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**THE IMPACT OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES ON FIRST-GENERATION
MINORITY STUDENT PERSISTENCE AT ROWAN UNIVERSITY**

by

Briana Vogel Collins

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Educational Services and Leadership
College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of

Master of Arts in Higher Education

at

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April 14, 2020

Thesis Chair: Andrew S. Tinnin, Ed.D

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My thesis is dedicated to my family, for I would not have graduated with not only one but two degrees. The days of hearing me complain about being in school, missing family gatherings, and being away for long periods of time will be coming to an end. The support you have given me means more to me than you will ever know and it is my hope that I have made you proud.

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Abstract

Briana Vogel Collins
THE IMPACT OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES ON FIRST-GENERATION
MINORITY STUDENT PERSISTENCE AT ROWAN UNIVERSITY
2019-2020

Andrew S. Tinnin, Ed.D
Master of Arts in Higher Education

The primary purpose of this study was to analyze Rowan University's Flying First and ASCEND learning communities in regard to first-generation minority student persistence. The study took place at Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ in the spring 2020 semester. The purpose for this qualitative study is to explore the impact that the Flying First and ASCEND/RISE learning communities have on first-generation minority student persistence using an outcomes assessment. Researchers have conducted a plethora of research on learning communities, marginalized first-generation students, and persistence/retention rates. However, there has been little research done on the topic of all three themes and how they contribute to first-generation minority student experiences and success on college campuses. According to the research, first-generation students often do not return to their institution after the first year, indicating that they are less likely to persist through to graduation, learning communities have had a significant effect in aiding students in their persistence due to the accessibility to resources, faculty/staff, and engagement opportunities (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018). As a result of the study, the data suggests that students who are members of either learning community feel as though they have adequate resources, faculty/staff interaction, and an increased sense of belonging which aids in their overall well-being and persistence

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Chapter I

Introduction

Learning communities have been prevalent in the United States since the early 1920's with the intention of enhancing student engagement and overall academic success and growth (Ashe & Romero, n.d.). Vincent Tinto (2003), describes learning communities as a form of co-registration for a certain curriculum. Colleges and Universities throughout the United States have implemented learning communities to also improve the social experiences of students living on campus by incorporating a balance between effective learning practices in the residence hall as well as in the classroom (Ashe & Romero, n.d.).

Another possible outcome of students living in learning communities is the potential of increasing persistence & retention rates at institutions (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018). In recent years, colleges and universities have seen an influx of enrollment for both first-generation (first-gen) students and students from low-income communities. Learning communities have shown to have improved the levels of student persistence at colleges and universities. The increased interaction with faculty, developing a stable family and student support system, engaging with their community, incorporating academic learning outside of the classroom has enhanced persistence at institutions (Pike, Schroder, & Berry, 1997; Tinto, 2003).

Flying First Learning Community at Rowan University

The Flying First Learning Community was instilled as a learning community at Rowan University in 2019 as an extension to the First-Generation task force that has been operational for three years (Living-Learning Community, 2019). With the intention to

provide resources and opportunities for first-generation students, the Flying First Learning Community was implemented to support first-generation students in their transition into college. Intentional programming to encourage first-generation students to engage, seek resources, and create a sense of belonging on campus was prioritized in planning the curriculum for the community. As a means of improving persistence and personal growth, students who participate in the programs and activities provided on campus would have the opportunity to gain a sense of pride in what it means to be a first-generation student; to relate to other first-generation students, share their personal stories, and celebrate being a first-generation student were a few of the main priorities the First-Generation task force emphasized when wanting to implement the learning community to address common needs for first-generation students on Rowan University's campus (Living-Learning Community, 2019; "Mission and Objectives", 2019).

ASCEND/RISE Learning Community

The ASCEND/RISE Learning Community, Achieving Success through Collaboration, Engagement, and Determination, is a New Jersey program that seeks to provide financial support for students of low socio-economic backgrounds. Through ASCEND, students receive intentional support and programming personally suited to their academic needs in order to persist through to graduation (EOF/RISE, 2019). Students belonging to the ASCEND program often represent broad levels of diversity from ethnic backgrounds, cultures, interest, and academic performance allowing each student's holistic experience to be truly universal and unique (EOF/RISE, 2019). The ASCEND program has been successful in empowering, retaining, and graduating students through many avenues of support such as academic advising, success coaching,

leadership development, mentoring, and intensive counseling thus maximizing opportunities for student success (EOF/RISE, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

Researchers have conducted a plethora of research on learning communities, marginalized first-generation students, and persistence/retention rates. However, there has been little research done on the topic of all three themes and how they contribute to first-generation minority student experiences and success on college campuses. Although there has been little research conducted to highlight all three themes, significant research on learning communities have shown an increase in students' sense of belonging and connection to their college campus, encourage students to explore and build their identities, and provide a nontraditional learning experience (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018). Evidence was found that first-generation students tend to come from low socioeconomic status families, are less likely to develop a sense of belonging on their campus due to low interaction with students and faculty, and are more likely to live off campus (Pike & Kuh, 2005). First-generation students often do not return to their institution after the first year, indicating that they are less likely to persist through to graduation (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018).

