistemology refers to a method of reasoning by which one searches for understanding through the clash of opposing arguments" (p. 19). Although epistemology can provide insight into how knowledge is gained through inquiry, the ontology of studying interpersonal relationships was key to Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) original work on RDT. Baxter and Montgomery found similarities in their methatheoretical assumptions in the ontological positions of China's Lao Tzu, Greece's Heraclitus, and Russia's Mikhail Bakhtin.

Lao Tzu was interested in exploring the notion of change and related change in the yin and yang. Through Lao Tzu's conceptualization of change, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) note "reality is a process of unity in which opposing forces are inseparable at the same time they are oppositional" (p. 19). While Lao Tzu was becoming a key figure in China, Heraclitus was speaking to the notion of logos in Greece. Heraclitus believed "that reality was a process of ongoing flux and change in which everything is both in a condition of becoming to be and ceasing to be" (p. 21). Although these two scholars greatly influenced the conception of RDT, the works of Kahn, Marx, Rousseau, and Hegel also did so. Finally, no scholar did more to shape the original assumptions of RDT than Mikhail Bakhtin.

Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic position is embedded throughout the foundations of RDT. Bakhtin spent most of his career marginalized as a consequence of his critiques of Communist Russia's political ideologies (Baxter, 2011, p. 20). Bakhtin was critical of a

monologic government where the majority of voices are silenced. Bakhtin's work on

dialogism was born of his frustration with the government as he sought to bring

"coherence to the whole" (Baxter, 2004a, p. 2). Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic perspective

also challenged views on language. He states:

> We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but
>
> rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view,
>
> even as a concrete opinion, assuring a maximum of mutual understanding in all
>
> spheres of ideological life. (p. 271)

Bakhtin not only contested how language should be viewed, but also focused on the

human experience. Bakhtin viewed the human experience as an "open dialogue

characterized by mutlivocality and the interderminancy inherent when those multiple

voices interpenetrate" (Baxter, 2004a, p. 2). Baxter (2004a) recognizes five distinct

meanings of dialogue based on Bakhtin's work. These are dialogue as: (1) a constitutive

process, (2) in a dialectical flux, (3) an aesthetic moment, (4) an utterance, and (5) a

critical sensibility. These five variations of meaning are the foundation on which RDT

was built.

Beginning with the view of dialogue as a constitutive process, individuals cannot

have self-awareness or relational understanding without knowledge of the other (Bakhtin,

1981). Moreover, individuals gain consciousness through their interactions with others

and "difference between parties is the basis of the excess of seeing and essential to the

construction of selves and relationships" (Baxter, 2004a, p. 5). Bakhtin believed that

self-awareness could only exist by accepting different ideologies. Baxter (2011) supports

this belief that "self and other do not exist as separate entities but as a relation of

similarity and difference" (p. 25). Dialogue as a constitutive process is the core concept of RDT.

The second meaning of dialogue is that of being in a dialectical flux. In other words, individuals must accept the views of others while also holding onto some of their own views. This task of unifying different perspectives can be difficult. Standing in contrast to many views regarding the nature of relationships, RDT views "communication in relationships as the dialectical tension of contradictory verbal-ideological forces, or discourses" (Baxter, 2004a, p. 8). To date, the majority of RDT research has focused on exploring these tensions of opposition. Consequently, a void exists in research exploring the role unity plays in them (Baxter, 2004a). As Baxter (2007) states, "to be sure, in its upending of the vexing and intellectual problems of unity and difference, a dialogic perspective takes interpersonal/family communication in a direction different from its current one" (p. 123). Furthermore, this view is acknowledged in Baxter's (2004b) defining view of RDT. Despite being constructed to explore family relationships, Baxter (2004b) also warns of linking RDT to a systems approach of inquiry. Opposed to systems approaches focusing on the notion of equilibrium, "relational dialectics, like dialogism more generally, displaces the notion of center with a focus on the centripetal-centrifugal flux. There is no center-only flux" (p. 186).

The third meaning explores dialogue as the aesthetic moment. That is, "parties can occasionally create a fleeting moment of wholeness in which fragments and disorder are temporarily united" (Baxter, 2004a, p. 12). This momentary feeling of unity comes when individuals find respect for their differences. Thus, through the aesthetic moment, individuals engage in empathy. Dialogue as an aesthetic moment can also be seen in

family and friendship rituals. Rituals as aesthetic moments are evident in dialectic research examining stepfamily relationships (e.g., Braithwaite, Baxter, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Braithwaite and Baxter, 2006; Cisna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990), wedding vow renewal (e.g., Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995), and adoption (e.g., Marko-Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010). Baxter (2004a) suggests that future research regarding dialogue as an aesthetic moment should "move beyond a conception of relating as goal-rationality and means-end instrumentalism to explore as well its emotional side" (p. 14).

The fourth meaning of dialogue focuses on utterances. In contrast to research exploring contradictions as individual manifestations, Baxter (2004a) contends that "contradictions are not internal cognitive dilemmas located in the individual mind, which in turn serve as the basis of the individual's goal-directed communication" (p. 14). In other words, meaning is not constructed individually; rather meaning is constructed between individuals involved in relationships. Utterances also sit within the boundaries of what has been said and what is left unsaid (Baxter, 2011). And discourses can be implicitly or explicitly implied within an utterance chain.

Important to note when exploring communication between first-semester students and others both at school and from home is that "an addressee can be distant, as well—an addressee who is not a fellow participant in the immediate conversation but who may respond to the utterance at a future time and place" (p. 31). Moreover, it is critical to realize that meanings are not fixed; but, rather, are constantly being negotiated by relational partners. Montgomery and Baxter (1998) argue that future research must clearly show that there are "many more than two voices expressing the tensions of

relating and must link these voices to the relationship, not the separate individuals in the relationship (p. 175).

The fifth and final meaning of dialogue according to RDT is critical sensibility, which highlights necessity of critiquing "the dominant voices" (Baxter, 2004a, p. 16). Critical sensibility recognizes the issues of power, dominance, and control in relationships. Not only is it important to recognize the prevailing dominant forces in different relational types; but it is also essential to examine what are the messages being communicated and then "pursue how it is that relationship parties jointly conduct their interactional life in such a way that some voices (whether verbal-ideological or the literal, embodied kind) are silenced while others are heard" (p. 17).

Through these five meanings of dialogue, especially dialogue as a constitutive process, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) created RDT as an extension of dialogism. Baxter (2011) explains RDT takes basic principles Bakhtin explored to analyze language and culture and translates them to study family and interpersonal communication. Moreover, "RDT narrows the domain of intertextuality from a more benign focus on differing discourses to the more combative focus on competing discourses"(p. 45). Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) also use these meanings to explore relational contradictions.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) contend that contradictions should not be viewed as individual occurrences, but rather as intermittently connected and entangled. The brunt of RDT research focuses on three primary contradictions, which can be internal or external. Integration-separation explores the tension individuals experience with regard to wanting to maintain independence and, at the same time, wanting to spend time with

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their relational partner (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). Stability-change is a tension with wanting predictable consistency in a relationship and, at the same, seeking novelty and the unexpected (Baxter, 2006). Expression-nonexpression is a tension between wanting honest and open communication and, at the same time, wanting privacy and discretion (Baxter, 2006).

These three sets of contradictions have been applied to research exploring friendships, romantic relationships, and familial relationships. Despite the applicability of these three contradiction sets, Baxter (2004a), in agreement with Bakhtin's (1981) position, warns researchers not to use them as standard templates. Rather, these three contradictions "must be examined in their concrete and situated particularities. In doing so, the multivocality of each of these contradictions becomes evident" (p. 9). Furthermore, researchers must work "to resist the temptation to view variations in the labels for contradictions as mere synonyms of one another" (Baxter, 2006, p. 136). Rather, as Baxter (2004b) contends, contradictions must always be examined "in situ" (p. 185).

Clearly, communication ought to be examined in context and researchers remain cognizant of the fact that individuals are constantly negotiating their identities and roles within relationships. Moreover, discursive struggles are not always negative and, in fact, are often positive. As Baxter (2006) explains, "dialogue is not a negative factor in relational dialectics theory; rather, the interplay of competing discourses is an energizing source of vitality" (p. 132). Finally, "theories are not static things; to stay alive, a theory must continue to evolve and grow" (Baxter, 2011, p. 1) and RDT is no exception. Thus,

the next section summarizes some of the ways RDT has evolved and its current focus in terms of its applicability to this dissertation study.

Exploring Discursive Struggles

In her recent work, Baxter (2011) argues that it is necessary to view RDT in a new light from its original conception. She remains committed to the belief that "meanings are wrought from the struggle of competing, often contradictory discourses" (p. 2). Baxter contends further, however, that understanding discourse involves a deep awareness of the complexities involved in meaning making. To clarify, "RDT's core theoretical principle is that meaning in the moment is not simply the result of the interplay of competing discourses," rather "what something means in the moment depends on the interplay of competing discourses that are circulating in the moment" (pp. 2-3). Rather than merely identify what dialectical tensions are at play, the goal of RDT must be to engage in contrapuntal analysis. Specifically, a contrapuntal analysis involves a focus "on the interplay of contrasting discourses (i.e., systems of meaning, points of views, world views) in spoken or written texts" (p. 152). Contrapuntal analyses reveal relational power issues. The interesting question surrounding power involves discovering "how some discourses are centered while others are marginalized in the dialogic struggle of competing discourses" (p. 124). Finally, Baxter (2011) purports that the discourse of individualism is the foundation for many other discourses and discursive struggles.

Discourse of individualism. The discourse of individualism was originally coined as meaning self-interest that threatens a sense of community. Baxter (2011) has recently broadened the definition to make room for positive connotations, as well. According to Sampson (1993), individualism positions Self in relation to Other:

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The more the other is involved in the life of the person, the less the person is

involved in his or her own life….Others are posited as potential thieves of one's

personhood. The more others take priority, the less priority exists for the

individual. (pp. 33-34)

Several factors must be considered when exploring the discourse of individualism

including "cognitions, personality traits, motivations, and other psychological concepts"

(Baxter, 2011, p. 55).

Baxter (2011) also identifies two strands of meaning within this discourse of

individualism: expressive individualism and utilitarian individualism. Expressive

individualism reflects a person's desire to maintain autonomy when making life decisions

without input from others. Whereas expressive individualism tends to arouse negative

connotations of selfishness and egocentrism, utilitarian individualism invokes positive

connotations of altruism by seeking autonomy for purposes of self-improvement and

achievement (p. 56).

There also can be instances of lifestyle enclaves within the discourse of

individualism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). Lifestyle enclaves

are present when the discourse of individualism values Other(s) due to the nature of

Other(s) satisfying the need(s) of Self. For purposes of this dissertation study, students

may begin to spend more time with new friends they meet because they live in the same

residence hall than with hometown friends or family members. Lifestyle enclaves also

reveal the opportunistic nature of the discourse of individualism in that individuals view

others as "expendable with limited sense of commitment and obligation" (Baxter, 2011,

p. 56). Additional subsidiaries within the discourse of individualism include the

discourses of community, privacy, rationality, romanticism, and numerous others. The discourse of community is particularly important in this dissertation study because an act like retention would not only be satisfying for the students but also for society at large (i.e., the college or university) (p. 57). The discourse of individualism is also visible in the discursive struggles focused on relationship identity, integration, and expression.

Discursive struggles of relationship identity. Research examining the discursive struggles of relationship identity tend to focus on romantic relationships as they negotiate the predictability-novelty and stability-change contradictions. Exploring constructions of the past and present are key within this struggle (Baxter, 2004a). To clarify, in a study examining marriage vow renewal, Braithwaite and Baxter (1995) found that spouses were both sentimental about their past together and, at the same time, anxious to recommit and move forward in their relationships.

Examining the discourses related to relationship identity is of particular relevance to this dissertation study. Not only do individuals involved in romantic relationships experience relationship identity turning points, so do first-semester college students as they transition from high school and hometown families and friendships to new relationships and identities at college. Toller (2005) examines turning points associated with death. It seems plausible that similar feelings of loss might occur among individuals as they negotiate their way through the first semester of college. If the transition to college marks a major turning point as research suggests it does, it is essential to explore how students navigate the discursive struggles they experience in navigating their relationships with hometown family and friends and new relationships formed at school. Baxter (2011) states:

Turning points are moments of major change in a relationship in which a

discursive competition of one kind or another will be especially prominent.

Although relationship identities are always in flux to some extent in everyday

interaction, turning points are potential occasions of major identity shift in which

discursive competition of one kind or another will be especially prominent. (p. 96)

Not only may individuals struggle as they construct and reconstruct their relationships in

terms of past and present, they may also struggle with competing discourses related to

integration.

Discursive struggles of integration. Baxter (1993) and Baxter & Montgomery

(1996) identify the struggles of integration as tensions of autonomy-connection and

inclusion-seclusion. Autonomy-connection highlights the internal struggle between

seeking independence from and feeling interdependence with relational partners or

parties. Inclusion-seclusion differs somewhat in that "the more secluded a dyad is from

their social network, the more the pair legitimates their dyadic autonomy and the

discourse of individualism; the more embedded a dyad is with the social network, the

more the pair legitimates their dyadic connection and the discourse of the community"

(Baxter, 2011, p. 61). Within the discursive struggles of integration, Baxter (2011)

argues that turning point events can either increase relational closeness or cause

individuals to come apart (p. 62). Baxter identifies nine different radiants of meaning

related to the discursive struggle of integration.

(1) Individual-identity construction surrounding physical (in)dependence.

Baxter (2011) describes this radiant as the tension between desiring the identity of an

autonomous being as opposed to being dependent on others (p. 65). For example, some

research has explored senior citizens and their health decision-making. For this dissertation study, it is interesting to explore how students may be seen as autonomous beings by members of the college community, but as dependent beings by hometown family members whom students may rely on for financial assistance. Like studies exploring dialectics of senior citizens regarding health assistance from family members, college students may struggle with a tension about parents assisting with tuition and bills as acts of love that may also threaten emerging independence.

(2) Individual-identity construction as coupled or free of commitment. This radiant of meaning differs from the struggle over physical independence in that the "basis of that (in)dependence is emotional and social rather than physical" (Baxter, 2011, p. 66). Although this radiant of meaning has mainly been applied to romantic relationships, it may also be relevant for studying first generation college students (FGS). Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011) discovered that FGS want to develop a college student identity that differs from their parents while, at the same time, want to remain emotionally connected to their parents.

(3) Voluntary or involuntary interdependence with a relational other. This radiant of meaning focuses on the desire for both choice and constraint. Although most people do not get to choose their family members, most can make choices regarding friends and romantic partners. This radiant of meaning has been applied to the study of stepfamilies because "this relationship is regarded as very challenging, as efforts to create a legitimate bond of trust between stepparent and stepchild bumped up against forced status" (Baxter, 2011, p. 67). The roommate relationship could also be an example of a relationship where the voluntary/involuntary radiant of meaning is present.

(4) Emotional distance and closeness. Within the struggle of desiring integration within a community and separation to maintain individualism is the emotional distance and closeness radiant of meaning. Baxter (2011) contends that "although emotions are represented as internal states of individuals in this research, what renders them intelligible to hearers is their framing within discursive struggles of meaning" (p. 67). The majority of research exploring emotional distance and closeness focuses on stepfamily communication. Baxter et al. (2004), for example, explored the contradictions in communication between stepchildren and stepparent. Ultimately, the authors were able to gain insight into the perspective of the stepchild. Similarly, this dissertation examines the struggles from the perspective of the first-semester college student in order to gain insight into their worldview during this transition period.

(5) Self-interests versus others' interests. In terms of this radiant of meaning, research has explored instances where individuals prioritize their own interests over their partner's interests (Baxter, 2011). Baxter states, "giving priority to the individual's self-interests is an act legitimated within a discourse of individualism, whereas the other-orientation that gives priority to the needs and interests of the other is intelligible from a discourse of community" (p. 68). For this dissertation study, first semester college students are encouraged to be independent and make their own choices, yet others can hold students accountable for their irresponsible acts.

(6) Competing individual rights. This radiant of meaning is similar to self-interests versus others' interests. Baxter (2011) cautions, however, that there are notable differences between the two. The competing individual rights focuses on laws and rights, whereas the previously mentioned radiant of meaning explores individual's wants and

desires (p. 69). Students may invoke their rights to individualism and making their own

choices by referring to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), or

contacting an academic Ombudsman.

(7) Competing demands on time and energy. The discursive struggle between

individualism and community is often examined in terms of desiring time and energy

either with or without another person (Baxter, 2011). Research has explored balancing

work and family time (Hays, 1996) and balancing time with in-laws (Prentice, 2009).

Sahlstein (2004, 2006) also explored how balancing time and energy can cause issues

within long-distanced relationships (LDRs). Both of Sahlstein's studies explore how

individuals involved in LDRs can feel that their relationships are both rewarding and

constraining. Sahlstein clarifies how this strand of meaning can create conflicting

discourses; "togetherness was legitimated from within the discourse of community; it was

a time to emphasize couple time, yet the ghost that was ever present for partners was a

realization that they each had another, independent life" (p. 70). Students maintaining

relationships with individuals who are not proximally close may struggle with demands

on time and energy.

(8) Competing loyalty demands. This radiant of meaning focuses on competing

discourses regarding how an individual displays loyalty (Baxter, 2011). Although a

person may be questioned on how they are spending their time and energy, Baxter notes

there loyalty can be tested in some additional ways. Research has looked at how

friendships have been tested for choosing sides (p. 71). For first semester college

students, loyalty may be questioned if they choose to stay on campus for a weekend when

family members expect them to come home. Also, their pre-college friends may question

their loyalty if these first semester college students choose to spend time with their new friends instead of them. Baxter remarks on this loyalty demand stating:

> On the one hand, according to the discourse of individualism, partners cannot monopolize one another's autonomous decision about who is in or out of their respective social networks; yet, within the discursive frame of community, parties feel comfortable making claims about others whom the partner affiliates. (p. 71)

(9) Dyadic segregation and integration. The final radiant of meaning differs from the eight previously referenced radiants. Here the focus is on a dyad at the center and the pair seeking either independence or integration with others. Baxter (2011) notes that the first eight radiants explore tensions of autonomy-connection, whereas this one deals with struggle over inclusion-seclusion (p. 71). This struggle is evident in the conclusions of Prentice's (2009) study of relationships with in-laws. Essentially, Prentice discovered that couples want to have alone time, yet also feel responsible to their family to attend events and functions. College students who remain in LDRs with individuals from their hometowns may desire to spend time with one another on the weekends at home, yet also feel constrained that they must spend time with family and friends who also are proximally close. The third discursive struggle to explore is the discursive struggle of expression, which is often at play when individuals negotiate their needs concerning individualism and community.

Discursive struggles of expression. Braithwaite and Baxter (2006) examine stepchildren's perceptions about communicating with the nonresident parent. This study showed the connection between integration-separation and openness-closedness. In order to protect their non-residential parent's feelings, as well as their new role in a stepfamily,

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the stepchildren chose to be open about surface topics but closed about topics related to their "new" family. This closed communication style created difficulties in stepchildren bonding and maintaining close relationships with their nonresidential parents.

Although this study explicated the discursive struggles and tensions present, numerous research efforts have been flawed in describing the discursive struggle of expression. Additional research has explored expression-nonexpression, disclosure-privacy, and openness-closedness, yet have mistakenly equated this struggle as simply "to be open or not" and have not made distinctions between these terms (p. 75). Baxter notes that this a huge flaw by researchers because one might be so concerned "on focusing on the behavior of nonexpression rather than viewing the act as a meaningful symbolic gesture" (p. 75).

Baxter (2011) examines competing discourses within the discursive struggle of expression. These are (1) disjuncture within a discourse, (2) individualism in play, (3) community in play, (4) rationality in play, (5) privacy in play, and (6) romance in play. It is essential to examine the similarities and variations in the various competing discourses. Through this examination, previous research efforts are described and potential applications to the dissertation study illustrated.

(1) Disjuncture within a discourse. Baxter (2011) contends that this competing discourse is evident when the discursive struggle of individualism is present. To clarify, Baxter identifies pregnancy and divorce as events that can be shrouded with both "secrecy and disclosure." For college students, there may be both secrecy and disclosure concerning any problems at home. Parents and family members may choose to conceal family problems in order to reduce stress and anxiety for college students. In turn,

college students may choose not to disclose their own issues and concerns to prevent families from worrying.

