INTERACTING WITH CARE: HOW COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT AFFAIRS
PERSONNEL SUPPORT FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

A Dissertation
by
DENA MOYER HOLMAN

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
at Appalachian State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2023
Educational Leadership Doctoral Program
Reich College of Education

INTERACTING WITH CARE: HOW COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT AFFAIRS
PERSONNEL SUPPORT FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

A Dissertation
by
DENA MOYER HOLMAN
May 2023

APPROVED BY:

_____
Peter Nelsen, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Dissertation Committee

_____
Star Brown, Ed.D
Member, Dissertation Committee

_____
Roma Angel, Ed.D..
Member, Dissertation Committee

_____
Katherine Kandalec Holm Ed.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

_____
Vachel Miller, Ph.D.
Director, Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

_____
Marie Hoepfl, Ed.D.
Interim Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies

Abstract

Dena Moyer Holman
B.S., Lees McRae College
M.A., Western Carolina University
Ed.S., Appalachian State University
Ed.D., Appalachian State University

Dissertation Committee Chairperson: Peter Nelsen, Ph.D.

Relationships between first-generation North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) students and student affairs professionals matter. They matter to the extent that they influence student persistence, completion, and career aspirations. To that end, this work is intended to highlight those relationships and measure how effective they are in supporting students' success.

To form a foundation for this research, I drew upon concepts regarding an Ethic of Care and Social Capital to explore and support the proposition that relationships between North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) students and student affairs professionals are crucial to student persistence, completion, and career aspirations.

This mixed-methods study was conducted using Q Methodology to assess whether the relationships that first-generation community college students in North Carolina had with student affairs professionals affected their ability to persist, and successfully complete their program and earn their degree. Currently, in North Carolina, administrators in the NCCCS depend highly on data for making decisions that affect student experiences on and off

campuses. What that data lacks is an understanding of the interactions between first-generation students and student affairs personnel. Ultimately, their decisions affect the next generation of community college students. This study is significant because it aims to identify what effect student relationships with student affairs professionals have on student success.

Acknowledgments

Completing this journey would not have been possible without so many people's love, encouragement, and support. My family, near and far, has provided encouragement and unconditional love every step of the way, even when I was ready to give up. Without them, none of this would be possible. To my husband, Ron, who has been my rock for our 28 years of marriage, especially throughout my pursuit of earning a doctoral degree. Thank you for your love, patience, motivation, and understanding throughout this process. Thank you, Ron, for pushing me through the finish line. To my children, Cody and Kyle, who have sacrificed so much during this journey and have often been without Mom. Thank you for your patience, understanding, and support. Thanks for being there for me when I needed you most. Now, Mom can be there for you and your beautiful children, and we can have more quality time together. To my parents, thank you for choosing me, for your endless support and words of encouragement, and for reminding me that "this too shall pass." You have always supported and encouraged me to pursue any of the goals and dreams I have set for myself.

I gratefully acknowledge and thank the amazing dissertation committee—Dr. PJ Nelsen (Chair), Dr. Star Brown, Dr. Roma Angel, and Dr. Katie Holm. Thank you for your willingness to serve as committee members and for challenging me to be the very best I could be. PJ, thank you for the patience, encouragement, and care you have shown me. You have challenged me beyond measure and taught me much along this journey. I would like to

Dedication

My work is dedicated to my wonderful husband and children, who have been so patient in my academic endeavors and pursuit of a doctoral degree. This study is also committed to helping first-generation students succeed and reach their goals.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

During the spring of my first year in college, I decided to major in history education. The history department at my college was represented by three middle-age men and one, lone, middle-age female. Since I was not familiar with Mr. Smith, Dr. Jones, or Dr. Williams's instruction, I began to ask teammates and friends who they would take classes with and why? Each would cringe and say something like: "Stay away from Dr. Williams; she's a killer." One of my best friends, Allison, commented that Dr. Williams was one of the hardest teachers she had ever experienced, but she really learned a lot in her class. Allison typically made A's with an occasional B, so I knew I had my work cut out for me. At this point, I knew I needed to sign up for a class with Dr. Williams.

On the first day of the fall semester of my sophomore year, I took my seat in Dr. Williams's class. I sat in the front row, left of the podium, two times a week for an hour and a half. I was given the advice to sit in the front because she wouldn't call on you if you sat there. Dr. Williams called roll, and described the class, her expectations, and her grading procedures. She then began lecturing and writing notes on the board at a pace I had never seen or experienced. I do not think she came up for a breath of air until the bell rang an hour and fifteen minutes later. My hand was aching. I had fifteen pages of single-spaced college-ruled paper filled, and I write rather small. And so it began: the challenge to capture her every word to replay after class every night. I was not going to fail. I had several things to prove and explore. First, I wanted to demonstrate that I could take the hardest college

professors and still be eligible to play soccer. Second, I knew the reading would be intense, and I wanted to prove that I could teach myself to read what was relevant and skip the rest. Third, I wanted to confront my fear of failure, and finally, I wanted to know if history was really something I was passionate about or if it was just a casual interest based upon my experience traveling with my family and visiting historical sites.

Midway through the semester, she asked me to come to her office after class. While I was scared and trembling, a calm Dr. Williams invited me into her office and began asking questions about the semester, my study habits, and my struggles with her class. When she began asking about my struggles with her class, I became paralyzed. I thought: Here we go! She is going to start belittling me, telling me how I don't belong in the class…it was just too difficult for me. That absolutely did not happen. She instead asked to see my notes. She knew I took copious notes that were almost verbatim because if she got off task answering students' questions aimed to derail her, she would say, "Where was I, Dena?" And every time, I would bring her back around. (I'm pretty sure my classmates detested these moments.) Instead of belittling me, though, Dr. Williams asked what I was using my notes for and how I was studying with them. She was the first teacher who showed an interest in how I was actually studying and learning.

I had already made a solid "C" on my first exam, which I was pretty excited about, but Dr. Williams took the time to suggest ways to improve my study habits. She described different strategies for reviewing my notes and even provided what she called "top secret tips for conquering her class." She told me that if she repeated herself three times, it was a turning point or significant battle and if a fourth, it was on the list of potential test questions. I left her office encouraged but apprehensive. I had never had an instructor take the time to

show an interest in me or the way I was learning, show me how to improve my skills or encourage me to voice my thoughts and opinions. These conversations continued after each exam. The exam grades I earned never rose above a low "B," but she continued to work with me. I could see my confidence growing and my passion for history becoming stronger. I finished my first semester with a "B" on the final comprehensive exam and a "B" for the semester. During the course of that semester, I learned as much about life and the necessary study skills to survive in college as I did about history. Most importantly, I learned that my college had teachers who really did care about their students, and Dr. Williams wanted to see her students succeed, even those who struggled to find success. I continued taking as many classes as I could with Dr. Williams and would often visit her office just to chat. She even helped me through one of the darkest moments while at school during the summer of my junior year.

I'm offering this opening glimpse into my experiences as a student, because it sets the stage for what matters to me as a student affairs professional. I work directly with students and lead a team of staff members, and our collective aim is to support students in the way that Dr. Williams did for me: I want to help students understand how to do school *and* that they belong. As the second example to follow illustrates, many students don't receive those positive messages from the staff and faculty they encounter in higher education. The result can be that students quit school, not just because they don't understand the intricacies of college, but also because they question whether or not they actually belong in the first place.

During the summer prior to my senior year, I took a history class with Dr. Jones. I should have known the course was going to be rough when I purchased the textbook. The book was maybe six inches wide by nine inches long and five inches thick. The book had

five thousand pages with maybe an eight-point font. I thought I was doomed, and I was right.

I entered the class and took what was now my normal left front-row seat. Close after, Dr.

Jones entered the room, and with a thud of the textbook on the front desk, he started talking.

He had no introduction, no point of historical reference, nothing—just talking. Occasionally,

he would say a phrase, term, or name with which I was familiar, but otherwise, he just

appeared to ramble in some sort of coded language that didn't sound like English. An hour

and fifteen minutes later, the bell rang, and he informed us that we would read the whole

book in the eight weeks we were to be in the class together. He assigned the first six hundred

and twenty-five pages for the next day.

Since the class was rather small, we all gathered in the line at lunch, trying to figure

out what had just occurred. Not one person understood what he was talking about. I was

shocked by the fact that I was expected to read six hundred and twenty-five pages by the next

day. Reading this much would take days or maybe weeks to do, so I was terrified with the

thought of having to complete the book by the end of July. In an effort to meet his demand, I

sat down and read for three hours. I might have gotten twenty-five pages read by the next

class. On pop quiz number one, I scored a thirty. How did I get three correct? The class

average was forty. This went on for a couple of days at each class meeting. Dr. Jones grew

more and more irritated with us. In response, our class became more and more agitated with

him until one day both sides laid everything on the table. Dr. Jones proceeded to humiliate

each and every one of us individually in alphabetical order, which was quite interesting since

he never called roll, not once, and never handed us back a graded paper or called us by name.

One by one he tore each one of us down, shredding us like confetti. His words cut deep and

pointed out our worst qualities, both physically and academically. His barrage went on for an

hour until students finally began to walk out. He slowed down his rhetoric, keeping a close glaring eye on those who left like he was keeping score. As he reached the end of his tirade, he was exhausted, sweating profusely, and red in the face. He dismissed class with two final comments: He would rethink the class overnight and present a new plan next class. He finished by exhorting us to "bring the cowards back with you next time." I was not sure if I was a coward for staying and enduring such abuse or if they were cowards for leaving the rest of us behind. The whole event was bizarre.

The next class, I remember timidly entering the room afraid to be alone and afraid of another tirade. His "rethinking" the class design resulted in his offering us a choice: We could either each write a twenty-five-page paper on a topic he would choose for each of us individually, or we could continue with the readings and quizzes as he had originally outlined. Feeling coerced and manipulated, we were each assigned a topic and two weeks to complete the paper. I was assigned to research the establishment of Laos. I had absolutely no idea where Laos was or even its significance to our class. Friends had other topics like the Vietnam War, Korean War, or leaders like Hitler and Mao Zedong.

Panicked and distraught, I went to seek comfort from Angela Smith and my library family. (I had a work study job there.) Angela was my work study supervisor who quickly became one of many substitute Moms during my time at college. I pulled it together and attempted to explain how the course started with the five thousand-page book and the expectation to read six hundred and twenty-five pages a week. My explanation quickly drew a crowd of library staff members including Mr. Russel Jackson. Russel asked if he was crazy expecting that many pages to be read in a week, "Yes, he was," I replied while explaining the expectations in the other class I was also taking. I then explained the research topic I was

given, and Russel again asked, "Is he crazy? He is setting you up to fail. You're not going to find enough information to write a twenty-five-page paper on that topic." As the head librarian, Russel was well versed in foreign affairs, since he had an intense interest in South East Asia. I was fixated with having to write twenty-five pages and researching a topic I had no idea about. I remember asking the group if I should drop the class, and Angela said she would consult Aaron at lunch. Right on que, Aaron entered the back of the library where we were all talking, and I was prompted by Angela to explain what had happened in Dr. Jones' class. This was certainly awkward, because I felt as if I was a tattle tale telling some deep dark classroom secret for the first time. Aaron had the exact same response as Russel. I asked him if I should drop the class, and he told me to stick with it and implied that other students had spoken with him about Dr. Jones and that he would be intervening in some way. Two weeks later, I turned in a paper outlining the history of the creation of Laos as a recognized country.

The following Monday we received our papers one by one and handed to each of us with a verbal lashing drawing attention to our inadequacies. Dr. Jones proceeded to call me stupid and a complete joke for a college student as he flung my paper at me. The paper was white with black letters when I turned it in, and when I received it back, I thought someone had cut themselves and bled all over it. Red marks were everywhere. Some comments were criticism for the sentence structure, word choice, or grammar. His comments were belittling my argument or thoroughness of the research. He told me that I received a 60 because he felt sorry for me. He was sorry I was living a fairy tale and for thinking that I could actually graduate college. Until this point, I had taken every verbal punch he had thrown my way with grace, but this was the tipping point. Tears began to drop one by one, slowly running down

my face until there was a steady stream. "Get your baby face ass out of my sight, and never come back; you don't deserve to be here, using my time, hearing my voice. Leave now!" The rage in his eyes and the tone of his voice was like nothing I had heard or experienced. This was the darkest moment of my life. I gathered my bookbag and ran as fast as I could to get out of there before I made him mad again.

I ran so fast that I almost knocked Dr. Williams over trying to get out of the building. She could see my tears, and she immediately asked what was wrong. I was paralyzed, frozen in shock from the insults and humiliation. I was silent. I had no voice. Dr. Williams grabbed my shoulder and escorted me to her office suite where she allowed me to cry and vent and cry some more. She attempted to console me. I was in pieces and irrational in my thoughts, and I was making plans to leave school and return home a complete failure, a college dropout. I finally calmed down enough to tell her what had just occurred and what had occurred throughout the course. The more I talked, the more irritated and enraged Dr. Williams became. In three and half years, I never heard her utter a harsh word about anyone or anything, even if she was in disagreement. This day was different. As I paused to recollect my thoughts she said, "That son of a bitch." She grabbed my shoulders and drew me close, wrapping her arms around me tightly. After what seemed like a forever, she let go and said:

> We are not going to let him ruin us are we? No ma'am. He puts his
>
> pants on the same way we do, right? Don't let him stop you!
>
> That's what men want; they want to control us with their words
>
> until we become submissive to their desires. Not in this world. You
>
> be you. Keep working hard and great things will happen. Leave me
>
> your paper, and let's discuss it on Friday. And show up to his class

tomorrow. Don't let him win by controlling your thoughts or

getting in your head.

I was confused. I could not forget the words he used and the rage in his voice. How could his words not control me? I recalled every single word he said over and over that night. I was so scared that I could not shut my mind off or close my eyes. I returned to class the next day to a small round of applause from my classmates until Dr. Jones entered. When he made eye contact with me, he said, "I guess you're not as stupid as I thought."

Dr. Williams and I met on Friday going over the paper paragraph by paragraph and page by page. She pointed out ways to correct some mistakes by making some paragraphs stronger and by changing the sentence structure or word choice. She reminded me to use the words I knew and the words that represented me in my writing. She asked me to write it over with her suggestions in mind. I spent that whole weekend working on my rewrite for Dr. Williams. Monday the week of finals came, and I entered class to hear Dr. Jones' voice. Before I even sat down he started, "You're still here," with a little chuckle and a shake of his head. He started class by asking for our second drafts which came to me as a total surprise, but thankfully I had a completed copy to hand him. Again I received a snide comment: "You don't quit do you?" Before he handed the final out he had two stacks of papers: the final exam and paperwork to withdraw from class. At this point I had zero chance of passing the class and mathematically, I knew what the outcome was going to be. However, I opted to take the final exam. The test had one hundred and twenty multiple choice questions and two hours to complete it. I was terrified, and as I read through the first couple of pages, not one question made any sense. I flipped to the back of the test and started there. Okay, I could answer a couple of these. I was on a roll! Two hours flew by, and I was down to forty or so

remaining questions that I had not attempted, so I began to select answers randomly, reciting "O Christmas Tree" while doing so. TIME! I collected my belongings and handed in my test. Dr. Jones asked me how I did. I thought, "Why care now?" I thought. Then he surprised me: "You'll make it in life, Davis, You won't give up or quit no matter how bad it gets. Good luck." Well, I earned the F in that class. It remains on my transcript, but thanks to Dr. Williams, I learned much more about writing than the grade reflects. I also learned some powerful lessons about what care does and does not sound and feel like.

My contrasting experiences with Dr. Jones and Dr. Williams are a study in what my research in caring behaviors and the transfer of social capital entails. Both instructors had similar titles, similar job descriptions, similar backgrounds in education, but that is where their similarities end. They handled their jobs very differently. They handled their students very differently. One took the time to see me beyond a statistic on a page, and one never even tried to learn my name or my goals in life. Both experiences taught me way more about life and how to treat people than about history. Both left lasting impressions on me, but only one emulated the teacher and person I wanted to become, and the other emulated the person I would never want another student to encounter. I received care from both faculty and staff, care that made all the difference. I remained in college. I earned an undergraduate degree. I earned a master's degree. And, I'm finishing a doctorate. Listening to students matters. Understanding that they need us to help them navigate the often confusing world of higher education matters. Perhaps even more, they need us to help them to believe that they belong and they are people who are intelligent enough to push through adversity. While I won't be talking about them in what follows, this dissertation is a testament to the care I received from

9

Dr. Williams and my family of staff members, like Angela Smith. Their care is why I am writing these words today.

Problem Statement

Despite the apparent benefits of obtaining a college degree, students who enroll in community colleges graduate at a much lower rate than those who attend four-year schools. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in the fall of 2019, public two-year college attendance represented 31 percent of all undergraduate enrollment. Of those who started college in the fall of 2017 at a two-year college, 62.3 percent were still enrolled at any institution in the fall of 2018. Just under 48.9 percent returned to the same college. The one-year persistence rate of students who started full-time was 69.7 percent; it was 56.3 percent for part-time starters. While community college is a starting point for first-generation students who enter higher education, many struggle to reap the benefits of reaching the goal of earning a degree.

Again, I must emphasize this essential point: community college students drop out of school or complete at a slower rate than students at four-year schools (Levesque, 2022). Some of the most documented reasons are because students often are of non-traditional age, are underprepared academically, face significant financial responsibilities, or are first-generation, usually meaning they require more support to navigate the complexities of college. Unlike university students who are traditionally between the ages of 18-24, community college students are often older and have families and financial responsibilities that traditional-aged students do not. In addition, community college students are often underprepared academically. They often lack basic English, reading, and math skills, placing them in remedial coursework to improve upon

the skills every high school graduate should have acquired. And finally, community college students are often the first in their families to aspire to be college graduates. Being the first in one's family often comes at a price. While they bring a host of strengths with them to the college experience, students may not have the appropriate background knowledge to navigate the complex world of higher education. They also may be pressured by family members to "give up school and stop trying to be better than us."

Despite the challenges many first-generation students face, community colleges *can* offer students many benefits often overlooked when searching for postsecondary opportunities. Students report smaller classes, lower tuition, and opportunities to take courses that focus on their career path by attending a community college (Levesque, 2022). Typically, community college classes are smaller in size. In fact, according to information from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS infographic, 2010), the average class size at community colleges ranges from 25 to 35, while classes at universities can have 150-300 students. Students report the benefit of smaller classes is more individualized instruction and a chance to get to know instructors (Barrington, 2022). Personalized instruction creates opportunities for students to feel nurtured, develop emotionally and intellectually, and improve academically. Many community college students report learning to study for the first time and often brag about learning to write on an academic level for the first time while in community college classes. Doing well can also help students feel more comfortable and confident interacting with others within a higher education setting.

Additionally, attending a community college is more affordable. Community college tuition and fees are much lower than those at universities, and enrolling in a community

college allows students to achieve the same academic success at a fraction of the cost. Students who begin their academic careers at community colleges and then transfer to four-year schools are more successful than those who start at universities (Styles, 2019). Students report having the ability to focus on their career path as a benefit of attending a community college (Levesque, 2022). They have an opportunity to get to know their instructors, which allows them to better understand the real-world application of the skills they are being taught. Because the students experience smaller classes, focus on career goals, earn interim credentials, and have greater transferability and flexibility with schedules, it often allows working students to take courses in various formats and times. In addition to these benefits, students often report choosing to stay in school or return to school is due to a connection to someone who cared about them (Rimm-Kaufmann & Sandilos, 2015). Smaller class sizes and flexible schedules of a community college allow students to get to know their instructors. Often, their instructors are from similar backgrounds, know the geographic area, and have friends in the field students want to begin a career.

Early research on student persistence in higher education found that student contact with faculty members outside the classroom helps students feel connected and remain enrolled in their schools (Karp et al., 2010; Teven, 2001). Additional studies on student persistence in higher education found that student contact with faculty members outside the classroom promotes persistence (Astin, 1997; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1976; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). These studies also show teachers' caring behaviors significantly influence students' behavior, relationships, educational experiences, and even their lives. Given this research, I suggest we need to understand what types of relationships and interactions are more likely to impact student persistence the most. Despite all we

know about why students stay in school, we need to better understand the role of support staff in creating a culture of care outside the classroom. The research lacks a discussion on the importance of student relationships outside of the classroom with non-instructional staff members.

Again, despite being the first in the family to attend college, being non-traditional in age, or being in need of academic support, community college can be just the setting a student needs to encounter a positive, caring environment that places value on the student as a person. The research shows us again and again that the experience of care makes all the difference (Rowan et al., 2002). Given my examination of the literature, my own experiences as both a first-generation college student, and now as a student affairs leader at a community college, I have come to believe that the experience of care is an essential difference between the students who remain in school and those who drop out. Those who experience care, whether it be from teachers, students, or staff members, are the ones who are most likely to remain and graduate.

Within the context of community colleges, then, I suggest that there is a natural relationship between an ethic of care and an exchange of insider knowledge, which I will frame as social capital in the next chapter. Students need staff and faculty alike to meet them where they are at. This is made possible if faculty and staff take the time to form meaningful relationships with students and to focus on meeting their real needs. As happened in my own case, deeper relationships with students may also lead to the exchange of important insider knowledge about how higher education works, knowledge that supports first-generation students as they navigate what can seem like a foreign system, one that can communicate that they don't belong. I suggest these relationships

would also benefit all community college students because all students would be treated in the same manner. What benefits the first-generation student helps all students in education. I suggest an environment such as this, one where all staff and faculty are intentionally attempting to bring care into their interactions with students, will cause a powerful ripple effect that will positively impact the lives of all students.

The importance of caring relationships between teachers and students is evident; however, research is missing a critical aspect. Research neglects to consider that students learn from and have interactions with other individuals besides teachers, instructors, and professors. The current research on caring relationships focuses on primary and secondary educators, specifically teachers; however, a limited number of articles focus on the value of relationships with student affairs personnel at community colleges (Culp, 2005; Keeling, 2014). Thus, in this dissertation, I explore what caring relations actually mean to first-generation college students. I specifically ask students about their interactions with student affairs professionals. We know that caring matters in student-faculty relationships, and I aim to explore its importance in student-staff relationships as well. All employees of community colleges need to learn more about community college student interactions outside of the classroom to help all stakeholders in higher education develop holistic and supportive experiences that lead to increased student success, especially for first-generation students. When an added emphasis is placed on holistic support services in community colleges to increase student completion and success, studying the influence of student affairs personnel seems pertinent.

Research Questions

Research has demonstrated that schools with caring teachers advantaged or helped

at-risk students break downward spirals of failure and unmet expectations (Comer, 1989; Schorr & Schorr, 1988; Whehlage et al., 1989). I speculate that relationships between first-generation students and from student affairs personnel may be as critical as students' relationships with faculty. While community colleges offer many advantages and help first-generation students remain in school, a significant percentage of first-generation students stop out of school (Evertt, 2015). Because early research on student persistence in higher education found that contact with faculty members outside the classroom helps students feel connected to and remain enrolled in their schools, I suggest we understand what type of relationships and interactions are more likely to impact student success (Hawk, 2017). Additional studies on student persistence in higher education found that contact with faculty members outside the classroom promotes student persistence (Astin, 1997; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1976; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). More studies have shown that teachers' caring behaviors significantly influence students' behavior, relationships, educational experiences, and even their lives. Despite all we know about why students stay in school, we need to better understand the role of support staff in creating a culture of care outside the classroom. The research lacks a focus on the importance of student relationships with non-instructional staff members outside the classroom.

Within this dissertation, I explore the types of interactions and behaviors student affairs personnel engage in with first-generation students that demonstrates care. The intention is to help community college educators (both staff and instructors) understand the importance of bringing a specific blend of caring and insider knowledge to educational and support relationships. To support first-generation college students, we need to better

understand the nature of caring relationships and what forms of insider knowledge students genuinely need. Thus, this research project focuses on exploring how first-generation college students understand caring actions.

My primary research question focuses on how first-generation college students understand caring behaviors: How do student affairs personnel construct and maintain caring relationships through non-classroom interactions? The research sub-questions that further refined my study are as follows:

Research Question 1: According to first-generation students, what are the most essential and non-essential behaviors or interactions that demonstrate student affairs personnel care about students?

Research Question 2: What behaviors do student affairs personnel demonstrate with first-generation students that lead those students to believe they are being cared for?

Research Question 3: How do student affairs personnel perceive their role in student persistence, completion, and career field choice?

Methodology

Q methodology is a mixed methods research approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative techniques. It involves a systematic approach to studying subjectivity by exploring the perspectives and viewpoints of participants. Q methodology uses a combination of quantitative techniques, such as factor analysis, and qualitative techniques, such as open-ended interviews or surveys, to understand the subjective experiences and beliefs of individuals. Q methodology is a valuable research method for exploring complex and nuanced issues that are difficult to capture through purely

quantitative or qualitative approaches. Quantitatively, correlational research traditionally does not allow for discovering patterns, and exploring the *how* and *why* people think the way they do had not been attempted before (Brown, 1994). Quantitative researchers typically pass over the viewpoints of the person's life from the one living it (Brown, 1996; Shemmings, 2006). Brown (1996) suggests that the chief goal of Q Methodology is to reveal how people conceptualize, think, and believe what is their reality and the way they do this and for what reason.