The intention of this study is to determine how learning communities affect student persistence/retention rates of first-generation students from marginalized backgrounds. This study will examine current learning community styles, practices, and success that has been reflected in these learning communities. Students in learning communities are often together in the same classes and will go over the material together linking the learning that is happening in the classroom to the community engagement that

is happening in the residence halls (Tinto, 2003). Learning communities have also shown students' abilities to connect to their institutions and have an easier time transitioning into college life (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Pulliam, Ieva, & Burlew, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose for this qualitative study is to explore the impact that the Flying First and ASCEND/RISE learning communities have on first-generation minority student persistence using an outcomes assessment. These learning communities provide their students with a plethora of resources such as increased faculty interaction, intentional programming, etc. The goals of these communities are to retain and graduate these students by providing tools that promote academic excellence, foster a sense of belonging, and increase educational opportunities. This thesis assesses first-generation minority students' ability to persist in the college environment by understanding their experiences, what resources were provided to them, as well as what challenges they needed to overcome in order to persist. The literature review will provide a solid basis of the study by providing context on the history and intention of learning communities and how they have evolved. The literature review will also highlight the progress made in learning communities for first-generation students as well as students from marginalized backgrounds.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research is to determine if learning communities are effective in student persistence. The data for this study will be comprised of information collected from two learning communities on Rowan University's main campus in Glassboro, New Jersey. The two learning communities to be assessed in this study are the

ASCEND/RISE and the Flying First learning communities. As a former resident of the ASCEND/RISE learning community, I was interested in exploring how current residents view their experiences and how they have or have not contributed to their persistence. In exploring the effectiveness of these two communities, an assessment can determine what programs need to be developed or implemented in order to improve student persistence.

Assumptions and Limitations

This thesis assumes that first-generation students are provided with resources on campus that aid in their persistence. First-generation students are also aware of these resources provided to them and use them throughout their college career. It is also assumed that first-generation students identify as the first in their family to go to college, receive a degree from an accredited institution or not from a community college, or their parents/guardian did not receive their degree from within the United States.

It is important that this study accurately assesses the learning communities' impact on student persistence, specifically for first-generation minority students.

Although first-generation students are enrolling in colleges at increased rates, those institutions hardly stay up to date on their students' progress or persistence which is a limitation found in most of the current research (Inkelas et al., 2007; Pulliam et al., 2017). Another limitation found within the research is that first-generation students often receive better or more resources than their more academically prepared peers, which can often isolate them from the rest of the campus population and impacting their connection and sense of belonging on college campuses (Ramsey, 2013).

Operational Definitions

Throughout this paper, there will be specific terminology used in order to accurately reflect key information related to the study. In order to better understand the study and literature, specialized vocabulary is as follows:

- **First-Generation Students (first-gen):** The first person in their immediate family to go to college or graduate with a degree. These students typically come from low-income backgrounds and are students of color (Checkoway, 2018)
- **Learning Community:** A residential community set to humanize the learning environment, promote academic success, increased community engagement, and access to campus resources (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018)
- **ASCEND/RISE (ASCEND):** Achieving Success through Collaboration, Engagement, and Determination, a New Jersey program that focuses on students' academic success and development by providing a plethora of academic and social resources as well as providing some financial support. (EOF/RISE, 2019)
- **Flying First learning community (FFLC):** Learning community being offered to students in order to increase student sense of belonging, strengthen the connection to the campus community, increase faculty/staff interactions, and to celebrate being a first-generation student (Flying First, 2019)

Research Questions

Research questions ensure that the study remains on task. The research questions developed, are to identify how learning community's impact student persistence as well

as how being in a learning community impacts their level of persistence. The research questions are as follows:

1. How have the Flying First and ASCEND/RISE learning communities specifically affected the persistence of the first-generation minority students from low-income backgrounds that resided in them?
2. How are the academic, environmental, and social aspects of first-generation minority students impacted by the Flying First and ASCEND/RISE learning communities?

Overview of Report

Chapter II provides a review of the literature related to the impact of learning communities as a whole, learning communities for first-generation students and marginalized groups, and what it means to be a first-generation student. This information is what will be used to formulate this study.

Chapter III describes the procedures used in this study. The chapter will highlight the methods in which the study will be conducted such as interviews and the analysis of qualitative data.

Chapter IV will include the findings and analysis of the students who partook in the interviews. The data found will be illustrated in various tables and direct quotes from the students.

Chapter V summarizes the data found in the results of the study. This chapter will also highlight future practices and conclusions that can be drawn from the study.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Learning Communities

Learning communities are considered a high impact practice installed in many universities across the country to challenge students to gain a broader experience that extends outside of the traditional classroom setting (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018; Nosaka & Novak, 2014). The typical environment for learning communities are in on-campus residence halls where first-year students live. Residence halls have been essential in aiding students in their academic and social transition into college (Pike et al., 1997).

High impact communities, such as learning communities, often place college freshmen in either academic or social themed communities. For academic learning communities such as computer science or engineering, these communities are often inhabited by students taking similar classes and students can look to each other as resources to expand their understanding of the subject beyond the classroom (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018; Tinto, 2003). In both social and academic learning communities, students are given opportunities to work on projects collaboratively, thus engaging them in the community and developing a support system amongst their peers. Students also perform better academically due to living in such centralized locations on campus giving them opportunities to connect with faculty (Gabbert, Peschka, & Spradley, 2008; Nosaka & Novak, 2014; Tinto, 2003).

Faculty who constantly engage with students maximize the students' potential to succeed academically and increase retention, which has been on a constant decline at institutions across the country in recent years (Nosaka & Novak, 2014; Thayer, 2000).