  (2) Individualism at play. This competing discourse differs from the disjuncture within a discourse in that individuals choose to reveal things at the expense of others (Baxter, 2011). Individuals may share information to regain a sense of self or as a means of catharsis. Family members may tell college students how much they miss them or what is happening at home as a means to feel a connection or as a maintenance strategy. Students may not desire this type of communication because they may feel homesick or guilt for being "missed" or for choosing to be away from home.

  (3) Community in play. Like the previously mentioned competing discourses, this discourse is used with and against other discourses. Research has explored occurrences of individuals putting community needs over individual needs. Derlega, Winstead, and Folk-Baron's (2000) HIV/AIDS disclosure study revealed, for example, that although individuals desired to keep their HIV/AIDS status private, they felt an obligation to be honest with their partners. First-semester college students might refrain from being open about individualistic needs in order to gain acceptance by the groups they belong to, such as sororities or fraternities. Also, a college student who is struggling with grades and knows they are going to fail out of college may want to conceal this information from a parent or roommate, but has to risk their positive self-presentation in order to protect their parent's finances and allow their roommate to find a replacement.

  (4) Rationality in play. The discourse of rationality "involves beliefs that (non)expression is (in)effective, (inefficient), (un)necessary to successful understanding between relational partners" (Baxter, 2011, p. 83). Individuals may feel that being candid

is necessary, but at the same time know that the information they present to others may hurt them. College students may interpret parental messages as hurtful when parents are engaging in tough love communication practices.

(5) Romance in play. In the discourse of romance, honesty should typically come before any other competing discourse when true love is involved (Baxter, 2011). Sometimes, however, when doing so helps a partner save face, or to manage privacy, complete honesty may not be the best option for maintaining the relationship (Petronio, 2002; Roloff & Ifert, 2000; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005) Many individuals may choose to use ambiguity as a way to protect themselves or spare relational partners' feelings in dating relationships. College students may choose to not fully disclose their activities and feelings with relational partners, especially those in LDRs in order to reduce jealousy or hurt feelings.

In sum, discourses employed in the discursive struggles of community and individualism, expression, and integration may be complementary or contradictory. That is, "discourses that circulate throughout a culture are given communicative life in the interactions in and about relationships" (Baxter, 2011, p. 87). In addition to discourses related to community, Baxter also explores struggles of relational history, otherness, and normative evaluation.

Discursive struggle of relational history. This discursive struggle focuses on relational-level meanings that contribute to relationship identity (Baxter, 2011). Numerous tensions may be present with this struggle: stability-change, certainty-uncertainty, predictability-novelty, old-new, past-present (p. 93). Research on relational history most often explores relational maintenance.

Relational maintenance. Baxter (2011) acknowledges there are numerous distinctions in research inquiries involving relational maintenance. However, most share the same biases focusing on repair (p. 97). Baxter argues against privileging change and discontinuity as a threat, and proposes taking a dialogic approach. In this approach, "reproduction isn't conceived necessarily as the desired outcome; instead, it risks functioning as a force of semantic inertia, standing as a possible obstacle for relationship parties to craft new relational possibilities" (pp. 97-98). Thus, Baxter advocates taking a turning point rather than stage-based approach to examine the discourses in situ.

Discursive struggle of otherness. Baxter (2011) explicates the importance for dialogic research to move beyond focusing on a singular communicative act and examine talk between relational partners (p. 99). Research has been limited in examining the proximal not-yet spoken and there needs to be a focus on difference. Baxter discusses this problem stating, "difference becomes a vexing problem in need of containment, not an intellectual problem in need of serious theorizing" (p. 106). One way to address these issues is by devoting equal attention to both similarity and difference.

Harrigan and Braithwaite (2010) explore the discursive struggles in families formed through visible adoption. As previously noted, Baxter (2004a) recognizes the void in RDT research exploring how unity affects the dialectical tensions. Thus, the authors explored the communicative practices that answer the question: "what discourses interpenetrate and reflect dialectical unity as parents communicate about their child's adoption?" (p. 132). They found that unity could be seen through the following dialectical tensions: pride and imperfection; love, constraint, and sacrifice; difference, pride, and enrichment; and legitimacy, expansion, similarity, and difference. This study

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explored the multivocal nature of contradictions and provides insight and areas for future research to help families experiencing adoption or those considering the adoption process. Although Harrigan and Braithwaite's study focuses on adoption, it is relevant to this study. Specifically, the authors chose to examine adoptive families because they are discourse dependent, constructing their family identities through communication interactions (p. 128). Families who are geographically dispersed may also be more discourse dependent. College students who are separated from their families while away at college may vary in their meaning making than students who live geographically close to their families and loved ones.

Discursive struggle of evaluation. The focus of this discursive struggle is on the distal-not-yet-spoken utterance link. Specifically, Baxter (2011) explains that individuals concerned about anticipated reactions to a message may influence what they actually communicate. The focus is on approval and acceptance rather than the original intent of the message. The concern over evaluation is present within the discursive struggles of romantic relationships and stepfamilies (Baxter, 2011, p. 57).

In sum, relationships are enacted through a wealth of complementary and contradictory discourses. These discourses show intertexuality and create struggle (Baxter, 2011, p. 120). Baxter urges future research efforts to address a question that has been missing from previous RDT research: "What systems of meaning make the statement intelligible?" (p. 87). Moreover, Baxter calls for continued evolution of the theory to augment its strengths and reduce its limitations, both of which are discussed in the following sections.

Strengths of RDT

As is evidenced by the examples of RDT research in family, friendships, and romantic relationships provided in this literature review, RDT can be applied to study communication in a variety of contexts and be focused on diverse subject matter. This examination illustrates several strengths of RDT. Foremost is the fact that it is a theory developed in the communication field rather than translated from another one. RDT "gives us a theory centered directly in communication, rather than a theory rooted in psychological or sociological constructs" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 358). Second, RDT reflects a stance that "theory growing takes place in utterances between scholars, not in the actions of autonomous scholars" (p. 190). Third, RDT lends itself to qualitative inquiry. Specifically, RDT is a sensitizing theory that provides heuristic value allowing for meaning making to occur and highlights relating in a new light (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). As such, RDT is appropriate for this dissertation study exploring the unique tensions that may be present in first semester college students as they navigate the complex transition from hometown high school student to independent adult college student.

Limitations of RDT

As is the case with any theory, RDT does have certain limitations, some of them rooted in misunderstandings of it. First, Baxter (2011) explains that many scholars have ignored the differences that exist among numerous dialectical theories, instead grouping them all together. Rather, RDT is the only theory housed within the dialectical family that is "unique in its explicit grounding in Bakhtin's dialogism" (p. 6).

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Second, some discount the theory based on a lack of explanatory and predictive potential. However, RDT cannot and should not be evaluated based on postpositivist criteria. Rather, RDT should be evaluated based on criteria used for judging interpretive theory. In Baxter's (2011) words, RDT consists of "a set of basic concepts and theoretical principles that can be brought to bear in analyzing communicative life" (p. 7). RDT is heuristic in nature with sensitizing and rich understanding as its purpose. To evaluate the theory from any other framework or axiomatic assumptions is essentially to commit a non sequitur reasoning fallacy. The goal of RDT is not to predict and explain but to help "see things in ways different from what would otherwise be the case" (p. 7).

Third, some critics have focused on whether RDT is a qualitative or quantitative theory. However, when critics do so with a quantitative bias, understanding it as a theory is difficult. Dubin's (1978) theory building approach is difficult to apply to any qualitative theory including RDT. Yet, the task is not impossible.

Fourth, Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) illustrate the need to apply RDT to longitudinal work to "better understand meaning-making as a synchronic and diachronic process" (p. 359). Calling this a limitation, however, might be unfair as it is actually a suggestion for future research.

Finally, some claim that RDT has focused too narrowly on examining only competing discourses and dialogues, which has prevented scholars from studying other RDT-related phenomenon. Baxter and Braithwaite (2010) point to two under-explored areas: "discourses need to be located in the chain of speech communication and the details of language use needs to be for double-voicedness, which in turns holds implications for controlling how social reality is constructed" (pp. 16-17).

In sum, these limitations and misunderstandings about RDT actually clarify the need to apply the theory to additional communication contexts. One such context is the focus of this dissertation study. Thus, the following section provides a rationale for using RDT to examine discursive struggles of first semester students as they attempt to make a successful transition from hometown to college town.

RDT in Instructional Communication Contexts

Interpersonal communication research commonly explores communication practices in family, friendship, and romantic relationships. However, interpersonal communication research is also conducted in health care, as well as in for profit and nonprofit business and organizational contexts. This dissertation study explores its utility in an instructional communication context.

Although parental-child communication has been studied in a variety of different contexts, it remains understudied within the context of the college student transition experience (Agliata & Renk, 2009). Researchers have also studied how honest messages may be perceived as hurtful in close relationships (Zhang & Stafford, 2009). Yet, research is still needed to understand how parental messages (honest, mixed, or hurtful) may affect college students' successful transition during that critical first semester. In fact, there exists a void in research about any of the potential contradictions and tensions that may exist for first-year college students. Although some research has been conducted about discrepancies in parental and college student expectations (Agliata & Renk, 2009) and the general experiences of first generation college students (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Orbe, 2004, 2008), RDT has never been applied to explore the discursive struggles of first-semester students regarding home and school, Moreover,

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RDT has only been applied in instructional contexts to examine classroom behaviors and course concept retention (Baus, 1995; Prentice & Kramer, 2006).

Two studies have applied RDT to first generation college student retention. Lowery-Hart & Pacheco (2011) examined interindividual contradictions (maintaining personal identities vs. satisfying social expectations) and intergroup contradictions (cultural differences at home and at college). Although they did not specifically examine the discursive struggles FGS face regarding messages to, from, and about home, they did discover tensions that FGS must manage regarding identity and cultural norms.

Orbe (2008) also applied RDT to FGS to "explore how identity negotiation is affected by contextual elements inherent in various environments, including those associated with home and campus" (p. 93). Although both Orbe and Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011) recognize the tensions that FGS experience and the utility of applying RDT in an instructional communication context focused on retention, neither study located the actual discursive struggles present. Furthermore, neither study took into consideration the importance of recognizing the various utterance links that exist within these discursive struggles. For this dissertation study, the proximal already-spoken link is of utmost importance, examining how students negotiate the meanings of their past relationships in the present. Baxter (2011) states:

> The relational meaning system—what kind of relationship the parties regard themselves as having—is always an inheritance from past interactions that serve as a backdrop for current interactions. Oftentimes, the relational meaning system of the past is simply reproduced –although never completely. However, the

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relationship's meaning system potentially is up for grabs with more dramatic changes, perhaps even competing relational meanings. (p. 52)

Furthermore, inherent in the experiences of first-semester college students, are the new relationships being formed and the changing nature of established relationships and the opposing discourses that may arise from conflicting responsibilities, goals, desires, and expectations students may experience in them. Orbe (2008) advocates a need for additional research exploring RDT and retention to "create frameworks that are more general or more specific and explore how identity negotiation is affected by contextual elements inherent in various environments, including those associated with home and campus" (p. 93). Since most students do not choose to be only at school or only at home, understanding how students might negotiate the space between the two locations effectively is warranted. It appears from this review that RDT is an appropriate framework for examining the communication struggles first semester college students continually negotiate as they transition from their pre-college identities in ways that make space to embrace new identities and relationships (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010).

In essence, this study uses RDT to examine the various discursive struggles that first-semester students identify and negotiate regarding messages to, from, and about home. The study goes beyond just recognizing and identifying these struggles, however, to also identify the dialectical tensions present within the discursive struggles and to explore how students deal with them. Therefore, the dissertation study proposes the following research questions:

RQ 1: What, if any, discursive struggles do first-semester college students report regarding messages to, from, and about home?

RQ 2: What, if any, discursive struggles do non-returning students report regarding messages to, from, and about home?

Summary

This chapter provided a review of literature related to (a) the first-semester college student transition experience and (b) relational dialectics theory as it grounds this dissertation study. Chapter Three explains the methods employed to answer the research questions. Chapter Four describes the results and Chapter Five offers conclusions, implications, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This dissertation study examines the discursive struggles reported by first-semester students regarding messages to, from, and about home. To do so, the analysis is grounded in the interpretive paradigm in order to provide "a rich understanding of that social context; and, in some cases, serve the purpose of promoting social change" (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000, p. 20). The associated assumptions of this paradigm are applied to conduct a thematic analysis design, identifying the discourses present in the participants' in-class free writes.

To begin, Carter and Little (2007) explore how epistemology, method, and methodology should guide the research plan. The authors argue that, despite varying definitions of these three research elements, all should serve as beacons for challenging the rigor of research methodologies. First, epistemology is seeking knowledge and providing "a justification of knowledge" (Carter & Little, 2007, p. 1317). Through epistemology, methodological decisions can be chosen and altered, if necessary. Methodology relates to the assumptions we hold concerning the process(es) of research (Frey et al., 2000, p. 425). Finally, method can be defined as the ways in which data is created, collected, and analyzed (Carter & Little, 2007, p.1317). These three research elements frame paradigmatic assumptions because it is "impossible to engage in knowledge construction creation without at least tacit assumptions about what knowledge is and how it is constructed" (Carter & Little, 2007, p. 1317). This chapter describes the role of the qualitative researcher, provides a justification for methodological choices, and details the research and data collection procedures. The chapter concludes by providing an overview of the data analysis process.

The Researcher's Role

When engaging in qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the primary tool through which the data is collected and the subject matter is filtered (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Thus, the following paragraphs clarify my role as the researcher in this study.

In chapter 1, I discussed the intense emotions I struggled to address, suppress, and manage during my first semester of college. Although I do not dwell on that period when I felt trapped in the transition between my hometown and college, revisiting that time in my own life shows reflexivity and transparency regarding my reasons for conducting this study. Even though I did not leave college early, I did struggle with the first semester transition to college. By exploring the unique struggles college students experience during their first semester, insight may be gained on issues that affect student retention.

Not only did my past personal experiences influence my desire to conduct the study, but my current experiences as an instructor, advisor, and researcher also played a role in sparking my curiosity. As an instructor, I am interested in incorporating class activities like journaling and free write exercises to relate with students as they connect course content with their lived experiences. As an advisor, I seek to identify both instructional and interpersonal techniques to assist students. As an applied researcher, I strive to recognize numerous implications for improving student learning and the environment for student learning in ways that may benefit students, parents and caregivers, and the academy. Despite my efforts at reflexivity, I remain cognizant of numerous research barriers.

Lykkeslet and Gjendal (2007) explore issues that can result from engaging in practice-close research. The authors explain that when a researcher is close to the

research, it is important to be reflexive, transparent, and explicit about one's preconceptions to avoid cultural blindness (p. 701). By acknowledging my various interests and roles associated with this study, I seek to be transparent in my research goals and realize that "qualitative inquiry is uniquely personal and involved activity" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 7). My personal connection to the subject matter is one justification for using a qualitative approach, however, several other reasons also serve to justify a qualitative approach for the present study.

Methodological Justifications

Qualitative Paradigm

With any research inquiry, the research question(s) should guide the methodological choice (Frey et al., 2000). Moreover, understanding the various research paradigms can help a researcher select an appropriate means by which to answer the research question(s). Rather than being concerned with the quantitative goals of explanation, prediction, and control (Frey et al., 2000), this study is situated within the qualitative paradigm in order to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of first-semester college students. This methodological decision can be better understood by addressing the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and praxeological assumptions.

Littlejohn and Foss (2005) describe ontology as the "questions of existence" (p. 10). Rather than viewing research through a singular lens, an ontological perspective grounded in a qualitative and interpretive paradigm views reality as plural and socially constructed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Thus, reflecting the participants' voice is essential. Providing direct quotations from participants can, for example, highlight the unique differences as well as similarities among individuals.

Epistemology explores knowledge claims and seeks to provide understanding on "how people know what they know" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 18). Through the qualitative and interpretive paradigms, Lindlof and Taylor (2002) explain that epistemology reflects the interdependence between the researcher and the research. In other words, "the researcher does not use methodological instruments. The researcher is the instrument" (p. 11). Therefore, the researcher cannot disconnect or detach him or herself from the research.

Axiology is concerned with exploring the value in the research. Whereas quantitative research explores objective reality and approaches inquiry from a value-free position, qualitative research explores the subjective nature of multiple realities and focuses on the value-laden nature of inquiry. Qualitative research embraces how values affect every aspect of one's life, personally and professionally, therefore objectivity is not sought or even believed to be possible.

Finally, the praxeology of the qualitative paradigm is to prioritize the voices of the participants and to treat each participant as unique. Ultimately, the researchers seek themes that help reveal shared meaning while also honoring differences.

Therefore, a qualitative methodology is appropriate for this dissertation study for several reasons. First, a qualitative methodological approach allows for a "wholistic [*sic*] understanding of the patterns and behaviors that characterize human beings" (Frey et al., 2000, p. 20). Second, a qualitative approach establishes an outlet for participants to find their voice and bring up topics in ways that are not always possible in quantitative inquiry (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Third, a qualitative methodology is consistent with the goals of RDT to be descriptive and accomplish "its capacity for heurism—its ability to be

useful in assisting us in seeing things in ways different from what otherwise would be the case" (Baxter, 2011, p. 7). Good research, is grounded in paradigms that are appropriate to the goals of the particular study. When considering my research goals and RDT, the dialogic paradigm seems most appropriate to extend the theoretical underpinnings.

Dialogic Paradigm

The dialogic paradigmatic assumptions focus on giving "a central place to discourse, or the system of meanings by which social realities are shaped" (Baxter, 2011, p. 39). Although RDT has been situated in both the critical and interpretive paradigms, Deetz (2001) explains:

> The linguistic turn enabled a critique of normative research's claim of objectivity
> through examining the processes by which objects are socially constituted and the
> role of language in that process and simultaneously a critique of interpretive
> research through demonstrating the fragmentation of cultures and personal
> identities and removing the psychological subject from the center of the
> experience. (pp. 31-32)

The dialogic perspective is appropriate for this study focused specifically on how students negotiate the discursive struggles they face during the transition to college. Dialogic scholars argue that "identities are fragmented and always in flux because they are discursive productions and always emergent in the competing discourses of a given moment" (Baxter, 2011, p. 39). Moreover, theory serves as the sensitizing guideline to inquiry and "language use produces and maintains social realities" (p. 40).

Particularly important to this dissertation study is the way in which the dialogic perspective treats issues of power and conflict. Dialogism is concerned with "opening up

new discursive possibilities" and treats power as not hierarchically situated but "understood as the fluid and emergent result of the situated clash of different, often competing, systems of meaning" (Baxter, 2011, p. 40).

For these reasons, a qualitative methodology was employed grounded in RDT to answer the question: What, if any, discursive struggles do first-semester college students report regarding messages to, from, and about home?

<center>**Research Procedures**</center>

Thematic Analysis

In an attempt to gain an understanding of first semester college student experiences and to answer the research questions, a thematic analysis was employed to examine student free write responses. Thematic analysis is a process in which researchers explicitly encode qualitative information (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4). To discover themes, the researcher examines the data in three stages: "Stage I, deciding on sampling and design issues; Stage II, developing themes and a code; and Stage III, validating and using the code" (Boyatzis, 1998, p.29).

A thematic analysis is beneficial for this dissertation study for numerous reasons. First, thematic analysis allows researchers to search for important moments in the participants' lives through "recognizing an important moment (seeing), precedes encoding it (seeing it as something), which in turn precedes interpretation" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 1). Second, thematic analysis provides a systematic means of inquiry for converting qualitative information into quantitative data. Finally, thematic analysis is an appropriate means by which to analyze both first cycle and second cycle codes (Saldana, 2009).

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Stage I, Sampling and Design Issues

Research Site

Golden-Biddle and Locke (2007) argue that qualitative researchers should seek to write theorized story lines. To do so, the authors note the importance of approaching methods sections in novel ways. One means by which to accomplish this is through the inclusion of a research site.

The University of Kentucky was selected as the research site for this dissertation study for several reasons. First, the free-write data set was accessible to me as a member of a research team studying retention. Second, I have a vested interest in improving retention efforts as a current instructor and advisor of undergraduate students. Fike and Fike (2008) note the importance of tailoring interventions to each specific university in order to "engage in interventions with students who bring particular characteristics and aspirations to the campus" (pp. 68-69).