For the purpose of this study, I employ Q methodology to uncover different patterns of thoughts, perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and beliefs by utilizing a rigorous and systematic procedure, which provides an objective structure to identify and quantify participants' subjective views on a given topic (McKeown & Thomas, 1988; Stephenson, 1953; Watts & Stenner, 2012).This methodology provides me with a way of understanding a subjective phenomenon using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Using Q Methodology enables me to identify groupings of shared beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions among participants within a study; these patterns or shared views in Q methodology are called factors (Cross, 2005; Watts & Stenner, 2012). This research approach emphasizes the *how* and why people think the way they do, but not *how many* people think a certain way (Valenta & Wigger, 1997). According to Akhtar-Danesh et al. (2009), Q methodology allows the researcher to identify "groups of participants having similar and alternative viewpoints and turn to ascertain similarities and differences between groups." The idea behind Q methodology is that only a limited number of distinct opinions exist about any topic (van Exel & de Graaf, 2005). A more in-depth examination of Q methodology will be presented in Chapter 3.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout the study and are defined as follows:

- *Ethic of Care*-as a receptive relationship where the carer listens to, understands, and then takes action to meet the needs of the cared-for. This relationship is one of This relationship is one of caring only if the cared-for receives the attempted actions as caring (Noddings 1984, 1992, 2002, 2005)

- *First-generation*—for this study, the term first-generation means that neither parent of that student holds a bachelor's degree.

- *P-set*—set of participants chosen to participate because they have relevance to the study (Watts & Stenner, 2012)

- *Q-methodology*—mixed method study conducted to examine a phenomenon or topic that includes chosen participants who respond by ranking items according to relevance (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

- *Q-set*—the set of items taken from the concourse for the participants to sort (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

- *Q-sort*—each participant's final product in the process, ranked by relevance (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

- *Social Capital*-is concerned with how individuals engage in social connections that result in the mutually beneficial exchange of information that helps to meet each individual's particular needs (Coleman, 1988).

- *Student affairs personnel* -professional individuals dedicated to supporting individuals' academic and personal development in a college or university setting.

- *Student support*—promoting students' educational, personal, and professional

development by securing and coordinating support that targets academic and non-academic barriers to achievement. This includes institutional efforts to improve academic advising, career services, financial aid awareness and literacy, student life, counseling and psychological services, and teaching.

Organization of Study

Through my research questions, I seek to better understand how student affairs personnel construct and maintain caring relationships through non-classroom interactions. After this initial introduction, in chapter two I lay out the literature used to describe the concepts of an ethic of care, social capital, and the intersection of these two literatures. My aim is to provide the reader with a better understanding of the themes discussed later in chapter five. In chapter three, I provide a discussion of the research method employed in this study. I introduce how I collected and analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data. Then in chapter four, I discuss the analysis of the data and the connection back to the research questions. Finally, in chapter five, I then analyze the experiences of the participants of the study, illuminating their voices to untangle the complex web of how caring and social capital intersect. These voices provide an overview and summation of key aspects of care and social capital. I ultimately offer implications for student affairs practitioners and give recommendations for higher education leaders.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The desire to be cared for is almost certainly a universal human characteristic (Noddings, 1992, p. 7).

As students, many of us have encountered teachers or educational staff members who supported and encouraged us to navigate difficult situations or who guided us through various stages or chapters of our educational lives. Many of us would not have succeeded if someone had not believed in us and offered insights into how to navigate the complexities of schooling. Even those students who had what are considered "protective factors" in their earlier lives (Henderson, 2013; Masten, 2001), such as supportive families, attentive guardians, socio-economic advantages, access to high-quality early childhood education, stable nutrition, and healthy housing may have benefited significantly from caring educators. This idea is supported by Davolas and Haensly's (1997) 22-year longitudinal study of over 200 youth. They concluded that "every successful person has had some special teacher who changed the course of life for that individual" (p. 209). Additional studies reveal that as many as 90% of graduating students indicate their school success can be attributed to a relationship with a significant adult who influenced them to remain in school (Webber, 1999). Of these graduates, over half of these significant relationships were with faculty or staff members (Weber, 1999). While the education literature repeatedly demonstrates meaningful encounters with caring adults as the key to student success in P-12 settings, this trend is true in higher education as well. Early research on student persistence in higher education also demonstrates student contact with

faculty members outside the classroom promotes student success (Astin, 1997; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1976; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). Furthermore, repeated studies have shown teachers' caring behaviors significantly influence students' behavior, relationships, educational experiences, and even their lives (Barrow, 2015; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Culp, 2005; Lewis et al., 1996)

While it is clear that caring matters, the research lacks a clear understanding of what makes up caring relationships in higher education. Likewise, while we know part of helping first-generation students navigate higher education involves the sharing of insider information, we do not have a clear understanding of how that intersects with caring behaviors in general. In order to set the stage for this research project that explores that specific intersection, in this chapter, I introduce ways to understand what both caring and exchange of insider information mean. In the first section, I turn to the specific literature on what it means to care, and in the second section, I then turn to the literature on the exchange of insider information known as social capital.

Care Theory

While much has been written about an ethic of care in education, Nel Noddings' words resonate with me (Noddings, 1984, 1992, 1995, 2002, 2005). As Noddings describes, my educational journey has been shaped by both positive and negative encounters, but some were examples of *caring* because I received them as such. I felt heard, valued, and cared-for. It is the positive influence of these behaviors that have influenced my professional journey. I agree that not every interaction is a demonstration of care and that care occurs when there is a connection between the one providing the care and the one receiving the care. Noddings' argument starts from the position that "care is

basic in human life and not something to be regarded as an added attraction–that indeed all people want to be cared for" (Noddings, 2002, p. 11). While being cared for may not be an activity everyone wants to receive, what is communicated in these situations is the need for certain kinds of responses from others. She describes an ethic of care as a "certain kind of relationship with others" (Noddings, 2003, p. 91). Noddings uses "caring" to describe something someone does or how it makes someone feel in a relationship, not specific behaviors or rules that we can identify outside specific contexts. She summarizes that every interaction is an opportunity to relate in a caring or non-caring manner. Caring is not a program or a strategy but rather a way of relating to people and, in this study, first-generation community college students that convey compassion, understanding, respect, and interest (Noddings, 1998). Noddings (1988) defines an ethic of care as "acts done out of love and natural inclination" (p. 219) to help each student grow and reach their potential. In this study, I define an ethic of care as does Noddings: It is a receptive relationship where the carer listens to understand and then takes action to meet the needs of the cared-for. A caring relationship only emerges, though, if those actions are received as caring. This relationship is one of caring only if the cared-for receives the attempted actions as caring. In this study, staff members in student affairs are the carer, and the cared-for are first-generation community college students (Noddings 1984, 1992, 1995, 2002, 2005).

Within an ethic of care, then, the fundamental question is not about yourself. The question is not, "What should I do?" Instead, it is always about a larger us: "What should be done to nurture the connections between those involved?" As a relational framework, it theorizes both how educators attempt to offer care and go about doing that *and* a way of

understanding how students experience receiving the caring relationship.

An ethic of care is rooted in feminist ethics. An early version of care theory emerged from Carol Gilligan's (1982) critique of Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development because of its sole focus on how men think about moral issues. Kohlberg's influential research posits that the highest stages of moral development are focused on abstract, justice-focused ideals. Gilligan critiqued his work because Kohlberg studied white, Harvard male students. She noted that on his resulting developmental moral reasoning model, most women showed up as developmentally immature when compared to males (Gilligan, 1982). Realizing Kohlberg's model was not accurate for everyone motivated Gilligan to ask how women think about complex moral issues. In a ground-breaking research study, Gilligan found that rather than prioritize abstract ideals, women in her study drew upon compassion and relationship-based reasoning. In response, Gilligan theorized an alternative ethic grounded in women's lived experiences. Such an ethic focused on relationships instead of emphasizing abstract reasoning and universal rules. Gilligan's writing on care historically connected its "parallel, feminized scheme of development to Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development" (Roberts, 2010, p. 451), which places the consideration of care above ethics of justice and creates a framework where "people…are seen and heard within the context of their own histories" (Jorgensen, 2006, p. 186). Gilligan's theory focused more on connections and situations being contextually dependent. For example, Kohlberg presented a scenario involving two eleven-year-olds, one male and one female, to measure the moral development of adolescence by presenting a conflict to resolve. In the scenario, a man named "Heinz considers whether or not to steal a drug which he cannot afford to buy in order to save the life of his wife"

(Gilligan, 1982, p. 26). The druggist has exclusive ownership of the drug, has set an exorbitant price, and refuses to lower it to help Heinz. When interviewed, the boy's response to how he would solve the problem demonstrated an "ability to bring deductive logic to bear on the solution of moral dilemmas, to differentiate morality from law, and to see how laws can be considered to have mistakes, points towards the principled conception of justice that Kohlberg equates with moral maturity" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 27). The boy relied on rational logic to come up with solutions to the situation, and he assumed others would side with his reasoning. In contrast, the girl's responses are from a relational narrative: "The girl envisions the wife's continuing need for her husband and the husband's continuing concern for his wife and seeks to respond to the druggist's need in a way that would sustain rather than sever connections. Just as she ties the wife's survival to the preservation of relationships" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 28). She instead relies on the process of communication, assuming connection and a belief her voice would be heard. In this example, she constructs a web of relationships through connections to networks that are sustained by communication.

Like Gilligan, Noddings (1982) developed an ethic of care to theorize caring as a "way of being in a relationship, not a set of specific behaviors" (p. 17). Noddings (1992, 2002) argued that older definitions of caring were incomplete because they focused on just one side of the caring interaction. For example, Milton Mayeroff (1971) attempted to create a universal definition of caring as a virtue. He stated, "Caring as helping another grow and actualize…is a process, a way of relating to someone that involves development, in the same way, that friendships can only emerge in time through mutual trust and a deepening and qualitative transformation of the relationship" (Mayeroff, 1971, p. 1). He

further argued that we can identify specific "ingredients of caring" to identify caring people. These ingredients included items like patience, honesty, trust, humility, hope, and courage. In contrast, Noddings (1984) argued that Mayerhoff's definition was incomplete. She argued that focusing on actions—even ones that attempted to demonstrate trust, empathy, and devotion to others— were one-sided. While any actions attempting to demonstrate empathy or trust might be well-intentioned, she suggested that focusing on those actions misses an essential point: the person receiving such an action may not perceive it as caring.

One of the reasons that Noddings' work is so helpful to this research study is the detail she offers in her account of the caring relationship. Individuals in student affairs may assume they are demonstrating care for the students they are interacting with on a daily basis. However, if the actions and interactions of the carer are not received as caring by the cared-for, then the relationship is not based upon care. For example, when a student affairs staff member reaches out to a student through email to return a phone message, the student may perceive the way they engaged as not being caring because they wanted something else. This is because the student picked up the phone and *asked* to hear a caring voice on the other end. The email in this example could be seen as a cold shoulder, *even though the staff member may have intended the email to be a caring action*.

As the previous example illustrates, the ethic of care emphasizes the importance of a caring relationship that focuses on a *response*. At its heart, the caring relationship turns on the receivers of care, in this case first-generation community college students, having received caring attempts by the ones who care (i.e., staff within student affairs). The theory is grounded on a belief that people have varying degrees of interdependence and

dependence on one another (in contrast to other theories that view people as having independent, separate interactions, and interests). The ethic of care fundamentally considers the importance of addressing contextual details of situations to safeguard and promote the actual specific interests of those involved (Bailey, 2008; Delworth & Seeman, 1984; Gilligan, 2011; Slote, 1998; Tronto, 1987; Tronto, 2013). For example, in the work of student affairs, specifically within the context of academic advising, the conversation often begins with small details about the current semester. A staff member may inquire about the student's experience, what has been good, what has not. If the staff member is operating through an ethic of care they are listening attentively for any needs the cared-for (i.e., the student) may have. Often, students may express their needs in ways that are subtle and not necessarily direct. At other times the cared-for may express needs outside the purview of the staff member they are working with. For example, they may need help with topics such as child care, domestic violence, financial aid or with mental health challenge. Even here, though, caring can emerge. While the staff member may not be in a position to attend to the student's direct needs, they can listen, express understanding, and partner with the student to support them in finding the support they need. This might include helping them connect with other staff members with more specific expertise in the area of need.

As stated above, it is essential to distinguish between the "cared-for" (i.e., student) and the "carer" (i.e., student affairs staff members). There's another essential detail that matters to Noddings: the carer makes specific actions towards the cared-for that are intended for *both* the developmental well-being of the relationship itself *and* the individuals within the relationship. That means that in addition to establishing

lasting caring relations, the ethic of care is also concerned with the needs of the carer. Carers can't overextend themselves. To be clear: the needs of the carer matter in the caring relationship as well. I am not suggesting that the cared-for must offer care back (though that might happen in many instances.) Instead, the point is that caring is not an ethic that demands quasi-sainthood self-sacrifice. Building upon Dewey, Noddings argues that caring emerges in ways that support both the carer and the cared-for to continue to engage in caring into the future (Noddings, 1992). An ethic of care involves all our senses and capabilities. The staff member should set their own desire to solve the problem aside instead to meeting the need of the cared-for. For example, staff may work with a student suffering from food insecurity. While the staff member may walk the student to the on-campus food pantry to meet the need while on campus, the staff member may have also heard the need for food at home and, as a result, the staff member may help organize a couple of days' worth of food until the next available community pantry is open. Through ongoing conversion, the staff member may learn that the student is not familiar with what is available in the community, and the staff member may gather a list of those resources for the student. The ongoing conversation allows the carer to know that the cared-for was receptive to the care being given. Caring-about is instrumental in establishing conditions in which the cared-for can flourish. To care for someone is not a formulaic process that progresses step by step. Instead, it evolves over time.

While the caring relation I have been describing is essential, there are more details to add nuance to what Noddings helped us understand. I will next outline and discuss four further key concepts within an ethic of care: engrossment, motivational

displacement, commitment, and confirmation. According to Diller, Houston, Morgan, and Ayim (1991), Noddings claims that engrossment is a form of attention-giving and a necessary condition for caring.

Conditions of care change over time. I may care for the inner circle of my family more intensely than I do for the student body as a whole, and then I may care differently yet again for the student in crisis in my office in tears. In student affairs, our first responsibility is to approach every student with one thought in mind and that is how do we foster caring relationships to meet the needs of the student who is in front of us (Noddings, 1984).

Nodding suggests that engrossment is only one part of what happens when one cares. She refers to motivational displacement as a necessary requirement of full caring for the one-caring (Diller et al., 1991). Motivational displacement occurs when the caregiver allows their energy to be shared with the cared-for without having any direction or beliefs about what the cared-for should do or want. In this moment, the caregiver has an increased vulnerability of being hurt by the actions of the cared-for (Noddings, 1984). During what might be an intense moment, the caregiver is committing to act on behalf of the cared-for, again, without judgment (Diller et al., 1991). For example, in student affairs I may have interacted with a student several times, and they are comfortable with me so a relationship is established. Throughout our conversation, the student may disclose financial information and concerns about being able to fund school. Within that context, they might also disclose that even though they are in their third semester, they are still undecided about their major. Working within motivational displacement, I would set aside any ideas I have about the students' major or any actions that I believe they should take. I choose to set aside my own

28

goals, interests and opinions. Instead, motivational displacement asks me to focus on the students' goals, interests, and needs.

Another key concept of Noddings work is commitment. Commitment is looking beyond observable actions to acts that can be seen only by the individual subject performing the act. Noddings (1984) states, "The commitment to act on behalf of the cared-for, a continued interest in his [sic] reality throughout the appropriate time span, and the continual renewal of commitment over this time span, are the essential elements of caring from the inner view" (p. 16).

The final element of an ethic of care according to Noddings is confirmation. During confirmation the cared-for begins to see themself as the caregiver sees them. Confirmation describes the moment when the cared-for perceives the intended action as one of care and then signals to the carer that it is received. This acknowledgment may be subtle and may occur in various forms. This is a moment of interpretation, so it is essential that we understand that true confirmation requires some sort of direct communication between the carer and the cared-for. We can certainly infer the establishment of care, but true confirmation involves an act of communication. As will develop later in this dissertation, I suggest that understanding these features of caring could help us in higher education create the conditions in which caring relations emerge. This fertile ground, in turn, may foster thriving, growth, and innovation if we were to place more individual focus on the needs of individual students.

Criticisms of an ethic of care typically emerge from two directions: 1) there are those who hold to an ethic of care as a domain ethic, and 2) then there are those who refer to an ethic of care as a dangerous ethic (Diller et al., 1991). Those who hold an ethic of care as

a domain ethic suggest that moral development plays a crucial role in relationships and the vast array of human experiences do not fit the caring model (Diller et al., 1991). As Diller et al. (1991) explained, "the central notion in a domain ethic is that we need different moral procedures and priorities for different contexts or domains" (p. 95). For example, business, economics, military, or political contexts all may require different ethical approaches that are outside the bounds of what an ethic of care can offer. However, Diller et al. (1991) counter that the worry is unfounded, at least within the domain of education: "We make an error when we think of the moral good in terms of acts that produce the greatest good for the greatest number of human beings" (p. 96). Education is not a place where we worry just about the "greatest good or the greatest number" (Diller et al., 1991, p. 96). This sort of thought process may be applicable in some domains, but education in general, and higher education specifically, is not a place where that sort of rationale should govern how we make decisions.

As I alluded to previously, another common criticism of the ethic of care is that it is dangerous, especially for women (Diller et al., 1991). For example, there may be a lack of attention to the conditions that surround acts of care, conditions in which women are expected to care for others because of gendered divisions of labor (Diller et al., 1991). In a similar vein, others worry that caring could come at a cost to women if they are encouraged to ignore their own needs, thereby elevating others' needs at the expense of the self (Houston, 1990). Both of these concerns are valid. I return to Noddings's emphasis that the needs of the one who cares matters. Caring relations cannot be built upon exploitation or oppressive circumstances, even if the cared-for experiences the actions of the carer as caring. In such cases, the relation of care has not been established. These are important details that I will

consider later in the recommendations section of this project (Diller et al., 1991).

In conclusion, an ethic of care is not a one-way interaction but rather a dyadic relationship where the caregiver is named the one-caring and the recipient, the cared-for is receptive of the care being given. In the previous section, I have discussed four key concepts of an ethic as described by Nodding: engrossment, motivational displacement, commitment, and confirmation. Then I provided a critique of an ethic of care. Noddings' ethic of care served as the foundation for this study because the action and interactions first-generation students participate in with student affairs personnel acknowledge the student is important and they matter. If student affairs personnel attentively listen to what first-generation students say, they will learn what students are needing and can respond with care. Therefore, staff members would, then be able step back and not impose what they view as for the good of the student. Instead, staff may choose to get to know the particulars of the individual's circumstances which would open the possibility that whatever direction the staff members or the students take would be ones that would meet their fundamental needs in real, lasting ways. Next I will discuss how social capital can be exchanged through caring interactions and relationships.

Social Capital

The term "social capital" can be traced back to the influential work of Lyda Judson Hanifan. In Rural School Community Center (1916), Hanifan described social capital as a way to understand the "social cohesion and personal investments in the community" (p. 133). Hanifan was concerned with how community members engaged in social connections that resulted in mutually beneficial exchanges of information that helped meet each individual's particular needs. Hannifin (1916) defines the value of social connections

as follows:

> The accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his [sic] social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvements as a whole will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his [sic] associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy and the fellowship of his neighbors. (p. 130)

Hanifan was on to an important detail that later research demonstrates again and again: first-generation college students need access to insider knowledge in order to succeed in higher education. Education is often seen as the only venue where the goal is to increase social mobility and economic growth (Cheng & Kaplowitz, 2016; Engle, 2007). Social capital describes just that: insider knowledge about how institutions of higher learning work both practically and socially. Hanifan's early definition is conceptually linked to the more recent work of both Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman; they add important complexity to Hanifan's work, as the discussion to follow will show.

For example, when most people think of 'capital,' they think of money or economic exchanges, such as capital investments. In 1984, Pierre Bourdieu complicated this by arguing that capital can be understood through the interaction of three sources: economic capital, cultural capital (or human capital), and social capital. In addition to the first, financial capital, the second two captured two general, non-economic forms people could acquire and utilize in various ways and settings. Cultural capital includes knowledge and skills obtained through being a member of a particular family, one's socioeconomic status, religion, and memberships in various social institutions. Social capital is most germane to this discussion because it describes the exchange of knowledge and information acquired

through connections and relationships outside of one's family of origin or social set. While social capital focuses on group-level interactions and memberships, Bourdieu described human capital as including *personal* or individual attributes such as knowledge, skills, and credentials that can be used to improve an individual's unique situation. As such, Bourdieu defined social capital as "The sum of the resources, actual and virtual, that accrue to an individual or group by virtue of possessing a network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, as cited in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). One's network of resources in higher education begins with interactions with staff members in student affairs. Thus, social capital captures how groups can mobilize connections, relationships, and resources in order to advance their individual goals and meet their individual needs. Bourdieu also suggested that all three forms of capital could be accumulated, exchanged, and transformed from one type to another. For example, if an individual completes a college degree, they have added human capital to their portfolio. In return, the individual has an opportunity for increased wages because of their investment in and completion of the degree. Finally, this person's social capital has also increased because of the relationships formed along the way. The person has met others with similar jobs as those they want in the future and formed a network with similar education, drive, and influence. Therefore, they increase their social capital. Thus, because of all these factors, each of these forms of capital can be activated to benefit the person's situation.

In *Forms of Capital* (1986), Bourdieu argues that social capital offers us a way to understand how social classes are maintained. While he believes in the power of social capital, he suggests that it is reserved for the "haves." According to Bourdieu (1986), a

lack of social capital among underrepresented or marginalized groups maintains societal class boundaries. McDonough (1997) and then Perna and Titus (2005) argue that the availability of college information is closely tied to the socioeconomic environment. Students with a low socioeconomic status are unlikely to have adequate access to individuals within their homes or communities who can transmit college knowledge and help them understand how to succeed in higher education contexts. As a result, low socioeconomic students are often left to rely on other sources for the type of support related to the exchange of social capital. One source of this can be found within their respective schools.

First-generation students often struggle with the processes and procedures within higher education. They do not have the experience or the insider knowledge to navigate the nuances of how college works because they simply haven't been exposed to the language and acronyms that are prolific in higher education. If grounded in trust, even initial interactions with student affairs personnel may build the foundation for the transfer of social capital. Many first-generation students may rely on staff members to clarify college language, explain processes step by step, and explain the acronyms and their meanings. Even if they don't fully recognize this dynamic, students may be counting on student affairs professionals to start them on the path to achieving their goals before they ever step foot in the college classroom.

In summary, Bourdieu was interested in using social capital theory to explain class reproduction. While this is an important aspect of social capital, it is not a component of this study. Furthermore, Bourdieu's theorizing fails to capture an essential element: individual behavior. His concept of social capital is more concerned

with the accumulation of capital by achieving positions of power and status through various forms of benefit or advancement. For example, imagine a student who had parents working at a local college, one as a professor and the other a senior administrator. As a result, this student would interact socially with professors and even members of the senior leadership and trustee members. This student would develop comfort with a variety of details, including the expectation that college is a likely step after high school. The student can also name-drop and feel comfort within the college environment, increasing the likelihood that their application and interview would be well-received by admissions staff. That accumulated sense of belonging and understanding of how to interact with people in higher education settings are forms of social capital.

While Bourdieu is concerned with power, status, and the uneven distribution of social capital between individuals and offers much to my project, his work fails to capture some of the details of social interactions at the individual level. To add to that complexity, James Coleman (1988) used the concept of social capital to explain the behaviors of individuals where the actions of individuals benefit the whole. According to Coleman (1998), "If we begin with a theory of rational action, in which each actor has control over certain resources and interest in certain resources and events, then social capital constitutes a particular kind of resource available to an actor" (p. 98). Thus, social capital exists in relationships among people. For Coleman, social capital captures the relationship among individuals that allows them to then enable actions to produce individual outcomes. For example, everyone would benefit from a neighborhood watch group to help lower the local crime rate, even for the individuals

who never personally participate (Coleman, 1988). Coleman (1988) further defined social capital by its function:

> It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they all facilitate certain actions of actors-whether persons or corporate actors within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that, in its absence, would not be possible. Like physical capital and human capital, social capital is not completely fungible but may be specific to certain activities. A given form of capital that is valuable in facilitating certain actions may be useless or even harmful to others. Unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors. (p. S98)

We see here that social capital describes something that emerges within the context of relationships among individuals. Coleman's definition describes structures as relations between actors and among actors; therefore, social capital is also a resource for people. Social structures may include family, religion, law, economy, class, status, roles, social networks, groups and organizations, social institutions, and society (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Granvotter, 1973; Lin, 1999; Stanton-Salazar et al., 1997). According to Colemen (1998), structures are individuals who are also seen as resources. Coleman uses the term actors in a relationship whereas Noddings uses carer and cared-for. In Coleman's explanation of structures, he is referring to the individual within the setting. Structures are the social context of the relationship in a social setting. In the context of my research, the

setting is the community college, and the social setting is the relationships first-generation students form when engaging with student affairs personnel. It is these relationships that can be seen as generators of social capital as Coleman describes.

While Bourdieu used social capital theory to explain the behavior of society and its class structure and Coleman used the concept to explain the behavior of individuals, it was Granovetter (1973) who demonstrated that relationships among individuals constitute social networks, which take the form of interpersonal relationships or ties. Strong ties exist, for example, among family and close friends, and weak ties are more prevalent among acquaintances and work colleagues. While pre-dating the more well-known theorists, Granovetter's (1973) earlier work used the concept of relationship associated with social capital to expand on social capital theory to emphasize the power and/or advantages of social network theory.