Beginning in the early 1990's, administrators began to notice the constant decline in student retention at colleges and universities. This was a call to action for universities to develop resources in order to aid student retention. Learning communities, although still a newer tactic, have shown significant success in students returning their second year or persisting to the end of their academic careers. The installation of learning communities allowed students to feel a connection to their institution by feeling a part of a community. These communities promote one's connection to the community by instilling a sense of responsibility, building relationships, acknowledging differences, and including acts of service. By instilling these values within the learning community setting, students have formed commitments to themselves, their personal and academic goals, the communities in which they live in, and their institutions (Gabbert et al., 2008; Nosaka & Novak, 2014; Seidman, 2005). Overall, learning communities serve a variety of student populations, however for the purpose of this paper, highlighting the ways in which learning communities affect graduation and retention rates for first-generation minority students is where much of the academic research is lacking in its assessment of the success of these students.

First-Generation Students

First-generation (first-gen) students come from a variety of demographics, however they typically come from low-income communities where their parent/s have not obtained a college degree and are disproportionately students of color (Checkoway, 2018; Gilbert-Thomas, 2018; Ramsey, 2013). First-generation students typically have not acquired an adequate high school education that prepares them for the intensive course load that they later experience in college. From a young age, first-generation students are

conditioned to strive toward going to college and earn their degree. Parents of first-generation students place high emphasis on earning a college degree that will allow the student to be more successful in prominent careers such as working in business or law to make more money (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018; Pulliam et al., 2017; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). The number of first-generation students enrolling in institutions is on the rise as they continue to discover how integral higher education is for their future (Checkoway, 2018).

As first-generation students enter academia, they have to overcome many obstacles that set them apart from students who have at least one parent who has gone to college. One obstacle is not being readily prepared to comprehend course work. Coming from low-income communities or disadvantaged backgrounds, minority students are not awarded as many resources to help them succeed in the college setting. Low-income community students sometimes lack stable home environments. Many first-generation students come from a one-parent household as well as work part-time to contribute financially to their household (Inkelas et al., 2007; Ramsey, 2013). First-generation minority students also struggle with accessing resources that can greatly impact their college experience such as admissions processes, financial aid packages, work-study, and college bridge programs (Checkoway, 2018; Inkelas et al., 2007; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Although first-generation minority students encounter many obstacles while on their journey into higher education, research has shown that high impact communities reflect positive results on first-generation student college experiences.

Learning Communities for First-Generation Students

In recent decades, as more first-generation students enrolled in 4-year institutions, administrators sought to provide first-generation students with resources that would help them combat the obstacles they face as new students entering the college atmosphere (Inkelas et al., 2007; Ramsey, 2013). With the enrollment rate of first-generation students increasing, most often enter into college lacking many of the skills and resources to help them transition smoothly. Some of these resources include a solid support system, academic preparedness, and a sense of belonging at the university (Inkelas et al., 2007; Ramsey, 2013). A large population of students also enroll in 2-year community colleges for a plethora of reasons, most due to the convenience of living at home, being able to provide income to the household by working part-time, being in the community in which they feel comfortable, and not having the financial ability to enroll in a 4-year institution (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018; Ramsey, 2013; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). The purpose of shedding light on this population is for the purpose of this paper, first-generation minority students who attend 4-year institutions are the focus. These students come from many walks of life and experiences; therefore, administrators need to be very cognizant of the type of resources they are providing to students, which includes learning communities.

First-generation minority students benefit from high impact practices such as learning communities that help guide their transition into college (Checkoway, 2018). Students living in academic learning communities shared most of the same classes and professors within their majors. This allows them to follow the course content at the same rate and be able to rely on each other as a resource outside of the classroom. These students form study groups, work together, and collaborate on projects related to their

course work. By having students within the same major in the same classes and living community, they are able to form a network as well as a sense of responsibility to their community (Checkoway, 2018; Tinto, 2003). Students living in other themed communities such as multicultural, social justice, or summer bridge programs carry over into a learning community experience for first-year students in a similar process to academic learning communities.

Although most learning communities focus on connecting students both in and outside the classroom, themed communities really attempt to bridge the first-year experience by recognizing that most first-generation students typically do not come from the most thriving communities and are often underprepared for college academically (Gabbert et al., 2008; Nosaka & Novak, 2014; Tinton, 2003). First-generation students often come into college needing to take remedial classes such as math, reading, and writing due to being inadequately taught in high school. Administrators saw this as an opportunity to enhance the students' learning experiences by having many of the students living in learning communities take these classes together (Inkelas et al., 2007; Pulliam et al., 2017). Students have performed better academically by being placed in learning communities; many students indicated that having the support of their peers who were taking the same classes as them substantially contributed to their academic success. As stated above, students living in learning communities have used each other as resources and support, they have worked collaboratively, helped each other prepare for exams, and recognize which professors empathize with them (Nosaka & Novak, 2014; Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

Colorado State University implemented their Key Learning Community in order to assist first-year students from disadvantaged backgrounds be able to adjust to college life. The Key Learning Community saw a 5% increase in student retention from students involved in the learning community as opposed to those who were traditional students. Colorado State University attributed this success to students being able to better understand the course work they were required to complete, students connecting to university and faculty resources, attending programs centered around all forms of diversity (Nosaka & Novak, 2014; Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

Learning Communities for Marginalized Groups

When entering into the college setting, first-generation students from low-income communities face many obstacles such as isolation, discrimination, and culture shock (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Students specifically from marginalized groups perform better academically after being in learning communities that focus on themes of access, identity, and community building. Learning communities structurally centered around multiculturalism and diversity have allowed students to connect to their institution and feel a sense of belonging. Students who feel a closer connection to their community and institution are more likely to be retained for their second year. Learning communities tend to dissipate the status of isolation and culture shock that first-generation minority students feel once enrolled at an institution. Learning communities for students of marginalized backgrounds aim to build students' self-esteem, build faculty expectations, and combat imposter syndrome by providing a safe environment for students to fully engage in and that is also conducive to their learning (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018, Jehangir, 2009).