This study was conducted at a university in a medium size Southern city with a population of approximately 555,000 (including surrounding metropolitan counties). The university has a thriving social environment that encourages student involvement in organizations, activities, and athletics. According to a report prepared by the university's Office of Institutional Research (2011), there were approximately 19,500 undergraduate students enrolled during the semester when data was collected for this dissertation study. In addition, 48.1% of these undergraduates were men and 51.9% were women. Furthermore, 81.5% of the student population was Caucasian. Of these enrolled undergraduates, approximately 4,283 were first-semester students enrolling in a university for the first time. The university's retention rate from first to second semester

was 93% and the first semester student GPA mean was 2.89. The retention rate dropped

significantly to 81.8% from first to second year. Although these rates are relatively high,

it remains important to examine what factors contribute to first-semester student

retention, as well as the factors that may be contributing to drop out decisions after the

first semester.

Participants

The participants were students enrolled in 15 sections of CIS 110 (Composition

and Communication) during the Fall 2010 semester. The study employed purposive

sampling (Frey et al., 2000), targeting only first-semester students enrolled in these CIS

courses. First, the sampling is purposive because existing retention research identifies

first-semester students as high-risk. Second, as a member of the grant team, I have access

to the data set.

Although 366 students were enrolled in the CIS 110 courses, only 243 students

answered free write prompts associated with the current study. Once students who did

not complete all three free writes were removed, 135 students remained in the study.

Participants (N = 135) were first semester students enrolled in CIS 110 at the

University of Kentucky during the Fall 2010 term. Of the 135 students that completed all

three free writes, 127 students also provided demographic information (see Appendix C).

The participants ranged in age from 18-25 (M = 18.15, SD = .714) and included

48.8 % men (n=62) and 51.2% women (n=65). The majority of participants identified

their race as Caucasian (85.8%, n=109), followed by African-American (8.7%, n=11),

Asian (1.6%, n=2), Hispanic (1.6%, n=2), Native American or Alaskan Native (.8%,

n=1), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (.8%, n=1), and Asian/Caucasian (.8%, n=1).

All 127 participants reported that the Fall 2010 semester was their first semester of college. However, 5.2% (n= 7) of the participants also reported having previously attended another college or university. Of the 5.2% (n=7) of participants, three had attended a four-year private institution, three had attended a community college, and one had attended a public university.

The participants were also asked whether they had declared a major. In response, 15.9% (n=20) of the participants were undecided, 27.8% (n=35) knew what major they were intending to declare, and 56.3% (n=71) had already declared a major. The majors participants in the study had declared or reported as intending to declare were: nursing, psychology, engineering, elementary education, biology, social work, philosophy, business, architecture, economics, computer science, kinesiology, landscape architecture, math, and integrated strategic communication.

The participants also reported information related to their university housing, as well as the location of their hometown. Beginning with their current university housing, 80.2% (n= 101) of the participants lived on campus, 10.3% (n=13) lived in apartments or rental houses, 7.1% (n=9) lived with parents, caregivers, or other family members, and 2.4% (n=4) identified that they lived with Other, which participants described as either both parents, one parent, a friend of a parent, or living in a condominium. Participants also identified the distance of the university from their hometown. The distance from one's hometown residence ranged from as short of a distance as 0 miles to as far away as 2407.04 miles from campus (M = 129.58, SD = 242.57). Also, 31% (n=39) of students' hometowns are less than 60 miles from campus, with 14% (n=19) of these students indicating that the university is in their hometown. In addition, 43% (n=54) of students'

hometowns are between 61 and 120 miles from campus, 13% (n=16) of students' hometowns are 120 to 240 miles from campus, and 13% (n=16) of students' hometowns are more than 240 miles from campus. One student did not provide their hometown location.

Parent and/or caregiver demographics were also collected to gain insight into the pre-college life of the participants. Regarding parent or caregiver educational attainment, the results varied from participants being the first in their family to attend college to students having parents completing professional degrees. Out of the 127 participants, 7% (n=1) reported that their primary parent or caregiver attended some high school, whereas 14.1% (n=19) of participants reported that their primary parent or caregiver graduated high school. Therefore, these 20 participants are recognized as first-generation college students. In addition, 21.5% (n=29) of participants said that their primary parent or caregiver attended some college, 33% (n=45) earned a Bachelor's degree, and 24.4% (n=33) earned a graduate or professional degree. Students also provided information on their secondary parent or caregiver. 3% (n=4) of participants' secondary caregivers or parents attended some college, 20% (n=27) graduated high school, 20.7% (n=28) attended some college, 30.4% (n=41) graduated with a Bachelor's degree, and 19.3% (n=26) had a graduate or professional degree. One student did not provide secondary caregiver information.

In addition, 41.7% (n=51) of participants revealed that they were currently involved in romantic relationships. Of those currently involved in romantic relationship, 2% (n=1) were married, 80.4% (n=41) were in committed/serious/exclusive relationships,

and 17.6% (n=9) were seeing or dating someone but did not consider the involvement serious.

Identifying the location of the romantic partners is also important to this study. Out of the 41.7% (n=51) participants involved in romantic involvements, 68.8% (n=35) were in relationships with individuals who did not attend the same university. Although 68% (n=35) of participants did not attend the same university as their romantic partners, it is also of interest to this study to know whether the participants lived in the same city as their romantic partners. The results showed that only 37.3% (n=19) of these students lived in the same city as their romantic partners.

Information about peer and roommate relationships may be important to this dissertation study, as well. Thus, 84.3% (n=107) of the participants reported having close friends who were also attending the same university. Conversely, 15.4% (n=20) of the participants reported not having any close friends attending the same university. Research has explored the risks to early departure of having too many friends, which can serve as distractions on campus, as well the opposite spectrum of having too little social support during the first semester.

This demographic information is not provided as a means to quantify or predict the type of student that may depart early from college. Rather, this information is included to help create a clear picture of the 127 (94%) participants who did persist at the university for a second semester and the seven (5%) participants who did not return after the first semester. (Returning information was not available for one student.)

Instruments

The data for this study comes from open-ended, qualitative responses participants provided during in-class free write assignments. The participants completed in-class free write responses (see Appendix D) during the first 10-15 minutes of class, three different times during the semester (i.e., Free Write (FW) 1, Free Write (FW) 2, and Free Write (FW) 3). Participants were asked in each free write prompt to identify times during the semester when they felt caught between a <u>desire</u> (of yours) or <u>expectation</u> (of others) to do something here at the university (academic or social) and a <u>desire</u> (of yours) or <u>expectation</u> (of others) to do something at home. More specifically, participants were asked to identify (a) the competing desires or expectations that made you feel caught in a no-win situation so-to-speak?, (b) who were the people involved in the competing desires or expectations?, describe any mixed messages you perceived in (a) a particular message and/or conversation (over e-mail, on Facebook, on the phone, in person, etc.) and (b) whether that message or conversation is part of an ongoing struggle between competing desires or expectations you've been having. Participants were also asked to identify whether the struggle was positive or negative, ongoing or resolved, and whether the struggle was affecting students' performance at the university.

Data Collection

Butler-Kisber (2010) describes the process of gaining access and informed consent as ongoing throughout the project. During the Fall 2010 semester, researchers visited each of the 15 sections of the CIS 110 to oversee the completion of the free write responses. During each class visit, researchers explained the purpose of the study and that the study posed no risks. Researchers suggested that students may benefit from

completing the free writes as a means of catharsis. The research team made sure the

participants were aware that their names would be taken off of the free writes to ensure

confidentiality. The research team also assured students that they could exercise the

option of not participating and that they could decide to stop participating at any point

during the semester.

In order to participate in the study, students had to: 1) agree to participate by

signing and returning an informed consent form and 2) have graduated from high school

in Spring 2010. Once consent forms were signed, a member of the research team

collected and filed them (see Appendices A & B).

To complete this dissertation study, students completed an online survey to collect

potentially relevant demographic information and a series of three free writes (FW) over

the course of the semester. FW1 was completed early in the semester (during the week of

August 30th through September 8th). FW2 was completed midway through the semester

(during the week of October 4th through October 8th). FW3 was completed later in the

semester (during the week of November 8th through November 12th), which was just

before Thanksgiving break. FW3 was collected prior to Thanksgiving break because

existing research suggests many students who do not return after first semester actually

drop out at this point. Moreover, Palmer et al. (2009) contends that the majority of

turning points occur for first semester college students during the first six to eight weeks

of the term.

Participants completed each of the three free writes as in-class assignments.

Thus, all students completed the free writes, but only the responses of those who signed

the consent forms were used in the dissertation project. The researchers assigned each

student an arbitrary three digit identification code number. These code numbers provided

the research team a concise way to link participants with their responses, their

demographic information, the free write period of collection, and whether the participants

returned or did not return to the university the following semester.

Several criteria guided the process of removing responses from the data pool.

These criteria were participants: (a) not signing the consent form, (b) being under 18

years old, (c) being absent on one or more of the days of data collection, (d) submitting

work after the assigned deadline for completion, and (e) not completing the free write

assignments. Ultimately, 135 participant responses were included in the study.

Stage II, Developing Themes and a Code

Data Analysis

Boyatzis (1998) identifies three distinct strategies for developing themes and

codes during stage II. Researchers can develop codes that are theory driven, prior data or

prior research driven, or inductive (p. 29). Each of these approaches has both strengths

and weaknesses and are dependent on the goals of the researcher(s) and the study. Based

on the goals guiding this dissertation study, a first cycle/second cycle inductive approach

to data analysis seemed most appropriate. During the first cycle, I engaged in a five step

process developing data derived inductively based code(s). According to Boyatzis

(1998), the five steps that assist in allowing themes to emerge include: "(a) reducing the

raw material, (b) identifying themes within subsamples, (c) comparing themes across the

subsamples, (d) creating a code, and (e) determining the reliability of the code" (p. 45). I

previously identified the unit of analysis to be the participant free write responses. For

this study, it is essential to navigate the five steps in a systematic manner due to the

enormity of the task at hand. During my previous qualitative research projects, my

sample size has been smaller, and I have analyzed data from one coding period.

For this longitudinal study, I had to be systematic, aware, and reflexive in order to

navigate through 405 coding artifacts through two separate coding rounds. In order to

begin this process, I began with Step 1: Reducing the raw data. Once I received the free

writes, I removed the participant responses that did not complete all three rounds (i.e.,

FW1, FW2, & FW3). I then sorted and organized the free writes by code number and by

free write round. Once I organized the free writes by the code number and free write

round, I read the free writes holistically. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) discuss the

importance of managing data to help "gain some control over the data that tends to grow

rapidly" (p. 211).

In order to make sense of such a large number of responses, I began outlining

responses and inserting the information from the responses into a word document to be

later moved to an Excel spreadsheet. I then reread the free writes to further reflect on the

responses that were provided. I organized the data in an Excel spreadsheet labeling the

data in the following columns: (1) Participant number, (2) Free write number, (3) Feeling

Caught, (4) Sender of the Message, (5) Receiver Responses, (5) Quote from Participants,

(6) Tension(s) Present, (7) Location, (8) Ongoing/Resolved, (9) Impact, and (10)

Comments. The Participant Number column identifies the number arbitrarily given to

each participant when their identifying demographics were removed for confidentiality.

The Free Write Number column reflects the round that the free write response was

provided (i.e., FW1, FW2, & FW3). The Feeling Caught column describes the message

or situation that the student struggled with resolving. The Sender Message column

established who sent the message to the participant. The Receiver Response column displays the participant response or reaction to the message sent by the sender. The Quote column is included for exemplar examples to help describe the codes. The Tension column describes the tension present. The Location column is included to indicate whether students are experiencing tensions at school, home, or both. The Ongoing/Resolved column establishes whether the student feels as if the tension is resolved or whether it is still ongoing in the student's life. The Impact column is provided to reveal whether students indicate that the tension is affecting their role as a student either positively or negatively. The Comments column includes reflection from me on the coding process. The Comments column serves as a means to write analytic memos and assists with reflexivity as a qualitative researcher (Saldana, 2009). This process was repeated for FW2 and FW3 periods.

Although tedious at times, this process assisted with the goals of data management and data reduction. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) discuss the importance of managing data to help "gain some control over the data that tends to grow rapidly" (p. 211). In order to speed up the coding process, I realized the importance of using abbreviations when describing the message sender (e.g., bf for boyfriend, gf for girlfriend, and rm for roommate) and for indicating whether the struggle was resolved or ongoing (e.g., r for resolved, and o for ongoing). Furthermore, I made sure that in order to "maintain the full picture of the subsample's information," I tried to engage in this first step slowly to make sure I was being patient and respectful of the responses (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 46). Therefore, during this first step, sometimes I would be able to code 30 free

write responses, while other times I could only do eight before needing to quit and move on.

Next, I engaged in Step two: Identifying themes within samples. This next step involves looking for the similarities that emerge from the data within each subsample (Boyatzis, 1998). During this step, the researcher must "specifically, (a) compare all of the summaries from one subsample, looking for similarities, or patterns within the subsample….and (b) repeat the process for the other subsample" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 46). From the advice given in Boyatzis' (1998) text, I chose to combine Steps 2 and 3.

Next, I followed Step 3: Comparing themes across subsamples. During this step, careful attention should be placed on "developing themes and codes" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 47). In order to compare themes across subsamples, I included each of the free write time periods (i.e., FW1, FW2, FW3) and examined the responses across the columns that were identified in Step 1. During the combination of Steps 2 and 3, documents were examined to assist in identifying the themes and subthemes present.

After completing Steps 2 and 3, I began Step 4: Creating Codes. Although previous steps involved searching for the similarities present within the subsamples, Step 4 requires a closer look at the raw data. Boyatzis (1998) explains the importance of this step stating, "return to the raw information and reread, listen, or watch the protocols while attempting to determine the presence or absence of each of the preliminary themes" (p. 48). During this step, I relied on a highlighting system to identify the themes and sub-themes. This highlighting system also became useful in helping to identify the number of times themes presented themselves during each of the coding rounds.

I was able to engage in a technique of data reduction during this step. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) point out researchers are not always able to use all of the collected data. When engaging in Step 4, I was able to reduce the data by combining an emerging theme into a larger category and disregarding irrelevant participant responses. Examples of discarded responses included those that discussed unrelated topics (e.g., pretending to be a Latino character) or discussed experiences that occurred two or more weeks before the participant began college. Through this reduction and revision process, three themes emerged that "(a) maximizes the differentiation of the subsamples…., (b) facilitates coding of the raw material (i.e., it is easy to apply); and (c) minimizes exclusions" (p. 48). Once the themes were identified, I moved on to Stage III.

Stage III, Validating and Using the Codes

Step 1: Coding the Rest of the Raw Information

Boyatzis (1998) explains that the researcher must begin Stage III by "applying the reliable code to the entire sample" (p. 50). I made sure that the themes were consistent across the three rounds of the free writes. I also color-coded each theme and sub theme to allow me to keep the data organized and in order to "visually compare the differentiation on each of your *[sic]* samples in relation to the themes in the reliable code" (p. 50). Through my organization, I also was able to differentiate how often the themes occurred during each free write. After coding the rest of the raw information, I began Step 2: Validating the Code.

Step 2: Validating the Code

In this study, validation strategies were conducted qualitatively. First, I reread the narratives to make sure that the themes and sub-themes were applied consistently across

the three rounds of data. Second, I sought opinions from members of my research team.

Specifically, I made frequent contact with the head of my committee, Dr. Deanna

Sellnow, seeking guidance on how I constructed and reconstructed the themes (Boyatzis,

1998). Weekly progress reports were sent on my coding choices and findings to Dr.

Sellnow. These progress reports and meetings to discuss findings helped enhance the

reliability of this study. I also engaged in two additional validation strategies. Creswell

(2003) provides eight validation strategies to aid qualitative researchers. Although I

would have liked to engage in member checking with the participants, I did not have a

means by which to contact the returning and departing students to discuss the codes and

themes that evolved from the data. Rather, I confirm validity through reflexivity,

transparency, and second-cycle coding. First, I show reflexivity throughout the study by

discussing my role as a researcher and my biases with regard to the subject matter.

Second, I show transparency by providing a detailed account of my methodological

choices and data analysis techniques (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Third, I confirm validity

through engaging multiple cycles of coding. Specifically, after completing the first round

of coding, I also conducted an inductive second-cycle coding method.

Criterion-Referenced Coding

According to Saldana (2009), "second cycle coding methods, if needed, are

advanced ways of reorganizing and reanalyzing data coded through first cycle methods"

(p. 149). For this coding round, I developed a code through using criterion-referenced or

anchored materials (Boyatzis, 1998). The first step when developing a data driven code

inductively is identifying criterion-referenced or anchored materials. Therefore, it is

important to identify material to be coded that "must represent a subsample of two or

more specific samples used in research" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 41). During coding, themes were compared and contrasted between participants who choose to return to the same university following the first semester and those who choose to not come back. Once the criterion-referenced variable(s) were identified, "the researcher uses a compare-and-contrast process to extract observable differences between or among the samples" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 42). One common drawback in using this coding approach is identifying the dependent variable (Boyatzis, 1998). For this study, my concern was not in identifying a dependent variable; rather I had difficulty in choosing only one variable to code. Boyatzis (1998) explains the importance of limiting your choices stating, "multiple criteria complicate your sampling and create an increased workload during the code development phase of the research" (p. 43).

For this study, numerous criterion-referenced variables could be identified and explored. However, for this study I am interested in comparing and contrasting the responses returning and non-returning students. Thus, developing codes related to student retention and departure was of the utmost importance. For future research, additional variables will be coded and explored.

As in the first cycle of coding, there are distinct stages to choose when engaging in criterion-referencing coding. I decided to engage in a modified version of criterion-referencing. Due to only seven students leaving after the first semester, I had to take a holistic approach and compare all of these students to the returning students. I began by managing the data. I pulled all of the responses from the free writes of the students who did not return and highlighted the responses and put these in a separate word document. Next, I looked at the codes that were created in the first round of coding. I explored both

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similarities and differences between the returning and non-returning students. I found three themes and related subthemes that were present across all of the non-returning student transcripts. I then went back to the original Excel file and looked at the associated data across all of these content categories. I then explored these themes in relation to the full sample, exploring the differences. The validation strategies were consistent with the first coding round. Through both coding cycles and careful attention to validation, the data has been thoroughly analyzed, leading to the research questions being answered.

Summary

In sum, this chapter described the methods employed to conduct this dissertation study. The next chapter provides the results.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The results of this dissertation study contribute to the understanding of first-semester students' communication to, from, and about home, specifically related to discursive struggles as explicated in Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). This chapter reviews the results in an attempt to answer the study's research questions: What, if any, discursive struggles do first-semester college students report regarding messages to, from, and about home? And what, if any, discursive struggles do non-returning students report regarding messages to, from, and about home? I examined the free-writes in three ways to answer this research questions. First, I examined all responses provided during from each of the three sets of free writes for emergent themes. Second, I compared themes that emerged in non-returning student responses to those from the students who returned for a second semester. Finally, I prepared a thick description using direct quotations from the students themselves to emphasize how first-semester students discursively negotiate and assign meaning to their lived experiences during the college transition.

Identifying Discursive Struggles

Guided by the current writing on RDT (Baxter, 2011), as well as the original tenets of the theory (Baxter & Braithwaite, 1996), I address the research questions: What, if any, discursive struggles do first-semester college students report regarding messages to, from, and about home? And what, if any, discursive struggles do non-returning students report regarding messages to, from, and about home? From this coding of all events from the three free writes, three distinct discursive struggles emerged with regard to how students make sense of the first-semester away from home. These are the

discursive struggles of independence, integration, expression. Within these discursive

struggles, students identify various radiants of meaning regarding messages to, from, and

about home. This chapter identifies both the discursive struggles and the associated

radiants of meaning. More specifically, these results identify both competing and

complementary discourses within these discursive struggles relevant to students'

formation of meaning about both school and home.

Across all rounds. A total of 405 narratives were coded for all three free write

rounds. Within these 405 narratives, the discursive struggle of integration was most

prevalent at 43% (n=177). The second most prevalent struggle across the data collection

periods was the discursive struggle of independence at 27% (n=116). The third struggle

was the struggle of expression at 21% (n=85). Finally, 7% (n=27) of the students'

narratives claimed not to be experiencing discursive struggles related to messages to,

from, or about home. Figure 4.1 reflects the themes that emerged when examining

narratives from all three rounds.

In looking at trends over time, the number of narratives that focused on discursive

struggles of integration fell over the course of the semester, which suggests that at least

some students may have gradually become more integrated into the campus community.