Granovetter adds another crucial element to our analysis: Granovetter claims that weak ties provide access to new information and new social networks that serve as potential resources. Weak ties can be understood as acquaintances with people who we do not interact with frequently but are crucial for having requisite knowledge about navigating the job market for example. For individuals exploring career options or opportunities, weak ties are sources of information about job opportunities; acquaintances constitute networks large enough to provide information to the individual that may not have been known otherwise but not so extensive as to circulate the information widely sufficient to negate the benefits of the connections (Granovetter, 1973). In this study, the networks are with the student affairs personnel who are the ties. These ties connect students to resources—such as financial aid,

career services, athletics, tutoring, and academic support, etc.—for students, especially first-generation students, to access and interact with. An important detail here is that Granvotter recognized that social networks are structures, some closed to outsiders and others more permeable. Higher education itself can be seen as a structure that is more permeable because, at the community college level in North Carolina, there is an open admissions policy where the student has to be eighteen or a high school graduate to be accepted into the college. This is unlike the selective admission practices at many four-year universities. For example, students from families without a history of the college experience are often associated with more extensive social networks of friends and family. Unfortunately, unless these large networks encompass individuals with college experience, the value of those large networks diminishes in some ways within the context of attending college (though those networks may have a lot of value as places of support, encouragement, and resilience). Having relationships with one or two individuals with college experience may hold more content-specific value than a large network without college-specific experience (Granovetter, 1973). These one or two individuals can form a relationship that is addressing a need (cared-for) and is led to a resource (carer) with the knowledge to address that need. Understanding these networks of relationships as structures is essential because these connections can encourage one to achieve goals. Thus, the structure of relationships enables actions.

Granovetter's work helps us understand a key feature of social capital under-emphasized in both Bourdieu's and Coleman's work: the transfer of social knowledge from one social network is predicated upon bridges and people mediate bridging actions. A liaison must be on each side; someone must transfer information from one side to the

other. For example, the federal program for first-generation students called Student Support Services can be seen as a bridge because it offers direct support for first-generation college students. Since students in the program create new relationships outside their current circles of family and friends, the program is a bridge as Granovetter indicates. Choosing to pursue a bachelor's degree at an out-of-state college is another example of bridging because students have to form new relationships beyond their existing ones in order to survive the experience.

Social capital may be transferred from anyone involved in a school setting, from the highest-ranking leader within a department to the person welcoming students at the reception desk. If information is kept only at the highest level, students may be negatively impacted because they may not understand important details. For example, if a cut score for a state-approved placement test changes and the changes are not communicated in a timely manner to students, they may be advised to take a course or courses that are not necessary, potentially costing the student unnecessary expenses. Likewise, students may need prerequisite courses and not taking them in the correct order could delay their progression in programs. Thus, staff members need accurate information to be shared with them and then, in turn, to share it with students who then share information with their friends and family, thus creating bridges between various social groups.

The transferring relationship that Granvoetter emphasized is captured in Nan Lin's (1999) research on social networks; it provides us with additional and essential insight into the value of relationships beyond family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. In this study, I recognize student affairs as a particular form of network first-generation students have access to. Lin (1999) defines social capital as "resources embedded in a

social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions" (p. 36). Lin's definition is slightly different from that of Bourdieu et al. because Lin emphasizes embedded resources which she describes as resources that are considered crucial for maintaining and improving an individual's socioeconomic status (Lin, 1999). I argue that staff members within student affairs are examples of these embedded resources within the social structure of higher education that can be accessed and then mobilized by first-generation students to improve and reach their educational goals, which will be discussed further in chapter five.

Lin (1999) recognizes four elements for why embedded resources in social networks enhance the outcome of actions. Embedded resources are relationships where trust, receptivity, care, and recognition all shape how individuals interact. As we can see from the previous discussion, the same elements are associated with an ethic of care. The first element of action is the flow of information. As previously discussed with Coleman, bridges facilitate the flow of information. In this study, the flow of information is through student affairs staff. In ideal circumstances, they have ties to labor market information such as needs and demands. Student affairs staff can thus provide students with information about employment trends and how to understand the college opportunities related to them. This sort of analysis may be difficult to find elsewhere, so it may be both crucial and difficult to obtain through other networks (Lin, 1999).

Conclusion

Through the literature review process, research on student persistence in higher education found that contact with faculty members outside the classroom helps students feel connected to and remain enrolled in their schools. Yet it failed to address relationships with

staff members in higher education. I suggest we understand what type of relationships and interactions students encounter with student affairs personnel that most likely impacts student success. In this chapter, I discussed and defined an ethic of care and social capital. I discovered that there were intersecting aspects of an ethic of care and social capital. Both concepts relied on trust, reciprocity, relationships, and confirmation in order for a relationship to form where the transfer of insider knowledge can be shared. The current study led to an understanding of the intersection of an ethic of care and social capital. In the next chapter, I will provide an explanation of Q Methodology which I used to conduct this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I discuss how I used Q methodology to explore how first-generation community college students perceived caring behaviors and the sharing of insider knowledge.

Q methodology involves a systematic approach to studying subjectivity by exploring the perspectives and viewpoints of participants. Q methodology uses a combination of quantitative techniques, such as factor analysis, and qualitative techniques, such as open-ended interviews and surveys, to understand the subjective experiences and beliefs of individuals. For the purpose of this study, I chose to use Q methodology because I was interested in understanding students' perceptions of care that were demonstrated by student services staff. Q methodology is useful to uncover different patterns of thoughts, perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of first-generation student interactions with student affairs personnel. By using q methodology, and specifically student interviews, I was able to understand the needs of the first-generation students that participated in my research. I utilized the rigorous and systematic procedure, which provides an objective structure to identify and quantify participants' subjective views on a given topic (McKeown & Thomas, 1988; Stephenson, 1953; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

The methodology provided me with a way of understanding a subjective phenomenon by utilizing this mixed methods approach. Using Q Methodology enables me to identify groupings of shared beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions among participants

within a study; these patterns or shared views in Q methodology are called factors (Cross, 2005; Watts & Stenner, 2012). This research approach emphasizes *how* and why people think the way they do, but not *how many* people think a certain way (Brown, 1994; Valenta & Wigger, 1997; Watts & Stenner 2005). According to Akhtar-Danesh, Baxter, Valaitis, and Stanyon (2009), Q methodology allows the researcher to identify "groups of participants having similar and alternative viewpoints and in turn to ascertain similarities and differences between groups," (p. 315). The idea behind Q methodology is that only a limited number of distinct opinions exist about any topic (van Exel & de Graaf, 2005).

The question driving this research project is: How do Student Affairs personnel construct and maintain caring relationships through non-classroom interactions? The research sub-questions that further refined my study are as follows:

Research Question 1: According to first-generation students, what are the most essential and non-essential behaviors or interactions that demonstrate Student Affairs personnel care about students?

Research Question 2: What behaviors do Student Affairs personnel demonstrate with first-generation students that lead those students to believe they are being cared for?

Research Question 3: How do Student Affairs personnel perceive their role in student persistence, completion, and career field choice?

Q Methodology

History of Q Methodology

Q methodology is a mixed methods research approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative techniques. It involves a systematic approach to studying

subjectivity by exploring the perspectives and viewpoints of participants. Q methodology

uses a combination of quantitative techniques, such as factor analysis, and qualitative

techniques, such as open-ended interviews or surveys, to understand the subjective

experiences and beliefs of individuals. Q methodology is a valuable research method for

exploring complex and nuanced issues that are difficult to capture through purely

quantitative or qualitative approaches. Traditional, correlational research typically does not

allow for discovering patterns and exploring *how* and *why* people think the way they do

had not been attempted before (Brown, 1994; Valenta & Wigger, 1997; Watts & Stenner

2005). Quantitative procedures typically pass over the viewpoints of the person's life from

the one living it (Brown, 1996; Shemmings, 2006). Brown suggests that the chief goal of

Q Methodology is to reveal by what means people conceptualize and believe the way they

do and for what reason.

In 1935, Q methodology was created by William Stephenson in response to the

need for a method of research that allowed for the exposure of subjectivity in any

condition. Q methodology, according to Donner (1998), "allows a researcher to explore a

complex problem from a subject's point of view: in a Q-sort, participants weigh

statements, in response to a question, in accordance to how they see the issue at hand" (p.

24). By utilizing this research method, I was able to see how participants shared similar

perceptions and viewpoints because the Q sorting consists of "a modified rank-ordering

procedure in which stimuli are placed in an order that is significant from the standpoint"

(p. 141). Participants are not aware of the statements before the sorting process, which

prevents them from prejudging the statements. According to Thomas & Watson (2002),

"Q-sort offers a robust, theoretically grounded, and quantitative tool for examining

opinions and attitudes" (p. 141). As a result, I could then look for patterns of response to uncover and name distinct viewpoints within different, small groups.

Adding to the range of qualitative methodological tools, Q methodology is a method to be applied when the researcher focuses on qualitative investigative procedures and extends the scope of how the data can be used in the study (Shemmings, 2006). Within Q methodology, the intention is to detect similarities, patterns, and themes from observations, interviews, and field notes to produce an extraordinarily manageable factor analysis. This method "requires no knowledge of mathematics to interpret the data obtained" (Shemmings, 2006, p. 147), although factor analysis, a statistical method used to describe variability among observed, correlated variables, is quite mathematically complex.

Consequently, Q Methodology gives me, as the researcher, an advantage because the aforementioned patterns and themes across a sample group can easily be identified. The significant difference between Q Methodology and correlational coefficients is that "Q does not need large numbers of subjects as does R (correlational research), for it can reveal a characteristic independently of the distribution of that characteristic relative to other characteristics" (Brown, 1994, as cited in Smith 2001, p. 2). A large number of participants is not needed to identify attributes that are clustered into groups. Instead, a low response rate will yield common clusters. Because of the flexibility Q Methodology offers, it is a useful choice for research where large numbers of persons with the experience to contribute their perspective to the topic may be challenging to access.

In this study, gathering a large number of community college graduates who had met the criteria for inclusion, alongside their student affairs counterparts, was

challenging, as these students had moved on in their education and careers. Regarding the respondents for the research study invitation, the only participants who responded were those from my current institution, with whom I had already built trusting relationships. This is a key aspect of the study, which emerged later in the research and is discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

As a mixed research method, Q Methodology is seen as a change in the order of what one would consider traditional factor analysis research since the procedures allow the researcher to correlate persons instead of conducting trials. However, historically qualitative studies are carried out using comprehensive written questioning procedures that contribute to developing conceptual frameworks from interviews (Shemmings, 2006). The Q factor analysis makes available data about resemblances, predictions, and perspectives on a specific topic (Brown, 1993), and when blended with qualitative research, it provides choices to the researcher. Steelman and Magire (1999) suggests that Q Methodology can often:

a) identify important internal and external constituencies;

b) define participant viewpoints and perceptions;

c) provide sharper insight into participant-preferred management directions;

d) identify criteria that are important to clusters of individuals;

e) Examine areas of friction, consensus, and conflict;

f) And isolate gaps in shared understanding (p 363).

Based on this information, the Q methodology approach was a good choice to use to determine the perspectives of first-generation college students on the most and least

essential interactions and behaviors indicative of caring relationships. Additionally, Q-sorting offers several benefits pertinent to this study, as suggested by Thomas & Watson (2002):

- Q-sort provides a way to conduct an in-depth study with a small sample population;

- Theoretical literature guides and supports its usage;

- Subjectivity is captured in operation through a person's self-reference;

- Participants do not need to be randomly selected;

- It can be administered over the internet;

- And its analysis techniques help protect the respondent's identity from the researcher making this anonymous.

Therefore, the Q methodology is practical when the researcher wishes to explore the *how* and *why* of individuals' perceptions.

Since Q methodology research involves human subjects and whenever human subjects are involved, it is necessary to engage and obtain approval from an Institutional Review Board prior to proceeding with any research activity. As a result, I obtained approval from the Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board before proceeding with my research. In the next section, I describe the recruiting process for the study participants and provide a detailed description of participants demographics.

Participant Recruiting Process

Once the study was granted approval by the Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board, I sent over eight hundred invitations to participate in the study to first-generation college graduates from two North Carolina Community Colleges in rural

western North Carolina. Per the recommendations of Bartlett and DeWeese (2015), these participants were purposefully chosen because of their familiarity with the topic being studied and their perceptions of their interactions with student affairs personnel. Although the invitation was sent to two separate rural North Carolina community colleges, responses were only received from one institution.

As the researcher, I am employed at the same community college as the student participants. Recognition and familiarity with the researcher may have contributed to the difference in the response rates between the two community colleges. I have no other explanation for the lack of respondents from the second community college. Twenty-six individuals who were recent (within the last three years) graduates of a community college responded to the call to participate in the study.

Participant Demographics

Forty-five total respondents participated in the study representing one community college in rural North Carolina. Twenty-six first-generation student participants completed the Q sort, arranging twenty-two statements of caring interactions on a scale of less essential -3 to most essential +3 between May 2022 and July 2022.

All student participants were first-generation college students, as required by the study criteria. An overview of participant demographics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information for Student Participants

Gender	N	%
Female	17	65%
Male	8	31%
Prefer Not to Answer	1	4%
Total	26	100%

Ethnicity	N	%
Hispanic/Latino	4	15%
Non-Hispanic/Latino	22	85%
Total	26	100%

Race	N	%
American/Native Indian	2	8%
Asian	0	0%
Black or African American	4	15%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	0%
White	20	77%
Total	26	100%

In the following section, I explain my connection to the study participants and the related ethical concerns related to this research project.

Role of the Researcher and Related Ethical Issues

As the researcher, I am currently employed at the community college where I conducted the research study. I have been employed at this same community college in

rural North Carolina for over twenty years. I currently serve in the capacity of senior leader for the division of student affairs, which is at the heart of this research study. As such, I acknowledge my subjectivity as an institutional insider and also understand my institutional history and professional position were not neutral in relation to this study. I am passionate about the proposed topic of study. I have personally experienced actions and interactions that have demonstrated caring behaviors, and I have been on the receiving end of non-caring behavior during my experiences as a first-generation college student, as referenced in my opening personal narrative in Chapter One. As such, I am highly committed to this study to better understand student perceptions of interactions with student affairs personnel. However, I understand that my personal belief in the necessity and value of student affairs demonstrating care for first-generation students urged me to conduct this study and also shaped how I interpreted the results of the data collection and analysis. As the researcher, I am aware that elements of my background may have influenced the data ascertained in this study as I made requests for study participants and conducted interviews. My connection to the institution and recognizability positively influenced the number of student participants, but may have also limited the responses provided during the student and student affairs personnel interviews. The trustworthiness of this study is further detailed in the description of the interview phases of the research, as this is the stage where interpretations can vary based on the chosen Q methodology. Once the participants were identified for the study, the steps of the Q sort research process were executed as detailed in the next sections.

Q Methodology Procedures

In Q methodological research, data is gathered from individuals during subjective studies on various matters of interest, which is then clustered based on the similarity of opinion. This method's general purpose is helping to grasp the subject matter by determining whether or not these opinions demonstrate a theme (Brown, 1993). Precise guidelines must be followed to produce the thematic effects that Q Methodology is used for. The primary stages of Q methodology include establishing the sample, administering the test, and analyzing the results as described in the following steps:

Step 1: Build the concourse.

In developing the concourse, the researcher tries to generate a comprehensive collection of all the possible statements that can be made about a given topic of interest. This material can be collected and obtained from various sources, including contributor's observation, experience from the educational and social involvements of the researcher, literature reviews, consultations, personal interviews, questionnaires asking experts, opinions, and the investigator's own words (van Exel & de Graaf, 2005; Watts & Stenner, 2005). The phrases developed in the sample do not need to be lengthy sentences; pictures, simple terms, or even single words can work (Thomas & Watson, 2002).

The statements are next categorized based on general themes. Though these opinions come from various sources, the gauge used to sort the items remains fixed. The collected material should represent the thoughts and opinions that people in the field of study would have to say on the subject matter (van Exel & de Graaf, 2005). A few critical rules for crafting a good set of elements or samples exist. First, try to use samples that mean different things. Items nearly repeated confuse the participants, as do pairs of

elements that are exact opposites. Next, avoid extreme elements such as so excellent or repulsive because it causes everyone you sample to agree or disagree. This can cause other elements to be left unsorted or ignored. Items should be plausible competitors with one another. Finally, try to keep the elements similar in style. Choose either all phrases or sentences but not both and avoid double negatives. The researcher should attempt to be as clear and concise as possible. Conducting a pre-test with participants will ensure the researcher has provided clarity and general comparability (Donner, 2001).

For this study, I built the concourse by initially reviewing eighty-eight student comments on Student Satisfaction Surveys from 2015 to 2020 at a medium-sized rural community college administered and obtained from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Strategic Planning and through interactions with colleagues and other student affairs professionals as well as my own personal knowledge as a first-generation student. It is appropriate for material to be collected and obtained from various sources, including contributor's observation, experience from the educational and social involvements of the researcher, literature reviews, consultations, personal interviews, questionnaires asking experts, opinions, and the investigator's own words (van Exel & de Graaf, 2005; Watts & Stenner, 2005).

Because the concourse is designed to be representative of all possible viewpoints on the area of interest, the first round of statement collection was unwieldy, disorganized, and sometimes contradictory. Based on the size of the initial concourse in this study, it is not included in this study. As I collected the statements, I reviewed and combined similar statements. The statements that were irrelevant or outside the area of focus I discarded. The condensed list of 80 behaviors or interactions can be found in Appendix A**.**

Step 2: Develop the Q Set.

The next step of Q methodological development is often considered the refinement of the concourse. While it is not unusual for the concourse in a formal Q study to consist of hundreds of statements, it is not practical for participants to review and sort hundreds of statements. As a result, the next step was to narrow down the list to create a sample of statements representing a full range of viewpoints. Brown (1993) suggests that this editing process can be completed by allowing experts in the field to critique those statements, perform a pilot study, or through a random sample of statements. Experts in Q methodological assessment recommend a finalized set of 30 to 60 sample items to be determined before beginning the Q-sort (Brown, 1996; Cross, 2005; Thomas & Watson, 2002). I was able to create a list of twenty-two statements. The refined list of Q-Set Statements can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Q-set Statements

Statement Number	Statement in response to: What are the essential and least essential behaviors or interactions of care demonstrated by student affairs professionals that help first-generation students persist, complete, and choose a career field?
1	Actually excited to see students
2	Available
3	Communicative
4	Compassionate
5	Conscientious
6	Courteous
7	Eager to help
8	Efficient
9	Empathetic
10	Good communication skills
11	Good listener
12	Helpful
13	Knowledgeable
14	Motivated
15	Patience
16	Personable
17	Positive Attitude
18	Reliable
19	Resourceful
20	Welcoming
21	Welcoming responses to students, faculty, and staff
22	Willingness to help others

Step 3: Select the P-set.

A P-set comprises individuals who are versed in the subject of research and have a perspective on the subject matter to form an opinion. Van Exel & de Graaf (2005) state that "this P-set is not random. Rather it is a structured sample of respondents who are theoretically relevant to the problem under consideration" (p. 6). For this research, it is helpful to think of the p-set as a sample of respondents. The size of the Q-Sample will determine the size of the p-set sample. To select the proper Q-Method sample size, the recommended ratio of Q-Sort to P-set is a minimum of 2:1 (Watts & Stenner, 2012). For example, if the given Q-Set contains 40 statements, a minimum of twenty samples or respondents will be required. The response is less about the number of respondents and more about the frequency of their responses once sorted. A draft of the email to prospective respondents is included in Appendix B.

The North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) consists of 58 institutions representing the state's five regions: Western/Mountain, Piedmont/Foothills, Central, Northeast, and Southeast. The group of participants making up the p-set consists of students from one rural community college in the foothills of Western North Carolina who meet the federal definition of first-generation as neither parent nor guardian has earned a bachelor's degree. The participants were asked to identify the person who exhibited care during their higher education experience and the position each person held.

Additionally, the student affairs professionals from these two institutions were asked to participate in the same q-sort to compare student perceptions to staff members' perceptions. Prior to their participation in the study, individuals were asked to complete a consent form, which was created with Google Forms. When submitted, it

returned directly to my secure AppState Google Drive. A copy of this Consent Form

can be found in Appendix E.

Step 4: Construct and Administer the Q sort activity.

After the Q-set is established, the next step is to direct the Q-sort. Once the

concourse is determined, a standard method of assessing the list of statements is to rate

them on a scale of -3 to +3, which reflects the participant's level of agreement with the

statement (Brown, 1993). I followed this standard procedure. I emailed students meeting

the above definition of first-generation and asked them to participate by completing the

participant consent form. Those consenting were then directed to complete a short

demographic survey and were provided a link to Q-Sortware, a free web application. Q-

Sortware allows participants to move sample items throughout the sorting process. I asked

participants to read all the statements carefully. This allowed each participant to become

familiar with the types of views and opinions on the topic. Q-Sortware randomizes the Q-

samples for each sort to help reduce possible effects due to Q-sample order.

The Q-sort began with all items in the q-set placed in the center of the

distribution. I instructed the participants through a rough sort of the attributes. I asked them

to place the statements into three categories: agree, neutral, and disagree. When the

participant finished the first sort, I then asked them to sort each category beginning with the

agree pile first to decide which must be moved within the -3 and +3 distribution anchors

ranging from definitely non-essential to very essential with gradations in-between. The

participants then arranged the behaviors or interactions of care they experienced or

encountered with student affairs professionals into seven categories.

Step 5: Factor analyze the Q factor analysis.

An exploratory factor analysis was then conducted on the rank-ordered scores by using the Kade Ken-Q Analysis software (2019) developed by Banasick. The Q factor analysis was not performed by variable, trait, or statement, but instead by person: people correlate to others with similar beliefs and opinions based on their Q-sorts (Valenta & Wigger, 1997), which resulted in the identification of factors that represent groupings of participants with similar views, experiences or feelings related to the theme of the study.

Step 6: Post-sort surveys and interviews.

Post-sort surveys and interviews are an optional but valuable component of a Q methodology study. These methods were used to gather additional information about the participants' perspectives and to better understand the personal experiences that influenced their rankings.

Post-sort surveys were used to gather demographic information about the participants, such as age, gender, and education level. I also include questions about the participants' experiences or beliefs related to the topic of the study. I asked each participant to explain why they ranked the behavior or interaction in the order in which they chose. The results of the surveys provided valuable context when I was interpreting the Q sort data.

Interviews are typically conducted with a subset of participants who represent a range of perspectives identified in the Q sort analysis. The interviews allow me to explore in more depth the reasons behind the participants' rankings and to gain a more nuanced understanding of their perspectives. These interviews can be

structured or unstructured and may be conducted in person or online. I sent invitations to ten students who expressed interest in participating in follow-up interviews after they completed their Q sort. Ten individuals agreed to participate with a the follow-up interview. Adhering to the interview protocol, I contacted participants consenting to the interview process via email and scheduled virtual interviews via Google Meet. In the end, I interviewed five student participants.

In qualitative research, it is crucial to ensure the trustworthiness of research findings. To ensure the perception of participants was accurately depicted, I reviewed the post-sort responses with the student participant for accuracy. For the students for whom I received their post-sort survey responses by phone, I transcribed their responses and returned them to the participant by email for validation. This step ensured the opinions, viewpoints, and perspectives of the individuals participating in the post-sort survey were accurately represented. After the interview with the first-generation students and the student affairs professional were complete, I shared a transcript of each participant's interview to ensure the reliability and credibility of the transcription and to receive any suggestions or edits.

Both post-sort surveys and interviews provide valuable insights into the participants' perspectives and the factors that influenced their rankings. By combining Q sort data with the purely qualitative information I gathered through these methods, I gained a more complete picture of the complex issues being studied.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the appropriateness of Q Methodology to address first-generation students' perceptions of caring interactions with student affairs professionals. I also explained the necessary steps involved in completing a Q Methodology study and how this study follows established parameters or previous research. I further discussed the development of the concourse, Q-set, P-set, and data analysis process. In the next chapter, I will discuss the analysis of the data from the q-sorts, as well as first-generation community college graduate responses to post-sort survey questions and follow-up interviews. In addition, if a first-generation student specifically named a particular person in student affairs as instrumental to their success, I then analyzed and interpreted the interview responses to assist me in answering the three research questions of the study.

Chapter 4: Findings/Results

This Q Methodology study aimed to learn about the perceptions of first-generation community college students regarding how the behaviors of student affairs personnel demonstrate care and play a role in student success. This chapter has four major sections presenting the findings and results of this mixed methods research study: 1) a detailed description of the processes used in analyzing the data from the Q sorts, 2) the first-generation community college graduate responses to post-survey questions, 3) follow-up interviews with students, which led to the final step of the research process, and 4) interviews with student affairs personnel.

The overarching research question which guided this study was: How do student affairs personnel construct and maintain caring relationships through non-classroom interactions? The research sub-questions that further refined my study are as follows:

Research Question 1: According to first-generation students, what are the most essential and non-essential behaviors or interactions that demonstrate student affairs personnel care about students?

Research Question 2: What behaviors do student affairs personnel demonstrate with first-generation students that lead those students to believe they are being cared for?

Research Question 3: How do student affairs personnel perceive their role in student persistence, completion, and career field choice?

In the following sections, I detail the steps of the Q sort research process that were executed as identified in the previous chapter.

Part One: Q sort Research Process

As an initial step in the Q sort process, I asked participants to sort twenty-two statements based on keywords and themes drawn from Student Satisfaction Surveys, interactions with colleagues and other student affairs professionals, as well as my own personal knowledge as a first-generation college student. Within the Q sort methodology, it is appropriate for material to be collected and obtained from various sources, including contributor's observation, experience from the educational and social involvements of the researcher, literature reviews, consultations, personal interviews, questionnaires asking experts, opinions, and the investigator's own words (van Exel & de Graaf, 2005; Watts & Stenner, 2005). I asked the student participants to sort the Q set statements, presented in the next section (see Table 1), based on their experiences with student affairs personnel who assisted them in achieving their academic goals while enrolled at a rural community college. Q-sortware, an online instrument created by Dr. Alessio Prennedu, was utilized to collect the data and complete the sorting process. This first major section of the chapter on the Q sort research process is divided into ten sections that follow the steps prescribed by the Q methodology, starting with 1) data collection and analysis; 2) examining the eigenvalues; 3) correlation matrix; 4) q factor analysis; 5) factor loading; 6) Z scores; 7) factor arrays; 8) defining characteristics; 9) consensus statements; and 10) distinguishing statements. Finally, an analysis of the Q sort findings will be presented along with a discussion of the respective emerging themes.