Bridge programs have also contributed to the social adjustment of first-year minority students. Rowan University's prominent summer bridge program is called the Equal Opportunity Fund (EOF/MAP). This bridge program is a pre-college institute for 150- 200, incoming college freshman who need financial assistance to help them persist in their academic career. Coming from low-income communities, each student was required to take two college-credit courses during the summer. This allowed these students to come into college with 6 credits, an understanding and knowledge of the university, as well as an established network of support.

A large component of marginalized students' academic success is being in a learning environment that they feel is conducive to their living environment. First-generation minority students want a curriculum that is taught by faculty who have cultural competency and are better able to empathize with students from disadvantaged backgrounds, understanding that they come into college being behind the curve. Although faculty have few performance expectations of first-generation students, they need to adapt to the changing demographics of student populations. First-generation, minority college enrollment has been increasing more and more every year. At the turn of the century, minorities made up 32% of 4-year college enrollments, we can only assume that this percentage has increased especially with more financial aid becoming available to low-income students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Checkoway, 2018; Gilbert-Thomas, 2018; Seidman 2005).

Pre-College/Summer Bridge Programs

More institutions are implementing the practice of pre-college institutes, also known as summer bridge programs, in order to increase the overall academic success and

preparedness of students at risk of attrition (Schell, 2010). According to Kallison and Stader (2012), there is an alarming amount of high school students coming into college unprepared to handle to course load and financial burden. With at-risk students being underprepared, they are more likely to not graduate from college and thus impacting their earning potential (Kallison & Stader, 2012). Most summer bridge programs are hosted for six weeks during the summer before students' first year; upon completion of the program, the students are admitted into the institution for the fall semester. These programs host a significant number of students and provide them with academic and transitional practices in order to help students' be able to adapt to the rigor of college courses and campus life (Schell, 2010).

Although there have been few assessments conducted on the effectiveness of summer bridge programs, there has been limited research conducted on the outcomes of such programs. Researchers have found that students whom attend summer bridge programs tend to perform stronger academically, become involved in their campus community, and have a more pleasant college transition (Schell, 2010). Another important indication found in the research is that students also persisted at higher rates and were retained until graduation (Schell, 2010). Successful summer bridge programs, at their core, establish high expectations of the students to perform well in their academics; provide professional development; give students personalized interactions to build trusting relationships; allow easy access to mentors, counselors, and advisors; and are a long-term strategic intervention for students to have maintained support throughout their college career (Kallison & Stader, 2012).

Persistence and Retention Rates

First generation students from marginalized backgrounds graduate at lower rates than their more advantaged counterparts. Although minority enrollment at institutions is high, first-generation minority students tend to leave the institution to go to community college or halt their education entirely. In recent decades, minority student retention has stood at around 41% from an overall 80% retained population (Seidman, 2005). Students who live in learning communities tend to have higher GPAs, which aid in their retention and overall college satisfaction. Retention is highly impacted by students' backgrounds, K-12 schooling, developed skills, and personal goals. As stated earlier, students who have positive experiences at their institutions tend to be more invested in their studies. When they encounter positive experiences within their community and with their professors, students take into account the resources they have access to and how well they feel supported (Gabbert et al., 2008; Nosaka & Novak, 2014; Seidman, 2005).

To reverse low retention rates, colleges and universities have used high impact environments such as learning communities. Students who are at risk of attrition have shown significant improvements with their academics as well as retention rates. First-generation students from low-income communities benefit the most from programs that increase interest in their personal and academic goals, as well as build a strong peer network and sense of belonging (Nosaka, 2014; Seidman 2005; Thayer, 2000). When students are involved in structured settings that enhance interpersonal connections as well as collaborative learning, students adapt and are retained at institutions (Jehangir, 2009; Thayer, 2000). Although the likelihood of 100% of first-generation minority students

persisting through to graduation is significantly low, there is a very large possibility that the percentage of student retention will continue to rise.

Summary

Overall, with first-generation minority student enrollment increasing, colleges and universities need to be aware of the deficits as well as the attributes that this increased student population is coming into college with. Luckily, there is research that shows that the installation of high impact communities such as learning communities has positively affected retention and persistence in first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Jehangir, 2009). Although there is significant research on learning communities, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and persistence rates, little research has been done in conjunction of all three. A limitation in the research first-generation students in learning communities is that there is a stigma that this student population gets special treatment.

First-generation students require resources that their more advantaged counterparts have had long before college. Fortunately for students who are not considered first-generation, who have come from better school systems, come from a household where at least one parent has a degree, and have been better prepared for college, they do not have the task of playing “catch-up” unlike most first-generation students (Ramsey, 2013). Learning communities centered around first-generation success is still fairly new in the work of higher education, however with the little research that has been done, it has been shown that first-generation students who come from marginalized backgrounds retain and persist longer throughout their college career when they have been a part of a learning community.

Chapter III

Methodology

Context of Study

This study was conducted during the spring semester of 2020 at Rowan University in Glassboro, NJ. According to Rowan Fast Facts (2018-2019), Rowan University's student population from 2018-2019 was just over 19,000 students consisting of 16,120 undergraduates, 2,228 graduate students, and 1,117 professional/ medical students. Rowan University is ranked 6th in the nation for being one of the fastest-growing research universities amongst public and doctoral institutions (Rowan Fast Facts, 2018). Student enrollment based off race/ ethnicity were 66.5% Caucasian, 10.6% African American, 9.7% Hispanic/Latino, 4.3% Asian, and less than 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander according to Forbes (2017-2018). The retention rate for Rowan University was 85% spanning across all races/ ethnicities, genders, and attendance status; including 35% of underrepresented students (Forbes, 2017-2018).