Similarly, the number of narratives claiming not to experience discursive struggles

related to messages to, from, or about home increased also suggests that some first

semester students were transitioning effectively from home to college. Conversely,

however, the number of narratives reporting discursive struggles about independence rose

over the course of the semester pointing to the fact that some students felt more tension

about becoming independent adults over the course of the first semester at college.
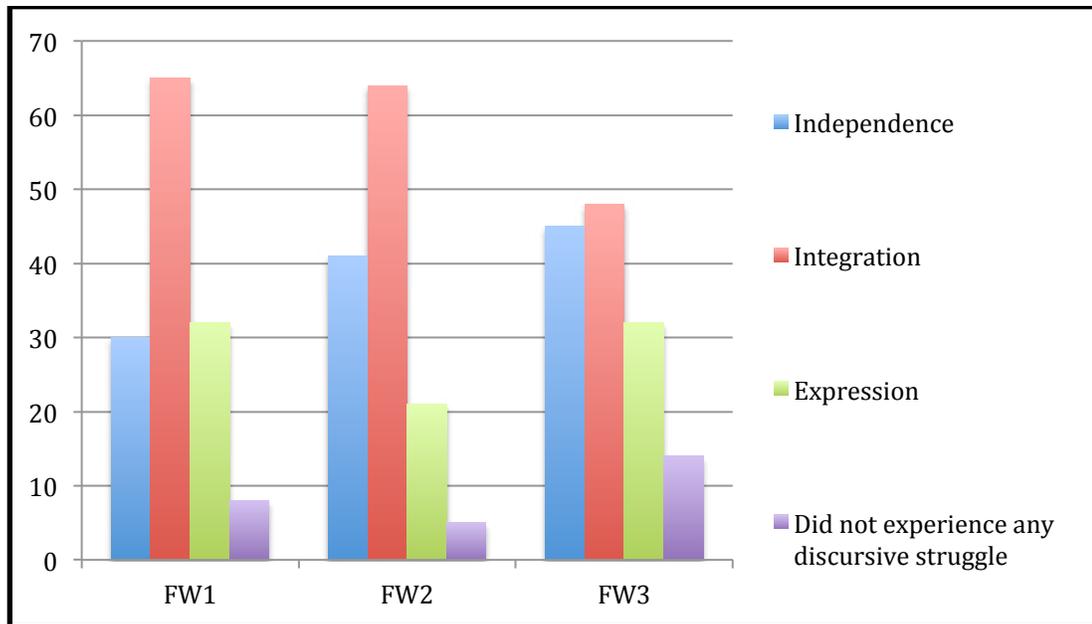
Figure 4.1. Discursive Struggles Present Across All Rounds

In addition to describing discursive struggles across the semester, students also identified contradictory and complementary discourses. When examining responses from all three rounds, students identified 672 discourses creating tension. Students identified more discourses during FW1 (n=225) and FW2 (n=225). The discourses decreased during FW3 (n=197). The fact that fewer students reported experiencing tensions by semester end may signal successful transitioning to college for them. Figure 4.2 highlights the various discourses present within the discursive struggles.
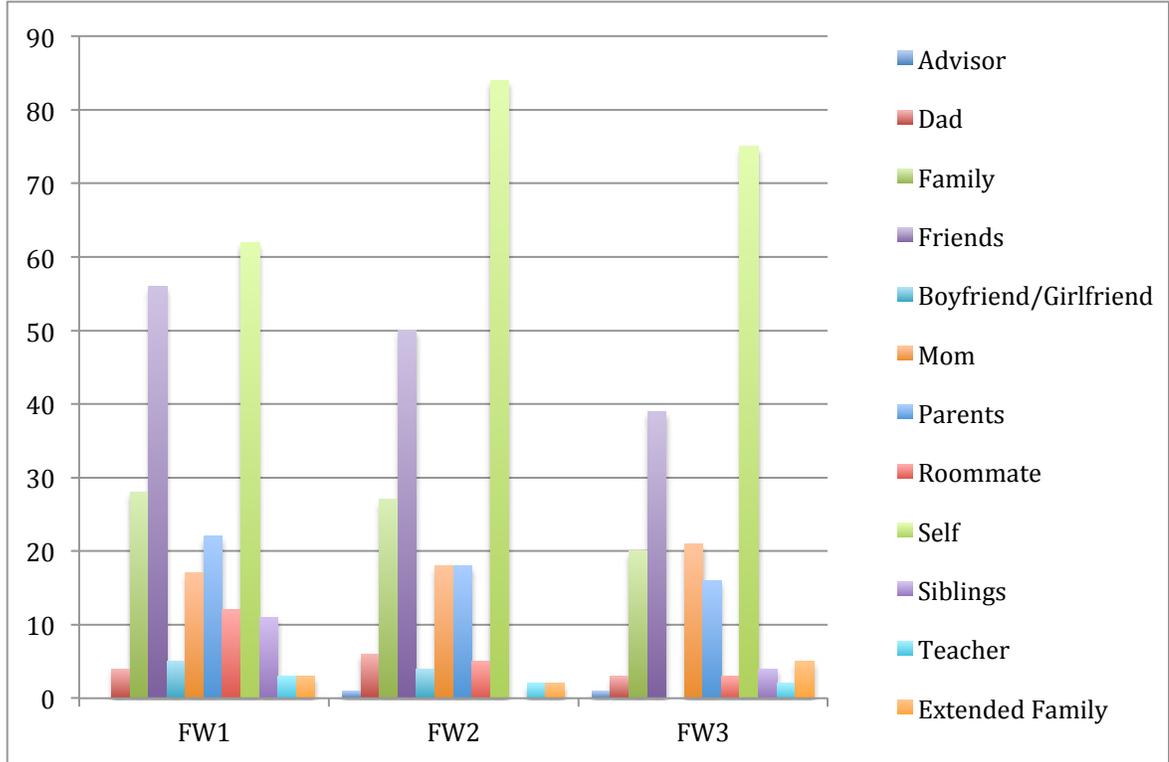
Figure 4.2. Discourses Present within the Discursive Struggles

Overall, individuals identified intrapersonal struggles as being the most prevalent source of tension. In 33% (n=221) of the responses, students reported feeling individually responsible for the majority of the tension that they were experiencing. This struggle was particularly evident when students discuss making decisions regarding completing school work or engaging in social activities. One student, for example, discussed the difficulty in balancing school demands this way:

> A catch-22 that I have had has been which homework I should do. I procrastinated and got it all built upon me so now I have not been able to decide which class was most important to do the work for. I did not take care of the work that I needed to when I had time to do it. (Student 212, FW1)

The second most common discourse of their discursive struggles involved friends (22%, n=151). Students throughout the free writes discussed issues with friends from home challenging their success at college. Two students wrote for instance:

> My friend continually tried to persuade me to give up on my desire to attend college in(location of study) and attend college with him. (Student 274, FW1)

> Now I have ever friends wanting me to leave campus and hang out with them while my parents expect me to be on campus. (Student 135, FW1)

Students also explained that new college friends created tensions. One student, for example, wrote that:

> All of my friends were disappointed in me because I chose to go home and missed out on so much fun (Student 289, FW 3).

Following friends, students identified family (11%, n=75), as being amongst the discourses creating tension during the first semester. Students discussed throughout the free writes that their family collectively made numerous requests for them students to come home to complete expected family tasks and responsibilities, while also expecting students to do well at school. One student expressed the tension this way:

> I absolutely love my family so it was hard for me to say no because I didn't want them to think I was choosing my social life over them. (Student 227, FW1)

Students also identified parents (8%, n=56) as playing a role in their discursive struggles. Throughout the free writes, students wrote that parents would send confusing messages where they wanted their college student to integrate into the college climate, but at the same time to come home often. One student explained:

> My parents wanted me to come visit but also talked about how they wanted me to make the most out of my college experience. (Student 292, FW 3)

Students also indicated that their parents impacted their decisions, for example, to change

majors or to join a group, team, or organization. One student, for example, explained

how she negotiated with her parents when joining a sorority:

> I joined (sorority) after I made an agreement with my parents that I wouldn't let
> my school work slip. (Student 165, FW1)

Finally, "mom" was a frequently cited discourse reported on within a discursive struggle

(8%, n=56). Although "dad" and "parents" were mentioned in the transcripts, students

identified discourses from their mothers much more often as creating turmoil for them

while away at school. Students explained that moms created tensions regarding what

activities they should be involved in on campus, whether they should be involved in a

romantic relationship, and most frequently, demands to come home more on the

weekends or transfer to a school closer to home. For example:

> Mom said you should just transfer to UC *[sic]*. It surprised and confused me
> because she is always the one telling me to never give up. (Student 385, FW1)

> While my mom has said that I do not have to come home over the phone, I fully
> understand that I must. (Student 171, FW2)

> My mom wants me to come home often AND she wants me to make good grades
> and get close to my sorority sisters. (Student 280, FW 3)

 I did not combine family, parents, and mom into one discourse theme because doing so

would have silenced distinct voices. Specifically, Montgomery and Baxter (1998) argue

that research must clearly exhibit that there are "many more than two voices expressing

the tensions of relating and must link these voices to the relationship, not the separate

individuals in the relationship" (p. 175).

Other discourses focused on advisors, dads, girlfriend/boyfriend, roommates, siblings, teachers, and extended family (e.g., grandparents, stepparents, and cousins). Through these discourses, students reported struggling with managing the competing messages at school, at home, and those occurring at both school and home. Moreover, students noted that the majority of their discursive struggles were occurring both at home and at school. Figure 4.3 reflects the location of the struggle.
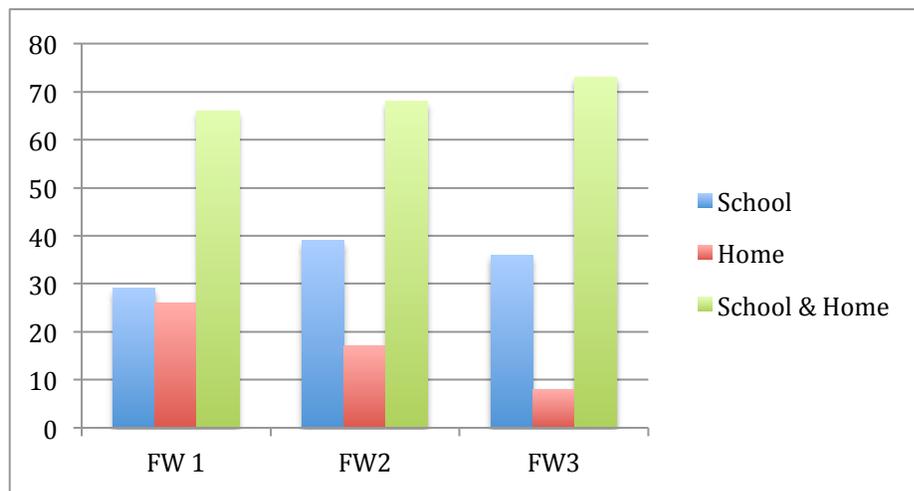
Figure 4.3. Location of the Discursive Struggles

Although the number of narratives focused on discursive struggles at home fell over the course of the semester, reports regarding discourses both at home and school not only increased over the course of the semester, but also represented the largest number of narratives overall (far more than either home or school in isolation). This may reflect the discursive struggle of integration at play for first semester students.

After exploring overall themes regarding discursive struggles, discourses, and locations, results from each of the three sets of free write responses is reported.

Responses from each free write set are examined according to the discursive struggles and the associated radiants of meanings present.

   Free write 1. A total of 135 narratives were coded from FW1. Within these 135 narratives, 22% (n=30) reflected the discursive struggle of independence, 48% (n=65) displayed the discursive struggle of integration, 24% (n=32) focused on the discursive struggle of expression, and 6% (n=8) conveyed experiencing no discursive struggles regarding message to, from, or about home during this data collection period (See Figure 4.4). Each of these discursive struggles and its associated radiants of meaning is discussed.
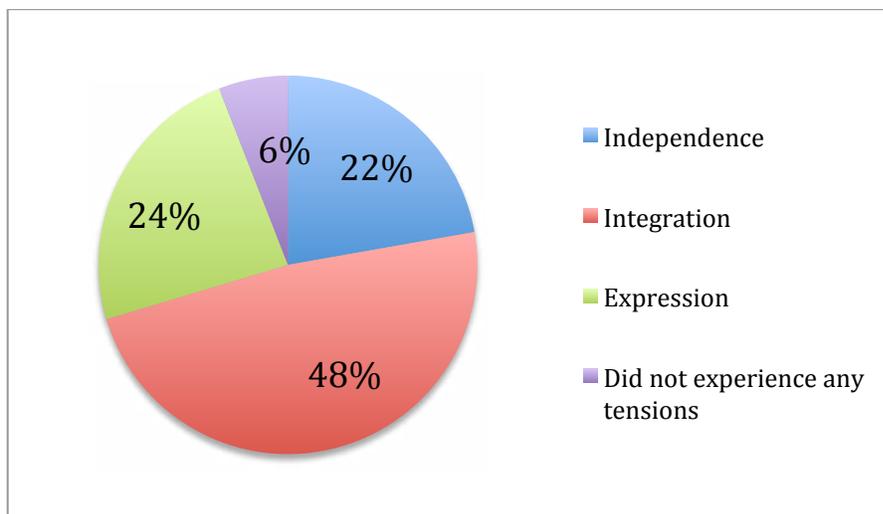
Figure 4.4. Discursive Struggles Present in FW1

   Data for free write one was collected between August 30 and September 8. During the first round of data collection, students appeared to still be negotiating their role as students at the university. Students in the first round of data collection discussed struggles about trying to establish their role as a college student and make decisions on their own. For many students, this first data collection period reflects their first opportunity go home for a break (Labor Day). Many students identified various

discourses influencing their decision about whether or not to stay at school over the Labor Day weekend. Students also reported feeling caught between studying and engaging in social activities, deciding who to spend time with on-campus and off-campus, and whether to join campus affiliated groups, teams, and organizations. These decisions were impacted by messages coming from and about home, as well as discourses coming from campus. Students reported experiencing competing discourses at school, home, and at both locations (see Figure 4.5).
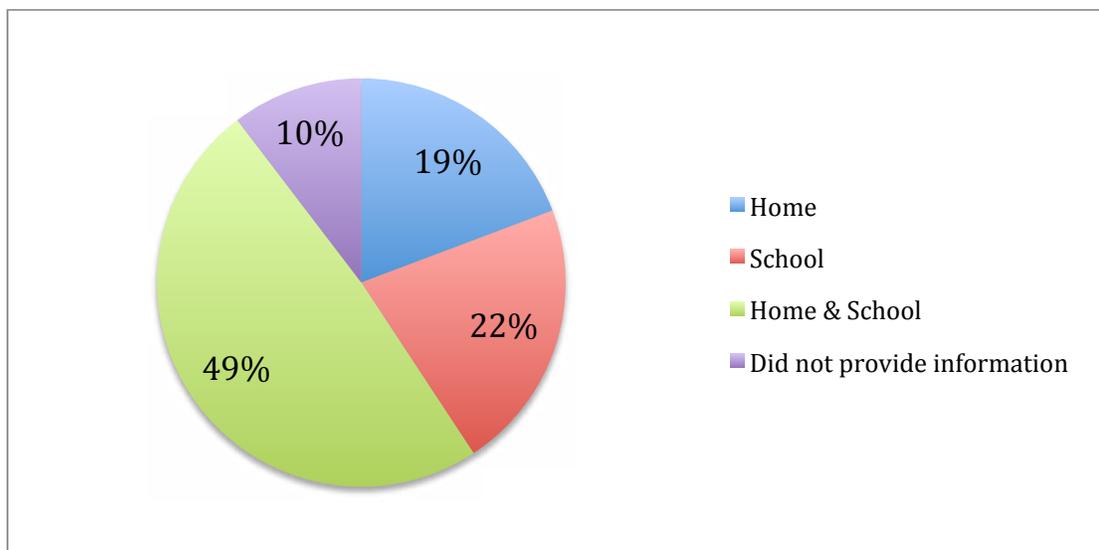
Figure 4.5. Location of Struggle identified in Free Write 1

Students also wrote about having difficulty deciding how and with whom to spend their time while on campus. Students explained being torn between "being an adult" and making solid decisions regarding their academic education and overall well-being, while struggling with having to do things on their own without the assistance of others. The majority of students responding to FW1 did not feel homesick until after they had gone home for the Labor Day weekend. Moreover, students who lived further away from campus (five or more hours drive) reported not feeling pressure to return home or feeling

of homesickness because they were "expected to stay at school." The majority of students who reported feeling homesick lived close to campus. Across FW1, only three students discuss feeling homesick. The students distance from school to home ranged from (28-70 miles, M=32.6). This close distance allotted students the opportunity to drive home often, when staying at college and getting acclimated may have been a better decision to aid the transition. Individuals from home (e.g., family members, romantic partners, hometown friends) of students who attended college close to their hometown (i.e., less than 120 miles) tended to make requests for them to come home more often than those students who attended school more than 240 miles from home. Figure 4.6 highlights the various discourses present within the discursive struggles during FW1.
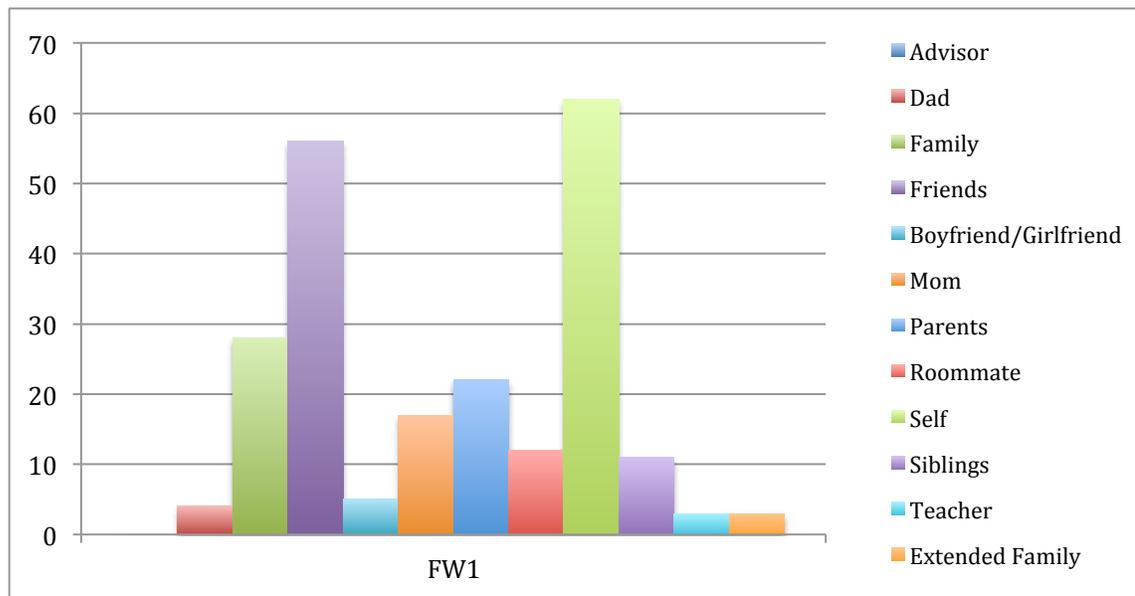
Figure 4.6. Discourses Present within the Discursive Struggles in FW1

Although eleven distinct discourses were identified by students, the majority of tension-producing messages were within the discourses of self, followed by friends, then family, and then parents. Student narratives revealed that mothers sent the majority of mixed

messages, confusing students on "whether college is hard work or a lot of fun." Of the

135 free write responses, 3% (n=4) of students indicated a desire to transfer or leave

college altogether. The majority of students reported loving being at college, despite

sometimes feeling torn and other times confused about the competing discourses.

Free write 2. A total of 135 narratives were coded from FW2. Within these 135

narratives, 30% (n=41) reflected a discursive struggle related to independence, 47%

(n=64) displayed the discursive struggle of integration, 16% (n=21) explicated the

discursive struggle of expression, and 4%(n=5) conveyed that students did not experience

any discursive tensions regarding messages to, from, or about home during that data

collection period (See Figure 4.7).
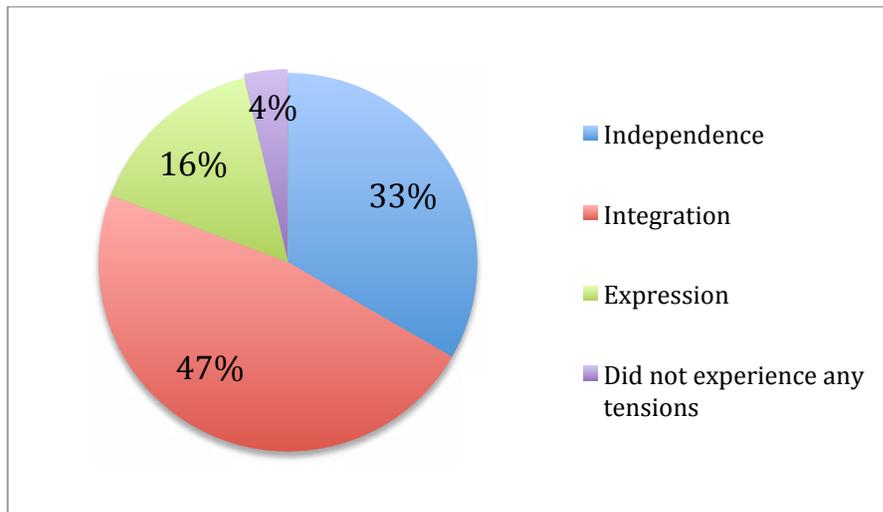
Figure 4.7. Discursive Struggles Present in FW 2.