Data Collection and Analysis

        The 26 community college student participants were asked to rank 22 potential caring behaviors that they may have experienced in their interactions with student affairs personnel. These 22 statements represent the Q set items (see Table 2 in the previous section) and the corresponding instructions provided to participants.

        In order to capture a picture of where participants share similar viewpoints, Q methodology uses an inverted factor analysis technique with a forced distribution sorting grid to build a shared point of view of the participants (as shown in Figure 1 below). It is important to note that the statement numbers are not displayed to the participants and bear no meaning aside from making the analysis smoother. According to Watts and Stenner (2012), participants ascribe their own personal meaning and psychological significance to the Q set statements and rank them in relation to that personal meaning. Once the sorting process was complete, the Q sorts were collected and compared to one another using a process called factor analysis. Factor analysis produces groups of participants, called factors, that characterize the perspectives and mindset of the participant group as a whole. Participants were forced to rank all of the statements in relation to each other, a process known as forced distribution, which is considered to be the most effective way of facilitating the collection and analysis process in the Q methodology (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

```
 1                                                          1

              3                              3

                   4              4

                        6
```

Figure 1. *Sample of a Q sort grid (Inverted Factor Analysis)*

Each participant ranked twenty-two statements, but were limited through the forced distribution to the number of statements they could place in each category. Participants could sort one statement in the -3 and one statement in the +3 slot, followed by three statements in the -2 and three statements in the +2 slots, four statements in the -1 and four statements in the +1 slots and six statements in the neutral category until all 22 statements were sorted.

Participants completed their Q sorts using an online sorting product called QSortWare (Pruneddu, 2017). Participants used rankings on a -3 to +3 scale, with -3 indicating the least essential and +3 indicating their most essential caring interaction. Once submitted, the Q sort data was downloaded to a secure drive and analyzed using KenQ Analysis Desktop Edition (KADE) software. A sample of a blank Q sort grid is provided in Figure 1 for a frame of

reference.

This Q Methodology study aimed to gain knowledge of the participants' viewpoints on student affairs personnel's specific influence on first-generation student success. In Q Methodology, it is the participants themselves and their perspectives as identified through the sort that is treated as the variables in the data according to Flowers (2017), who noted, "By engaging in the sorting and ranking process, participants rank the statements in relation to each other and their preconceived notions of the topic" (p. 64). Each participant had a unique interpretation of or perspective on the statements and the importance of each when considered in relation to each other. It is the similarity to other individuals' perspectives that creates the factor groupings and the differences between groups that create meaning. Each statement in the Q sample is interpreted uniquely by the sorter, based on their own views of the topic and their past experiences. This means that each respondent singularly understands what these statements mean to them and that, "There are no operational definitions to consider in the sorting process because it is up to the sorter to interpret the meaning contained in the…Q sample" (Ramlo, 2015, p. 77). The Q sample in the current study contained 22 statements. Comparing each Q sort with all other Q sorts produced themed groups or factors capturing the distinct viewpoints that represent the p-set in its entirety (Bartlett & DeWeese, 2015).

To strengthen the Q sort used in this study, I used a forced distribution method, rendering the activity more structured for participants and more pragmatic for researchers than a free distribution approach where participants can rank as many items as they wish in each category (McKeown & Thomas, 1988; Watts & Stenner, 2012). The forced choice approach engaged the participants (P-set) in the process of thoughtfully differentiating

between statements as they rank-ordered them in relation to one another. This is the opposite of a free distribution approach which allows statements to be placed anywhere on the spectrum, leading to the "Likert effect." The Likert effect, also known as the "summation effect," is a phenomenon that occurs in survey research when respondents are asked to rate multiple items on a non-forced scale to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a statement or item (Carter, et., al., 2021). This non-forced approach can be problematic because it can make it difficult to accurately assess the true level of agreement or disagreement with the statements or items being rated. However, Bartlett and Deweese (2015) stated that a benefit of Q methodology is that it helps identify the similarities and differences in subjective perceptions across a sample group and describes a variety of subjective viewpoints regarding the topic of interest. In 2005, Watts and Stenner concluded that the distribution type will have little or no effect on the factors. They point out that by using a forced distribution it creates less work for both the participants and I as the researcher when analyzing the results.

The Q grid represented a scale of +3 to -3, where participants ranked the Q sample from *very essential* to *definitely non-essential,* as indicated as a condition in the instructions. Watts and Stenner (2012) recommended surveying roughly half the number of participants as Q sample items used in this particular study. However, they acknowledge that fewer participants can still provide valuable and meaningful data for the problem under consideration. Ultimately, this current study used 22 statements to survey 26 community college graduate participants. According to Watts and Stenner (2012), however, having more participants does not devalue the data or study. Q sortWare was the online instrument used to collect the Q sort data. Then after the data was collected and the instrument was closed, the

results were imported into the KADE software. KADE was then used to analyze and develop

the factor groups, calculate the scree plot, and create the correlation matrix to demonstrate

the best-fit solution.

In the following sections of this chapter, I discuss the recommended processes in the

factor analysis phase, beginning with the determination of the appropriate number of factors

which will then be followed by a brief discussion on factor loading, z scores, Eigenvalues,

and correlation matrix. Later, I name the factor groups and provide an explanation for the

name and a rationale for why I supplemented this analysis with narrative support for the

student participants who completed the post-sort survey.

Eigenvalues

Watts and Stenner (2012) identified Q methodological research as a means to explore

factor-analyzed data instead of individual opinion statements, providing a quantitative way to

analyze what could otherwise be qualitative or subjective perceptions. Factor analysis begins

with factor extraction, which is a data reduction technique and is considered a way of taking

the completed Q sorts (lists of statements or phrases about how student affairs personnel

demonstrate care) and grouping them by themes so that the similarities between the groups

become apparent (Watts & Stenner, 2012). This factor analysis process is conducted with the

hope of learning more about how both students and student affairs personnel view care in the

context of interactions within a community college setting. It is important to keep in mind

that in Q methodology, the analysis examines the factor group data as opposed to the

individual opinion statements. In this way, it is the participants—differentiated by their

narrative and demographic data—that are the statistical variables, not the statements. As a

result, I could identify groups of students who ranked the provided statements similarly,

demonstrating their shared similar perspectives, viewpoints, or attitudes about the topic at hand. For this study, a similar perspective was on the behavior or interaction which demonstrated care by student affairs personnel. The factor groups are themed, named, and characterized by the statistical characteristics and the qualitative, narrative information they provide at the conclusion of their Q sort (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Selecting the appropriate number of factors, or groups of participants, is not an exact science; the researcher must use their best judgment to determine the number of participant groups or factors that best represent the population's viewpoints (Watts & Stenner, 2012). According to Watts and Stenner (2012), it is recommended that the researcher starts by extracting a factor for every six Q sorts in a study. I started with the eight factor groups and through trial and error landed on a four factor solution as described next.

The initial step, illustrated in Table 3, is to conduct the factor analysis among multiple possible solutions in order to find the best fit solution. The solution of "best fit," as characterized by Brown (1994), suggests that factor groups should have eigenvalues higher than 1.00 while also containing at least two significantly loading participants, which means that there are enough individual participants in each group to be able to draw meaningful conclusions through not only the quantitative data analysis, but also through the examination of their qualitative responses. Eigenvalues are used in Q methodology to identify patterns in the data and to calculate factor scores for each statement or item, and they are calculated by summing the squared loadings of all Q sorts on a factor. Completing a factor analysis showed similarities between participants' sorting of statements, which provided insight into how participants' perceptions about how student affairs personnel demonstrated care in student interactions.

Table 3

Tested Factor Solutions

Proposed Solution	Eigenvalues	Total Variance Explained	Factor Considerations	Highest Correlation Between Factors
3 factor	4.4052 3.1197 2.1272	37%	**	.3119
4 factor	4.4052 3.1197 2.1372 1.9931	45%	*	.3309
5 factor	4.4052 3.1197 2.1372 1.9931 1.8268	52%	****	.2481
6 factor	4.4052 3.1197 2.1372 1.9931 1.8268 1.1347	56%	****	.3893
7 factor	4.4052 3.1197 2.1372 1.9931 1.8268 1.1347 1.0745	60%	****	.3689
8 factor	4.4052 3.1197 2.1372 1.9931 1.8268 1.1347 1.0745	63%	***** +	.3833

0.8840

Factor analysis is the process of distributing the data from the Q sort into similar groups based on factor loading. The factor analysis for first-generation students began with an eight-factor solution based on Principal Component Analysis (PCA). PCA is a technique used in multivariate statistics and data analysis to reduce the dimensionalities of a data set while retaining as much of the original information as possible. It is often used to simplify and make sense of large, complex data sets (Brown, 1994). The basic idea behind PCA is to find a new set of coordinates, called principal components, that can be used to represent the data in a lower-dimensional space. These principal components are linear combinations of the original variables or features and are chosen such that they explain the maximum amount of variation in the data. Next, a Varimax rotation was applied, which is a method of factor rotation seeking a mathematically-superior solution that maximizes the amount of variance explained by the extracted factors (Watts & Stenner, 2005, 2012). Varimax rotation is often used in conjunction with PCA or factor analysis to identify patterns or themes in the data, as it makes it easier to interpret the factors or principal components.

The eight factor solution was tested by analyzing the responses of first-generation community college students. However, with eight factor groups, two of those groups had no significant loadings or similarities. In response, I then performed a factor analysis of each possible solution, from three to eight groups, until four factors provided significant loading. Table 2 shows a summary of the tested factor solutions. I split Factor Group 2 into two factors because two of the participants loaded as negative factors in the original Factor Group 2; therefore, I split that factor using a bipolar factor technique resulting in Factor Group 2A

and 2B. This modified four factor groups into a five factor solution. I selected the five factor solution because it offered significant variance, strong eigenvalues, and included the best descriptive factors for the model. Numerous participants could be flagged on the resultant factors. I describe the flagging process in the section titled Factor Loading.

I next analyzed the views of the participants provided through the sorts using the factor and correlation analysis, which together make up a quantitative emphasis of Q methodology research (Simons, 2013). After comparing analysis output ranging from three to eight factors, I selected a four-factor (one bipolar) solution based on the best fit and then determined common themes that emerged from those groupings and similarities and differences within and between groups, presented in the Q sort findings section toward the end of this first major section.

Correlation Matrix

The next step in a Q sort analysis is completing a correlation matrix. The correlation matrix is a form of data checking that allows the researcher to compare the relationships between participants visually. "In Q methodology, correlation provides a measure of the nature and extent of the relationship between any two Q sorts and hence a measure of their similarity or otherwise" (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 97). The correlation matrix "allows us to ascertain the degree of agreement, or disagreement, between the entire set or item rankings produced by any two persons. In other words, we can conduct a direct and holistic comparison of their respective Q sorts" (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 22), which strengthens the research through quantitative analysis. The correlation statistic represents "the degree of agreement between two sets of scores from the same individuals" (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 8). A high level of agreement between two sets of scores would be represented by +1.00,

while a high level of disagreement between two sets of scores would be represented by -1.00

(Bartlett & DeWeese, 2015). The truncated correlation matrix for this study is located in

Table 4 and represents the level of agreement between sorts. The full correlation matrix can

be located in the appendices. This process is used for data checking and ensuring the

reliability and validity of the best-fit solution. For example, if two individuals had sorted onto

the same factor, yet their correlation statistic was -.75, that would indicate an issue in the

statistical computations.

Table 4

Truncated Correlation Matrix

	P01	P02	P03	P04	P05	P06	P07	P08	P09	P10
P01	100	18	-8	-2	6	10	-26	8	6	10
P02	18	100	6	30	-36	14	-14	-46	-14	-2
P03	-8	6	100	-34	2	-28	16	36	10	46
P04	-2	30	-34	100	6	10	-20	-34	4	-36
P05	6	-36	2	6	100	-24	30	54	8	20
P06	10	14	-28	10	-24	100	-34	-16	-60	-52
P07	-26	-14	16	-20	30	-34	100	12	2	24
P08	8	-46	36	-34	54	-16	12	100	-2	30

P09	6	-14	10	4	8	-60	2	-2	100	42
P10	10	-2	46	-36	20	-52	24	30	42	100

The data revealed that the highest correlation value (60) was noted between Participant 5 and Participant 17.

As the correlation matrix serves as one form of data checking, another is the scree plot, which is generated during the initial data analysis. While the matrix allows us to see how strongly each pair of factors is related to one another and to identify any underlying patterns or structures in the data, with a large number of factors, it can be difficult to determine which factors are most important or relevant to the study. This is where a scree plot comes in. A scree plot is a visual representation of the eigenvalues of the correlation matrix, which can help us identify the number of factors that are most significant in our analysis. This scree plot is discussed in the next section.

Q Factor Analysis

As an additional form of data checking, the researcher used a scree plot method to visually represent the factor eigenvalue comparison (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Scree plots are similar to correlation matrices in that they provide a form of "at-a-glance" data checking. This is where one could see if something in the proposed solution is misaligned or needs further examination. As portrayed in Figure 2, an elbow bend occurs at factor three. However, the curve exhibits a subtly noticeable bending after factor 4, justifying the need to run the analysis on both the three-factor solution and the four-factor solution. The number of factors to extract indicates the point at which the line changes slope (Watts & Stenner, 2012).
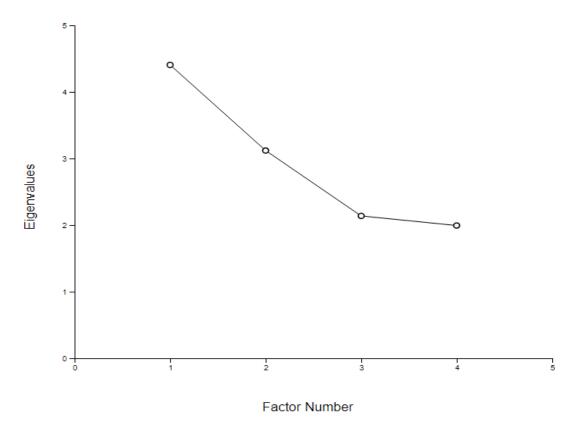
Figure 2. *Scree plot representation of appropriate factor solution*

It is recommended that only those factors with eigenvalues greater than one are used

for the final interpretation of the data since these will explain more of the total variance than

those factors with eigenvalues less than one (Donner, 2001). The eigenvalues for the four

selected factors range from a high of 4.4052 to a low of 1.9931, as depicted in Figure 2

above.

When used in conjunction with the statistical analysis of the Q sort data, the scree plot

aided in affirming that four factors would offer the best solutions. Ultimately, the

combination of the Q sort analysis and the scree plot created meaningful groupings of first-

generation community college graduate participants who share similar viewpoints or

perceptions of student affairs personnel and their portrayal of care. In the next section, I describe the process of factor loadings within the Q sort analysis process and how this step led to a deeper understanding of participants' views about how student affairs personnel demonstrate care.

Factor Loadings

While factor analysis is the statistical technique used to identify underlying patterns or themes in the data, factor loadings are the correlations between each statement or item and the factor group identified by the factor analysis (Merlter & Vannatta, 2010). Table 3 presents the flagged factor loading produced by the KADE statistical software. In Q methodology, factor loadings are used to identify the degree to which each statement or item in the Q set (the set of statements or items used to represent a particular perspective or viewpoint) is associated with a particular factor or theme. Factor loadings are calculated by performing factor analysis on the responses to the Q set. Factor loadings can be used to interpret the factor groups identified by the factor analysis by showing which statements or items are most strongly associated with each factor group. High factor loadings indicate that a statement or item is a good representation of the factor or theme, while low factor loadings indicate that a statement or item is not well represented by the factor or theme. In Q methodology, loadings are considered significant at the .4 level and range from -1.0 to +1.0. Variables will generally load on all factors but will only load highly on one factor (Merlter & Vannatta, 2010).

Table 5 presents a summary of the factor loadings, which allowed me to place each of the participants into their best-fit factor group. In this research, none of the participants were flagged in more than one factor group. Group 1 contained six participants, Group 2A had two

flagged participants, Group 2B contained three participants, Group 3 had four participants

flagged, while Group 4 contained five participants who loaded highly. In all, 20 of the 26

participants were loaded into a factor group, which represented 77% of student participants

represented in one of the five groups.

Table 5

Flagged Factor Loading

	Factor 1	Factor 2A	Factor 2B	Factor 3	Factor 4
p1	-0.0101	0.0482	-0.0482	*0.4425*	-0.0354
p2	0.3824	0.1536	-0.1536	0.0492	-0.5925
p3	*0.7693*	-0.1744	0.1744	-0.1277	0.0595
p4	-0.0979	0.3922	-0.3922	-0.2036	-0.3235
p5	0.0056	0.0934	-0.0934	-0.0803	*0.5772*
p6	-0.1811	*0.5458*	-0.5458	0.3814	-0.2616
p7	0.0904	-0.0456	0.0456	-0.5016	0.3725
p8	0.3027	-0.0605	0.0605	0.2519	*0.7643*
p9	-0.0704	-0.3366	0.3366	-0.1414	-0.1231
p10	0.2885	-0.7675	*0.7675*	-0.05	0.2554
p11	0.3644	0.1913	-0.1913	*0.4183*	0.2645
p12	-0.0013	0.1729	-0.1729	*0.7475*	0.2503
p13	*0.698*	-0.1259	0.1259	0.158	-0.0233
p14	0.234	0.1286	-0.1286	0.0345	*0.5738*
p15	*0.5018*	0.3043	-0.3043	0.0603	0.2751
p16	*0.4867*	-0.0409	0.0409	0.2776	0.1315
p17	0.0344	0.1076	-0.1076	0.3234	*0.5247*
p18	0.2595	-0.2755	0.2755	*0.7256*	0.0605
p19	-0.0768	-0.48	*0.48*	0.0347	-0.1385
p20	-0.1901	-0.6065	*0.6065*	-0.3331	-0.0222
p21	*0.4655*	0.2824	-0.2824	0.0135	0.2001
p22	0.4443	0.3182	-0.3182	0.026	0.1884
p23	*0.4906*	0.0216	-0.0216	-0.0577	*0.6084*
p24	0.0349	*0.7977*	-0.7977	-0.1756	0.0391
p25	0.3762	0.0003	-0.0003	-0.2803	-0.2621
p26	0.267	-0.1691	0.1691	-0.1179	0.3191

Using the threshold of .4, Group 1 had six individuals that loaded significantly into the factor group. The factor loading for Group 1 ranged from .7693 to .4655. Group 2A only had two individuals significantly loaded (.7977 and .5458). Group 2B had three individuals with significant loadings (.7675, .6065, and .48). Group 3 saw four participants load significantly ranging from .7475 to .4183. Finally, Group 4 had significant loading for 5 individuals ranging in score from .7643 to .5247.

In Q methodology, these factor loadings are a way of measuring how strongly each participant's responses (or "sorting" of items) are related to each factor group or theme that emerges from the data analysis. Essentially, factor loadings indicated how much each participant is related to each theme that I identified. To use a simple analogy, one can consider the factor loadings as being like weights on a scale. Just as different weights can be added to see how much they contribute to the overall weight total, different factor loadings can be added up to see how much each participant's responses contribute to each factor. So, if a participant's responses have a high loading for a particular factor, that means their sorting of the items is strongly associated with that factor group (or theme) and vice versa.

Understanding these factor loadings is important because they identify which participants are most closely aligned with each factor and which factors are most important or influential in shaping the overall patterns in the data. By looking at the factor loadings, I identified how different people think about and prioritize different statements, and in this case, which characteristics of caring behavior are most essential in student affairs personnel. After calculating factor loadings for each participant, the next step in the Q methodology analysis is to convert these loadings into standardized z-scores. This transformation is necessary to enable meaningful statistical comparisons across participants, since factor

loadings are based on individual differences in response patterns rather than absolute values. By standardizing the factor loadings into z-scores, one can more accurately compare the strength and direction of each participant's association with each factor regardless of their individual sorting patterns. In the following section, I describe the process of transforming the factor loadings into z-scores and discuss the implications of these scores for our understanding of the underlying factors in my Q methodology study.

Z Scores

Z scores are often used to measure the standard deviation between an item in the Q set and the mean. The z score is used to standardize data and make it easier to compare and analyze across different variables. It allows one to identify the relative strength or weakness of a particular variable compared to the overall results. If an item is a specified number of standard deviations below the mean, this produces a negative z score. Conversely, a positive score is created when an item is a specified number of standard deviations above the mean. The closer the z score is to zero, the closer it is to the mean (Sweet & Grace-Martin, 1999). For the Q sort methodology, z scores are used to determine how significant a specific statement is to the factor on which it loaded. The closer the z score gets to + 3.0, the higher the level of agreement that the statement should be placed towards the extreme positive end of the Q sort. A z score near -3.0 would indicate the same is true at the extreme negative end of the Q sort (Spurgeon et al., 2012). Table 5 shows the z scores for each of the statements amongst the five factored groups. During the process of factor analysis, isolating this information is helpful in that it makes available not only direction (+/-) and distance (in standard deviation) from the mean, but it is also valuable for categorizing responses into factor groups.

Table 6

Statement Z Scores

	Factor 1	Factor 2A	Factor 2B	Factor 3	Factor 4
Actually excited to see students	0.3	1.13	0.3	0.01	-0.98
Available	-0.02	1.69	-1.2	0.75	0.98
Communicative	1.43	-0.93	1.49	1.05	0.84
Compassionate	0.65	-1.13	0.84	-1.08	-0.14
Conscientious	-0.67	1.53	0.01	-1.57	-0.14
Courteous	-0.01	-0.76	0.31	-0.88	0.04
Eager to help	1.48	0.96	-0.75	1.43	0.33
Efficient	0.7	-1.16	1.42	-0.33	1.02
Empathetic	-0.79	1.73	-1.27	0.38	-1.15
Good communication skills	1.32	0.16	-0.23	1.26	1.02
Good listener	-0.62	0.4	-1.5	0.05	0.11
Helpful	0.75	0.76	-1.73	0.39	1.45
Knowledgeable	1.25	0.56	-0.3	-0.01	0.96
Motivated	0.44	0.2	0.59	-0.33	-1.13
Patience	-2.38	-0.36	-0.22	0.84	0.04
Personable	-1.57	-0.2	0	-1.22	-1.13
Positive attitude	0.24	-0.2	1.35	-0.84	-0.85
Reliable	-0.7	-0.4	1.57	0.3	1
Resourceful	0.2	-0.96	-0.08	-1.33	0.83
Welcoming	-0.92	-0.2	-1.34	-1.39	-1.96
Welcoming responses to students, faculty, and staff	-0.36	-1.69	0.07	0.6	-1.65
Willingness to help others	-0.72	-1.13	0.67	1.92	0.51

In summary, z scores are a standardized measure of the strength and direction of each participant's association with each factor in a Q methodology study. Transforming the factor loadings into z scores, helped me more accurately compare the relative strength of each participant's association with each factor, and identify any underlying patterns or structures in the data. However, while z scores can help provide insights into the individual differences in response patterns, they do not provide a clear picture of how the factors are related. To gain a more complete understanding of the factor structure, I also examined the factor arrays. This provided a visual representation of how each item or statement is associated with each factor. In the next section, I discuss how I used the factor arrays to interpret and validate the underlying factors in our q methodology study.

Factor Arrays

A factor array represents a composite Q sort for a conceptual best fit of respondents loading predominantly on that factor (Dziopa & Ahern, 2011) and can be used to help the researcher and readers make better sense of the data being presented. The clustering of similar Q sorts or factor arrays is a strength of Q Methodology (Cuppen et al., 2016), which helped me to interpret how the statements ranked within each factor (Bartlett & DeWeese, 2015). Put another way, the visual factor array helped me to identify at a glance which statements were ranked in which order by each group. I completed the rankings by using whole numbers from +3 (strongly emphasized) to -3 (definitely non-essential) using the group's z scores (Watts & Stenner, 2012). The use of whole numbers is also advantageous when reporting factor arrays, as it provides an easier way to compare and contrast the attributes of each statement as well as each group or factor (Bartlett & DeWeese, 2015). Factor arrays helped me to execute factor interpretation and theme development since the

arrays can be seen as a typical Q sort for the factor and are a generalization of a perspective (Bartlett & DeWeese, 2015; Cuppen et al., 2016; McKeown & Thomas, 2013). I captured this information in a table format so that I could then compare and contrast the data to other factors and statements in the Q sort. The Q sort documented first-generation student perceptions of student affairs personnel in a manner that created a forced distribution, revealing participant viewpoints. Factor scores helped me examine the configuration of all items within the array and the significance of specific statement locations (i.e., how students ranked the statements within the forced distribution array). Statements within the factor array with the highest and lowest scores are typically more helpful for interpreting themes (Bartlett & DeWeese, 2015). The analysis of statements that score the highest or lowest defines a factor and distinguishes it from another factor (Cuppen et al., 2016; Wright, 2013).