The study evaluated the impact that the Flying First and ASCEND learning communities had on first-generation minority student persistence of both current and previous residents of the learning communities at Rowan University. There has been little research exploring how learning communities affect first-generation minority student persistence, however the main findings of all three themes were that student persistence positively impacted students' sense of belong and campus/community connection (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018). For this study, a survey of about twenty questions was sent to current first-generation minority undergraduate students who are or have been residents

of either the Flying First or ASCEND learning communities to assess the impact on their persistence. The findings of this study will aid the Flying First Learning Community Coordinator and ASCEND Programming Director in planning future initiatives and programs to assist with first-generation minority student persistence.

Population and Sampling

The study was conducted with the approval of the Rowan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The consent of the Residential Learning University Housing Department (RLUH), who oversees the learning communities, Flying First Learning Community Coordinator, and the ASCEND/RISE Office, along with the personal consent of the students was needed in order to conduct this study. RLUH was essential in contacting the students who currently live in these learning communities; by providing the names and contact information of the currently residing students, assessing their level of belonging and anticipation of persisting was intended to be captured in the survey. The ASCEND/ RISE Office provided the contact information of the students who were previously in the learning communities and retained beyond their first year at Rowan. The importance of contacting the students who were previously living in the learning communities is to examine their narrative of how the resources provided to them assisted in their persistence or if they needed additional resources that were not provided and contributed to, if at all, a lack persistence (Ramsey, 2013). Participants were contacted via email through a list provided by RLUH and the ASCEND/RISE office (see Appendix A). The survey consisted of about 20 questions and took about 7 minutes to complete (see Appendix B). The participants were asked questions related to the first-generation

minority student experience at Rowan University and how it has impacted students' persistence.

Data Collection and Implementation

The survey consisted of about twenty questions and did not exceed fifteen minutes; measures were taken to protect anonymity. This survey provided both qualitative and quantitative data for the study in order to assess how students previously or currently residing in the ASCEND/RISE and Flying First learning communities' persistence was impacted as a result of being in these learning communities, assessing students' open-ended responses was key in understanding their experiences and development in order to have accurate qualitative data.

The students were initially asked a series of demographic questions such as age, academic year, years completed at Rowan University, and race; these demographic questions can reflect data that indicate if students of a different race or different majors persist longer than others (Ramsey, 2013). They were then asked semi-structured questions related to the resources provided to them by being involved in the learning communities such as, have they developed a sense of belonging at the institution, do they feel as though being in contact with faculty and staff contributed to the success in their academics, and what educational opportunities were offered to them. Students were also asked how the resources provided to them through being in the learning communities aided in their persistence.

Data Procedures

Once the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Rowan University approved the study, first-generation minority students were contacted via email from listserv provided

from the Residential Learning University Housing Office and Dr. Dawn Singleton, Director of the ASCEND/RISE program. The email received by students included the Impact of Learning Communities on First-Generation Minority Student Persistence Email (see Appendix A). Identifiers were implemented to ensure that all of the participants remain anonymous while limiting the potential of data being skewed or altered. Participants were asked to specify that they are a current first-generation minority student at Rowan University who is or was a part of either the Flying First or the ASCEND learning communities. Respondents were also asked to specify their gender along with questions generally perceived about first-generation minority students. Survey responses were sorted into different themes around first-generation minority student persistence. This was to interpret commonalities within the findings that will be important to continue the research. Participants who participated in the study were instructed that by taking this survey that the information provided will be used for educational purposes and for furthered research on the specified study. The respondents were also instructed that their names would not be used along with other identifiable and personal information. In Chapter IV, the data analysis include the findings of the students who participated in completing the online survey. The data found are illustrated in various tables measuring levels of persistence and involvement; direct quotes from the students are also used in exploring the students' experiences.

Chapter IV

Findings

Profile of Study

The subjects for this study were students who identified as first-generation minority students at Rowan University. The subjects were recruited through emails sent through the ASCEND office listserv. All methods of recruitments had IRB approval prior to the distribution and conduction of the survey. Of the 189 surveys distributed, 20 students completed the survey, yielding a 10% return.

Table 1 contains demographic information about the subjects as well as information related to being a first-generation minority student at Rowan University. The survey reflected that three students were at least 18 years old (15%), six students were 19 years old (30%), one student was 20 years old (5%), and at least half of the students were 21 years old or older (50%). From the data collected, seven students identified as First-Year students (35%), three students identified as Sophomores (15%), one student identified as a Junior (5%), and nine students identified as Seniors (45%). In regard to gender, more than half of the 20 participants who completed the study identified as female (80%) followed by male (20%). No participants identified as non-gender binary or had indicated that they identified as another gender. Out of the 20 participants, eighteen (90%) indicated that they were both a first-generation student as well as a member of a marginalized group; two of the respondents (10%) indicated they fit neither criteria, this can be attributed to not every student within the ASCEND learning community has to belong to a marginalized group or not being the first person in their family to attend

college, although many members of the learning community fit both criteria, ASCEND is mainly based on familial income. However, in order for students to receive tailored resources and support, it is beneficial for all students residing in the Flying First Learning Community to be first-generation students.