Data for free write two was collected between October 4th and October 8th, which

occurred during midterm examinations. During the second round of data collection,

students still appeared to be negotiating their role as students at the university. During

the first round of data collection, students reported that they were trying to establish their role as a college student and make decisions on their own. In FW2, student responses began to acknowledge how their attention to academics was paying off or, conversely, how their attention to social needs was impacting their grades and increasing their stress about doing well in school. Student narratives continued to reflect issues concerning pressures to return home frequently, deciding who to spend time with, and how to manage messages that are critical or that challenge their needs for independence, integration, and expression. These decisions were impacted by messages from and about home, as well as discourses coming from campus. During FW2, six students explicitly address being homesick. Again, students who were reporting these feelings were also individuals who could frequent home often due to the close proximity. The distance did increase this time, with the distance for homesick students ranging from 28-284 miles (M=114). Students discussed competing discourses at school, at home, and at both locations (See Figure 4.8).
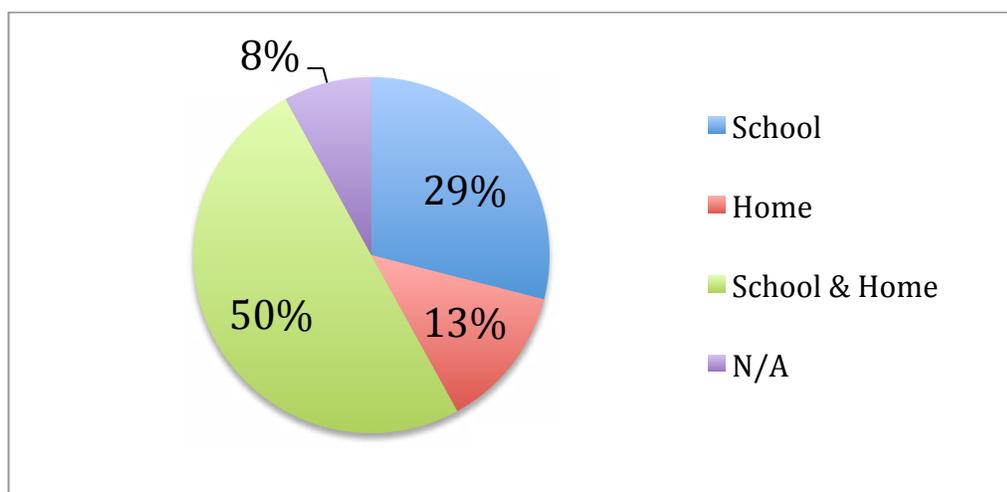
Figure 4.8. Location of Struggle identified in Free Write 2
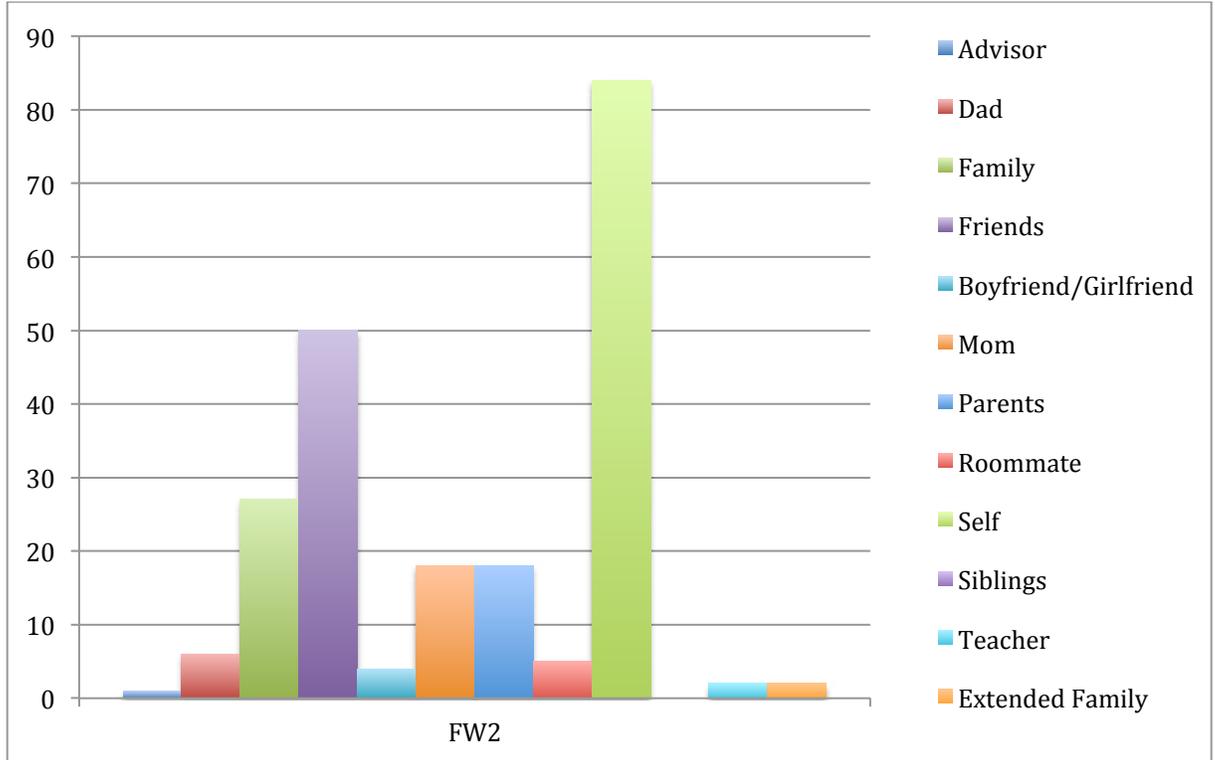
Figure 4.9. Discourses Present within the Discursive Struggles in FW2

Students also identified the discourses present during this data collection period

(See Figure 4.9). Although eleven distinct discourses were identified by students, the

majority of messages that evoked tension were intrapersonal communication, followed by

friends, family, mom, and then parents. Student narratives continued to reveal that moms

send the most mixed messages; however, reported in FW2 that family and friends used a

"tag team" approach where one parent or friend would call early in the week and make a

request from the student (to visit or complete a task), and then later in the week a

different family member or friend would follow up and make the same request. Students

discussed more pressure during this round to please others and more instances of feeling

homesick or wanting to transfer. In fact, in FW2 5% of students (n=7) voiced their desire

or a desire expressed by others for them to transfer or to leave college early and find employment.

Free write 3. A total of 135 narratives were coded from FW3. Within these 135 narratives, 33% (n=45) reflected the discursive struggle of independence, 36% (n=48) displayed the discursive struggle of integration, 24% (n=32) explicated the discursive struggle of expression, and 10% (n=14) conveyed that students did not experience any tensions regarding message to, from, or about home during this data collection period (See Figure 4.10).
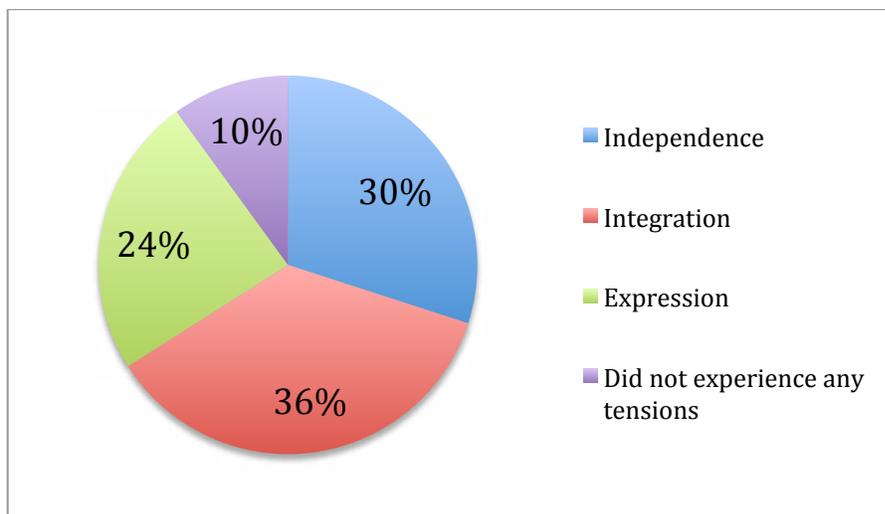
Figure 4.10. Discursive Struggles Present in FW 3

FW3 was completed November 8th through November 12th, which was close to Fall break. During this third round of data collection, student narratives reflected feelings of loyalty to the university and most students discussed their identity as being college students as opposed to struggles in becoming college students as reported in FW1 and FW2. Homesickness was reported less during FW3, with only one student indicating that they missed home. Students discussed pressures concerning balancing grades and social

interests, decisions regarding traveling home for Thanksgiving, and whether to return to the university for a subsequent semester or to transfer to a different college or to leave college altogether and find employment. These decisions were impacted by messages from and about home, as well as discourses coming from campus. Students discussed competing discourses at school, at home, and at both locations (see Figure 4.11).
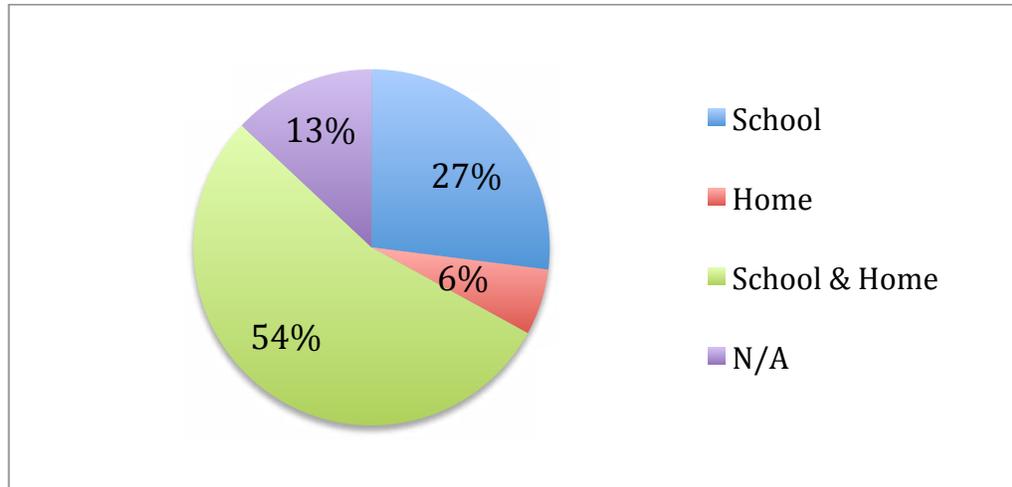
*Figure 4.11.* Location of Struggle identified in Free Write 3

Figure 4.12 highlights the various discourses present within the discursive struggles during FW3
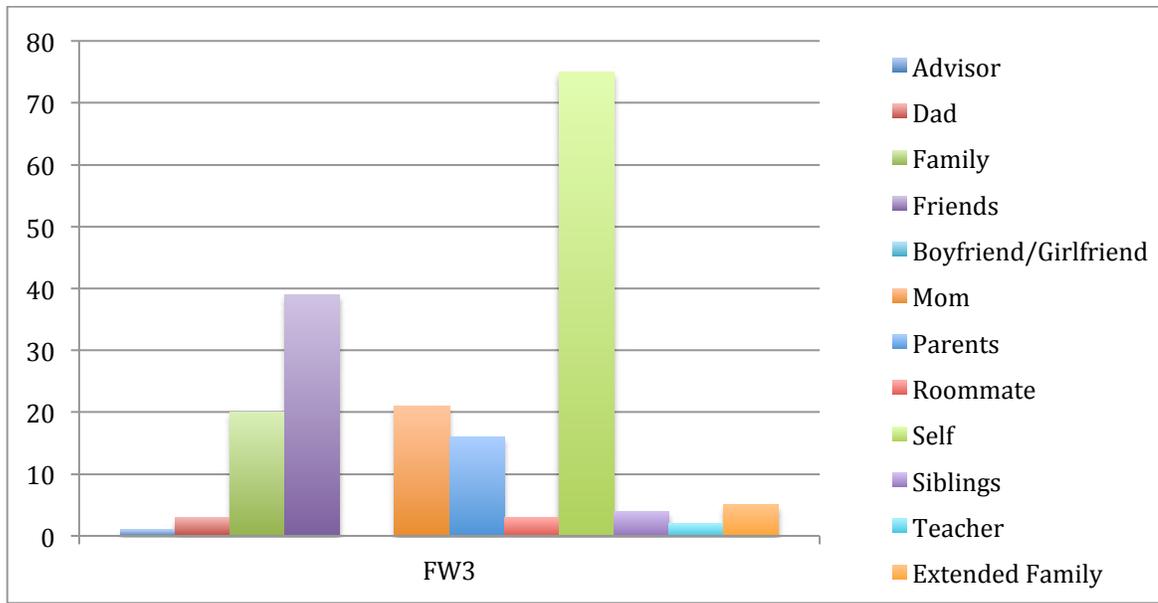
Figure 4.12. Discourses Present within the Discursive Struggles in FW3

Although eleven distinct discourses were identified by students, the majority of messages that evoked tension were intrapersonal communication, followed by friends, mom, and family. Although mothers were identified as the parent sending the most pressuring messages, students identified friends as creating more of a struggle between their academic and social lives. During FW3, students acknowledged that individuals were sending more overt, and pressuring messages via Facebook and texts than during previous free write rounds. During FW3, 3% (n=4) of students discussed transferring or leaving college to find employment.

Exploring the Discursive Struggles

Through these competing discourses, various discursive struggles and radiants of meaning were present across all the free write periods. Through this contrapuntal analysis, attention can be given to the power residing within the discourses and locating marginalized discourses through the free write rounds. To engage in this analysis, it is

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important to examine each of the three discursive struggles. The first is the discursive struggle of independence.

The discursive struggle of independence. Overall, 22% (n=30) free writes in FW1, 30% (n=41) free writes in FW2, and 33% (n=45) free writes in FW3 reflected the discursive struggle of independence. Events coded reflect this struggle as students wanted to somewhat shed their pre-college identities to become independent, yet could not fully transform because they were feeling interdependency within their pre-college and newly formed relationships. Student narratives suggested that not only were students struggling with newfound independence and having interdependent needs, but messages from home also reflected the struggle to simultaneously hold on to and let go of the students.

Through this apparent struggle, students explicated that messages concerning both campus and home challenged their changing identities as first-semester college students. Within the struggle, the discourses reflected competing discourses of students either attending to their own needs (i.e., academically or socially) or satisfying the needs of others (e.g., friends, family, romantic partners, roommates). Through the free writes, students addressed the difficulties in making the "right choice." Specifically, students discussed wanting do things on their own, but still feeling (inter)dependent on pre-college relationships.

The discourse of independence was present throughout narratives as students discussed the desire to find their own way while at college, yet the discourse of interdependence was present, as well. Student narratives reflected the need for students to stay connected to family, friends, romantic partners, and pre-college identities even at

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the cost of their emerging adulthood identity needs. By invoking the discourse of independence with the discourse of interdependence, students discursively attempted to construct their new identities as being free, responsible, and self-regulated, yet dependent on others and dependent to others. Students feared that if that if they did not make their own decisions, they would be stuck in their pre-college identities. Four students wrote:

> I have been waiting to be independent for so long now I don't see why I would go home. (Student 244, FW1)

> I'd like space and more general respect as I am old enough to make my own decisions. (Student 226, FW 3)

> My parents tell me to make sure that school is my #1 priority however they also want to make sure I stay connected to them. (Student 281, FW2)

> I'll still put someone before me but I need to start weighing priorities. (Student 131, FW1)

Within this struggle concerning newfound independence, students recognized the need to balance demands imposed by self and others. Through this struggle of independence, one radiant of meaning present within the discursive struggle was the desire to stay connected to pre-college identities and relationships.

Desire to stay connected to pre-college identities and relationships. Across all of the free write rounds, students reported being torn between doing things they wanted to do socially or completing tasks expected of them by friends and family. Students explained that while they were accomplishing academic tasks, they were making social decisions and plans that affected pre-college relationships. Students conferred that the majority of their decisions to selfishly choose social and extracurricular events came at the expense of letting someone down. One student wrote:

> A while back my friends and I made plans to go to the beach and stay at a friend's beach house. I told everyone I could drive-consequently finalizing our plans. My

mom told me that she was changing the date of my dad's birthday party to a time I planned to go to the beach. My mom strongly encouraged me to attend my dad's bday [*sic*] but understands that I am 18 and she allows me to make my own decisions. (Student 215, FW1)

Like Student (215), other students voiced believing it was important to spend time with friends but did not consider how the choice would affect family members who had high expectations of spending time with the student. For example, these students stated:

Of course it was expected of me to go with my family to see the fireworks but they made plans after I made plans with my friends so I refuse to break plans with my friends. (Student 349, FW1)

I have gone from feeling bad for leaving my parents to not wanting to go home. (Student 158, FW 2)

Although students reported that the tough decisions they faced put them at odds with their family and friends, none discussed how negotiating their changing relationships and newly independent status might affect later academic success(es). With FW1 occurring early in the first semester, students may have been engaging in a "honeymoon" stage of college where they were following rules and expectations placed upon them at school. Students may not have realized until later in the semester that they still had to maintain familial ties and actively engage in relationships from home.

The responses across the free writes reflected numerous instances where students caved to on-campus or off-campus pressures due to promises of tangible rewards from family members and friends. Students discussed, for example, a desire to stay on campus to spend time forging new friendships or to complete assignments, yet were drawn to the rewards and promises made by others at home. Students wrote:

I called my mom and she said I should come home. She would fix my favorite meal for me if I did [come home]. (Student 235, FW1)

My mom kept telling me that she and my dad missed me and she would take me shopping if I came home. (Student 223, FW1)

My mom wanted me to come for Labor day weekend and she used me setting up my bank account as an excuse so I could have access to my money even though I wanted to stay here. (Student 336, FW1)

My stepdad told me to stay and study but kept asking me to come to dinner. (Student 347, FW 3)

Both parties bribed me-my parents bribed me with seeing my puppy, my bed, everything and my friends bribed me on not wanting to miss anything. (Student 179, FW 3)

These examples show that even though students may have felt more independent living on their own and desire independence, they also realized that they still had ties to their communities. Parents not only provided students with incentives to return home, they also relied on pre-college responsibilities to get students to return home. Students explained having to return home more frequently than they would like because parents expected them to mow the lawn (Student 232), fix a friend's car (Student 171), and help a sister plan a wedding (Student 160).

Students also explained that new relationships sometimes impeded them from satisfying independent needs:

My roommate has kind of taken on the role of mom. Not necessarily in a bad way, just cleaning, seeing where we are, and when we are coming home. (Student 133, FW1)

Students also discussed wanting to join groups or organizations, but worried how their family members or friends would judge these decisions or felt the need to ask permission to engage in these activities:

I joined (sorority) after I made an agreement with my parents that I wouldn't let my school work slip. (Student 165, FW 1)

As Baxter (2011) clarifies, the discourse of individualism is commonly accepted as a dominant discourse that permeates individualistic cultures like the U.S., coexisting with the discourse of collectivism (p. 57). Baxter explains the web of discourse is so complex that these discourses are present and layered within additional discursive struggles, such as integration and expression.

The discursive struggle of integration. The discursive struggle of integration was the most visible across the three rounds of transcripts. As a group, first-semester students revealed a confliction about how to immerse themselves in the college culture. Students discussed the desire to integrate and be accepted as college students, while also experiencing separation needs connected to belonging to another group off campus, including family, friends, high school classmates, romantic partners, and the like. This discursive struggle reflects the discourse of individualism and community. Students identified discourses that promote integration and those that pull students toward separation. Although these issues are relatively external to the students' relationships, the students also highlighted various struggles concerning issues internal to their relationship. Whether discourses affected the internal or external issues to relationships, during all rounds of data collection five radiants of meaning revealed themselves within this discursive struggle: Individual-Identity Construction Surrounding Physical (In)dependence, Individual Identity Construction as Coupled or Free of Commitment, Voluntary or Involuntary Interdependence with a Relational Other, Competing Demands on Time and Energy, and Competing Loyalty Demand.