In my Q methodology study, I used a factor array table to visually represent the association of each item or statement with each factor. The factor array table allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the defining characteristics of each factor. By examining the factor array, I was able to identify which items or statements were most strongly associated with each factor, which helped me to develop a more nuanced understanding of the underlying themes or constructs that were driving the response patterns in my study. Overall, the factor array table was a critical component of my Q methodology study, which helped me to better understand the complex relationships between the items or statements, the sorting patterns of the participants, and the underlying factors driving the response patterns. The factor array for each factor group in an equal distribution is shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Factor Arrays

No.	Statements	F1	F2A	F2B	F3	F4
1	Actually excited to see students	0	2	0	0	-1
2	Available	0	2	-1	1	1
3	Communicative	2	-1	2	2	1
4	Compassionate	1	-2	1	-1	0
5	Conscientious	-1	2	0	-3	-1
6	Courteous	0	-1	1	-1	0
7	Eager to help	3	1	-1	2	0
8	Efficient	1	-2	2	0	2
9	Empathetic	-2	3	-2	0	-2
10	Good communication skills	2	0	-1	2	2
11	Good listener	-1	1	-2	0	0
12	Helpful	1	1	-3	1	3
13	Knowledgeable	2	1	-1	0	1
14	Motivated	1	0	1	-1	-2
15	Patience	-3	0	0	1	0
16	Personable	-2	0	0	-2	-1
17	Positive Attitude	0	0	2	-1	-1
18	Reliable	-1	-1	3	0	2
19	Resourceful	0	-1	0	-2	1
20	Welcoming	-2	0	-2	-2	-3
21	Welcoming responses to students, faculty, and staff	0	-3	0	1	-2
22	Willingness to help others	-1	-2	1	3	0

It is often helpful to use factor arrays to analyze and interpret Q sort data since all of the sorts from a given factor are combined and presented in a simplified manner. Factor arrays are typically created for each factor group, and are presented later in this chapter as composite Q sorts for each identified factor group. The factor arrays assist in the creation of themes to represent each of the twenty-two statements and all five factors. These five-factor themes that emerged were 1) communication, 2) student-centered, 3) availability, 4) helpfulness, and 5) support, which were developed by examining the factor arrays in combination with the participant post-survey results. I will discuss these in the next section.

To summarize, I used the factor arrays in this Q methodology study to visually represent the association of each item or statement with each factor, which helped me gain a deeper understanding of the defining characteristics of each factor. By analyzing the factor arrays, I was able to identify which items or statements were most strongly associated with each factor, enabling me to develop a more nuanced understanding of the underlying themes or constructs driving the response patterns in my study.

However, to fully comprehend the defining characteristics of each factor, I also considered other inputs, such as the qualitative data I collected during the study. This qualitative data includes the narrative responses presented in Chapter Five and the content of the statements themselves, presented in the following sections as defining characteristics. Combining the factor arrays with qualitative data, the existent literature, and my first-hand knowledge allowed me to interpret and define the characteristics of each factor in my q methodology study. This comprehensive approach enabled me to develop a more complete understanding of the key factors driving the response patterns and draw meaningful conclusions from the participant clustering.

Defining Characteristics

A key part of Q methodology is making meaning of the factor groups through examination of not only how they sorted statements, but also delving into the meaning and context of the statements themselves. Each of the five factors contains certain perceptions that are similar among the participants in that group. There were six respondents in Factor Group 1, two in Factor Group 2A, three in Factor Group 2B, four in Factor Group 3, and five in Factor Group 4. As a check of the reliability and validity of the data, one must examine the calculated average relative coefficient (ARC) and composite reliability of the factor groups to ensure that the groups are statistically sound prior to making too much meaning from the statements. The average relative coefficient is a statistical measure used to assess the level of agreement among participants in their sorting of statements. A high ARC indicates a high level of agreement among participants in their sorting patterns, suggesting a strong and reliable sorting structure. ARCs greater than .7 are considered high. The composite reliability indicates the likelihood that participants would sort the same way if repeating the Q sort and the factors would be identical. Table 8 displays the defining characteristics, including composite reliability and standard error of factor scores.

Table 8

Defining Characteristics

Characteristics	Factor 1	Factor 2A	Factor 2B	Factor 3	Factor 4
Number of Defining Variables	6	2	3	4	5
Avg. Rel. Coef.	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
Composite Reliability	0.96	0.889	0.923	0.941	0.952
Standard Error of Factor Scores	0.2	0.333	0.277	0.243	0.219

Once the Q sort data has been analyzed, researchers can identify two types of statements that are particularly important for understanding the underlying factors that shape people's perspectives on the topic being studied. The first type of statement is known as the consensus statement, which represents the statements that are perceived by all participants as being most important or relevant to the topic. These statements can provide valuable insights into the shared beliefs or values that underlie the participants' views. The second type of statement is known as the distinguishing statement, which represents the statements that are perceived by some participants as particularly relevant or important, but by others as less relevant or important. These statements can help researchers understand the individual differences in participants' perspectives and identify the subgroups of participants who share similar attitudes or values. By examining distinguishing statements, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the factors that shape these individual differences and use this information to develop tailored interventions or communication strategies for different subgroups of participants. Overall, both consensus statements and distinguishing statements are essential components of Q methodology research, as they provide unique insights into the attitudes, beliefs, and values that influence people's perspectives on the topic being studied.

Consensus Statements

Statements with no significant difference between any factors upon comparing z scores are said to lack variance. These are often referred to as consensus statements. Identifying consensus statements adds considerable value to the factor analysis because it allows the researcher to understand the features of that factor. In this research, the KADE statistical software indicated no consensus statements indicating that no one statement was statistically agreed upon by all identified factors. This indicates that between the various

groups, as discussed later in this chapter and expanded upon in depth in Chapter Five, the essential characteristics of care are subjective and influenced by each participant's unique perspective and experiences. That then extends to their factor groups.

The next step in making meaning of the results is to identify the statements which were unique in their rankings between factor groups. While a distinguishing statement is not necessarily ranked higher or lower than others, its ranking is significant enough from the other groups to warrant a deeper look into the reasoning why.

Distinguishing Statements

Distinguishing statements are determined by comparing z scores as well. Factors with significantly different z scores at a p-value <.05 are considered distinguishing statements and are used to understand the groups' inconsistencies. These inconsistencies then provide differences that allow the researcher more insight into how the factor groups differ. Statements that are ranked significantly higher or lower by a given factor group, when compared to the other factor groups, are also considered distinguishing statements. Analyzing the distinguishing statements allows the researcher to add depth to the understanding of a factor's underlying components and comprises the onset of the qualitative aspects of Q Methodology. Factor 1 had three distinguishing statements, Factor 2A had four distinguishing statements, Factor 2B had five distinguishing statements, Factor 3 had four distinguishing statements, and Factor 4 had four distinguishing statements. Considerations should be made for statements that rank higher or lower by a given factor compared to the other factor groups.

Table 9 shows the statements with significant enough variance between the factor groups to be recognized by the KADE software as distinguishing statements. Among the

distinguishing statements, nine of them varied on a single factor, while six of the statements

varied on multiple factors. By providing additional insight into the factor's essential makeup,

distinguishing statements allow the researcher to begin to dig into the qualitative aspects of

the Q Methodology. While the data analysis provided thus far provides a quantitative way to

group participants into the different factor groups, it is the subjective nature of the statements

themselves, as well as the qualitative responses provided through the narratives and

interviews, that allow the researcher in Q methodology to make meaning of the results. This

research produced 15 distinguishing statements of the 22 total statements that students

identified as being cared for as demonstrated by student affairs personnel, providing the

researcher insight into how the statements were sorted in the general sense.

Table 9

Factor Array with Distinguishing Statements

Nm	Distinguishing Statement	Factor Groups(G)				
		G1	G2A	G2B	G3	G4
S1	Actually excited to see students* (G4 only)	0	2	0	0	-1
S2	Available (G1and G2B)	0	2	-1	1	1
S3	Communicative* (G2A only)	2	-1	2	2	1
S4	Compassionate G4 only)	1	-2	1	-1	0
S5	Conscientious*(G2A and G3)	-1	2	0	-3	-1
S7	Eager to help* (G2B only)	3	1	-1	2	0
S8	Efficient (G2A and G3)	1	-2	2	0	2
S9	Empathetic* (G2A and G3)	-2	3	-2	0	-2
S11	Good listener (G1and G2B)	-1	1	-2	0	0
S12	Helpful* (G2B only)	1	1	-3	1	3
S14	Motivated (G4 only)	1	0	1	-1	-2
S15	Patience* (G1 and G3)	-3	0	0	1	0
S17	Positive attitude* (G2B only)	0	0	2	-1	-1
S19	Resourceful (G4 only)	0	-1	0	-2	1
S22	Willingness to help others* (G3 only)	-1	-2	1	3	0

Note: (p<0.05: Asterisk (*) Indicates Significance at p<0.01)

The distinguishing statements help identify the factors that were driving the response patterns. By analyzing the distinguishing statements, I was able to identify key themes and perspectives that were particularly relevant to each factor, and I used this information to develop a more nuanced understanding of the underlying constructs. The next step was to conduct the factor interpretation, which involves the identification of statements useful in the analysis. Statements within the factor array with the highest and lowest scores are typically more useful for interpreting themes (Bartlett & DeWeese, 2015). The statements with the highest and lowest z scores for each factor also act as anchor statements. Consensus statements tend to align themselves similarly across the factors (Zabala & Pascual, 2016; Zabala et al., 2018). Six individuals did not load into any of the five factors. This study did not reveal any consensus statements. However, a distinguishing statement with scores at a statistically significant level on a factor can differentiate one factor from another.

In the following section, I will present the findings of the Q sort analysis, which builds on the insights gained from the distinguishing statements to provide a more comprehensive picture of the response patterns in my study. Through the Q sort analysis and the remainder of this paper, I will explore the relationships between the items or statements, the participants' sorting patterns, and the underlying factors. I will discuss the implications of these findings for understanding the broader context of the study. Overall, the Q sort analysis provided a more detailed and in-depth examination of the response patterns in my study, and it helped to shed light on the key factors driving these patterns.

Q sort Findings

I carried out the Q methodology steps and processes described here with my overarching research purpose in mind: How does the ethic of care intersect with the transfer

of social capital through interactions with student affairs personnel? Through the Q sort analytical process, I discovered the emergence of five themes: 1) communication, 2) student-centered approach, 3) availability, 4) helpfulness, and 5) support as those with a high level of importance for how student affairs personnel can demonstrate the ethic of care when interacting with students in a community college setting.

In the following sections, I address research question one which asked: According to first-generation students, what are the most important and least essential behaviors or interactions that demonstrate student affairs personnel care about students? I will describe each of the four factor groups that emerged from the community college graduate participants by highlighting their distinguishing statements, commonalities, and differences. I will conclude by describing the emergent themes, which give each group its name.

Factor Group 1: Communication

Factor Group 1 is named Communication. A total of six participants loaded significantly on Factor 1 after analyses. This accounts for 23% of the final p-set and 12% of the variance. Through a review of the data I suggest that a portion of the participating first-generation community college graduates had similar views regarding the most essential and least essential character traits of student affairs personnel who encouraged and supported them to achieve their educational goals. Table 10 identifies the behaviors or interactions that demonstrate care ranked the highest and lowest of Group 1.

Figure 3 demonstrates the composite model for the completed Q sort by participants in Group One. The model identifies which statements the participants in Group 1 recognized as the essential or least essential character traits of student affairs personnel in rural community college settings and can be considered representative of how the conceptually

Table 10

Highest and Lowest Ranked Statements from Group One: Communication

Ranking Highest	Statement Number	Statement
1	7	Eager to help
2	3	Communicative
3	10	Good communication skills
4	13	Knowledgeable
5	12	Helpful
Lowest		
18	22	Willingness to help others
19	9	Empathetic
20	20	Welcoming
21	16	Personable
22	15	Patience

ideal member of the factor group would sort the statements and is created using the factor arrays presented earlier in this chapter. These composite models are a visual representation of the data presented through the factor array table. While the model is necessary for understanding the perceptions of this group, the open-ended questions at the end of the survey and follow-up interviews provided an additional understanding of this group's viewpoints. This combination of quantitative and qualitative information collected from the participants helped me to see the underlying themes of this group's viewpoints on the meaningful behaviors or interactions of student affairs personnel. This group emphasized student affairs personnel's communication skills, desire to be helpful, and knowledge as the most needed behaviors or interactions of caring individuals.

Group 1 had three distinguishing statements: available, good listener, and patience, which also happened to be ranked the lowest, supporting the narrative describing the student affairs personnel they encountered throughout their community college experience. Table 11 represents the distinguishing statements for factor group one.

Composite Q sort for Factor 1

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
** ◄ Patient	Empathetic	* Good listener	actually excited to see students	Helpful	Communicative	Eager to help
	Welcoming	Conscientious	Positive Attitude	Efficient	Good communication skills	
	Personable	Reliable	Resourceful	Compassionate	Knowledgeable	
		Willingness to help others	Courteous	Motivated		
			* Available			
			Welcoming responses to students, faculty, and staff			

Legend

* Distinguishing statement at P< 0.05

** Distinguishing statement at P< 0.01

► z-Score for the statement is higher than in all other factors

◄ z-Score for the statement is lower than in all other factors

Figure 3. *Composite Q Sort for Factor 1*

Table 11

Distinguishing Statements for Factor 1

Nm	Distinguishing Statement	G1	G2A	G2B	G3	G4
2	Available	0	2	-1	1	1
11	Good listener	-1	1	-2	0	0
15	Patience*	-3	0	0	1	0

Note: Asterisk (*) Indicates Significance at p<0.01

In summary, Factor Group 1: Communication emphasized communication skills, the desire to be helpful, and knowledge as words capturing how students perceived caring individuals. Their distinguishing statements were available, good listeners, and patience was further supported in the narrative describing their interactions with the student affairs personnel throughout their community college experiences.

Factor Group 2A: Student-Centered Approach

Factor Group 2A has been labeled Student-Centered Approach. A total of two participants loaded significantly on Factor 2A after analyses. This accounts for 7.70% of the final p-set with 11% of the variance. Table 12 shows the highest and lowest-ranked statements for Factor Group 2A. These statements from the respondents align with the distinguishing statements for Factor 2A, as evident in Table 13 and illustrated visually in Figure X.

Table 12

Highest and Lowest Ranked Statements from Group 2A

Ranking Highest	Statement Number	Statement
1	9	Empathetic
2	2	Available
3	5	Conscientious
4	1	Actually excited to see students
5	7	Eager to help
Lowest		
18	19	Resourceful
19	4	Compassionate
20	22	Willingness to help others
21	8	Efficient
22	21	Welcoming responses to students, faculty, and staff

Table 13

Distinguishing Statements for Group 2A

Nm	Distinguishing Statement	G1	G2A	G2B	G3	G4
9	Empathetic*	-2	3	-2	0	-2
5	Conscientious*	-1	2	0	-3	-1
3	Communicative*	2	-1	2	2	1
8	Efficient	1	-2	2	0	2

Note: Asterisk (*) Indicates Significance at p<0.01

Composite Q sort for Factor a

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
Welcoming responses to students, faculty, and staff	Compassionate	Reliable	Motivated	Eager to help	Available	** ▶ Empathetic
	Willingness to help others	Courteous	Good communication skills	Helpful	** ▶ Conscientious	
	* ◄ Efficient	** ◄ Communicative	Personable	Knowledgeable	actually excited to see students	
		Resourceful	Positive Attitude	Good listener		
			Welcoming			
			Patient			

Legend

* Distinguishing statement at P< 0.05

** Distinguishing statement at P< 0.01

▶ z-Score for the statement is higher than in all other factors

◄ z-Score for the statement is lower than in all other factors

Figure 4. *Composite Q Sort from Group 2A*

These participants made it clear that students in rural North Carolina view student affairs personnel as individuals who demonstrated a student-centered approach, who focus on the student as a person, and not as a number as key figures in their success as first-generation community college students. The group's distinguishing statements were empathetic, conscientious, and communicative.

Factor Group 2B: Availability

A total of three participants loaded significantly on Factor 2B after analyses. This accounts for 11% of the final p-set and 11% of the variance. Factor Group 2B was labeled Presence. The ranked items and distinguishing statements bring understanding for this label.

Table 14

Highest and Lowest-Ranked Statements for Group 2B

Ranking	Statement	Statement
Highest	Number	
1	18	Reliable
2	3	Communicative
3	8	Efficient
4	17	Positive Attitude
5	4	Compassionate
Lowest		
18	2	Available
19	9	Empathetic
20	20	Welcoming
21	11	Good listener
22	12	Helpful

Factor 2B is confounded because the items that ranked the lowest are the behaviors or interactions the narratives best support, which will be described in more detail in Part Two: Student Post Survey Responses and Part Three: Student Interviews.

Composite Q sort for Factor b

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
** ◄ Helpful	Empathetic	Good communication skills	actually excited to see students	Compassionate	Communicative	Reliable
	Welcoming	Knowledgeable	Welcoming responses to students, faculty, and staff	Willingness to help others	Efficient	
	* ◄ Good listener	** ◄ Eager to help	Conscientious	Motivated	** ► Positive Attitude	
		** ◄ Available	Personable	Courteous		
			Resourceful			
			Patient			

Legend

* Distinguishing statement at P< 0.05

** Distinguishing statement at P< 0.01

► z-Score for the statement is higher than in all other factors

◄ z-Score for the statement is lower than in all other factors

Figure 5. *Composite Q Sort for Group 2B*

95

Table 15

Distinguishing statements for Group 2B

Nm	Distinguishing Statement	G1	G2A	G2B	G3	G4
17	Positive Attitude*	0	0	2	-1	-1
7	Eager to help*	3	1	-1	2	0
2	Available*	0	2	-1	1	1
11	Good listener	-1	1	-2	0	0
12	Helpful*	1	1	-3	1	3

Note: Asterisk (*) Indicates Significance at p<0.01

The narrative provided by participants and the data collected in the Q sort brings together an understanding about why this group was labeled as Available and will be discussed in depth in a later section. Briefly, however, this group valued reliability and efficiency, with being communicative and having a positive attitude much higher than feeling that their student affairs representative was welcoming, empathetic, helpful, or a good listener.

Factor Group 3: Helpfulness

A total of four participants loaded significantly on Factor 3 after analyses. This accounts for 15% of the final p-set, and 9% of the variance. All four individuals expressed experience in a services-oriented career field. Factor Group 3e has been labeled Helpful due to the participants' career experience they bring with them to higher education.

Table 16

Highest and Lowest Ranked Statements for Group 3

Ranking Highest	Statement Number	Statement
1	22	Willingness to help others
2	7	Eager to help
3	10	Good communication skills
4	3	Communicative
5	15	Patience
Lowest		
18	4	Compassionate
19	16	Personable
20	19	Resourceful
21	20	Welcoming

Table 17

Distinguishing Statements for Group 3

Nm	Distinguishing Statement	G1	G2A	G2B	G3	G4
22	Willingness to help others*	-1	-2	1	3	0
15	Patience	-3	0	0	1	0
9	Empathetic*	-2	3	-2	0	-2
8	Efficient	1	-2	2	0	2
5	Conscientious*	-1	2	0	-3	-1

Note: Asterisk (*) Indicates Significance at p<0.01

Composite Q sort for Factor 3

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
** ◄ Conscientious	Personable	Motivated	** Empathetic	* ► Patient	Eager to help	** ► Willingness to help others
	Resourceful	Positive Attitude	Reliable	Available	Good communication skills	
	Welcoming	Courteous	Good listener	Welcoming responses to students, faculty, and staff	Communicative	
		Compassionate	actually excited to see students	Helpful		
			Knowledgeable			
			* Efficient			

Legend

* Distinguishing statement at P< 0.05

** Distinguishing statement at P< 0.01

► z-Score for the statement is higher than in all other factors

◄ z-Score for the statement is lower than in all other factors

Figure 6. *Composite Q Sort for Group 3*

While the highest-ranked character statement demonstrated by student affairs individuals was a willingness to help others, the lowest-ranked demonstrated least essential character trait was conscientiousness. Three participants ranked willingness to help others and eager to help as the essential character traits of student affairs personnel. In contrast, these same individuals ranked personable, resourceful, and welcoming as least essential, which seems to be in direct opposition. This indicates a group of perspectives that find the appearance of willingness, eagerness, and open communication to be more essential in the exhibition of caring behaviors or interactions than for the individual to actually be personable and welcoming. The distinguishing statements, post-sort survey, and interviews for this group illuminate this seemingly bivariate view and will be discussed in Part Two: Student Post Survey Responses and Part Three: Student Interviews later in this chapter. Table 17 lists the distinguishing statements for Factor Group Three.

In summary, Factor Group 3: Helpfulness was focused on being helpful and being driven to make an impact in their family and their community. Individuals within this group were employed in customer-oriented or customer-service career fields. Their distinguishing statements were willing to help others, empathetic, and conscientious. At the intersection of an ethic of care and social capital is trust. This is established when an individual has a need met and the narrative spoke to this when student affairs were responsive and provided timely follow up which builds trust.

Factor Group 4: Support

A total of five participants loaded significantly on Factor 4 after analyses. This accounts for 19% of the final p-set, and 12% of the variance and represents four females and one male. All individuals were under the age of 25 while enrolled in the community college.

Table 18 shows that Supportive is represented within Factor Group 4.

Table 18

Highest and Lowest Ranked Statements for Group 4

Ranking Highest	Statement Number	Statement
1	12	Helpful
2	8	Efficient
3	10	Good communication skills
4	18	Reliable
5	2	Available
Lowest		
18	16	Personable
19	14	Motivated
20	9	Empathetic
21	21	Welcoming responses to students, faculty, and staff
22	20	Welcoming

Table 19

Distinguishing Statements for Group 4

Nm	Distinguishing Statement	G1	G2A	G2B	G3	G4
19	Resourceful	0	-1	0	-2	1
4	Compassionate	1	-2	1	-1	0
1	Actually excited to see students*	0	2	0	0	-1
14	Motivated	1	0	1	-1	-2

Note: Asterisk (*) Indicates Significance at p<0.01

Composite Q sort for Factor 4

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
Welcoming	* ◄ Motivated	Conscientious	Willingness to help others	Available	Efficient	Helpful
	Empathetic	Positive Attitude	Eager to help	Knowledgeable	Good communication skills	
	Welcoming responses to students, faculty, and staff	** ◄ actually excited to see students	Good listener	Communicative	Reliable	
	Personable	Courteous	* ► Resourceful			
		Patient				
		* Compassionate				

Legend

* Distinguishing statement at P< 0.05

** Distinguishing statement at P< 0.01

► z-Score for the statement is higher than in all other factors

◄ z-Score for the statement is lower than in all other factors

Figure 7. *Composite Q Sort for Group 4.*

In summary, Factor Group 4: Support was focused on seeking affirmation and assurance that they belonged. They described the relationships they had formed and why they were important. The distinguishing statements for this group were clustered on expressing excitement to see students and the capacity to motivate them. Participants identified the importance of building relationships as one of the tenets of their experiences of care.

This section covered the data analysis and results of a Q sort completed by 26 first-generation community college graduates in rural North Carolina. The Q sort addressed the factors (behaviors or interactions) contributing to persistence, completion, and career aspirations. The results of the study resulted in five factor groups. An analysis of the results was described in detail. There were five factors grouped by the similarity of their sorts, Factor Group 1: Communication, Factor Group 2A: Student-Centered Approach, Factor Group 2B: Availability, Factor Group 3: Helpfulness, and Factor Group 4: Support. Next, I will discuss the analysis of the student post-sort surveys.

Part Two: Student Post Survey Responses

In the following section, I use first-generation student responses provided during the post-sort survey to address research question one, which asked: According to first-generation students, what are the most essential and least essential behaviors or interactions that demonstrate student affairs personnel care about students? I conducted post-sort surveys to understand the rationale for student sorting preferences, and I also analyzed this additional data for significance. Since one aspect of an ethic of care is concerned with how the actions of the carer are received by the cared for, understanding the "why" behind the sorting preferences helped me interpret the previously discussed quantitative data. Collecting additional data through post-sort narratives and interviews is a common practice in Q

102

methodology studies and can provide added clarity during the interpretation phase of the study. In this research, looking at the first-generation college students as the cared-for and the student affairs professionals as the carers, I sought to understand how the actions of those student affairs professionals were interpreted. Through the collection of the narrative, qualitative data, such as the post-sort surveys and interviews, I was able to dive deeply into the "why" behind the "what" of the students' perspectives.

After transitioning the Q sort data from the collection tool to the data analysis software, I realized that it would be valuable to understand why participants ranked the statements as most important and non-essential. Therefore, I contacted each participant who completed the Q sort through the email address provided on their participant consent form and asked why they sorted the highest (+3) and lowest statements (-3) in the order they did. All 26 students completed the post-survey and their responses helped me gain deeper insight into how they perceive interactions with student affairs personnel as contributing most or least to student success. This combination of post-sort narrative and the q factor analysis led to the identification of participants' perspectives on the most essential and least essential behaviors or interactions indicative of caring relationships, which are described in the following sections.

Most Essential Behaviors or Interactions

First-generation students report various experiences with student affairs personnel that demonstrated behaviors or interactions of care. Sixteen unique positive statements out of a possible twenty-two were selected by student participants, as shown in Table 20.

Table 20

Distribution of the Essential Behaviors or Interactions of Student Affairs Personnel that Demonstrate Care

Available (4)	Empathetic (2)	Positive Attitude
Communicative	Good Communication Skills (2)	Reliable
Compassionate	Helpful	Resourceful
Conscientious	Knowledgeable (2)	Welcoming
Eager to Help (3)	Patient	Willingness to Help Others (2)
Efficient		

Six of the twenty-two statements were not included as the highest (+3) ranked item by any of the student participants as follows: 1) actually excited to see students, 2) courteous, 3) good listener, 4) motivated, 5) personable and 6) welcoming responses to students, faculty, and staff. This is surprising as these tend to be the outward characteristics we typically see stressed in staff meetings, job postings, and performance evaluations, though the data does not indicate that these were viewed by graduates as being most important.