Table 1

Demographic Information (N=20)

	<i>f</i>	%
Age		
18	3	15
19	6	30
20	1	5
21+	10	50
Class Year		
First-year	7	35
Sophomore	3	15
Junior	1	5
Senior	9	45
Gender:		
Female	16	80
Male	4	20
Non-gender binary	0	0
Other	0	0
First-generation student & Minority		
Yes	18	90
No	2	10

Analysis of the Data

Research question 1. How have the Flying First and ASCEND/RISE learning communities specifically affected the persistence of the first-generation minority students from low-income backgrounds that resided in them?

Subjects responded to an electronic survey focused on indicating how the ASCEND and Flying First learning communities have impacted their persistence as a first-generation minority student at Rowan University. Tables 2 and 3 reflect how living in either learning community as well as living on campus as a whole has impacted their overall experience. Data shows that 35% of the participants stated that they definitely felt connected to the campus environment. From the data collected, 55% of the respondents indicated that it was moderately easy to gain access to resources that were beneficial to their experience. The data shows that over half of the respondents (80%) went to college in order to achieve having a successful career as well as receive a competitive salary. The data shows that 70% of the respondents' families expected them to go to college after graduating high school, 80% of the respondents also stated that their families were supportive of their academic programs.

Sixty percent of the participants indicated that English is not the primary language spoken in the home. In regard to receiving financial aid, 95% of the respondents indicated that they receive financial aid from the government followed by 70% indicating that they have a part-time job on or off campus. Half of the participant population (50%) stated that that they have utilized on-campus resources for first-generation minority students. The data shows that 50% of the participants indicated that it was somewhat easy for them to get answers to questions related to well-being or education. In regard to respondent's

interactions with different groups of students, 50% indicated that it had somewhat of an impact on their personal growth, attitudes, values, and beliefs. From the data collected, 45% of the participants stated that living in a learning community probably impacted their sense of belonging to the college campus. In regard to Flying First or ASCEND allowing students transition to college to be pleasant, 55% of the participants strongly agreed that the learning community programs allowed for a smoother transition into college life.

Table 2

Resources Impact on Persistence (N=20)

	<i>f</i>	%
Connected to the Campus Environment		
Definitely yes	7	35
Probably yes	5	25
Might or might not	6	30
Probably not	2	10
Definitely not	0	0
Access to Resources		
Extremely easy	2	10
Moderately easy	11	55
Slightly easy	3	15
Neither easy nor difficult	3	15
Slightly difficult	1	5
Interactions Affect Attitudes, Beliefs, Growth, and Values		
Very much	6	30
Much	10	50
Some	4	20
Little	0	0
Very little	0	0
Impact on Sense of Belonging		
Definitely yes	4	20
Probably yes	9	45
Might or might not	4	20
Probably not	2	10
Definitely not	1	5
FFLC or ASCEND Helped with Smooth Transition		
Strongly agree	11	55
Somewhat agree	7	35
Neither agree nor disagree	1	5
Somewhat disagree	0	0
Strongly disagree	1	5

Table 3
Demographic Impact on Persistence (N=20)

	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Went to College to Achieve		
Better job pay	1	5
Successful career	3	15
Both	16	80
Other	0	0
Family Expectation to go to College		
Yes	14	70
No	6	30
Family Support of Academic Program		
Very supportive	16	80
Slightly supportive	2	10
Neither supportive or unsupportive	1	5
Slightly unsupportive	0	0
Very unsupportive	1	5
English Primary Language in Household		
Yes	8	40
No	12	60
Financial Aid Assistance		
Yes	19	95
No	1	5
On or Off Campus Job		
Part-time	14	70
Full-time	1	5
No	5	25
Utilization of Campus Resources		
Yes	10	50
No	10	50
Access to Resources on Well-being and Education		
Extremely easy	4	20
Somewhat easy	10	50
Neither easy nor difficult	2	10
Somewhat difficult	3	15
Extremely difficult	1	5

Research question 2. How are the academic, environmental, and social aspects of first-generation minority students impacted by the Flying First and ASCEND/RISE learning communities?

In order to grasp the scope of the participants' ability to persist through their academic programs as well as assess how access to resources and the community affected their sense of belonging, they were asked questions that sought to target how their experiences in either community benefitted them and their overall experience, what resources contributed to their levels of persistence, as well as resources they believe would allow them to continue to persist through to graduation. While completing the survey, the respondents were asked how they would describe their experience living in either the Flying First or ASCEND learning community, the following responses were stated:

1. The best opportunity I have experienced.
2. Living with my EOF family helped me to have a support system and a shoulder to cry on my freshman year when times got rough. All I had to do was go down the hall.
3. Living with my EOF family my freshman year made my first year here worthwhile. Not only was I surrounded by them but because I was with them for 6 weeks over the summer, I was able to establish that bonds. That way when school started we all just continued that friendships and I am still in contact with a couple still now!

4. Very diverse, I got to know different people who come from different backgrounds and also had the opportunity to see people with the same ethnicity, being able to connect in different ways I can't do with a lot of people.
5. So far my experience has been great with the financial help and advice.

When the respondents were asked what resources contributed to their persistence, the following resources were indicated:

1. My EOF family and counselors encouraged me when I felt like giving up.
2. Flying First.
3. The tutoring center and my RA.
4. The ASCEND holiday lunch kept my spirits alive for finals last semester.
5. ASCEND and SCCA.
6. ASCEND counselors... they are super resourceful and know everything.
7. The PCI meetings kind of bring us all back together.

The data shows that when the respondents were asked what resources they feel could help them persist throughout their college careers, they indicated the following resources would be beneficial to their persistence:

1. Monetary resources.
2. If flying first had a summer program like ascend in order to transfer into college life.

3. More minority group programs.
4. The counselors in the EOF office and OCA
5. Continuing to be a part of the community that I am already in. This family has given me so much support.