Individual-identity construction surrounding physical (in)dependence. Baxter (2011) explains that research exploring integration has focused on whether an individual's identity is that of an autonomous being or is physically dependent on others. Research has examined elderly issues pertaining to autonomy-connection (e.g., Pawlowski, 2006). Although most students in the current study did not indicate having physical ailments that created dependencies on others, students did explain that their autonomy was threatened at times due to feeling physically constrained by a vehicle (or lack thereof), and through parental physical dependencies.

Vehicle constraints. Numerous students discussed feeling stuck on campus because they did not have a car or a ride to visit home more frequently, or that other individuals, such as roommates or friends depended on them to take them places. One student (233, FW1), for instance, discussed that he did not want to go home to visit family but felt pressured to do so his hometown friend was driving home:

> I feel obligated to take my friend up on his offer to let me drive him home because I don't have a car.

On an opposite note, Student 226 felt a desperate need to visit home, but did not have a car or friends that could drive him home:

> I am wanting to go home but my family thinks that they only need to get me to come home once a month. I feel stuck here and am becoming stressed. I have no life. My family just sort of ditched me. (Student 226, FW 3).

Another student (177, FW1) focused on a different issue that affected his need for autonomy. His roommate depended on him:

> I just want to go and get my car fixed but my roommate needed me to drive him somewhere.

Parental dependencies. During the free writes, students also reported that it was comforting to have family members living close to the university. But, with that closeness came with additional stressors including expectations for visits and to maintain pre-college responsibilities. Students 129 and 381, for example, reported feeling they had to go home to help out family members because no one else would:

> Over Labor day weekend my mom wanted me to come home and help her do some lifting and straightening up around the house. The only time she was available was Saturday afternoon, the day of the football game. I had already made plans to go see the games with my friends. She was slightly disappointed but rearranged her Monday to take time off and I was able to help her then. (Student 129, FW1)

> I have a desire to stay here on the weekends, but I feel conflicted to go home and help my mom move into her new place. My mom and younger sister are who I feel like I am expected to go home and help them out because my parents are divorced and there's no one else to help them move. (Student 381, FW1)

> My mom and dad want me to come home because they need me to help them around the house and since I am an only child it is my responsibility. (Student 235, FW 2)

> They [parents] expect me to do everything for them and to drop everything I'm doing for them. (Student 206, FW 2)

Although these examples highlight that students' autonomy was affected by physical constraints, Baxter (2011) also explains that students may struggle with emotional and social pulls that affect their needs for autonomy and connection. This radiant of meaning is identified as Individual Identity Construction as Coupled or Free of Commitment.

Individual Identity Construction as Coupled or Free of Commitment. Although Baxter (2011) notes this radiant of meaning has generally been explored in dating research, it was also present in the transcripts examined for this dissertation study.

During the free writes, students discussed the desires of wanting to join on-campus

groups and organizations, such as intermural teams and Greek life, yet at the same time

wanting to construct a separate identity of being a "regular" college student. Students

also reported a fear that if they joined an on-campus group, their friends and family at

home would disapprove. For example, these students discussed this tension involving

joining a sorority:

> During rush week I felt like I was being pressured to join my sister's sorority at
> first. She's in KKT and every time I would go to that house I would be called a
> 'little kronie' or they would say something about my sister. I felt that if I joined it
> would only be because of Claire, my sister. But if I joined somewhere else I
> would disappoint her. (Student 336, FW1)

> Not many people back home expect me to join a sorority but I have been thinking
> about it a lot lately because I kind of feel left out. For some people I hear it isn't
> worth the money or time to be in a sorority, which I do want to concentrate on my
> academics for the first year, and I don't have a lot of money to spend. But from
> other people I hear it is so much fun and you meet a lot of people that you are
> friends with forever. (Student 341, FW1)

Students also discussed tensions associated with integrating into other on-campus

organizations and teams:

> My friends like Frisbee and want to be on the club team. I enjoy it too but I don't
> feel like going to practice every Monday and Wednesday. (Student 218, FW1)

> The more clubs I join and can get involved in, the harder it to focus on my grades.
> (Student 331, FW 2)

Although students explored the desire to integrate into the university through

teams and organizations, they also noted their need for autonomy while also drawing

upon a discourse of integration to hold onto their pre-college relationships and identity.

Conversely, students also discussed their need for autonomy when their families and

partners were seeking connection.

Student 154, for example, explained that he thought he made the right decision when coming to college by terminating his relationship with his girlfriend so he would not have to deal with the associated stressors of being involved within a long distance relationship (LDR). However, rather than feeling relief about being single, he was struggling with regret and missing his girlfriend:

> I thought it would be too difficult having a long distance relationship while so much is changing in our lives right now. I just want a partial relationship, like we would still see each other and do things like we did while we were together. (Student 154, FW1)

For other students, the struggle deciding to maintain or terminate a relationship was just beginning. For example, Student 208 questioned whether having a significant other would negatively impact her social desires and needs:

> I saw things that I could be missing out on because I had a boyfriend and wouldn't do them. I am afraid I am holding back from doing things that I enjoy and that I will regret later. (Student 208, FW 2)

Students also discussed a desire to maintain their current relationship and integrate into the college culture. Student #246 wrote, for example:

> He [boyfriend] didn't understand that I did want to see him but also live out the whole college experience. This was putting even more stress on me between fighting with him and classes. (Student 246, FW1)

Although these examples reflect family pressures and pressures imposed by a relational partner, many college students also struggled with needs for integration and separation from individuals they were forced to live with, such as roommates.

Voluntary or involuntary interdependence with a relational other. Baxter (2011) notes "the discourse of individualism presumes that individuals have full selection of their relational partners. However, the discourse of community emphasizes

membership into a larger social group where choice may be constrained" (p. 67).

Therefore, like families where individuals are stuck with one another, students noted

feeling stuck with a roommate. Exploring this voluntary/involuntary radiant of meaning

provides insight into students feeling torn in their needs for integration and separation.

During the first semester, some students felt that roommates were negatively affecting

impacting their academic goals:

> One expectation I had and one that my parents had was making it to class at
> (college), I had to pick an embarrassing walk to the front desk or wait it out and
> miss class. And I just kept yelling at my roommate to hurry up. I felt like I
> ruined the start of my freshman year. (Student 420, FW1)

> I wanted to study and my roommates wanted to play video games and watch
> television. They had already done their homework but I was just getting started.
> (Student 272, FW1)

> When I first came to (college), I found my roommate was valedictorian of her
> class, majoring in biology and someday hopes to become a pharmacist. I felt very
> intimidated because even though I was tenth in my class, I certainly wasn't as
> smart as she was. As the weeks started coming she studied a lot. My classes
> didn't require me to study as much as hers but I felt like she expected me to study
> as much as she does. I almost felt looked down upon while she studied for hours
> and I wasted time on Facebook. (Student 422, FW1)

> When you live in the same room as someone you feel as if you are constantly
> invading each other's space and it creates an uncomfortable living situation.
> (Student 228, FW2)

Students also wrote that roommates affected their needs to socially integrate or separate:

> There have been times that my roommate and I will go to events and once I am
> ready to go I tell her I am leaving so she says she will go too but on the way out
> she stops at every person to talk and say goodbye. So about 30 minutes later I am
> finally headed back to my dorm. (Student 166, FW1)

Some of the roommate conflict involved roommates making decisions on whether they

were planning on staying for the remainder of the semester, or depart college early. One

student wrote for example:

> I want her (roommate) to stay but also need to find another roommate if she
> leaves. (Student 160, FW3)

In addition to students struggling with voluntary and involuntary demands, they also struggled with competing demands on time and energy.

Competing demands on time and energy. During the first semester, students identified the most common struggle as being able to balance demands on time and energy. Students discussed feeling pulled between completing tasks they wanted and needed to accomplish, while being present for friends, family, and romantic partners. Baxter (2011) explains that "the discourse of community privileges spending time and investing energy in the relational partner, whereas the discourse of individualism privileges a decision by the person to honor the demands on his or her time and energy" (p. 69). First, students identified discourses from home that were placing demands on their time and energy.

Student 234, for example, had numerous school assignments to complete but received continuous pleads from his girlfriend to visit on weekends:

> She [girlfriend] kept begging and begging for me to come visit her so I finally
> called and we worked out a plan so I could see her Friday after class. I think I
> made the right choice. (Student 234, FW1)

For Student 346, the continuous pleas from a boyfriend were not just to visit more frequently, but to leave college all together and transfer to a school closer to home:

> My boyfriend wants me to transfer but she (mom) doesn't now. Now my
> relationship with my boyfriend is on thin ice. (Student 346, FW2)

In addition to feeling torn between satisfying the demands of relational partners and their own desires for autonomy, students also reported feeling pressured by friends and

roommates to spend more time with them. Students explained these pressures and both

short term and long term consequences for them as college students.

> I told my best friend that I would not be going home every weekend and see would have to accept it. I am more focused on doing homework and studying here at school rather than by going home and trying to do so. (Student 123, FW1)

> They were trying to get me to go, but I resisted the urge and stayed in my dorm. They said things like c'mon it'll be fun and your *[sic]* always inside studying. (Student 193, FW1)

> All of my friends want to go out but I have way too much homework and not enough time to get it done. They were all begging me to come and making me feel guilty saying things like you always have hw *[sic]* and you never come out. I had to choose between my homework and skipping parties and memories. But more parties will come. The real reason we are here is for the academics. (Student 179, FW1)

> I am attending school *[sic]* to get an education but it is hard to leave my friends and family behind. I mean I wanted to return home to see my family and friends but I really needed to use that time to catch up on homework. It was hard for me to tell them that I had to stay to finish up some work. I didn't want to convey that I didn't want to see them but was unable to because of homework. (Student 277, FW1).

Despite these struggles about prioritizing homework and academic goals over personal

social needs and the desires of family members, friends, and loved ones, all of the

students who prioritized academics explained that their decisions resulted in positive

outcomes. Students wrote, for example:

> It [*sic*] actually makes me feel better like I'm being a good and dedicated student. More parties will come but the real reason I am at school is for the academics. (Student 179, FW1)

> I finished my hw [*sic*]. It was a weight lifted off my chest. This way I can get good grades and then have fun. (Student 217, FW1)

> I think it paid off. I got a lot done and then next day in class I understood what was going on and felt prepared. (Student 193, FW1)

> This experience has taught me time management and social time are always going to conflict. (Student 312, FW2)

Additional narratives reflected the true altruistic drive of students balancing their time and energy. Students explained that by putting academics first they would be able to eventually take care of their families and loved ones:

> Balancing my time is very important. I want to show my loved ones that I still care about them but I also need to keep up with my work. (Student 277, FW1)

> I know I am expected to be here getting my education so I can provide for my family one day with the career of my choice. My desire is to be home right now but I am expected to be here. I know by sticking college out and earning my degree the inconveniences will be well worth the struggle someday. (Student 144, FW1)

The majority of the narratives that showed students struggling with choosing school or social needs actually resulted in students putting schoolwork before social desires. While at school, students were making the necessary sacrifices regarding time and energy to become adults by working toward academic goals and accomplishments when challenged by friends. However, the narratives from students regarding family and romantic partners reflected more issues concerning balancing time and energy. Students also discussed a struggle that affected their transition regarding competing loyalty demands.

Competing loyalty demands. Baxter (2011) explains that how and whom a person spends time can create competing expectations concerning loyalty. Specifically, Baxter notes, "often, how a person spend his or her time and energy is regarded as a marker of loyalty, but loyalty is enacted (and violated) in ways other than time/energy expenditure" (pp. 70-71). Students identified four struggles about feeling torn over "choosing sides": choosing romantic partners or family, choosing between parents,

choosing new friends or pre-college friends, and choosing friends or family. Students

discussed that these decisions created turmoil for them both at college and at home.

During FW1, students identified this loyalty demand to be a source of tension,

especially with regard to the Labor Day weekend. Students who did intend to go home

for the weekend felt torn because even though they were "home," they still wanted to

spend the majority of their time with their romantic partners:

> I had a desire to go see my boyfriend who attends a different school while my
> mom leaving for Florida to go take care of my grandma. With my mom going to
> Florida I would not see her for a while and she really wanted to see me. I ended
> up going home to see her and while it felt good to be with her, my boyfriend and I
> had an even longer time apart. My mom wants to be with me all time (which has
> gotten better) and she said it was okay to see Ryan (boyfriend) one night but I
> could tell she was upset in a way where I I'd choose him over her. (Student 382,
> FW1)

> On the long holiday weekend my parents wanted me to come visit them and my
> other family members, but my plan was different. I wanted to stay (at school) and
> then go to (different city) with my roommate to see my boyfriend. I felt that
> either decision I chose would upset someone. (Student 243, FW1)

> I had to make a decision to go bowling with my boyfriend and his friends or stay
> home with her before going back to school that night. The message I was getting
> from my mom was that I like Chris (boyfriend) more than her and don't ever want
> to hang out with just her anymore. This struggle makes me wish I went to school
> at School A (school close to home) so I could spend more time with my mom.
> (Student 159, FW1)

> My boyfriend wants me to transfer but she [mom] doesn't now. Now my
> relationship with my boyfriend is on thin ice. (Student 346, FW2)

Student narratives reflected the difficulties of choosing between spending time with

romantic partners and family members. Students also discussed loyalty demands

between parents:

> My parents are divorced. So over the Labor day weekend they both wanted me to
> go home and visit. It felt good to not let my dad down, and I felt somewhat
> obligated to see him. My mother came back Monday and did not know I was at

my father's. I think she was kind of upset when she found out that I had seen him and not her. (Student 270, FW1)

Another struggle that students identified involved balancing demands from new friends from college and old friend from home. Students acknowledged that they wanted to spend time with both groups of friends, yet due to time and proximity had to make decisions that prioritize some, while offending others:

> I had a close friend back home that was in need of my direct support. He and his girlfriend of one year had broken up earlier that week and he was taking it very hard. So in essence I had to decide between my own happiness and pleasure, and truly pleasing my best friend. I came to the conclusion that it would mean a lot more to my old friend just to see me than for me to hang out with my new friends. (Student 148, FW1)

> Before Labor day weekend, my friends from back home were expecting me to come back for the holiday. I had told them before leaving that I would be coming back then. However, I had met several new friends at UK, and they wanted me to stay here. I really wanted to continue making friends here, and use the weekend to hang out with new people, but I also didn't want to risk loosing *[sic]* my old friends. (Student 147, FW1)

Finally, the loyalty demand that was present the most during FW1 involved students struggling with choosing to spend time with friends or family:

> A bunch of my new friends were going to another girl's lake house for the weekend. On one hand, I really wanted to go. On the other hand, my mom was expecting me to come home for the weekend. (Student 216, FW1)

> My second weekend at (school) I felt confident on whether I should stay or go. All of my newly met friends wanted to stay while my family really wanted to see me. I felt like I should hang out with my friends, but I also thought my family would be offended by that. (Student 140, FW1)

> This past weekend I was debating between going home on Friday or Saturday. My parents and siblings wanted me to meet them at my lake house on Friday, but my friends wanted to stay here. I could tell my mom really wanted me to meet up with my family, but she told me to stay if that was what all my friends were doing. (Student 176, FW1)

Throughout the various radiants of meaning, it is evident that students'

communication exchanges and decision-making is influenced by numerous competing

and complimentary discourses. From the free write examples, students explained that

they have discourses that permeate their needs for individualism and community, some of

which support their own needs, while others contradict students wants and desires.

Baxter (2011) notes that "from a dialogic perspective, communicative life is riddled with

a myriad of discourses, all in play with and against one another at the same time" (p. 73).

To further understand the various discourses present for first-semester college students, it

is essential to examine the discursive struggle of expression.

The discursive struggle of expression. Baxter (2011) contends that the

discursive struggle of expression has been mistakenly reduced by researchers to

exploring how individuals are either open or not (p. 75). However, the student narratives

revealed a more in-depth examination of this struggle. Students desired openness from

individuals from home, but that openness also created feelings of homesickness and

doubt during the first semester. Additionally, students discussed communicating openly

about relationships and fears with friends, family members, and relational partners, both

at school and home; yet that disclosure came with a risk for students. Students discussed

that their openness caused others to offer messages that they perceived as being critical

rather than supportive. Across the free writes, three radiants of meaning were present

related to the discursive struggle of expression: Individualism at Play, Rationality at Play,

and Romance at Play.

Individualism at play. When exploring this radiant of meaning, it is important to

identify discourses that individuals choose to reveal at the cost(s) of others. Students

revealed that the narratives that create hurt and confusion involved individuals telling

them that they desired the students to transfer to different colleges and universities:

> My family and friends want me to go to school closer to home but I love it here. My mom and dad keep telling me I could get the same education much cheaper at NKU. (Student 178, FW1)

> My parents tell me to do what I want to do but then bring up the idea of staying home or attending a school closer to home. (Student 274, FW2)

> My friend continually tries to persuade me to give up on my desire to attend college in [city] and attend college with him. This situation puts more stress on me at [school]. (Student 274, FW1)

> Mom said you should just transfer to (a different college). It surprised and confused me because she is always the one telling me to never give up. This makes me want to succeed more but it also makes think how easy it would be to transfer. I just don't know what I am going to do. (Student 385, FW1)

Students also discussed wishing their loved ones at home would not send messages

conveying how much they missed them. These messages made students feel homesick

and lonely:

> Everyday my mom will talk to me and say how much she and everyone back home misses me. She doesn't try to pull me back home but this does tug at the heartstrings. (Student 240, FW1)

> My mom was telling me how much she missed me and making me feel more obligated to go home. (Student 200, FW1)

> My mom gave me a mixed message over the phone when we talked about my plans for Labor day weekend. She had told me that she and my grandparents missed me and wanted to see me but when told her I planned to stay she told me that was okay in a concerned voice. (Student 149, FW1)

> I have been getting mixed messages from my parents in many conversations I have had with them. Every time I see them they will joke with me and say things like, "Hi you're your mom" and "Haven't seen you in ages!" These messages seem mixed because my parents are laughing, but at the same time I think it is how they really feel. These messages are a huge part of my conflicted feelings because I don't know how to take them and they linger in my head. (Student 342, FW1)

> They [parents] say they miss me and want me to see me but when I say no they change their mind and say its good you want to stay. (Student 347, FW2)

> She (mom) posted on Facebook multiple times she wishes her child would come home. (Student 140, FW2)

> My parents pretty much stalk me through my card swipes and Facebook. (Student 145, FW 3)

> My mom has been sending me the most sad and depressing text messages about miserable she is and how much she wishes I was home. (Student 179, FW2)

> I had a talk with my parents and they said they wanted me to come home every weekend. (Student 416, FW2)

Students also reported wishing they did not see messages from friends and family discussing their fun activities or status updates because they experienced jealousy or feelings that everyone was moving on without them:

> I see all of my friends' FB [*sic*] (Facebook) statuses that didn't go to college or went to community college and see all of the fun they are having without me. (Student 372, FW1)

> I saw messages and pictures on Facebook from everyone at home and I wanted to be there with them. (Student 233, FW 2)

Rationality at play. In the narratives, students identified thinking their parents were attempting to be supportive in their disclosures or candid communication, yet the revealing of information made students feel uncertain and criticized about their adult decision-making. Students explained that parents' openness concerning health practices, employment, course withdrawal, and joining groups or organizations created tension:

> Not many people back home expect me to join a sorority but I have been thinking about it a lot lately because I kind of feel left out. (Student 341, FW1)

> My parents want me to do good in school but also be in a sorority that will take away from school work. That is a mixed message to me. (Student 151, FW3)

My mom assumes that I party instead of studying because I dropped the course. She randomly still mentions this to show her disappointment. (Student 271, FW3)

Romance at play. Within the discursive struggle of expression, students discussed times in which they used ambiguity to spare a romantic partners, friend, or roommate's feeling. In turn, students provided instances where their family members and friends used ambiguity to spare their feelings. Yet the ambiguous messages created tension and uncertainty for students:

My dad would say I want you to be close to home but I want you to be happy. (Student 318, FW1)

My parents told me that they love when I come home but also said they wanted me to come back to (school). (Student 175, FW1)

My floormates would say no don't go stay here and then two seconds later they would say go visit him at his college. (Student 376, FW1)

Identifying the three discursive struggles and associated radiants of meaning provides insight into the discourses that created support and tension for students during the Fall 2010 semester. In addition to identifying the discursive struggles of all students in this study, it is essential to examine the discursive struggles (See Figure 4.13) and discourses present for non-returning students to answer RQ 2: What, if any, discursive struggles do non-returning students report regarding messages to, from, and about home?