Several student participants provided specific examples of interactions with a member of student affairs in their responses to give more insight about their selections. For example, Ally reported having a positive attitude as her highest (+3) ranked demonstrated behavior. She commented as follows:

I met Hailey. She was very positive, supportive, and motivating. She always

encouraged me to work hard and do my best. I was a pre-nursing student and then

accepted to the nursing program. It was easy for me to get frustrated and discouraged. Hailey kept checking in, and it always seemed like an email would appear just when I needed it, or it was an encouraging word in passing. She helped get me through.

Alana, a thirty-seven-year-old Culinary graduate, stated she ranked "eager to help" the highest because she needed it:

My classes are long with only a few minutes in between classes. I know that if I have a question or need help I know I can always find Alice either in person or quickly through email. Alice had always been eager to help me since I met her the first time I stepped on campus. She stopped what she was doing and we casually talked as she walked me to the admissions office.

Finally, Jennifer, a twenty-four-year-old Office Administration graduate, said communication was most important:

I ranked good communication skills as the most important behavior or interaction with a member of student affairs that demonstrated they cared for me because Hailey communicates verbally and in writing in a clear, simple manner with common vocabulary that I could understand and relate to, she breaks complicated pieces into smaller manageable steps. This really helped since neither of my parents have gone to college, so they can't really help me with this stuff.

These three examples relate to three of the statements (available, eager to help, and good communication skills) that were among the most frequently highly ranked by student participants. Three other statements (empathetic, knowledgeable, and a willingness to help others) were also often ranked highly by students. Empathetic, knowledgeable, and a willingness to help others were more frequently sorted as the most essential behaviors or

interactions but not specifically named by the participants. However, in the three examples, I

provided these behaviors or interactions demonstrated by student affairs personnel based

upon the responses provided by the students during their interviews. All of the above are

excellent examples of the most essential behaviors or interactions student affairs personnel

can demonstrate in interactions with first-generation students to show them they are cared

for.

Least Essential Behaviors or Interactions

As part of the post survey process, I also asked student participants to further explain

their lowest sorted statements (-3). Students responded that there were fifteen unique

behaviors or interactions that were less essential for letting the students know they were

cared for by student affairs personnel. Student participants were a little more in agreement

with the less essential behavior rankings than the most essential behavior rankings, but also

provided less rationale for their lowest-ranked statement. Table 21 shows the twenty-six

responses of first-generation students' when asked what is the least essential behavior or

interaction that tells them that student affairs personnel care for them. Table 21 shows the

distribution of the less essential behaviors or interactions and the frequency in which trait

was ranked the lowest.

Table 21

Distribution of the Least Essential Behaviors of Student Affairs Personnel that Demonstrate Care

Actually Excited to See Students	Good communication skills	Reliable
Conscientious	Helpful	Resourceful
Courteous	Motivated	Welcoming (4)
Efficient (2)	Patient (3)	Welcoming responses to students, faculty, and staff (3)
Empathetic (2)	Personable (2)	Willingness to help others (2)

Seven of the twenty-two statements were not included as the lowest (-3) ranked item by any of the student participants as follows: 1) available, 2) communicative, 3) compassionate, 4) eager to help, 5) good listener, 6) knowledgeable and 7) positive attitude. These results were consistent with my expectations. These are the same aspects of caring behaviors and interactions, as previously discussed throughout Chapter Two, that build meaningful relationships between students and student affairs personnel. While not a direct correlation, these behaviors tended to rank on the positive end of the grid throughout the participants' sorts. It would have been surprising if, for example, a student participant had responded that they did not want their admissions counselor to be compassionate in their interactions.

When I reviewed student responses about why they sorted the lowest statements (-3) in the order they did, most of the students responded with a more transactional rationale that centered the student as a customer and the student affairs personnel as providing a transaction

or a service. For example, one student participant commented, "I'm the one paying the tuition that pays their salaries; they better be welcoming." Several responses from students indicate possible confusion with the question at hand for the lowest ranked items, such as statements being too similar to each other (i.e., welcoming vs. welcoming responses). Another student's statement indicated that they "marked personable as the least essential behavior, but how is that different from welcoming, or willingness to help others." In addition, another student responded when I was on the phone, "What's the difference between welcoming and welcome responses to faculty, staff, and students? I put welcoming responses as the least essential." Isolating the rationale for why students marked the least essential behaviors or interactions in the manner in which they did is difficult to comprehend by looking at only one element of the puzzle in isolation.

While the post-sort follow-up surveys added valuable insight and feedback for participants' rationale behind their ranking preference, I took the project a step further by interviewing some of the student participants to seek a deeper understanding of how student affairs create meaningful relationships that lead to student success. The follow-up interviews were conducted to help interpret the quantitative data from the Q sort process as well as the results of the post-surveys. This additional phase of the research process helped identify and name the themes emerging from the factor groups about the students' ranking of the most essential and least essential caring behaviors. The narratives and follow-up interviews are further analyzed in Chapter 4 when examining the differences and similarities in viewpoints between first-generation community college students and student affairs personnel. In the next section, I discuss the results of the interviews conducted with five first-generation community college graduates to better understand the types of relationships student affairs

personnel engage in that lead to student persistence, completion, and aspirational career choice.

Part Three: Student Interviews

In the third phase of the research process, I interviewed students within the Q sort participant pool who were interested in engaging in further conversation about their experiences with student affairs personnel. In the following section, I discuss the interview process and present student experiences in which student affairs personnel demonstrated care. I explore how these demonstrations of care impacted each factor group in Chapter Five.

Interview Process

To address research questions one and two about the: 1) most essential and non-essential behaviors or interactions that demonstrate that student affairs personnel care about students and 2) the behaviors or interactions that student affairs personnel demonstrate with first-generation students that lead those students to believe they are being cared for, I conducted interviews to support the previously discussed quantitative findings, a qualitative technique that adds richness to the findings. I sent invitations to ten students who expressed interest in participating in follow-up interviews after they completed their Q sort. While ten individuals agreed to participate in the follow-up interview; in the end, five were interviewed. Adhering to the interview protocol, I contacted participants consenting to the interview process via email and scheduled virtual interviews via Google Meet. During these interviews, I used a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix H). After each interview, I transcribed the audio recordings, and I manually coded the narratives to determine the qualitative themes that emerged. I then used these themes to support the factor groupings identified in the analysis of the quantitative data as well as to see if new themes

emerged outside of those previously identified.

Three female and two male students agreed to participate in the interview process. The participants were in their early to mid-twenties, and the males represented minority populations. All the participants earned associate degrees at the same rural community college in the North Carolina Community College System.

Demonstrations of Care

Caring interactions are fundamental to human relationships, and their significance extends across a wide range of settings. For the purposes of my research, I focused this study on first-generation student views of their interactions with student affairs personnel in the community college environment. For a first-generation student, stepping foot on a college campus for the first time can be incredibly challenging. My research explored the emergent and interwoven perspectives of caring interactions demonstrated by student affairs personnel, particularly on confidence, career choices, and relationship building as derived from the q sort, post sort surveys, and student interviews. The key statements from the student interviews were indicative that the most impactful student affairs personnel were authentic, present, had a passion for their work, and offered a non-judgmental ear and encouraging word when necessary. These items were not necessarily unique to any one factor group, but rather they were present in each group in various degrees of relative importance. They were interwoven through each of the participants' responses. I present selected quotes from the student interviews below in order to share their perspectives in their own words.

Being the first to go to college comes with expectations and the unknown experience of the college campus environment as one student noted in an interview. For example, Tim came to the community college directly out of high school to play basketball. When we

began his interview, Tim, now a 21-year-old, spoke to this. He talked of being scared, shy, and confused until meeting someone who encouraged him daily. He highlighted a positive interaction with an employee in student affairs as follows:

> I met the Director of Student Activities one day halfway through my first semester. She took me in and encouraged me to get involved at the school. She was passionate about her job and the importance of education. She put my success above everything else… I knew Kendra cared for me when I graduated and left the community college. She continued to check in; I knew I could reach out whenever needed.

Katlyn, in her interview, articulated the behavior or interaction of care demonstrated by student affairs personnel that had the most significant impact on her persistence when she stated:

> Just being there, being present, listening to me, and letting me talk through whatever I was feeling at that moment. This really helped me stay focused. Having Kendra as a listening ear for me helped because there were many times that I wanted to give up due to the pressure to succeed weighing me down. But she gave me that push when I needed to keep going.

Throughout Katlyn's interview, I heard that she experienced care when the staff member was willing to listen. In addition, Katlyn stated that, "Being supportive, being able to stop and listen to what I needed, being encouraging, being motivating and overall just being there for us for whatever we needed" were important to her.

Career Aspirations

To better understand the influence student affairs personnel have on first-generation students' career aspirations, participants were asked how educational experiences draw

111

students into their chosen career fields.

Callie entered the community college right out of high school, intending to become a teacher after completing the requirements to become a Certified Nurse Aide (CNA), only to figure out that healthcare was not very appealing while working in a nursing home after graduation. Callie spent four years at the community college, initially working towards her associate in arts degree to transfer to a four-year university but made a decision at the end of year two's fall semester:

> Something was driving me back towards healthcare. I sat down with Kendra. I remember the conversation because listening was the character trait Kendra demonstrated that showed me she cared for me. This really helped me stay focused on wanting to be a listening ear for others. This listening ear helped me figure out that healthcare was really where my heart was, just not with the elderly. A listening ear is handy when working with patients on a daily basis. Thanks to having that listening ear and someone willing to help me work through what I was feeling at that moment gave me the push I needed to keep going. I graduated two years later with my medical assistant degree and love every minute of the job I have now.

Dawn reported a similar experience.

> During my time at my community college, having a person from student affairs personnel who was unselfish enough to drive hours to and from home to work with a wide range of students taught me what it truly means to care about who you work with daily. When I started my college career, I wanted to be a nurse, but that did not seem right for me at the time. So I completed my transfer degree. But something kept nagging at me. Having someone show me what it means to be unselfish to come and

112

work with college students made me realize that I still wanted to work in the medical field somehow. After deciding, I still wanted to work in the medical field, I talked this over with Sally, who encouraged me to apply to the nursing program. I wanted to be able to pass along the same kindness, care, and unselfishness that had been shown to me over the years.

Dawn is a 24-year-old female and a 2020 first-generation community college graduate who received her Associate in Applied Science Degree in Nursing. She is married and has been working in a local hospital since graduation through one of the most challenging times for the medical field during a national pandemic. She attributed her conversations with her identified staff member as the reason she is a nurse today.

Ricky, a twenty-three-year-old male, stated the following:

I have always cared about other people and always tried to treat others the way I want to be treated. When I came to college, I was unsure what I wanted to do. I was required to meet with this guy in the Counseling Department. I thought I was doing something wrong. I learned from Steve that it was perfectly normal not to have a clear path or goal when starting college. We selected classes for that first semester that would work for almost any major I chose. Over that first semester, I met with Steve several times to explore my interest and strength and learn about everything the college offered. Steve was patient and always available every time I just stopped by to ask a question. I finally applied for and was accepted to the Radiography program. Steve demonstrated a passion for his job and compassion for me. When we were working together, nothing else mattered

to him; he stayed focused on me. I graduated last spring [2022] and am employed at a local hospital and could not be happier with what I get to do every day. I get to care for my patients the same way Steve took me under his wing to help me figure out where I was going in life. I get to play a small role in their lives.

Mentoring

Tim's experience spoke to the long-term impact of the relationship students engage in with student affairs personnel and the impact those relationships have on a first-generation student's career choice:

Our relationship grew from support built on honesty and trust to a mentorship, driven by enthusiasm and passion for helping others. I knew Kendra cared when I graduated and left the community college; she continued to check in, and I knew I could reach out anytime I needed. This outreach has continued to this day, and now we are colleagues. That is such an honor for me to work alongside the person I looked up to the most.

These are a few examples of how a student affairs team member can contribute to a student's persistence, completion of a credential, and choice of pursuing an altruistic career field through their demonstration of care.

While Tim, Callie, and Katlyn were not enrolled at the exact location at the same time, all three described encounters with student affairs personnel that demonstrated care through genuine interactions. Additional themes and insights that emerged from the student interviews include a passion for their work, the value of encouraging words, the availability and presence when students needed them, and

most importantly, a non-judgmental ear. I began to understand that students were asking to engage with student affairs professionals in certain ways that will be further discussed in chapter five. I took the project a step further by engaging student affairs personnel named by the students to gain a deeper understanding of behaviors and interactions demonstrated as caring.

In the next section, I discuss the findings from the interviews I conducted with the student affairs personnel. These individuals were identified by the first-generation students as having demonstrated care towards and for them during their time as community college students. This additional step addressed the third research question, which sought to identify how student affairs personnel perceive their roles in helping students complete their degrees and settle on career choices. It helped me add an additional layer of insight as I interpreted the findings.

Part Four: Interviews with Student Affairs Personnel

To move into the final stage of the research process, I reviewed the names of the student affairs personnel who were identified as individuals who demonstrated care by the students completing the Q sort. I assigned each individual the students identified as an employee from student affairs a number, and I entered those numbers into a spreadsheet. I then used the random number generator function within spreadsheets to select five individuals to interview. I then invited five individuals to participate in a single virtual interview at a convenient time. I notified them that the session would last an hour and a half at maximum. Five individuals agreed to be interviewed after I confirmed they were employed in a position that fit under the umbrella label of student affairs. The goal previously discussed by the committee was to interview three individuals; this is why five were offered interviews.

However, after four months and numerous attempts to coordinate interviews with five student affairs professionals, I completed two interviews. The responses provided by the two interviewees were rich and added valuable insight into how student affairs personnel perceive their role.

The student affairs personnel who agreed to participate in the interviews were female. The first participant was in her late thirties with 12 years of community college services in student affairs as a counselor. The second participant was in her mid-fifties with 20 years of community college service in multiple areas within student affairs, such as career services, counseling, and student activities. These participants did not previously graduate from a North Carolina Community College institution. In the next section, I discuss how student affairs personnel perceive their role in relationship building, student persistence, completion, and career field choice.

Relationship Building

Student affairs personnel establish relationships with their students at a foundational level out of care that is nurtured over time through mutual respect and trust. This was affirmed by Sally, who stated the following:

> I'm the lucky one I get to know students on a more relational level. I would describe my role with some students as advisor/student, others it is counselor/student-client, and with others, it is almost family. For some students, we are the closest they have to family. I do, however, try my best to keep my boundaries, keep my side professional. The bottom line, though, is that there has to be trust. I learn about their ups and downs, challenges, and victories. Students tend to open up with us. I try to create a space that is friendly and welcoming. They share stories and ask for advice because I

116

get to know their families and because they are not afraid to open up to me. Students

don't feel intimidated around us. Here is an example from this past year. One of our

students got extremely sick after a procedure that she had done. She was on campus

and needed to go to the emergency room. She asked for me; she had no family to be

with her. We arranged for her to get to the emergency room, and another staff

member and I followed her and stayed with her while she was treated. We made sure

she got home and had what she needed for the weekend. Sometimes we are the only

ones they have. I feel honored to be trusted by them.

Affirming Sally's comments, Kendra added to this same thread when she stated, "My position and relationship is to advise, guide, teach, inspire, lead, and be led by the student I work with." Kendra emphasized that on numerous occasions she "learned as much from the students she interacted with as the students learned from her."

Student Persistence

Student affairs staff acknowledge their role in improving student persistence through various interactions that demonstrate an ethic of care and foster an environment in which social capital can flow naturally. For example, Kendra perceived her role in student persistence through interactions that demonstrated patience, respect, and care. Kendra said, "If a student feels or thinks they have been fully attended to and heard, then it will lead to a better interaction the next time they are in your office. That feeling of being seen and respected will help with persistence." While Sally echoed some of the same caring behaviors of Kendra, she stressed the importance of encouraging words. She stated, "I listen to them, I encourage them, I help them find answers, and we celebrate accomplishments. I reach out and check in to see how things are going. When I haven't heard from a student in a while, I

reach out." Sally spoke about availability as a key to student success: "I try to maintain consistency with students. I am available. I answer their emails, texts, and phone calls. I try my best to be where I say I will be when I say I will be there." Sally spoke about students having an assigned advisor, but because of her open door policy and availability, students often returned to her each semester for advising. Being seen, respected, and encouraging are caring behaviors or interactions demonstrated by student affairs personnel that leads to trust, which is a key element at the intersection of an ethic of care and social capital. These actions of care demonstrated by Kendra and Sally as student affairs professionals are essential for creating an environment where students can persist toward their academic goals.

Student Completion

Student affairs personnel recognize their role in student completion. Sally described this role as "facilitator in helping students realize their own potential by helping them set goals and navigate the obstacles of higher education and life." During our conversation, Sally and Kendra both mentioned that we as student affairs professionals cannot make a student complete a credential or earn a degree, but that it was our responsibility to provide them with all the necessary tools to reach their goals.

Career Choice

Student affairs personnel describe their role in assisting students with career choice as an opportunity to let students know they are seen. They also want to help students understand their strengths and places where they could grow. They frame both as areas of opportunity. Kendra stated:

> I tell them how I perceive them. How I see them as a leader, intelligent, capable, and
> hard working. Sometimes students need to see how others perceive them, so we act as

a mirror with words of encouragement. Sharing our stories about our own educational

journey can be helpful. Students need to hear how we overcame our circumstances.

Sally specifically stated:

> I think caring leads to deeper conversations around career aspirations. It has
>
> to be a safe space to really share your hopes and dreams with someone. If a
>
> student has shared their dreams/goals with close family members or friends,
>
> and they were met with discouragement, disappointment, or ridicule, they
>
> likelihood they will share with a student affairs professional might be slight
>
> at best. It is through creating a safe space to explore, that student can either
>
> share their fully formed dream or begin to dream of something more."

Through conversations with student affairs personnel, first-generation students have the

opportunity to understand a profession outside the classroom in education. These

conversations create opportunities for the transfer of knowledge (social capital), allowing

first-generation students to widen their knowledge of what some would refer to as traditional

careers.

During the interviews with the student affairs professionals, a variety of caring

behaviors or interactions such as patience, respect, encouraging words, availability, and

consistency, emerged. These caring behaviors or interactions were demonstrated through

daily interactions and encounters with students that lead to student persistence, completion,

and career choice. This is an example of the importance of earning students' trust in daily

interactions with student affairs professionals. Many of these behaviors or interactions were

echoed as themes that emerged throughout the study. The themes from the q sort were

communication, student centered approach, availability, helpfulness, and support. The post-

sort surveys identified confidence, career choice, and relationship building as themes. The final themes that emerged from the student interviews were authentic, present, passion for their work, and non-judgmental. These themes are discussed in the findings section in chapter five.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the results of the Q methodology analysis conducted to explore the subjective perspectives of participants on the topic of caring behaviors or interactions among student affairs personnel in the community college environment. Participants included first-generation college students and personnel in the student affairs division of a community college in North Carolina. The Q methodology approach allowed for an in-depth examination of the individual viewpoints and the identification of shared perspectives among the participants. Through the Q sorting process and factor analysis, a range of distinct perspectives, or factor groups, emerged, including Communication, Student-Centered Approach, Availability, Helpful, and Support, each representing a unique viewpoint on the research topic. The results of the study provide valuable insights into the subjective experiences and beliefs of participants and contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Q methodology was used for this study as it was designed to measure a target population's perceptions, attitudes, and viewpoints. This chapter further discussed the method, justification of the method, research design, data collection, the data analysis, and interpretation process. This chapter also included a description of the software programs used for the study (QSortWare and KADE). To answer the study's research question, 26 first-generation graduates from two North Carolina community colleges completed a Q-sort and

responded to a post-sort questionnaire that provided a narrative response. In addition, five students were selected to participate in follow-up interviews to add to the already rich data of the q sort. Finally, I interviewed two student affairs professionals who were identified by the student as someone who had cared for them during the time as a community college student.

This chapter covered the data analysis and results of a Q-sort completed by 26 first-generation community college graduates in rural North Carolina at the time of the study. The Q-sort addressed the factors contributing to persistence, completion, and career aspirations. The results of the study resulted in five-factor groups. The analysis included correlation, factor scores, factor arrays, and distinguishing statements for each factor. In addition, post-sort comments were examined to develop a deeper understanding of each factor group's underlying attitudes, perceptions, and viewpoints. In Chapter Five, I discuss these findings and provide links to the literature. Gaps in the literature previously presented are also revisited in relation to the study findings. In addition, Chapter Five includes implications of the research for educators, presents limitations to the current study and provides recommendations for future study.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

I used Nel Noddings's (1984) ethic of care to understand how caring relations are established within community college settings between students and student affairs staff. In addition, I inquired into how such caring relations aided the exchange of social capital. This research addresses a gap in the literature by helping us understand how caring interactions with non-faculty members support student success. While the initial quantitative aspect of this study identified early themes, the qualitative phase offered an even more rich glimpse of the tangled web of how caring and social capital intersect. To help untangle the complex web that I discovered, I divided the following discussion into five sections: the intersecting themes of an ethic of care and social capital, emergent themes from the data analysis, study implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research and conclusion.

Intersecting Themes of an Ethic of Care and Social Capital

After engaging deeply with the data through multiple reads, I heard the voices of the students I interviewed when I closed my eyes. As I worked with both the quantitative and qualitative data, I realized that caring behaviors or interactions were rarely discussed in isolation. Instead, most were intertwined with many others. I thus suggest it is through complex interactions that caring relations are established. In the following analysis, I will reflect on the carer's actions and the cared-for's perceived experiences primarily through students' voices. Each section will demonstrate a theme in the heading that describes what the first-generation students in my study wanted higher education staff to understand. These

can also be read as students asking for specific types of interactions.

Please understand my family has expectations of me.

The importance of family was determined to be a point of significance during the interview process for student participants who spoke about what it meant to be the first in their family not only to go to college but also to graduate. Ricky, a student, spoke of the importance of being the first in his family to go to college: "I have a little brother who watches every step I take. I can't fail…I can't let him or my parents down." He then went into detail about how his parents wanted more for him and did not want him to work in a hot, stuffy factory doing the same thing every day as they did. In this example, the student explained that he felt cared for by a specific student affairs professional because they could, in this case, find common ground between them. He said, "Steve demonstrated care for me because he reassured me that I was making the right choice." Ricky explained that sharing stories with Steve about family expectations helped set him at ease. Many first-generation college students do not have the privilege of experiencing family conversations about the exploration of college, which is a form of capital. This interaction demonstrates an intersection of an ethic of care because the carer demonstrated an action or interaction that was received by the cared-for, and some knowledge about college was being transferred between them.

Further analysis provided another example of family expectations with Katlyn, a single mother:

> I had already completed two semesters when I got pregnant and dropped
> out. I needed to finish this to show my son that you can do anything you want
> if you set your mind to it. I also wanted to be the first in my family to earn

123

a college degree.

Katlyn, the cared-for, indicated that Trinity, the staff member and the carer she identified, showed her care by "taking the time to listen to my struggle as a single mom, returning to school while juggling a full-time job." Katlyn spoke about the pressure of being the first in the family to go to college and her fear of disappointment. She also mentioned the difficulty of being unable to discuss college-related questions with family members. She spoke with appreciation and gratitude for the care Trinity provided. Katlyn described how Trinity acknowledged that college is complicated and sometimes scary. She appreciated that Trinity reminded her "anything is possible if you set your goals and connect to the resources and supports available." This student expressed appreciation for the opportunity to relate to Trinity, who acknowledged that she was a young single parent while she was working on her degree. Katlyn stated, "Trinity was compassionate and empathetic without feeling sorry for me." Through these interactions with Trinity, Katlyn indicated she felt cared for. Family expectations and the expectations first-generation students place on themselves can be challenging to navigate, but through interactions with staff members who demonstrate care by recognizing those family expectations, students reported experiencing care that helped them succeed, which was described as the encouragement and reassurance they received from members of student affairs. What follows next is a discussion on understanding how college works.

Please understand I do not know how college works.

Dawn spoke of the importance of having someone at the college who could explain college in a simplified manner. Dawn stated:

Hailey communicates in writing in a clear, straightforward manner with a

common vocabulary that I could understand and relate to. She broke down

complicated pieces into smaller, manageable steps. This helped since

neither of my parents has gone to college, so they can't help me with

this stuff.

This student indicated she had an aunt who had previously attended the community college

several years ago with whom she could talk about college. These interactions led to some

relevant transfer of college knowledge. However, Dawn revealed she reached a point in her

own educational journey where her aunt was no longer helpful because she had not finished.

Instead, the student relied heavily on Hailey in student affairs. She stated,

Hailey never made me feel like an interruption or a bother. She made sure I knew

what I needed to do, how I needed to do it, and when I needed it done. I asked lots of

questions, but she never made me feel dumb or laughed at me. I always told my

family or friends to see Hailey. She will take care of you.

This student spoke at length about needing someone to talk to about college because "you're

the first in your family." In this example, the cared-for expressed that the carer addressed her

needs through actions and interactions with clear communication free of higher education

terminology. This was important to her because no one in her immediate family had college

experience, so they couldn't provide guidance. Through these interactions of clear and

simplified communication in person, by email, or over the phone, an ethic of care was

demonstrated by carer Hailey and received by the cared-for Dawn. The repeated interactions

were met with patience, understanding, and trust.

As an older adult returning to school because of a layoff and failed marriage, Amy

reported:

I was terrified that I would be unsuccessful at school as well. I was already

devastated; I couldn't handle any more rejection. When I first walked into

Student Services, I had no clue what I was doing or what questions to ask. The

first person I met had an infectious smile and a positive attitude. She greeted

me as if we had known each other all our lives. She was eager to help and could

tell I was scared and nervous.

Amy indicated in the interview that this interaction "set me at ease and assured me I was

making the right choice to pursue my degree." Through the student's own acknowledgment,

she felt cared for.