Overall, the findings presented from the survey provided valuable information on first-generation minority student persistence, experiences, and resources that are already being provided as well as resources that students feel as though are still needed in order to support them throughout their college careers. The first-generation minority students who participated in the study are current Rowan University students as well as current or previous members of either the Flying First or ASCEND learning communities. In Chapter V, the current findings will be connected from the research to provide future recommendations that will aid the Flying First Learning Community Coordinator and ASCEND Programming Director in planning future initiatives and programs to assist with first-generation minority student persistence.

Chapter V

Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This section will discuss and highlight the findings that first-generation minority students shared about their experiences and levels of persistence while living in the Flying First or ASCEND learning communities. This section will also discuss implications to aid in future programming initiatives for the Flying First Learning Community Coordinator as well as the ASCEND Programming Director. Prior to going into the discussion of the findings, it is relevant to note the limitations of the study. The first limitation to the study was the timing in which the survey was sent to students. The intention was to send the email recruitment to students three times in bi-weekly increments before analyzing the data. However, the survey was only distributed twice in the span of two consecutive weeks. This could explain why there were only 20 respondents to the survey instead of 150 as intended.

This study investigated first-generation minority student persistence attributed to the Flying first and ASCEND learning communities at Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ in the 2019-2020 academic year. An eIRB anonymous survey was distributed to 189 current and previous residents of both learning communities in which participants were able to opt out of the survey at any time. The first part of the survey, six multiple choice questions was intended to collect demographic data from the participants. The section part consisted of a thirteen question Likert scale gathering data related to the respondents association to certain themes that are associated with the first-generation minority experience such as English being the primary language used in the home, receiving of financial aid, and having a job in addition to be a student.

Discussion of the Findings

Research question 1. How have the Flying First and ASCEND/RISE learning communities specifically affected the persistence of the first-generation minority students from low-income backgrounds that resided in them?

The findings of the data revealed that the subjects benefitted from being a part of either learning community at Rowan University. According to the literature, first-generation minority students benefit from high impact practices such as learning communities that help guide their transition into college (Checkoway, 2018). The majority of the subjects indicated that they had an increased sense of belonging to the campus as well as to the communities they lived in. Subjects also stated that they found it easy to gain access to resources related to their overall well-being and education allowing them to persist. Of the total responses, 95% of the respondents indicated that they were receiving financial aid assistance as well as indicated that the financial assistance by being a member of the ASCEND community has had a positive effect on their ability to persist. According to the research, first-generation minority students also struggle with accessing resources that can greatly impact their college experience such as admissions processes, financial aid packages, work-study, and college bridge programs (Checkoway, 2018; Inkelas et al., 2007; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Many of the respondents stated that the accessibility to Flying First and ASCEND mentors, counselors, and programming like the ASCEND holiday lunch during the fall finals week has had a great impact on their experiences while navigating college.

Research question 2. How are the academic, environmental, and social aspects of first-generation minority students impacted by the Flying First and ASCEND/RISE learning communities?

Learning communities provide their students with a plethora of resources such as increased faculty interaction, intentional programming, and financial literacy programming. The goal of these communities are to retain and graduate these students by providing tools that promote academic excellence, foster a sense of belonging, and increasing educational opportunities. According to the research, learning communities are described as humanizing the learning environment in order to promote academic success, increased community engagement, and access to campus resources (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018). In regard to campus connection, many of the respondents stated that their connection to their counselor provided them a sense of support and guidance as well as the offices associated with these learning communities are centralized on campus and easy to find. From a residential aspect, respondents reported that their time spent in the learning communities allowed them to form or continue bonds within the communities. Some of the respondents also indicated that their Resident Assistant was a resource to them by hosting programs to have the residents interact in a larger group as well as provide peer support as a student. The research has shown that he increased interaction with faculty/staff, developing a stable family and student support system, engaging with their community, incorporating academic learning outside of the classroom has enhanced persistence at institutions (Pike, Schroder, & Berry, 1997; Tinto, 2003).

Conclusions

The results of this study was able to confirm that both the Flying First and ASCEND learning communities are beneficial to the students they serve. The Rowan University students who participated in this study were impacted and influenced to persist during their time while residing in either learning community as well as had significant access to resources after no longer residing in the learning communities. This study strongly suggests that both communities are structured to support first-generation minority students as well as promote continued student involvement. Students having resided in these communities have gone on to be Resident Assistants to oversee these communities as well as see other leadership opportunities such as becoming peer-mentors for the Harley E. Flack Program. Student who participated in the study but did not go one to get involved in other leadership opportunities still saw the communities as beneficial resources.

Rowan University has implemented a plethora of resources in order to promote academic success, increased community engagement, personal growth, and overall well-being of its first-generation minority students on campus. The respondents value the relationships built from being in both communities and how they continued to flourish after no longer residing in the learning community. Subjects reported that Rowan University's ASCEND and Flying First Programs provide resources and experiences that allow for students to have a smoother transition to college life. Students' access to resources and ability for connections to be maintained can be attributed to the centralized location of the offices in which these programs function out of. Both the ASCEND Programming Director as well as the Flying First Learning Community Coordinator can

utilize the current research as well as proposed recommendations to assist in the development of future initiatives and programming for first-generation minority students.