Non-returning students.

Of the 135 students who completed all three free writes, seven students did not return for a second semester. Students 133, 161, 229, 280, 287, 376, 385 did not persist.

Examining the struggles present may provide insight into reasons why students choose not to return for a second semester.

During FW1, non-returning these students denied having any issues, or acknowledged from the start that they did not know how to balance the demands and expectations of others with what they wanted themselves. During FW2, students opened up more about being torn over staying at the university or leaving after the first semester. Students also were more open and detailed about the competing discourses that interpenetrated their daily communication. Finally, during FW3 students were again in denial regarding issues they were struggling with, and/or embarking on last ditch efforts to maintain relationships and academic status. Throughout these three rounds, students struggled between independence and interdependence, integration, and expression. Specifically, students struggled over wanting to leave and being expected to stay, self-interests versus interests of others, and competing discourses focused on individualism in play.

Wanting to leave and being expected to stay. Throughout all three free write rounds, the non-returning students express a desire to leave college, either short term (i.e., weekend) or long term (i.e., transfer or dropout). Students struggle with listening to their own wants and desires, while struggling with the competing discourses challenging students to stay at college. For example:

> I cannot go home because my friends always told me that I would be the one to succeed
> I know I have to stay but my true desire is to go home. (Student 161, FW1)

> I love [school] and everything about it but I also have desire to go home. I know more people and feel more comfortable. I am a role model to my younger cousins, if I give up they won't even try. (Student 161, FW2)

Although my parents tell me to not worry about finances it is hard because I'm not working or contributing anyway to relieve the financial burden. (Student 161, FW3)

Makes me want to succeed more but it also makes think how easy it would be to transfer
stick out the school year at UK or leave by Christmas which is mom's plan. (Student 376, FW1)

Self-interests Vs. Interests of others. Across all three rounds of free writes, non-returning students discuss self-interests vs. interests of others. Specifically, students either want to engage in potentially harmful (e.g., academically or socially) behaviors, but fear that these decisions will be in contradiction of those from home or students want to spend time devoted to academics, yet feel torn to return home to appease the wishes of pre-college relationships;

I am always having to choose school work over my sorority. I desire to be with them but I desire good grades more. (Student 280, FW 2)

My family wants me to do well in class and I want to try to also have as much fun as possible I kind of wish I didn't come to Uk but I have made a ton of friends that I would give anything for I need to pay attention and attend all of my classes. (Student 287, FW 2)

My mom wants me to come home often AND she wants me to make good grades and get close to my sorority sisters I would rather let me social life slip than my grades. (Student 280, FW 3)

Competing discourses: Individualism in play. Individuals choose to reveal things at the expense of others (Baxter, 2011). This radiant of meaning manifested itself in a variety of ways. Specifically, individuals reveal that individuals either gave advice that was not desired, individuals felt they could not talk to someone, or individuals sent messages letting students know they were missed:

My parents don't really tell me they want to see me because I don't really live that far away and I come home once a month to visit and hang out with friends.

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If I am happy I do well in school and I am motivated but lately I have been depressed and I have gotten down and am doing horribly in school. (Student 287, FW3)

I can't talk to them (girls in sorority). I feel as though none of them know who I am

I ended up going to see her [best friend] because she gave me a little bit of a guilt trip but,

it helps me as a student to know my priorities and be able to figure out what is best for me. (Student 376, FW 2)

My friends sent messages on FB telling me I should come home and it almost changed my mind but I decided to stay-makes me miss my friends but also makes me feel more responsible and able to be a successful student. (Student 385, FW 3)

Numerous discourses impacted the daily decision-making and communication exchanges of non-returning students. Although students discussed the importance of prioritizing academics and understanding what choices they should be making, students kept many of these concerns to themselves and opted not to communicate until perhaps it was too late in the semester. The free writes of the non-returning students convey the importance of providing support, not pressure, addressing roommate issues before they manifest into larger issues, and satisfying independent needs over interdependent needs and demands during the first semester.
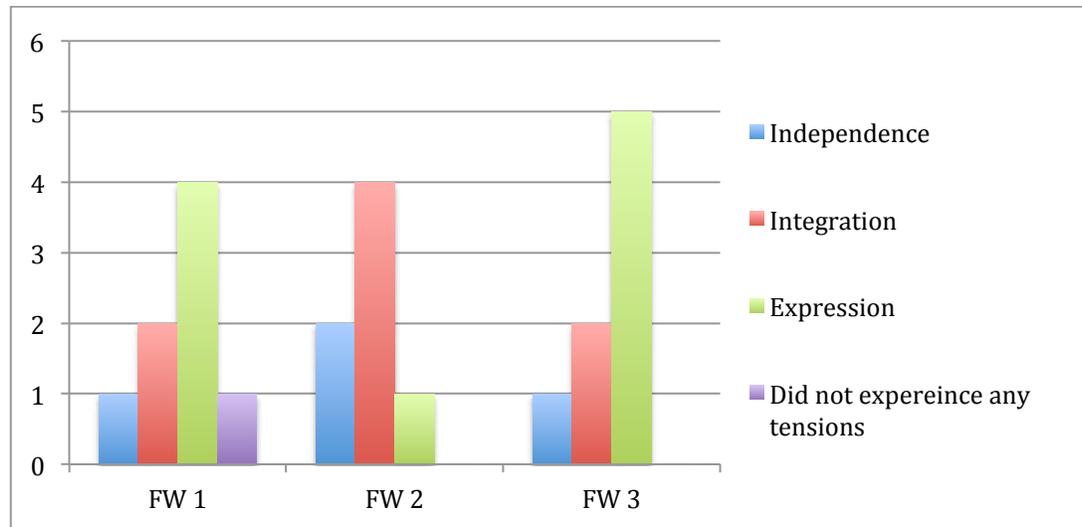
Figure 4.13. Discursive struggles present for non-returning students

Summary

Three discursive struggles emerged from this analysis of first-semester college student in-class free write responses. First, students struggled with their felt need for independence, yet identified interdependent constraints imposed by themselves and by others. Second, students experienced a discursive struggle regarding integration, noting the desire to engage with new individuals and experiences, but also needing to maintain connections with pre-college relationships. This discursive struggle reflected numerous issues that were both internal and external to their relationships. Third, this analysis revealed a theme regarding a discursive struggle regarding expression. Students wanted to create meaning and openness with others, yet they also desired to conceal information from others. Interestingly, they also reported a desire for others to conceal information from them. In regard to both students who persist and those who did not return for a subsequent semester, all three discursive struggles were present across all three rounds of data collection. Non-returning students, however, discussed feeling more stress concerning the discursive struggle of expression than either of the other two struggles.

In sum, the results showcased the predominance of competing discourses present in first-semester student communication regarding messages to, from, and about home. The free-write responses revealed that desires for independence (and interdependence), integration, and expression may be major obstacles for students transitioning into their first semester of college. Finally, the results revealed that not all students who departed early fit the definition of at-risk students according to existing retention literature. The next chapter provides conclusions, poses several implications, acknowledges implications, and offers suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS

This final chapter offers conclusions, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research. First, conclusions are drawn based on the results. Next, implications are provided for students, parents, faculty, and the academy with regard to focusing on the needs of first-semester students, which can positively impact retention. Third, several limitations of the study are addressed. Finally, avenues for future research are explored.

Conclusions

This study confirms existing literature suggesting the complex nature of communication for first-semester college students. That is to say that students' communication "is a multivocal process that involves the weaving of numerous significant meaning systems—or discourses" (Marko-Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010, p. 138). More specifically, this dissertation study provides insight into how first-semester students navigate the first semester and manage the discursive struggles resulting from discourses to, from, and about home. Furthermore, this study begins to shed light onto the discursive struggles experienced by non-returning students over the course of the first semester rather than after they left the institution. The following paragraphs reveal several conclusions arising from this analysis.

First, this analysis did, in fact, reveal three distinct discursive struggles that appear to impact first-semester students' transition from home to school. Students negotiated discursive struggles of independence, integration, and expression. For many, these discourses that affected meaning making came from people both at home and at school. This dissertation extends RDT by going beyond the examination of communication in a single dyad or group exploring the various discursive struggles that

emerged from a complex network of relationships in which first-semester college students find themselves. Included in this complex network are new relationships formed at college and existing relationships from home (e.g., hometown friends, new friends, family members, professors, advisors, roommates, romantic partners, teammates, coworkers, classmates). Through this study, it is evident that research efforts identifying dialectical tensions are no longer sufficient. Through this study engaging in a contrapuntal analysis, the study identifies the interplay of contrasting discourses at home and school and revealed relational power issues.

Of the 135 students who completed all three sets of free writes, seven (5%) of the students did not return to school for a second semester. Although this number is relatively low, their responses do differ from those of the returning students in several ways, shedding possible light on the role their discursive struggles might play on their failure to transition successfully into college students that persist. Moreover, the students who did not persist in this study do not share many of the at-risk factors reported in existing retention literature.

A second conclusion, then, is that non-returning students found it difficult to manage the discursive struggle regarding expression. To clarify, although these non-returning students reported struggling with individuals sharing too many stories and concerns regarding home, they also chose not to disclose these feelings with others either at home or at school. By opting for nonexpression, these non-returning students consequently did not receive the support or assistance they may have needed to persist for a second semester. Opting for nonexpression, can be seen as taking a denial or disorientation strategy (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The authors explain that these

strategies are impractical because they involve either a denial of an existing tension or a belief that a tension is only negative, without any positive attributes. Students could have connected with members from home, sought assistance from others, received catharsis, and learned how to balance demands by opening up to others. In addition, if students would have engaged in spiraling inversion, balance, or segmentation then the students may have been able to receive and share messages both stressful and supportive messages to, from, and about home. Specifically, this study examines how college students and relational partners negotiate spiraling inversion and segmentation. This inclusion is important, as Baxter (2011) criticizes previous RDT research for not prioritizing such negotiation in research efforts (p. 128).

Third, non-returning students also identified themselves as struggling with desiring independence, yet feeling interdependency to and from individuals from home. Students indicated that they wanted to transfer schools or switch majors, but felt trapped because individuals were looking up to them as role models or depending on them to be successful. However, Tinto (1993) points out that being uncertain about college and career goals is not necessarily a negative factor. Rather, "movements from varying degrees of certainty to uncertainty and back again may in fact be quite characteristic of the longitudinal process of goal clarification that occurs during the college years" (p. 41). Thus, non-returning students in this dissertation study may have benefited from knowing that such uncertainty is a common experience of transitioning students and in fact not necessarily a sign of failure. As such, these, may have instead felt the freedom to engage in open exploration.

Fourth, non-returning students discussed the discursive struggle of integration. Non-returning students reported wanting to integrate into the college campus, yet felt torn to stay connected to pre-college relationships and responsibilities. Within this struggle, students explained that the number of messages from home encouraging and even demanding them to visit frequently along with those messages urging them to engage socially and perform academically at school resulted in feeling extreme and competing pressures. Ultimately, the free write responses revealed that non-returning students appeared to prioritize maintaining pre-college relationships at the expense of both their own integration into groups and organizations at school and at the cost(s) of their own academic achievements. The free write responses are consistent with the concerns Orenstein (2009) posed on whether constant communication to and from home encumbers students from successfully separating from their pre-college identities. Even though students communicated frequently with pre-college relationships (i.e., phone, text, Facebook,), all messages were not deemed supportive and did not promote students staying and completing a four-year degree. In fact, the frequency of contact bombarded many students with pressures, stress, and suggestions to depart school early.

Fifth, from this examination of free writes by both returning and non-returning students, it is evident that the majority of discursive struggles faced by first-semester college students result from discourses both on campus and off campus. On campus discourses appear to challenge or support students' existing goals and self-concepts. For example, students who discussed prioritizing social needs seemed to identify similar discourses that seek the same outcome. Although these discourses are unifying, they still potentially may have negative outcomes for the student while at college. Similarly,

messages from and about home appear to unify and complement one another in that

students feel they are the marginalized voice within the web of discourses. For example,

students who identified that their parents, high school friends, and romantic partners

conveyed requests for frequent student visits caved to these requests more frequently than

students who only had one or two individuals making demands on their time and energy.

This analysis of first-semester student free writes reveals that students believe that the

majority of on campus and off campus discourses contradict each other (e.g., peers at

school want students to stay for the weekend, whereas parents at home want students to

come home).

This finding is important to address for two specific reasons. One, this finding

highlights the necessity of critiquing "the dominant voices" (Baxter, 2004a, p. 16).

Critical sensibility recognizes the issues of power, dominance, and control in

relationships. By identifying the discourses involved within the discursive struggle and

the location, one can recognize Not only is it important to recognize the prevailing

dominant forces in different relational types; but it is also essential to examine what are

the messages being communicated and then "pursue how it is that relationship parties

jointly conduct their interactional life in such a way that some voices (whether verbal-

ideological or the literal, embodied kind) are silenced while others are heard" (p. 17).

Two, this study explores how unity affects discursive struggles, which as previously

noted, Baxter (2004a) discusses as being under explored in RDT research. This

dissertation study was able to address what discourses interpenetrate and reflect

dialectical unity as first-semester students communicate messages to, from, and about

home.

Thus, this dissertation study confirms the importance of not focusing solely on individual differences. Copeland and Levesque-Bristol (2011) explain that retention research has narrowly focused on individual differences to predict the type of student that is most likely to persist. However, focusing only on variables such as traits, characteristics, and demographics fails to acknowledge the social influences both on and off campus that impact students' transition during the first semester.

To clarify, all of the non-returning students in this dissertation study did well on the standard college entrance exams (e.g., ACT, M=23; SAT, M=1020) and entered college having identified a major they intended to pursue. Moreover, the majors they reported were diverse (elementary education, mechanical engineering, landscape architecture, nursing, psychology).

Furthermore, none of the non-returning students were from the same city as the University and their hometowns ranged from 12.62 miles to 423.64 miles. The students resided either in a dorm (n=6) or an apartment close to campus (n=1). All of the non-returning students had friends from their hometown at college, with the students ranging from having one friend (n=1), to two to three friends (n=1), four to six friends (n=4), and having 10 or more friends (n=1). Non-returning students also revealed whether they were currently involved in a romantic relationship. Four students stated that they were in a serious relationship prior to coming to college, whereas three individuals came to college single. Individuals also stated whether they romantic partner lived in the same city where the student attended the university (n=2) or lived in a different city (n=2). Finally, non-returning students revealed that their parents attended some high school or graduated

from high school (n=3), graduated from college with a Bachelor's degree (n=3), and held graduate or professional degrees (n=1).

Of the seven non-returning students, three were labeled at-risk and still managed to slip through the cracks despite retention efforts focused on them. Interestingly, of these three at-risk students, only one departed with failing GPA of a .462. The other two at-risk students departed with GPAs of 2.5 and 3.1 on a 4.0 scale. In addition, the four non-returning students not identified as at-risk left the university with GPAs ranging from 0 to 3.75 on a 4.0 scale. This again confirms the flaw in attempting to determine at-risk students according to individual differences traits and characteristics such as GPA, socioeconomic status, location of school in relationship to home, race, and so forth.

The majority of students in this study who departed early would have been identified as "the right students" who are likely to succeed based on demographics and other characteristics (Copeland-Levesque-Bristol, 2011). However, results from this dissertation study support Ewell's (1984) argument that we must cast a wider net to truly understand first-semester student retention.. More specifically, this present study reveals that discourses at school and at home affect first-semester student communication and successful transition from high school student to college student.

Implications

Several important implications arise from the conclusions drawn from this dissertation study. These implications are highlighted in the form of theoretical extensions and practical applications.

Theoretical Extensions

This study extends RDT theory in several ways. First, various discursive struggles did emerge in the free write responses of first-semester students as they discussed how messages to, from, and about home affected their college transition. Thus, RDT can prove fruitful when applied to relationships of students in an instructional communication context.

Moreover, rather than exploring dialectical tensions that may affect first-semester college students, this study took Baxter's (2011) advice and placed college students at the center of a complex web of discourses. Previous work on RDT and college students has been focused narrowly on conflicts between relational partners. This study instead prioritized the goals of dialogic inquiry and focused on "contradiction—the unity of opposites is the discursive struggle, not a conflict between individuals, and not a psychological tension within an individual between competing needs and motivations. Discourses are struggling" (p. 17). Thus, the main focus of analysis was on the "discourses not the individuals" (Baxter, 2011, p. 18). As such, this dissertation represents the first study to prioritize the central discourses that affect first-semester students' communication related to successful transition to college and retention.

By examining RDT in this light, Baxter (2011) suggests it may be of more utility across various fields of inquiry. By focusing on discursive struggles and not simply dyadic conflict, numerous research topics could be examined or reexamined using RDT as theoretical grounding. Certainly, this study points to its utility for understanding first-semester student transition and retention issues. In other words, relational communication ought to be examined as a piece of the departure puzzle because they are

"meanings rather than contextual containers. They are constructed in communication, rather than being mere settings in which communication occurs" (Baxter, 2011, p. 15).

Practical Applications

The conclusions drawn from this analysis provide beneficial insight regarding communication among first-semester students and their friends and families, as well as instructors and advisors during the transition from home to college. More specifically, they point to several strategies that may be employed to improve first-semester student transition to college and, thus, retention.

First, the free-write experience seemed to create an opportunity for students to bring underlying discursive struggles from a subconscious to conscious level. Doing so may allow them to deal more effectively with them during the transition. Far more students expressed not wanting to be at the university than the seven that did not persist. Creating opportunities to work through such struggles on paper may have been cathartic opportunities for students faced with institutional and self uncertainty. Perhaps first year experience courses should incorporate such assignments as standard in order to help students work through the discursive struggles related to transitioning successfully from home to school.

Second, retention efforts ought to be multivocal and target various individuals (i.e., parents, peers, advisors, resident advisors, and faculty members) in a number of ways. Moreover, these communications may need to occur before and throughout the first second semester.

For example, universities ought to initiate communication with students and their families prior to the on-set of the first semester. With millennial students and their

parents desiring frequent communication across a variety of mediums, universities ought to be intrusive in their communication efforts via email, text, phone, and regular mail. If university personnel establish relationships and reduce uncertainty with prospective students and their parents prior to the start of the first semester, students may be more likely to seek assistance as needed during their first semester at school.

In addition, universities ought to enhance the focus of orientation events and activities to address the social and academic concerns students shared within the free writes. Orientation efforts ought to communicate to students and parents the importance of engaging with faculty members, developing peer relationships, fostering positive roommate relationships, and engaging in both academic and residence hall advising relationships. Students should be introduced to and be invited to participate in various on-campus groups and organizations before classes begin not just be provided with a list of such organizations. In doing so, students may be more like to form social support networks they can then call on during the turbulent times that occur throughout the first semester.

Since parents of millennials want to be informed and involved, college and university personnel ought to provide ways for them to feel involved without impeding the student's transition with regard to separation and autonomy. For example, college and university personnel could create communication packets and materials to send to parents throughout the first semester. Many parents, caregivers, family members, and hometown friends may not realize that the messages they send are actually impeding a successful transition for these first-semester students. Materials could include communication dos and don'ts based on what this study revealed regarding discursive

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struggles in the free write responses. Just as students need on-campus social support, so do parents of Millennials who have been so involved in the lives of their children need ways to feel engaged and involved without hindering student growth as helicopter parents. Another strategy for helping parents of millennials feel connecting might be orientation and parent weekend events, as well as online social support groups geared toward connecting first-year parents with other first-year parents.

To help students separate appropriately from pre-college relationships, university personnel ought to help students understand they need not terminate pre-college relationships or entirely divorce themselves from pre-college identities. However, strategies also ought to be developed to stress the importance of building new relationships. For example, if all first-semester students (not just those labeled as at-risk) were placed in learning communities, students could connect with fellow students and possibly establish institutional loyalty. Frankly, if all first-semester students were required to be placed in a learning community, students currently labeled as at-risk may be less likely to feel marginalized based on this ascribed status.