Throughout this discussion, it is clear that first-generation students need caring

interactions with student affairs staff members to help them navigate the ever-changing

landscape of higher education. Thus far, I have discussed students' desires so that we

understand how they experience family pressures to succeed as well as the expectations and

desire to understand how college works which, over time, results in a transfer of insider

knowledge. While community colleges may be an opportunity to build skills for a better job,

how to begin may not be clear to first-generation students. Thus, I will next discuss the type

of assistance students seek regarding career decisions.

Please help me find my career path.

Students in this study expressed desires to obtain better jobs and experience more

stability. Many discussed wanting to obtain one full-time job versus multiple part-time jobs.

Students also spoke about the need to have a better work-life balance. Ricky stated, "I knew

that resuming my education was the ticket to a better future." Callie expressed a desire to

have a job "where the pay was good enough that I don't have to worry about how I'm gonna

pay the bills or choose between a doctor's appointment or food on the table." It was through these descriptions that I recognized students were referencing the importance of upward mobility that was associated with obtaining a college degree. The literature indicates that obtaining a college credential does lead to higher wages (Nietzel, 2022). Students often look for a quick solution to their financial woes, not realizing that completing an industry-recognized credential may take some time—in some cases, as little as eight weeks or as long as two years. For a first-generation student, all of this can be overwhelming. For example, Callie entered a community college right out of high school, intending to become a teacher after completing the requirements to become a Certified Nurse Aide (CNA), only to figure out that healthcare was not very appealing while working in a nursing home after graduation. Callie spent four years at a community college, initially working towards her associate in arts degree to transfer to a four-year university. However, at the end of the year, in the fall semester, "something was driving me back towards healthcare," Callie stated. "I sat down with Kendra. I remember the conversation because listening was the character trait Kendra demonstrated that showed me she cared for me." Callie continued to explain:

> She showed me patience as I tried to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. She listened to my inner struggles and repeated to me what I was saying, which really helped me to see that all I was doing was talking in circles. Anything to avoid getting started on changing my career path.

All this suggests that care was demonstrated and was confirmed when Callie acknowledged Kendra's actions:

> Thank you for having that listening ear and being someone willing to help me work through what I was feeling at that moment, giving me the push I needed to keep

going. I graduated two years later with my medical assistant degree and love every minute of the job I have now.

Student affairs professionals might help students establish realistic career goals and offer motivation and assistance toward meeting those goals. In this study, the students who participated in the follow-up interviews recognized that improving their skill sets could lead to different employment opportunities, and through their interactions with student affairs personnel, I suggest there is evidence of an exchange of social capital occurring as well. This insider knowledge was information about the various ways students could improve their financial situations. Through patience, communication, and reassurance, students learned that seeking financial stability is possible through higher education. It is through these ongoing interactions that social capital is transferred, and in this instance, how to access higher education and the steps needed are shared.

Please help me to see I belong here.

An interesting theme that emerged was a need to belong. Throughout our individual discussions, the students each spoke of examples of their staff members pointing out skills and strengths. For example, one student indicated he was unsure of his career goals and that starting college felt weird with no end in mind. But it was through conversations with his staff member that:

> I learned from Steve that it was perfectly normal not to have a clear path or goal when starting college. Over that first semester, I met with Steve several times to explore my interests and strengths and learn about everything the college offered. Steve was patient and always available every time I just stopped by to ask a question.

This student was insistent in his comments toward Steve. The student stated, " Steve demonstrated a passion for his job and compassion for me. Nothing else mattered to him when we were working together; he stayed focused on me." Steve demonstrated being present as the carer and, at the moment with this student, focused on the student's needs which the student recognized as being cared for. He suggested that this interaction set him at peace with his decision to pursue a degree and enter college, and he said, "I knew I chose the right school." This statement was an acknowledgment that he was experiencing a sense of belonging. As he mentioned, he passed two other schools to attend this particular community college.

Tim recalled during his interview a conversation with Kendra that had a significant impact on him as a young college student. Tim disclosed that he was the youngest of four and had been raised by his grandparents on his mom's side since he was nine. He described his relationship with his biological parents and siblings as almost non-existent. He spoke of his grandparents' excitement that he was going to college, but most of the praise he received from them was because he got good grades and was a good basketball player. Tim made a point to tell me this because it was the first time someone had pointed out his strengths and skills not related to school or the basketball court. He recalled Kendra telling him that she saw him as a leader. She told him he was intelligent, capable, someone with intuition, self-motivation, and a hard-working ethos. Tim had the biggest smile on his face when he described that conversation. That led me to believe that Tim needed to hear those words from someone other than a parent figure or coach.

Understanding our students and the prior knowledge, experiences, perceptions, and skills they bring with them to an institution helps us to offer them the care that responds to

129

their specific needs. This also allows staff members to set the student at ease so they can point out the student's strengths and skills to help the student to understand they belong in the college setting.

While these two examples demonstrate instances of caring behaviors, it is the impact on the future where we can infer that social capital may have been exchanged. For instance, in the first example, the first student learned it was okay to be undecided. This student learned that being unclear about their goals was part of what college was for—to explore and consider what majors or career programs genuinely match their interests and goals. In the second example, Tim Learned he had strengths and skills he did not recognize. Through Kendra's reference repeatedly, Tim began to see these strengths and skills in himself. Tim spoke of Kendra's assistance in choosing a major, selecting a four-year college, and then after graduation, interest in a master's degree program. The progression in Tim and Kendra's relationship demonstrates how social capital can be transferred through subtle interactions that occur over time but are received as care built on trust. Of course, building trust is another essential theme that emerges in the research, which I will discuss next.

Please help me trust you.

Students spoke about how trust was built over time, especially when they had a sense that staff members were endlessly patient with them through their interactions and behaviors that build trust over time through patience. Others described a sense of trust as feeling safe, having a sense that the school felt like family, and believing staff members would keep what they shared with them confidential. For example, one student commented, "Once I feel that I am in a safe atmosphere, I will start to open up." In this example, trust and safety were seen as similar, and both took time. Trust frequently does not occur through

one interaction but over multiple interactions, each building upon the last.

Another student spoke about the importance of school being like a family. "I should have contacted my family, but I can't count on them to help me, but I should," hinting that family should be trusted and counted on. She offered more:

> I got really sick after a procedure, and I was on campus one day and needed to go to the emergency room. I don't have any immediate family that would go with me, so I asked my school family, and Sally made arrangements to not only get me to the emergency room, but she stayed with me.

This student was complimentary of Sally for putting forth this "extra effort" that let her [the student] know, "she had a school family to rely on and who cared for her." While most of us would agree not all families are perfect and that not everyone views family in the traditional sense, this student felt that the individuals she interacted with throughout her educational experience were like family to her.

While students did not specifically name confidentiality, they spoke of being able to "speak openly and freely." They reported being able to "say what was on their minds." Another student also expressed that what they wanted was to be assured they would not be the talk of the campus. Callie discussed having a medical condition that would cause her to be out of school, and she referenced her experience with a support program where people "talked too much." She let me know she was scared to tell the person on the other side of the desk too much personal information because people in "that office liked to gossip." She acknowledged that her responsibilities on campus were extensive and that her hesitation was, "I did not want everyone I have contact with to know all my personal business." She gave Sally what she needed to know to meet Callie's needs. This student went on to speak

131

about meeting with Kendra and the need to discuss some things from her past and how it took her trust to have that sort of difficult conversation. While not a direct example of an exchange of social capital, I suggest that it is through interactions like these that such caring work can be done. Creating confidential and safe environments opens the possibility that social capital can be offered to the student. On the surface, when students are comfortable, they may seem to divulge more information than is needed, but these trusting glimpses into their worlds create opportunities for real support to be offered.

While seemingly a separate topic, students specifically raised the importance of timely communication as an aspect of building trust and care. Students repeated several specific strategies that were helpful. For example, some spoke about clear email communication. Others discussed offering simplified and specific steps to follow without lots of technical words. These small details matter. Something like timely acknowledgments can offer students the experience of being cared-for. Again, while a seemingly small detail, staff being responsive is critical if students are waiting on answers. When responses are not offered, students may wonder if they matter.

Dawn reported, "When someone feels as though they can trust you, they are going to be more willing to come to you when they feel like they're going through a tough situation either at home or school." Staff members understand this need for trust, and it shows up in small ways that make a big difference. For example, Kendra stated, "I answer their (student) emails, texts, and phone calls. I try my best to be where I say I will be when I say I will be there." Additionally, as a student affairs professional, when I interact with a student, I set realistic timeframes to return a call or respond to a question I am unsure of. If I tell a student I will return a call by the end of the day, I make sure to do that. While student affairs

professionals are vastly knowledgeable in our field, students are dependent upon us to provide accurate, timely information in a manner that is not so complicated that they give up or not so simplistic that they feel as if they are incompetent. These interactions are opportunities to transfer knowledge while responding to the student's needs. This is an example of how social capital is transferred in this context. Students may not be able to move forward until they receive answers to their questions. Leaving a student to wonder if a call or email has been received creates doubt and leads to a lack of trust. This also leads to the potential for the student to go to another institution or, even worse, remove themselves from higher education altogether.

While timely email communication is an important aspect of developing trust, in-person interactions also address students' desires for spaces to be heard. This involves verbal cues, non-verbal facial expressions, and casual phrases of acknowledgment. Students also expressed appreciation for the ability to "pop in" an office and speak to a staff member. Participants used phrases like, "being able to stop and listen-listen to what I needed," "letting me talk through what I was feeling in the moment," and "supportive and empathetic but not feeling sorry for me" to describe being heard by the staff member. A student indicated in her post-sort survey that, "being supportive, being able to stop and listen to what I needed, being encouraging, being motivating and overall just being there for us for whatever we needed," was what got her through nursing school and to graduation.

So far, I have discussed themes such as wanting staff members to understand that students experience the pressures of family expectations, that they want to understand how college works, that they want support figuring out how to navigate school-related career decisions, and that they want to experience both belonging and trust at school. The

next theme to emerge is certainly related to these, though it has a different flavor, that of mentoring.

Please be a mentor to me.

Katlyn expressed, "Having someone show me what it means to be unselfish to come and work with college students made me realize that I wanted to go into the teaching profession." This particular student spoke in depth about her relationship with Sally and what it meant. She stated, "She is someone who loves to see each student succeed in life, whatever that may be for them." Yet it was through this relationship and the modeling that occurred that built a relationship into a mentoring experience as time went on.

Tim's experience spoke to the long-term impact of the relationship students engage in with student affairs personnel and the impact those relationships have on first-generation student's career choice: "Our relationship grew from one of support built on honesty and trust to a mentorship, driven by enthusiasm and passion for helping others." In the summer of 2022, Tim was hired at the same community college as Kendra. He was over the moon with excitement when he described what it meant to him to work side by side with his mentor; "it is an honor for me to work alongside the person I looked up to the most." It was through Kendra's "enthusiasm and passion" for helping others that Tim understood he was being cared for. This relationship also demonstrates the transfer of social capital that led Tim to pursue his bachelor's degree. He discussed conversations around four-year degree decisions and majors that matched his skills. He commented on his decision to pursue social work and the career opportunities available with that degree which led him to pursue a degree in school counseling, which led to a need for a master's degree. Tim stated, "I have been working as a high school counselor now for three years. So when I saw the posting

here, I knew I was ready to make the move to higher education." This was a move to a job that he described as, "his dream job in student affairs." Tim shared that,

> Each of these decisions was made with Kendra along by my side. That was important because I valued her opinion and the friendship we had developed but the mentoring she provided as well. She was there for the highs and lows and the celebrations. Every time I graduated, she was always one of the first voices I heard, sending congratulation and asking what was next.

Through these interactions, which demonstrate an ethic of care, there was an exchange of social capital from employee to student, then transitioned to a colleague, which affirms that the transfer of insider knowledge is not a one-time transaction but is ongoing.

Callie also spoke of her relationship with members of student affairs that would be considered mentoring. She talked about activities and interactions that demonstrated care:

> I changed my major one semester short of graduation. I spent a lot of time talking to Trinity while making this decision. She helped me weigh the pros and cons. She didn't make the decision but helped me hear what I was already saying. Trinity couldn't have been happier when I told her I was switching to Medical Assisting.

While it took Callie two more years to complete all her degree requirements and her interactions with Trinity were less frequent, she stated, "Any time I was making a tough decision, I knew I could rely on Trinity for feedback (chuckle) both good and bad." Even though Callie has graduated, she discussed how her relationship with Trinity has continued and how she continues to learn from Trinity. This is another example of the long-term impact members of student affairs have on students because of the care they have been given and how the care was received by the students.

135

As professionals in higher education, I suggest we remember that we were once in our students' shoes. We did not gain our knowledge without social transactions that gave us the foundational knowledge that helped us to persist, complete our degrees, and choose careers. Because we're working with students who may need us to help them navigate higher education, one aspect of caring that may be essential is the sharing of insider knowledge. While we may know the ins and outs of our work world, our students may not. They are trying to fit in. The ability to listen and understand the student and clearly communicate information to them in ways that match their needs is a key to understanding how to establish caring relations. One student affairs professional stated, "I think it is also important to understand that while we are experts in how the college works, resources, and next steps, they are the experts of their life." So this relationship becomes a reciprocal process. By that, I mean that we can also learn from our students. Not only does an ethic of care occur between the one being cared-for and the carer, the transfer of social capital is also a reciprocal interaction. They teach us how to care for them, and, in turn, how we may potentially care for future students.

In the next section, I will draw upon the preceding themes to discuss implications for practice and leadership. I will then conclude with a section on limitations and recommendations for future research and provide an overall summary of the chapter.

Study Implications

The current study was designed to explore first-generation students' perceptions and viewpoints of student affairs professionals to better understand how student affairs professionals demonstrate care through their actions and interactions. In this study, I focused exclusively on first-generation community college graduates at one rural community college

in North Carolina. The findings from my study carry implications for both student affairs professionals and institutional leaders. The applicable audiences include student affairs professionals and leaders at both community colleges and four-year colleges and universities. All student affairs professionals, regardless of institutional size or location, can benefit from a deeper understanding of behaviors and interactions that is perceived and demonstrated as caring. Student affairs professionals at other higher education institutions can learn from the findings of my research and can apply individual elements to support student success. In the next section, I discuss six implications for practitioners and higher education leaders.

Implications for Practice and Leadership

This study has implications for practitioners who engage in direct student contact. There are also implications for senior leaders who have minimal direct interaction with students. At each level within the institution, staff and leaders alike can help each other create the conditions in which students experience care, and as a result, realize their educational aspirations. All throughout, a key to establishing caring relations in many instances can be expressed through the transfer of social capital. In the next section, I discuss the implications for daily practitioners and for those in leadership positions before moving on to recommendations.

Implication #1: Please understand my family has expectations of me.

The results build on existing evidence that caring relationships with faculty members outside the classroom are essential to student success (Rogers & Webb, 1991; Teven, 2001, 2007; Wang, 2014). Based on experiences described by student participants, the same is true with non-faculty-based relationships such as those with student affairs personnel. The result of this study demonstrates that interviewed students want student affairs staff members to

137

understand the expectations first-generation students place on themselves and the expectations family members place on them. Student affairs professionals can contribute to student persistence and completion by listening to student stories about why the educational journey is important to them and their families and finding out what they need. Listening actively is one way that student affairs professionals can attempt to establish care and positively influence student success.

If they are interested in creating the conditions in which caring can thrive, I suggest that institutional leaders need to understand that students want us to understand them beyond being numbers to be placed into budgeting formulas associated with funding dollars. Instead, they are human beings with complicated lives and expectations from family members that sometimes seem impossible.

Implication #2: Please understand I do not know how college works.

The findings of this study suggest that interviewed students want college staff members to interact through clear and simplified communication regardless if the communication occurs in person, by email, or over the phone. Higher education, like many other fields, seemingly has an acronym for almost everything. This higher education lingo can prove to be confusing for all students, especially first-generation students. Here are a few examples of acronyms that students may encounter during their introduction to higher education: APS-Academic Planning Sessions, FAFSA-Free Application for Federal Student Aid, SAP-Satisfactory Academic Progress, RISE-Reinforced Instructions for Student Excellence, and AAP-Academic Accommodation Plan. In order to better meet students' needs, practitioners would do well to remember that the higher education world is a new and unfamiliar territory for students. While engaging with students, staff members may need to

spend an extra moment explaining the various higher education acronyms to students as well as the given name of a process, procedure, or form. This extra time for explanation will aid in better understanding when the student hears that language again (i.e., it will not be the first encounter with the term). It is also important for student affairs professionals to go deeper than simply explaining what an acronym stands for, but to also clarify the purpose of certain policies and to detail the steps of associated processes. By taking the extra time to describe unfamiliar terms and processes, student affairs personnel can demonstrate care by helping students become more comfortable navigating the new college environment. Additionally, the exposure to the language of higher education is a subtle step whereby student affairs are transferring social capital. As a result, staff members who send out communications to students could attempt to demonstrate care by writing emails and letters that are clear and simplified.

For example, staff members in financial aid could collaborate with the bookstore and the business office to produce handouts with important dates, such as when students can purchase books using financial aid and payment plan deadlines. Streamlining informational documents is yet another opportunity to help students understand how college works. For example, on an institution's website, a prospective student needs to be able to access the steps to apply in one location with step-by-step instructions. In North Carolina, completing the admission application through the College Foundation of North Carolina (CFNC), the Residency Determination System (RDS), and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, all online, can be a difficult process. For first-generation students, these intimidating processes can be quite a challenge. However, community colleges can send staff members to the local high school during specific times of the year and work one on one with seniors

interested in applying to the community college. Or, institutions might create opportunities for prospective students to receive guidance and assistance with the application process by allowing them the option to schedule an appointment online, by phone, or by email. This range of assistance in different formats could apply to any other process a student may encounter during their time in college. Students need to be able to receive the assistance they require that best fits their schedule in a multitude of formats, such as video conference, in-person, or over the phone. With that being said, student affairs staff are often the first "teachers" students encounter before the student even makes it to the classroom. Essentially, student affairs personnel are some of the first individuals to "teach" students how college works. The expectation is to meet students where they are and show them how to get to where they want to go while supporting and encouraging them along the way (Herring, 1987).

To further the conditions where care may thrive, I also encourage institutional leaders to find ways to support students through engagement as a means to help new students begin to understand how college works. Senior leaders could participate in new student orientations. Through brief introductions, there is an opportunity to demonstrate care by helping students to feel welcome. Participating in welcome-back activities is a more casual opportunity for deeper conversations that can become the foundation for a more meaningful relationship.

Implication #3: Please help me understand my career aspirations.

A critical area that emerged from the interviews was students' desire for more clarity in career exploration and the connection to choosing a major. While this aspect was part of the research questions, it was not fully explored because participants did not make a

connection with the questions being asked regarding career aspiration and the influence a staff member may have had on their career choices. However, two students did speak to the influence of their student affairs person on their career choice. In alignment with the student's desire for an improved career exploration process, personnel in student affairs can assist students with outlining the courses required for different majors. This allows students to think beyond the major to see the different types of courses required within that particular program of study. Students may have misconceptions about specific majors, and this process could help start deeper conversations about major and career choices. Personnel can also recommend various personality and skill assessments for career exploration. These activities can provide assistance in helping students to hone their decision-making skills and make more informed career choices.

Student affairs staff often serve in multiple capacities. As a way of fostering an environment where care may emerge, it would be beneficial for all student affairs personnel to have a basic understanding of labor market information for the service area and surrounding counties. This type of knowledge will assist staff members in understanding what sectors have the potential for job growth and which sectors offer more stability. Typically, this information is embedded within the areas of Career Services or Counseling areas. Additionally, this information helps match students with the educational offerings at the institution. I believe that labor market knowledge is not widely known across different student affairs areas, specifically Admissions, Academic Advising, and Success Coaching. Knowledge of labor market information on the front end with admissions, advisors, or success coaches would provide students with more information to assist students to make better-informed decisions about their career choices and majors. Cross-training staff

members in this capacity would also create an atmosphere that encourages students to experience care.

For individuals in positions of leadership outside of student affairs, this study has implications for implementing future program offerings. For example, students indicated a desire to find employment that comes with a sustainable living wage. In order to meet these student needs, leadership could work with business and community members to build a diverse workforce and to strengthen the employability of those seeking employment or upskilling those currently employed. This could occur through engaging the community, speaking with businesses and industry about their various needs, and collaborating with the partners involved in the economic development of the counties or regions the institution serves. To help students explore care options, institutional leaders could invite business partners and community leaders to meet and greet with students, simply provide words of encouragement or showcase their business and career explorations rather than employer recruiting even.

Implication #4: Please help me to see I belong here.

Students in this study asked student affairs personnel to help them see that they belonged in higher education and specifically at their chosen college. If student affairs staff want to establish caring relations with students, then they may want to listen for when students express a need for a sense of belonging, even if students don't use those exact words. A better understanding of a student's need to belong can aid personnel in a greater understanding of the student's personal and physical situations. In order to listen in this way, staff members may also want to strategize ways to be fully present with students, creating spaces free of interruptions. Being focused on the student's needs also lets the student know

they belong at the institution. Members of student affairs can connect with the students through casual conversation. These types of interactions may help students feel at ease and help them to visualize themselves setting similar goals and achieving those milestones. Student affairs professionals may be compelled to attend to the well-being of first-generation students and all students equitably, with all interactions demonstrating a commitment to care and the relationship being created.

In addition, staff could organize activities and events that encourage interaction with other students, especially first-generation students, in order to build a sense of belonging. Likewise, staff members could reach out to students and invite them to campus activities. This could offer opportunities for students to get to know each other. And finally, the student affairs personnel could also explore ways to continuously affirm with the student that they have made the right choice to continue their education.

Institutional administrators can take the lead in cultivating a culture of care. One way leaders of the campus community can work toward this goal is to offer first-generation faculty and staff the opportunity to share stories with first-generation students in an informal setting. Campus leaders can follow up on items in question to gain a better understanding of student needs. Again, these more casual settings may create opportunities for students to feel supported, encouraged, and cared for. This allows students to get to know the faculty and staff who are also first-generation. Students may begin to see that being the first in their family to go to college is difficult and is accompanied by its own set of challenges. Staff members need to let students know they are not alone in this journey and that we are going to be here to help throughout their journey. Taking advantage of opportunities to interact with students in a less formal setting allows students to get to know

the leaders of the college. An additional bonus is if the leaders within the college are also first-generation.

Implication #5: Please help me trust you.

Student participants frequently commented on the significance of trust in relationships with student affairs professionals. Students need to know that someone would be there for the long term. Regular student check-ins are one way that staff members can establish trust and demonstrate care to students over time. The intentional scheduling of student check-in messages is a way to establish a pattern of trust and care over time.

For higher education institutions, establishing leadership mentoring programs and succession plans are critical to the future success of an institution. When an individual has been selected for a leadership position, they should be paired with another individual for the first year. This has implications for modeling an ethic of care. The notion of care is not aligned with being turned on and off and applied when it is convenient. To truly take root, an ethic of care is something to be enacted within all aspects of an organization. An ethic of care is an approach to being in a relationship that is both authentic and personal.

Implication #6 Please be a mentor to me.

Student affairs could develop a mentoring program for first-generation students, either with other first-generation students in their second year or with faculty and staff that identify as first-generation. The mentor and mentee could meet twice a semester formally on campus for a workshop or structured activity. In between activities, there could be periodic touch points throughout the semester. This sort of strategy could begin with one particular major and expand as appropriate each semester if there are enough first-generation second-

year students or faculty and staff. An activity such as this wraps aspects of an ethic of care and social capital into a potentially sustainable relationship that continues past graduation.

From a leadership perspective, the mentoring programs can be endorsed and possibly expanded to not only faculty and staff. What if a business or industry partner was willing to mentor a first-generation student who is majoring in the field in which this partner has job openings? Now, this student not only has the potential to collect insider knowledge about the college, but now has extended their network and available social capital being transferred from the business world. This combination of social capital and networking connections ideally would lead to future employment.

In this section, I discussed the findings of this study as portrayed by the student to demonstrate some of the needs students are trying to have met when they interact with student affairs staff. The students also provided examples of being cared for as they perceived the interaction. These interactions depicted an ethic of care because the actions of the carer were received by the cared-for student. I detailed specific caring actions that student affairs professionals and institutional leaders can implement into daily practices that can contribute positively to student success and ultimately lead to the transfer of social capital. Next, I discuss the limitations of the study, followed by recommendations for future related research.

Study Limitations

In the course of the current study, I encountered a few challenges. Given the results of this study and q methodology, below I detail the primary limitations of this research study.

Limitation #1: Q-methodology Technical Issues.

The first limitation of this study involved the method of collecting data with

QsortWare software. The utilization of an online software package offered convenience; however, some technical and user-error issues arose. The associated technical issues slowed down the data collection process and required clarification of the instructions. Only a minuscule fraction of those who were invited to participate reached out for technical assistance. It is unclear how many surveys were started and abandoned because of technical difficulties. None of the participants reported prior experience with Q methodology or the procedures involved, which may also have contributed to the low response rate.

Limitation #2: Single Representation.

The second limitation of this research is that the q sort was only completed by first-generation graduates at one community college. As the researcher, I invited 347 first-generation graduates from a sister institution to participate and received no responses. I believe a lack of familiarity with me as the researcher may have created a reluctance to respond. I have been employed with the North Carolina Community College System for twenty-one years and, fortunately, with the same institution for this period of time. I am currently the senior administrator in the Division of Student Services, which places me at the heart of my research. I acknowledge that because of my position and history with the institution, my subjectivity is not neutral in relation to this study. I am fully aware that my background may have influenced the data collected in this study. To ensure I accurately captured the responses of students, I allowed them to review their individual transcripts for accuracy.