Recommendations for Practice

Based upon the findings and conclusions of the researcher, the following suggestions for practice are presented:

1. In regard to the Flying First Program, the task force should consider implementing a summer bridge programming component for the students who would be residing in the learning community for the academic year.
2. The Flying First Program should consider hiring a full-time Learning Community Coordinator focused on the development of the learning community and first-generation student programming for the entire campus population.
3. Explore ways for increased faculty and student interaction outside of the classroom for a more holistic experience.
4. Explore opportunities for parents/guardians to become a part of the students' experience such as parent information sessions, first-generation friendly terms and guidelines for families to follow and gain an understanding of some of the university offices and abbreviations associated with their students' college experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based upon the findings and conclusions of the researcher, the following suggestions for future research are presented:

1. Future studies should be conducted during larger scale campus events such as move-in weekend, commencement, and finals celebrations in order to assess how

these events are perceived by first-generation students in regard to their persistence to retain to attend these large scale events.

2. Research the skillset and knowledge that first-generation minority students often come into college with as opposed to focusing on their deficits.
3. Specific research should be conducted to assess how different institutions such as Predominantly White Institutions (PWI's), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI's), Minority-Serving institutions (MSI's), and Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCU's) seek to provide resources and support to their first-generation students that allow them to persist.
4. Further studies should include first-generation faculty/staff to the study investigate what impacted their persistence in order for them to be in their current positions in higher education.

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Appendix A

First-Generation Minority Student Persistence Survey Recruitment Email



Dear First-Generation Minority Students,

My name is Briana Vogel Collins. I am currently am a graduate student in the Higher Education Administration program at Rowan University. I would like to invite you to participate in a survey entitled “First-Generation Minority Student Persistence.” You are included in this survey because you are a current undergraduate student at Rowan University. In order to participate in the survey, you must be 18 years or older, have been a part of the ASCEND or Flying First learning communities, and a first-generation minority student. This survey may take approximately 7 minutes to complete. Your participation is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate in this survey, then do not respond to this survey. The number of subjects to be enrolled in the survey will be 400.

The purpose for this research study is to understand the impact that learning communities have on first-generation minority student persistence at Rowan University. I will be assessing first-generation minority student experiences and access to resources that aid in first-generation minority student persistence. Your survey responses will provide valuable information to be used to further initiatives and program planning for first-generation minority students at Rowan University. This survey is also a part of my thesis requirement for my master’s degree.

All information collected in this survey will be kept confidential. Any part of the research that is published as a portion of this study will not include any personal information. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study, for any reason, and without any consequence. If you have any questions about the survey, you can contact me at vogelb0@rowan.edu or my Principal Investigator and thesis chair Dr. Drew Tinnin at tinnin@rowan.edu. Thank you in advance for being a part of my research! I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Follow this link to the survey: [First-Generation Minority Student Survey](#)

Or copy and paste the URL into your internet browser:
https://rowan.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_71FXabrR5Lu9FrL

Appendix B

Survey Consent and First-Generation Minority Student Persistence Questionnaire



Welcome to the research study!

We are interested in understanding the impact that learning communities have on first-generation minority student persistence at Rowan University. You will be presented with information relevant to first-generation minority student persistence and asked to answer some questions about it. Please be assured that your responses will be kept completely confidential.

This study should take you around seven minutes to complete. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study, for any reason, and without any prejudice. If you would like to contact the Principal Investigator in the study to discuss this research, please e-mail Dr. Drew Tinnin at tinnin@rowan.edu.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation in the study is voluntary, you are 18 years of age, and that you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation in the study at any time and for any reason.

Please note that this survey will be best displayed on a laptop or desktop computer. Some features may be less compatible for use on a mobile device.

- I consent, begin the study
- I do not consent, I do not wish to participate

1. How old are you?
 - 18
 - 19
 - 20
 - 21+

2. What is your academic year?
 - First-year
 - Sophomore
 - Junior
 - Senior

3. How do you identify yourself?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non-binary
 - Other

4. Are you a first-generation minority student (the first in your family to go to college and a part of a marginalized group)?
 - Yes
 - No

5. How would you describe your experience living in either the Flying First or ASCEND learning community?
 - <text>

6. During your time living in either learning community, did you feel connected to your campus environment?
 - Definitely yes
 - Probably yes
 - Might or might not
 - Probably not
 - Definitely not

7. What resources, if any, contributed to your persistence?
 - <text>

8. How easy is it for your, as a first-generation minority student, to access resources related to your education and overall well-being?
 - Extremely easy
 - Moderately easy
 - Slightly easy

- Neither easy nor difficult
 - Slightly difficult
9. Did you decide to go to college to achieve?
- Better job pay
 - Successful career
 - Both
 - Other
10. Did your family expect you to go to college?
- Yes
 - No
11. How would you describe your family's support of your academic program, in regard to encouragement and expectations?
- Very supportive
 - Slightly supportive
 - Neither supportive or unsupportive
 - Slightly unsupportive
 - Very unsupportive
12. Is English the primary language used in your household?
- Yes
 - No
13. Do you receive financial aid from the government?
- Yes
 - No
14. Do you have a job off on or off campus?
- Part-time
 - Full-time
 - No
15. Have you utilized resources on campus for first-generation minority students?
- Yes
 - No
16. Have you found it easy to get answers to your questions about things related to your well-being or education?
- Extremely easy
 - Somewhat easy

- Neither easy nor difficult
- Somewhat difficult
- Extremely difficult

17. How have your interactions with different groups of students impacted your personal growth, attitudes, values, and beliefs?

- Very much
- Much
- Some
- Little
- Very little

18. Has living in a learning community impacted your sense of belonging on campus?

- Definitely yes
- Probably yes
- Might or might not
- Probably not
- Definitely not

19. Would you say that either the Flying First or ASCEND programs allowed for your transition to college to be more pleasant?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

20. What resources, if any, do you feel could help you persist throughout your college career?

- <text>