Similarly, college and university personnel ought to work with student life organizations to sponsor workshops and seminars that address the relational communication issues revealed in this dissertation study. Seminars could focus, for example, on how to balance school work and social needs, how to survive a breakup, how to maintain long-distanced relationships, how to communicate with parents, how to manage social network relationships, how to survive a bad roommate, how to communicate with one's residence hall advisor and academic advisor, how to make

connections with faculty members, and what strategies to follow for graduating on a four-year plan.

Finally, colleges and universities ought to shift the goals and focus of academic advising from a primary focus on choosing classes and planning schedules to establishing and maintain a positive student-advisor relationship. Pizzolato (2008) identifies three principle ways of doing so: (1) validate students as knowers; situate learning in students' experiences; and (3) define learning as mutually constructing meaning (p. 21). Pizzolato explains that advisors must be aware of the available resources, slow down and plan longer advising sessions, use questioning to "help students better understand themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, and how to effectively make and act on decisions" (p. 23).

Advisors and students need to be properly informed about the goals of advising. Although academic planning is important, students must know that they can also reveal personal struggles and concerns to their advisor. When advisors are viewed as teachers, their role is to assist first semester students to navigate "the process of constructing new knowledge and making new meaning of their experiences" (Darling & Woodside, 2007, p. 6). Research has shown the importance of advisors encouraging advisees to open up and discuss their pre-college identities (Darking & Woodside, 2007). This approach is especially beneficial for at-risk students who report fears of communicating with advisors, due to their lack of knowledge on the college culture. Through the story telling approach, advisors initiate a personal relationship with advisees and gain an understanding of the unique experiences that can affect their success as students. According to Chickering (1994), advisors are also encouraged to self-disclose and share

their own experiences, which can create connections with the student and encourage liking and confirmation. Baxter Magolda (2008) notes that this approach also helps students create ownership of their experiences and helps students adopt autonomous identities. Darling and Woodside (2007) discussed that through adopting this approach, advisors "engage in constructing new knowledge and meanings with first-semester students" (p. 6).

Hester (2008) acknowledges that many universities note the importance of encouraging a developmental advising approach, yet do not train advisers to adopt and implement the practices. This training is desperately needed because Fielstein (1989) explains that students desire developmental approaches that create forming personal relationships between students and advisors. Creamer and Creamer (1994) recognize the tasks that developmental advising can serve, specifically the "use of interactive teaching, counseling, and administrative strategies to assist students to achieve specific learning, developmental, career, and life goals" (p. 19).

O'Bannon (1972) notes the importance of advisers and students building personal relationships, and in doing so advisors may assist students in accomplishing five specific dimensions. Advisors may help students examine their life goals, explore their vocational goals, assist with a program choice, assist with a course choice, and schedule courses. Propp and Rhodes (2006) explain that in this role, advisors become counselors who assist advisees with more than just the academic. Propp and Rhodes discuss advisors help students with their career choices, develop life skills, and achieve personal goals (p. 52). Koring, Killian, Owen, and Todd (2004) discuss this type of advising is crucial because advisers can teach students' skills of being good decision makers, critical

thinkers, and knowledgeable on curriculum and academic rules. Furthermore, Hale, Graham, and Johnson (2009) discuss that rather than focus on areas of improvement that students need to focus on, this approach highlights the positive attributes of a student, which creates ego-boosters and leads to students feeling self-reliant (p. 317).

Limitations

As with any dissertation study, this project has several limitations. First, the student population was not very diverse. Although the 135 students varied across demographics, the pool of students who did not return was only seven students, the majority sharing similar racial, sexual, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Second, the current study only examines the struggles present across the first semester. The inclusion of the whole first year could help shed light into additional discursive struggles. Third, the third free write occurred before Thanksgiving break. In hindsight, it may have been more beneficial to have asked students to complete the final free write during final exams week at the end of the semester rather than just before the Thanksgiving break. Fourth, the methodology employed is both a strength and weakness. Relying only on free writes limited me from being able to engage in member checking and gaining more-in depth questioning that could be gleaned from interviews or focus groups. Fifth, the results of this study are not generalizable as they represent only one university in one specific geographic region of the United States. Finally, the time placement of the free writes limited what I was able to learn. To gain more insight into the discourses present for the students in this study, data should have been collected before the start of the semester (e.g., orientation, dormitory move in day, first day of class), as well as during final exams

week. A more comprehensive data collection period may have helped paint a clearer landscape of the entire first semester college experience.

<center>**Suggestions for Future Research**</center>

Conclusions illustrated in the present study give rise to numerous directions for future research. First, additional research ought to apply RDT to explore the entire first year college experience. Although the first semester has been identified as a high marker for early departure, it is still pertinent to explore the struggles students experience beyond it. Such exploration may provide additional insight into the departure puzzle.

Second, research exploring the reworking of RDT is essential as this new framework provides heightened awareness into the struggles individuals, dyads, and small groups may experience when creating meaning. This study reveals that RDT is an appropriate framework from which to study interpersonal communication and relationships in instructional contexts. Future research should examine the struggles of second-semester, second-year, third-year, and fourth-year students in order to address the changing needs and struggles that can impact students throughout their college career. Although Tinto (1993) discusses the importance of students separating and transitioning to college, additional obstacles may exist for students as they discursively negotiate with members of their interpersonal circles throughout their college careers.

Third, this study highlights the utility of using unstructured writing experiences (Ortlipp, 2008) as a research methodology. Although this methodological choice has been used by researchers studying English and creative writing as a means to help participants "sharpen their language skills, to write and write and edit and edit, and to use these skills to explore themselves and their world" (Allen, 2008, p. 78), little research has

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been conducted from the communication discipline exploring in class free write journaling as a qualitative methodology.

Millennial students need to feel connected to their classwork and peers, as well as be challenged in order to be motivated to learn. Using in-class free writes can assist instructors with creating connections between in-class activities and subject matter and relevancy to students' lives, which in turn increases students' motivations to learning (e.g., Keller's ARC model). Waldeck, Kearney, and Plax (2010) explain that "when students perceive that an instructor has provided a meaningful exercise or activity to help them understand a concept, they report feeling confirmed" (p. 165). More studies using in-class free writes may help students address some of the internal struggles they are experiencing in a meaningful way.

Although the use of free writes is a clear strength in this study, future research efforts would benefit from in-depth interviewing and focus groups consisting of both returning and non-returning students. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the experiences of first-semester students, yet future research efforts should also examine parents and caregivers perceptions of the discursive struggles. Both avenues could provide additional insight into the complex webs of meaning students are struggling to preference or marginalize. Furthermore, due to the ease and cathartic nature of free writing, this method could be also used to assess student experiences within advising, residence life, courses, and numerous additional campus activities and involvements.

Finally, future research could focus on first-semester students' discursive struggles at additional colleges and universities. Doing so might shed light onto the generalizability of the result discovered in this dissertation study.

Summary

Although the departure puzzle has not and cannot be completely resolved, identifying struggles that students experience across the first semester closes the gap between those who persist and those who leave early. This analysis of the discourses the permeate the space between and about home and school gives rise to several new retention efforts college and university personnel can employ to help first-semester students transition successfully from home to school. As a result, perhaps the number of students feeling trapped in transition can be reduced as more students learn to effectively manage messages to, from, and about home.

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Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Assessment of Composition and Communication Courses

WHY ARE YOU BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?
You are being invited to take part in a research study about first-semester students

enrolled in the University of Kentucky's Composition and Communication classes. You

are being invited to take part in this research study because you are currently enrolled in

one of these classes. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about

400 people to do so this semester.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?

The people in charge of this study are Dr. Deanna Sellnow, a professor in the Department

of Communication, and Dr. Roxanne Mountford, a professor in the Department of

English; both researchers are at the University of Kentucky. There may be other people

on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

By doing this study, we hope to learn what students are learning in the Composition and

Communication courses and how we can improve these courses. We also hope to learn

about how first year students at the University of Kentucky transition from high school to

college.

ARE THERE REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS

STUDY?

You should not take part in this study if you are under the age of 18.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT

LAST?

The research procedures will be conducted on assignments you complete as part of class

after they have been graded and your grade and name have been removed.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be granting permission for the

researchers to examine the work that you complete this semester in your Composition

and Communication class. If you give permission for us to use your work, we will ask

your instructor to provide copies of student work and we will remove your name from all

of your work before we begin examining it.

During this semester, your instructor will not know whether or not you have chosen to

participate. Your participation in the project will in no way affect your grade in this

course, nor will it affect the instruction you receive in this class, nor will it require any

additional work from you beyond what is expected to earn your grade.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

There are no anticipated risks associated with this study.

WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

You will not get any personal benefit from taking part in this study.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

You do not have to participate in this study. You will not lose any benefits or rights you

would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the

study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

IF YOU DON'T WANT TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY, ARE THERE OTHER

CHOICES?

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in

the study.

WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?

There are no costs associated with taking part in the study.

WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

You will not receive any rewards or payment for taking part in the study.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be personally identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

Your name will be removed from all of your work and once this step has been completed, there will be no record that can match your work to you.

CAN YOUR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?

If you decide to take part in the study you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact one of the investigators: Dr. Deanna Sellnow at 859-257-2886 or Dr. Roxanne Mountford at 859-257-6985. If you

have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the staff in

the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Kentucky at 859-257-9428 or toll

free at 1-866-400-9428. We will give you a signed copy of this consent form to take with

you.

_____   _____

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study   Date

_____

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

_____   _____

Name of [authorized] person obtaining informed consent   Date

Appendix B
Consent Form for Composition and Communication I Students

This survey asks you a series of questions about your experiences here at UK.
You must be at least 18 years old to participate and in your 1st semester as a student at the University of Kentucky. At the end of the survey you will be asked to provide the code you were assigned on the first day of class. This information will be stored in a separate file and is collected in order to provide the instructor your name so that you can receive credit. Your responses to the items on this survey will remain confidential with the researchers and will not be provided to your instructor.
Many of the questions on the survey are answered using rating scales provided to you. For these questions, simply click on the answer choices that best reflect your feelings. There are no right or wrong answers. We are simply interested in your feelings. You may skip any question and exit the survey at any time.
Recall this is a two part survey and you will be emailed a reminder to complete the second part of the survey in November.
The survey should take about 10-15 minutes to complete. If you have any questions, please contact Deanna Sellnow at Deanna.sellnow@uky.edu.
You may also direct your questions, concerns, or suggestions to the Office of Research Integrity. To reach the ORI Research Compliance Officer, please use this toll-free phone number, 1-866-400-9428.
Clicking on the link below implies consent for the data you provide to be used for research purposes.
Select "I Agree" when you have fully read the above consent.

Demographics Questionnaire for Students

Code # _____
<u>Basic Demographics</u>
1. What is your sex?

   € Male

   € Female

2. What is your date of birth?

   Month/Day/Year _____

3. What is your race/ethnicity?

   € American Indian or Alaska Native

   € Asian

   € Black or African American

   € Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

   € Hispanic or Latino

   € White

   € Other _____

<u>School</u>
4. When did you graduate high school?

   Month/Year _____
   If you did not graduate high school, when did you receive your GED?
Month/Year _____
5. How many semesters have you been at the University of Kentucky?

   € This is my first semester.

   € I have attended UK before, but did not complete a semester.

   € I have completed one semester.

   € I have completed more than one semester. How many?
   _____

6. Have you attended another college or university?   Yes   No

7. What type of institution did you attend?

   _____

8. For how long did you attend?

_____

9. In regard to your major:

    €   I am undecided.

    €   My intended major is _____.

    €   My major is _____.

10. What is your living situation while at UK?

    €   I live in a dorm.

    €   I live in a Greek house.

    €   I live in an apartment or rental house.

    €   I own my own house.

    €   I live with one or more of my parents.

           Which parent(s) do you live with?

           _____

    €   I live with another family member or family members.

           What is the relationship to you?

           _____

    €   Other

_____
_____

11. Where is your town from which you graduated high school?

       City _____ State _____
County_____

12. How long did you live in this town?

_____

13. Did you live in a different town between finishing high school and coming to UK?   Yes   No

    If so, for how long?

    _____
    What town was this? City _____ State _____ County_____

14. How many miles away from home is UK? _____

15. Where do your parents currently live? City _____ State
    _____ County_____

16. What is the highest level of education that the first primary caregiver you identified completed?

    - € Some high school

    - € Graduated high school

    - € Some college

    - € Bachelor's degree

    - € Graduate or professional degree

17. What is the highest level of education that the second primary caregiver you identified completed?

    - € Some high school

    - € Graduated high school

    - € Some college

    - € Bachelor's degree

    - € Graduate or professional degree

18. Do you have any close friends from home attending UK?   Yes   No

    How many? _____

Romantic Status

19. Are you currently involved in a romantic relationship?   Yes   No

20. How would you define your relationship?

    - € We are married

    - € We are engaged

    - € We are currently cohabitating

    - € We were cohabitating prior to move to UK

    - € We are in a serious/committed/exclusive relationship

    - € I am seeing/dating someone, but it's not serious.

21. How long have you been involved in that relationship? (in months/years)

    _____

22. Does this romantic partner attend UK?   Yes   No

Does this romantic partner live in Lexington?   Yes   No

Appendix D
In-class Free-Writing Assignments for Composition and Communication I

Retention Projects: Composition and Communication I In-Class Weekly Free Writing
RQ: Is there a relationship between students' perceptions of mixed messages from people at UK (teachers, students, friends, family) and people at "home" (family and friends) with regard to doing something at UK and at "home" and their decision to stay at UK?
Wednesday September 8, Wednesday October 20, and Monday November 29
Students will be asked to do an in-class free writing assignment for the first 10-15 minutes of class answering the following question.
Think of a time over the last two weeks when you *felt caught* between a <u>desire</u> (of yours) or <u>expectation</u> (of others) to be at UK (academic or social) and a <u>desire</u> (of yours) or <u>expectation</u> (of others) to be at home. Answer the following questions about it.
1. Describe the competing desires or expectations that made you *feel caught* in a no-win situation so-to-speak?
2. Who were the people involved in the competing desires or expectations?
3. Describe any mixed messages you perceived in (a) a particular message and/or conversation (over e-mail, on Facebook, on the phone, in person, etc.) and (b) whether that message or conversation is part of an ongoing struggle between competing desires or expectations you've been having. Explain in as much detail as possible.
4. Would you describe the struggle as resolved or ongoing at this point and why?
5. How, if at all, does this struggle affect how you feel about what you are doing as a student at UK?

<div align="center">**Vita**

Molly Reynolds, Ph.D</div>

EDUCATION

Ph.D., Communication, University of Kentucky
Expected Graduation: May 2013
Emphasis: Interpersonal/Instructional Communication
Chair: Deanna Sellnow
Committee members: Karen Badger, Laura Stafford, and Shari Veil
Dissertation title: *"Trapped in Transition: Examining first semester college students' discursive struggles about home and school."*

M.A., Communication, University of Cincinnati, June 2004
Emphasis: Interpersonal Communication
Publishable Paper title: *"Maintenance Strategies and Attachment Issues of Parents and Young Adults through the Transition of College."*
Chair: Cindy Berryman-Fink

B.A., Broadcast Journalism, University of Kentucky, May 2002

PROFESSIONAL ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

Fall 2010-Present	Lecturer, Division of Instructional Communication, University of Kentucky
Fall 2009-Present	Graduate Assistant, Department of Communication, University of Kentucky
Fall 2007- 2009	Adjunct Lecturer, Department of Communication, University of Kentucky
Fall 2007-2008	Adjunct Lecturer, Department of Communication, Bluegrass Community & Technical College
Fall 2004- 2007	Adjunct Lecturer, Department of Communication, University of Cincinnati
Fall 2003-2004	Graduate Instructor, Department of Communication, University of Cincinnati

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Kentucky
>Interpersonal Communication
>Basic Public Speaking
>Advanced Small Group Communication
>Composition and Communication
>Darkside of Interpersonal Communication
>Studies in Persuasion

Bluegrass Community & Technical College
>Basic Public Speaking

University of Cincinnati
>Effective Public Speaking
>Communication in Problem-Solving Groups
>Persuasive Speaking

Research Activity

In press

Reynolds, M. A. (in press). Speech to convince example formal outline: Hooking up, friends with benefits relationships (FWBR), or dating: Not really a tough choice. In D. Sellnow, *Confident public speaking* (3rd ed.) (pp. 304-316). Florence, KY: Cengage Learning.

Stafford, L., Price, R. D., & Reynolds, M. A. (In press). Adults' meanings of friends with benefits relationships (An exploratory study using focus groups and values coding). In J. Manning & A. Kunkel, Qualitative studies in interpersonal communication. Thousand Oaks, Sage.

Under Review

Reynolds, M. A., Warren, J. L., & Kratzer, J. M. W. (Under Review). *Facebook in the Classroom: What are students' perceptions?*

Reynolds, M. A., & Price, R. D. (Under review). *Dear John: A suggested activity for discussing relational development, maintenance, and dissolution in a basic interpersonal communication course.*

Price, R. D., & Reynolds, M.A. (Under review). *Making a name for communication concepts on Wikipedia.*

<u>In progress</u>

Reynolds, M.A. (*Data Analysis*). *Trapped in Transition: Examining first semester college students' dialectical tensions about home and school*

Reynolds, M. A., Head, K. J., & Sellnow, D. (*Data collection*). *Exploring the dual identity of being a student and instructor.*

Price, R. D., Reynolds, M. A., & Stafford, L. (*Data analysis*). *Conceptualizing commitment: A mixed methods analysis and extension of Johnson's Tripartite Model of commitment.*

Stafford, L., Price, R. D., & Reynolds, M. A. (*Data analysis*). *What is dating?: An analysis of romantic and sexual involvements.*

Conference Presentations

Reynolds, M. A. (2013, April). *Babies, boobs, and bias: An exploration of academic mothers'*
breastfeeding experiences. Panelist at the Central States Communication annual conference.

Price, R. D., & Reynolds, M. A. (2011, November). *A new voice for commitment?: Exploring the conceptualization of commitment in dating relationships.* Paper to be presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, New Orleans, LA.

Reynolds, M.A. (2010, April). *Graduate Student Perspectives on Theory: Benefit or Burden.* Panelist at the Central States Communication Association annual conference.

Reynolds, M. A., Warren, J. L., & Kratzer, J. M. W. (2013, April). *Facebook in the Classroom: What are students' perceptions.* Top Paper Award. Paper to be presented at the annual meeting of the Central States Communication Association, Kansas City, MO.

Reynolds, M. A., & Price, R. D. (2011, March). *Sex, intimacy, and commitment: Exploring college students' and older dating adults' perspectives.* Paper presented at the 13th Annual Communication Symposium: Stop, Collaborate, and Listen, University of Kentucky.

Reynolds, M. A., & Price, R. D. (2011, November). *Sex, intimacy, and commitment: Exploring college students' and adults' dating perspectives.* Paper to be presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, New Orleans, LA.

Reynolds, M. A., & Warren, J. L. (2010, May). *Finding One's Self Through Working with Other.* Poster presented at the CPE KySoTL and Teacher Quality Summit.

Stafford, L., Price, R. D., & Reynolds, M. A. (2012, July*). Conceptualizing nonmarital commitment: Links to life satisfaction and mental health.* Paper to be presented at the annual meeting of the International Association for Relational Research. Chicago, Illinois.

Invited Presentations

Reynolds, M. A., Tompoulidis, T. M., & Davenport, D. C. (2012, October). *Breaking up is hard to do: Managing the post relational termination blues.* Presentation for UK 101, University of Kentucky

Reynolds, M. A., & Price, R. D. (2011, March). *Lust, liking, and love: Exploring "dating" relationships.* Presentation for social psychology department, University of Kentucky.

Grant Experiences

Team member. *The relationship between messages both from and about "home" and first year student retention.* Grant for Collaborative and Innovative Work, College of Communications and Information Studies, University of Kentucky. $25,000.

Purpose: Exploratory study to collect and examine baseline data regarding first-year students' communication with others from "home" and about "home" as it may reveal insight about student retention decisions.

Individual contributions:
- Helped develop qualitative questions
- Data analysis in progress.

SERVICE

Departmental Service
2009-Present, Assistant Director of Com 252
2010-Present, Curriculum Committee Member
2010-Present, C & C Steering Committee Member
2011-Present, Academic Advisor
2012-Present, Chair of the Shining Star Student Award
2012-Present, Mentor for CIS 590 Apprentices

National and Regional Association Service

2010	Paper and panel reviewer, Student Section, National Communication Association
2003	Research Committee member for the Learning Community Program, University of Cincinnati

MEMBERSHIPS

2009-Present	Central States Communication Association (CSCA)
2009-Present	Graduate Student Association (GSA)
2010-Present	National Communication Association (NCA)