Therefore, it may be helpful to access personal connections and professional networks to recruit study participants. Additionally, recruiting should not be confined to one community college. It would be helpful to recruit first-generation students from several

community colleges to understand if the viewpoints or opinions vary by institution or for first-generation students as a whole.

Limitation #3: Small Interview Pool for Student Affairs Professionals.

The third limitation of this study was the fact that only two student affairs professionals participated in the interview process. Five individuals were invited to participate in the interviews, but due to scheduling conflicts, only two interviews were completed. A broader sample would allow for more perspectives to be analyzed, promoting a greater understanding of a more extensive group's opinions and viewpoints. These two individuals are employed at the same community college as I am. None of the individuals who were invited to interview reported directly to me.

Limitation #4: Student Affairs Data Not Analyzed.

Another limitation of this study was the fact that I asked student affairs professionals to participate in the q-sort and post-sort surveys. Q data was collected for 19 student affairs professionals, meaning that the student affairs professionals completed the same q sort as the student participants. However, due to the complexity of this study and the data analysis, this study only utilized the data from the interviews with student affairs professionals. The lone student affairs personnel data used in this study was from the two interviews referenced above.

Limitation # 5: Time Gap Between Research Steps.

A fifth limitation of this study is the time gap between the sort and inquiry. Student participants were asked why they ranked their most essential and least essential statements in the order they chose several weeks after they completed the sort. This gap in time between the initial q sort and the post-survey responses allowed time for changes in thought or

opinion by the student participants.

In the preceding section, I discussed the limitations of the current study. In the next section, I discuss the recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on first-generation college student graduates' perceptions of care as demonstrated by student affairs professionals. In reviewing the results of the study and knowing the delimitations of the study, three recommendations can be made for future research.

Recommendation #1: Research Design and Instrument.

The first recommendation for future research begins with the research design and the instrument used to collect the data. Future studies using q methodology should have clear written directions with screenshots to guide the participants. Demographic information might be expanded to include age, socioeconomic status, education, employment status, marital status, family and dependents, and English learner. A deeper analysis and interpretation of demographic data may lead to a better understanding of how students' relationships with student affairs professionals and their daily interactions.

In addition, the q sort should include post-sort open-ended questionnaires to collect the qualitative elements, which serve to add to the richness and quality of the data (Gallagher & Porock, 2010). Likewise, this study neglected to include specific data collection techniques to adequately address all three research questions. The interview process did not include any questions about career selection or the influence the student affairs may have had on those decisions. However, two students spoke about their career path and the influence a member of student affairs had on their decision. In the future it would be beneficial to

understand the role student affairs staff play in student career aspirations.

Recommendation # 2: Replicate with multiple community colleges.

This study was limited to one community college; therefore, the second recommendation for future research begins with expanding the participant pool of both the students and student affairs professionals. Participants should be invited to participate from multiple community colleges. Opening the participant pool to all community college students currently enrolled vs. graduates may result in a greater response rate. Inviting student affairs professionals from the same community college would create an excellent comparison of perceptions, viewpoints, and opinions. By expanding the participant pool and various institutions, the number of participants will allow a broader depiction of the data that could surface from the study. This will allow for more generalization across institutions and student populations that may have more meaning beyond one institution being studied in this study.

Recommendation # 3: Gain the perspective of all members of the institution.

A third consideration for additional research could incorporate the viewpoints of all members of the institution. While the current study sought to understand first-generation students' perceptions of student affairs, an interesting contrast would be to see if these perceptions align or differ from the viewpoints of the entire campus community to understand their perceptions and viewpoints regarding how they demonstrate care to students and other employees. Adding additional employees would allow the researcher to understand the viewpoint of faculty, staff, and those in leadership roles. Depending upon the outcomes, there may be potential professional development opportunities for institutional staff members to learn more about an ethic of care and how to demonstrate an ethic of care in their daily interactions with students, colleagues, and community members. As employees further

develop an institutional culture of care, they could create professional development offerings for other community colleges or present at local and national conferences.

Recommendation #4: Explore the influence of college employees on student career choice.

A final recommendation for future study would include a deeper exploration of the student's choice of career path and the influence community college employees have on these decisions. In the current study, this was discussed on a superficial level. More specific interview questions could lead to a better understanding of students' career choices and how employees in student affairs influence these decisions. Additionally, to better understand the students' perspectives, I would encourage the researcher to include questions about the influence of student affairs personnel's role in first-generation students' selection of major or future career choices.

I have discussed the four recommendations for future research. I presented four recommendations: research design and instrument, replication with multiple community colleges, a desire to gain the perspective of all members of the institution, and the influence of college employees on student career choice. Next, I will provide a summary of the chapter, followed by a brief return to my experiences as a first-generation college student, student affairs professional, and educational leader.

<p style="text-align: center;">**Conclusion**</p>

In this study, I explored first-generation community college students' perceptions of the behaviors and interactions that demonstrate care by student affairs personnel using Q methodology. Community colleges continue to look for new ways to serve the growing student populations who come with various educational needs and diverse experiences. As

already mentioned, an ethic of care is not a prescriptive set of actions or specific behaviors. However, as demonstrated in this chapter, caring relationships did occur between first-generation students and student affairs personnel through natural interactions in which both parties contributed to the relationship in order for the caring to be complete.

A Q methodology research study was conducted to better understand first-generation community college students' viewpoints and perceptions of how student affairs professionals demonstrate an ethic of care while sharing valuable social capital that leads to student success. In this chapter, I included an overview of the research methods I used to analyze the data, which contributed to the overall outcome of the data collection. I outlined several limitations that may have affected the outcome of the study. Additionally, I discussed the implications for student affairs professionals and institutional leadership. I then made recommendations for future research based on the overall results of the study. And finally, I concluded this dissertation by bringing this study full circle by returning to my experience as a first-generation student, student affairs professional, and educational leader.

Returning to my Experiences as a First-Generation College Student, Student Affairs Professional, and Educational Leader

While this study began with a glimpse of my educational journey, it is these positive and negative experiences that have shaped my actions and views of leadership and services through daily interactions. As the leader of the division of student affairs in a community college in rural North Carolina, I try to model how to create trust, another theme at the intersection of an ethic of care and social capital. The culture of trust begins between me and my staff. Like responding to student needs, I am reminded it is imperative that I provide my staff with answers in a timely manner. I am compelled to listen to each person with an equal

amount of thought, effort, compassion, patience, and understanding. I am encouraged to be non-judgmental and put my feelings aside. I am compelled to lead by example. I am committed to modeling the behavior I want them to demonstrate with the students they encounter. They depend on me to communicate promptly, or they may miss out on key updates that can negatively impact the students we serve. While trust is an important behavior demonstrated through an ethic of care by student affairs personnel as a first-generation student, I recognize that it strengthens over time, but can easily be broken if the interaction is not genuine or authentic; hence, one type of behavior intertwines with another and is not occurring in isolation.

Within our division, we have created a space where students are welcome to come and talk. The interactions are more casual, where the transaction of social capital (insider knowledge) occurs at a slower pace in a more authentic relational manner when students are ready. Additionally, as student affairs professionals, we have the privilege of getting to know our students on a personal level and not a transactional one. This is important in my role to continue to remind myself what our students are overcoming every day to pursue higher education, and secondly, I am the person responsible for student code of conduct violations, so students tend to avoid my office. Many of the student affairs professionals have snacks and candy available for students because "we all need a pick me up from time to time," when in reality, we are also addressing food insecurities without drawing attention to a student's unmet needs. This is a simple demonstration of an ethic of care that has the potential to have a long impact. This small gesture has broken down barriers, and I personally have had the privilege of getting to know more students because of this subtle invitation to our students to come to visit. As a professional in student affairs, we need to

acknowledge these behaviors and remember that students are worthy of a confident and compassionate response to their inquiries in a timely manner in every encounter to build trust and exchange social capital (insider knowledge) in the world of higher education.

This dissertation has been a labor of love and has brought full circle my passion for student success. I have demonstrated that an ethic of care and social capital have an intersection. This intersection occurs when both parties are authentic in their actions. When the actions of the carer are received and acknowledged by the cared-for, trust is established over time. Relationships form as a result of patient encounters based on give and take between both parties. There is no script or formula for caring or even how social capital is exchanged. However, it is at the intersection with an ethic of care that the essential elements of expectations, understanding how college works, career aspirations, a sense of belonging, trust, and mentoring occurs. Through interactions and behaviors that demonstrate care by student affairs personnel, all students, especially first-generation students, can know that someone cares about them. Relationships matter and ultimately make a difference in student success.

References

Akhtar-Danesh, N., Baxter, P., Valaitis, R. K., Stanyon, W., & Sproul, S. (2009). Nurse

    faculty perceptions of simulation use in nursing education. *Western Journal of*

    Nursing Research, *31*(3), 312-329. https://doi-

    org.proxy006.nclive.org/10.1177/0193945908328264

Astin, A. W. (1997). Liberal Education & Democracy: The Case for Pragmatism. *Liberal*

    Education, *83*(4), 4-15.

Bailey, K. (2008). *Methods of social research*. Simon and Schuster.

Banasick, (2019). KADE: A desktop application for Q methodology. *Journal of Open Source*

    Software, 4(36), 1360, https://doi.org/10.21105/joss.01360

Barrow, M. (2015). Caring in Teaching: A Complicated Relationship. *Journal of Effective*

    Teaching, *15*(2), 45-59.

Bartlett, J.E., & DeWeese, B. (2015). Using the Q methodology approach in human resource

    development research. *Advances in Developing Human Resources, 17*(1), 72-87.

    doi:10.1177/1523422314559811

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique* o*f the judgment of taste*. Harvard

    University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of theory and*

    research for the sociology of education (pp.241-258). Greenwood Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2011). The forms of capital. (1986). *Cultural theory: An anthology*, *1*, 81-93.

Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. University of

Chicago press.

Brown, S.R. (1993). A primer on Q methodology. *Operant Subjectivity.* 16(3/4): 91-138.

Brown, S.R. (1994). Q methodology as the foundation for a science of subjectivity. *Operant*

Subjectivity, 18, 1-16.

Brown, S. R. (1996). Q methodology and qualitative research. *Qualitative health research*,

6(4), 561-567.

Carter, G., Brown Wilson, C., & Mitchell, G. (2021). The effectiveness of a digital game to

improve public perception of dementia: A pretest-posttest evaluation. *PloS one*,

16(10), e0257337. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257337

Cassidy, W., & Bates, A. (2005). "Drop-outs" and "push-outs": Finding hope at a school that

actualizes the ethic of care. *American Journal of Education*, *112*(1), 66-102.

Cheng, S. T., & Kaplowitz, S. A. (2016). Family economic status, cultural capital, and

academic achievement: The case of Taiwan. *International Journal of Educational*

Development, *49*, 271-278.

Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital. *American Journal of*

Sociology, *94*, S95–S120.

Comer, J. (1989). Racism and the education of young children. *Teachers College Record*,

90(3), 352-361.

Cross, R. M. (2005). Exploring attitudes: the case for Q methodology. *Health education*

research, *20*(2), 206-213.

Culp, M. M. (2005). Doing more of what matters: The key to student success. *New*

Directions for Community Colleges, *2005*(131), 77–87. doi.org/10.1002/cc.207

Cuppen, E. Bosch-Rekveldt, M.G.C., Pikaar, E. & Mehos, D.C. (2016). Stakeholder

engagement in large scale energy infrastructure projects: Revealing perspectives

using Q methodology. International Journal of Project Management, 34(7), 1347-

1359. doi:10.1016/jproman.2016.01.03

Davalos, R. A., & Haensly, P. A. (1997). After the dust has settled: Youth reflect on their

high school mentored research experience. *Roeper Review*, *19*(4), 204-207.

Delworth, U., & Seeman, D. (1984). The ethics of care: Implications of Gilligan for the

student services profession. *Journal of College Student Professionals*, *25*(6), 489-92.

Diller, A., Houston, B., Morgan, K., & Ayim, M. (1996). In *Gender question in education:*

Theory, pedagogy, and politics (pp. 89–104). essay, Westview Press.

Donner, J. C. (2001). Using Q-sorts in participatory processes: An introduction to the

methodology. *Social Development Papers*, *36*, 24-49.

Dziopa, F., & Ahern, K. (2011). A systematic literature review of the application of q-

technique and its methodology. *Methodology: European Journal of Research*

Methods for the Behavioral & Social Sciences, 7(2), 39-55. doi:10.1027/1614-

2241/a000021

Engle, J. (2007). Postsecondary access and success for first-generation college students.

American Academic, *3*(1), 25-48.

Everett, J. B. (2015). Public community colleges: Creating access and opportunities for first-

generation college students. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, *81*(3).

Farr, J. (2004). Social capital: A conceptual history. *Political theory*, *32*(1), 6-33.

Gallagher, K. and Porock, D 2010. 'The use of interviews in Q methodology', *Nursing*

Research, 59 (4): 295-300.

Gilligan, C. (1982) In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development.

> Harvard University Press.

Gilligan, C. (2011, July 17) *Carol Gilligan*, https://ethicsofcare.org/carol-gilligan/

Granovetter, M.S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology, 78*(6),

> 1360-1380.

Hanifan, L. J. (1916). The rural school community center. *The Annals of the American*

> *Academy of Political and Social Science*, *67*(1), 130-138.

Hawk, T.F. (2017) Getting to know your students and an educational ethics of care. *Journal*

> *of Management Education, 41*(5), 669-686.

Held, V. (2006). *The ethics of care: Personal, political, and global.* Oxford University

> Press., p.29

Henderson, N. (2013). Havens of resilience. *Educational Leadership*, *71*(1), 22-27.

Herring, W. D., & Jenkine, J. (1987, February 14). *Oral history interview with William*

> *Dallas Herring, February 14, 1987. interview C-0034. southern oral history program*

> *collection (#4007): Electronic edition. shaping a mission for North Carolina's public*

> *schools*. Documenting the American South homepage. Retrieved April 7, 2018, from

> https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/html_use/C-0034.html

Inkpen, A. C., & Tsang, E. W. (2005). Social capital, networks, and knowledge transfer.

> *Academy of management review*, *30*(1), 146-165.

Inkpen, A. C., & Tsang, E. W. (2016). Reflections on the 2015 decade award—social capital,

> networks, and knowledge transfer: An emergent stream of research.

Jorgensen, G. (2006). Kohlberg and Gilligan: Duet or duel? *Journal of Moral Education,*

> *35*(2), 179-196.

Karp, M. M., Hughes, K. L., & O'Gara, L. (2010). An exploration of Tinto's integration

    framework for Community College Students. *Journal of College Student Retention:*

    Research, Theory & Practice, *12*(1), 69–86. doi.org/10.2190/cs.12.1.e

Keeling, R. P. (2014). An ethic of care in higher education: Well-being and learning. *Journal*

    of College and Character, *15*(3). doi.org/10.1515/jcc-2014-0018

Kohlberg, L. (1984). *The psychology of moral development: The nature and validity of moral*

    stages. Vol 2. Harper Collins Publishers.

Kuh, G. D., & Hu, S. (2001). The effects of student-faculty interaction in the 1990s. *The*

    review of higher education, *24*(3), 309-332.

Lewis, C. C., Schaps, E., & Watson, M. S. (1996). The caring classroom's academic edge.

    Educational Leadership, 54(1), 16-2 1.

Levesque, E. M. (2022, March 9). *Improving community college completion rates by*

    addressing structural and motivational barriers. Brookings. Retrieved October 19,

    2022, from https://www.brookings.edu/research/community-college-completion-

    rates-structural-and-motivational-barriers/

Lin, N. (1999a). Building a network theory of social capital. *Connections,* 22 (1), 28-51.

Lin, N. (1999b). Social networks and status attainment. *Annual Review of Sociology, 25,* 467-

    487.

Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American*

    Psychologist, *56*(3), 227.

Mayeroff, M. (1971). *On caring*. Harper & Row.

McDonough, P. M. (1997). *Choosing colleges: How social class and schools structure*

    opportunity. Suny Press.

McKeown, B., & Thomas, D. (1988). *Quantitative applications in the social sciences: Q methodology*. SAGE Publications, Inc. doi:10.4135/9781412985512

Merriam, S. B., (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (3rd edition). Jossey-Bass.

Miller, R. M. (2008). The influence of teachers caring behavior on high school students' behavior and grades.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). Undergraduate Enrollment. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved July 22, 2019, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cha.

Nietzel, M. (2022) New Report Shows College Degree Continue to Provide Better Employment Prospects and Higher Income *Forbes*

Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education.*: University of California.

Noddings, N. (1988). An ethic of caring and its implications for instructional arrangements. *American Journal of Education*, 96(2), 215-230.

Noddings (Eds.), *Caring: readings in knowledge, practice, ethics, and politics* (p.56- 82). University of Pennsylvania Press.

Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education.* Teachers College Press.

Noddings, N. (1995). *Philosophy of education. Dimensions of philosophy serie*s. Westview Press.

Noddings, N. (2002). *Educating moral people: A caring alternative to character education.* Teachers College Press.

Noddings, N. (2003). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education.* University of California Press. (Original work published 1984)

Noddings, N. (2005). What does it mean to educate the whole child?. *Educational leadership*, *63*(1), 8.

Owen, L. M., & Ennis, C.D. (2005). The ethic of care in teaching: an overview of supportive literature. *Quest, the National Association for Kinesiology and Physical Education in Higher Education, 54*(4), 392-425.

Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *75*(3), 249-284.

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1976). Informal interaction with faculty and freshman ratings of academic and non-academic experience of college 1. *The Journal of Educational Research*, *70*(1), 35-41.

Penuel, W., Riel, M., Krause, A., & Frank, K. (2009). Analyzing teachers' professional interactions in a school as social capital: A social network approach. *Teachers college record*, *111*(1), 124-163.

Perna, L.W., & Titus, M.A. (2005). The relationship between parental involvement as social capital and college enrollment: An examination of racial/ethnic group differences. *The Journal of Higher Education 76*(5), 485-518.

Pruneddu, A., & Zentner, M. (2011). The "Q-sortware" as a web tool for personality assessment. Poster presented at the 27 th Annual Q conference, Birmingham, UK.

Postsecondary institutions and cost of attendance in … : degrees and other awards conferred

   … and 12-month enrollment. (2012). U.S. Department of Education, National Center

   for Education Statistics.

Rimm-Kaufman, S. (2015, March 9). *Improving students' relationships with teachers.*

   American Psychological Association. https://www.apa.org/education-

   career/k12/relationships

Roberts, M.A. (2010). Toward a theory of culturally relevant critical teacher care: African

   American teachers' definitions of care for African American students. *Journal of*

   Moral Education, 39 (4), 449-467.

Rogers, D., & Webb, J. (1991). The ethic of caring in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher*

   Education, *42*(3), 173.

Schorr, D., & Schorr, L. B. (n.d.). *Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage*.

   Doubleday.

Shemmings, D. (2006). "Quantifying" qualitative data: an illustrative example of the use of

   Q methodology in psychosocial research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2),

   147–165. doi-org.proxy006.nclive.org/10.1191/1478088706qp060oa

Slote, M. (1998). The justice of caring. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, *15*(1), 171-195.

Smith, S. S. (2001). *Boom for whom?: Education, desegregation, and development in*

   Charlotte. SUNY Press.

Spady, W. G. (1971). Dropouts from higher education: Toward an empirical model.

   Interchange, *2*(3), 38-62.

Stanton-Salazar, R.D. (1997). A social capital framework for understanding the socialization

   of racial minority children and youths. *Harvard Educational Review*, 67 (1), 1-40.

Steelman, T. A., & Maguire, L. A. (1999). Understanding Participant Perspectives: Q-Methodology in National Forest Management. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *18*(3), 361–388.

Stephenson, W. (1953). The study of Behavior: Q-technique and methodology. University of Chicago Press.

Styles, A. (2019, January 15). *Community College transfer students more likely to graduate than traditional students at Selective Colleges*. Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. Retrieved January 7, 2020, from https://www.jkcf.org/our-stories/community-college-transfer-students-more-likely-graduate/

Teven, J. (2001). The Relationship among Teacher Characteristics and Perceived Caring. *Communication Education*, *50*(2), 159. doi:10.1080/03634520109379241

Teven, J. (2007). Teacher Temperament: Correlates with Teacher Caring, Burnout, and Organizational Outcomes. *Conference Papers -- National Communication Association*, 1.

Thomas, D. M., & Watson, R. T. (2002). Q-sorting and MIS research: A primer. *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, *8*(1), 9.

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research, 45*(1), 89-125.

Tronto, J. C. (1987). Beyond gender difference to a theory of care. *Signs*, *12*(4), 644-663.

Tronto, J. C. (2013). *Caring democracy*. New York University Press.

Valenta, A. L., & Wigger, U. (1997). Q-methodology: definition and application in health care informatics. *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association : JAMIA*, *4*(6), 501–510. doi.org/10.1136/jamia.1997.0040501

Van Exel, N.J.A., & de Graaf, G. (2005). Q methodology: A sneak preview.

www.jobvanexel.nl

Wang, T. R. (2014). "I'm the Only Person From Where I'm From to Go to College":

Understanding the Memorable Messages First-Generation College Students Receive

From Parents. *Journal of Family Communication*, *14*(3), 270–290.

doi: 10.1080/15267431.2014.908195

Watts, S., & Stenner, P. (2005). Doing Q methodology: theory, method, and interpretation.

Qualitative Research in Psychology, 2(1), 67-91.

doi.org/10.1191/1478088705qp022oa

Watts, S., & Stenner, P. (2007). Q methodology: The inverted factor technique. *The Irish

Journal of Psychology, 28*(1), 63-76.

Watts, S., & Stenner, P. (2012). *Doing q methodological research: Theory, method and

interpretation*. SAGE Publications Ltd. doi.org/10.4135/9781446251911

Weber, J. (1999) As cited in Miller, A.S. Students that Persist: Caring Relationships that

Make a Difference in Higher Education. Online Submission. 2007 Jun 24.

Wehlage, G. G., Rutter, R. A., Smith, G. A., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R. R. (1989). Reducing

the risk: Schools as communities of support. Falmer.

White, B. (2003). Caring and the teaching of English. *Research in the Teaching of English*,

295-328.

Wright, P.N. (2013). Is Q for you?: Using Q methodology within geographical and

pedagogical research. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 37*(2), 152-163.

doi:10.1080/03098265.2012.729814

Appendix A: Characteristics of Non-Instructional Professionals

Data were collected from keywords of behavior characteristics demonstrated by Non-Instructional Staff at a rural community college administered by the Office of Accountability and Strategic Initiatives at CCC & TI.

A warm smile	Motivated
Acting as though they are being bothered	Negative
Actually excited to see students	Negative body language when greeting a student
Available	Organized
Bad Attitude	Paranoid
Body language that they don't like their job	Patience
Chronically tardy	Patience
Communicative	Personable
Compassionate	Positive attitude
Condescending	Procrastinator
Conscientious	Provides warm
Courteous	Quick responses to students
Creative	Reliable
Dependable	Resourceful
Displays a "not my job" attitude.	Rude
Doesn't follow up with timely actions.	Uninterested in providing support
Doesn't support co-workers but rather tries to make them look bad	Scornful
Eager to help	Self-centered
Efficient	Sloppy
Empathetic	Smiles
Ethical	Strong work ethic

Friendly	Takes a long time to get back to a student
Good communication skills	Unapproachable
Good listener.	Undependable
Hardworking	Unempathetic
Helpful	Unethical
If they don't know the answer, the employee will find it and get back to the student instead of passing them off	Unfriendly
Impassionate	Uninformed
Impatience	Unknowledgeable in their area of support
Impatience and lack of focus when speaking with the student.	Unreliable
Inarticulate	Unselfish
Innovative	Unskilled
Insensitive	Unwilling to be helpful
Judgmental	Uncommunicative with students or colleagues.
Kind	Very impatience
Knowledgeable	Welcoming
Lack of caring	Welcoming responses to students, staff, and faculty.
Lack of empathy	Willing to try new things
Lazy	Willingness to help others.
Limited knowledge of the academic offerings	Works well with co-workers

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate

Dear Potential Participant:

My name is Dena Holman, and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at Appalachian State University. I am conducting a research study to explore the experiences of Student Affairs professionals and the impact they have on first-generation student success.

Introduction and Purpose of the Study

This study aims to gain a better understanding of Student Affairs professionals who play a significant role in student success, retention, completion, and career aspirations. In particular, the study will explore how these individuals use their own experiences to create an environment and atmosphere that supports first-generation students through their higher education experience. Consequently, participants will offer insight into the practices higher education professionals can implement to support the growth and development of first-generation college students.

Description of Study Procedures

As a participant, you will be asked to complete a sort survey where you will sort a set of statements (concourse) about the qualities of Student Affairs professionals according to how much these attributes or actions affected their ability to aid in the success of first-generation student success. After the completion, you will have the option to participate in a follow-up interview. The interview will be audio-recorded. All discussions and other materials will remain confidential and stored on a password-protected computer and a secured online server to ensure confidentiality throughout the process.

Risks of Participation

There are no risks or threats associated with your participation in the research. Under no circumstance will your interview data be shared with anyone without your explicit permission. The results of this research project may be presented at academic conferences, professional meetings, or in publications; however, your identity will not be disclosed.
Presentations and manuscripts typically contain participants' quotes, but participants will not be identified. Your involvement in the research project is entirely voluntary. You have the right to discontinue participation at any time.

Benefits of Participation

The findings of this study have the potential to offer recommendations to higher education Student Affairs professionals, so they can work towards more policies and practices that support student success. Moreover, sharing your experiences may prove to be beneficial for you and your institution.

Contact Persons

If you have any questions concerning this research project, please contact Dena Holman (Principal Investigator) at (828) 217-0923 or holmandm@appstate.edu or Dr. Peter Nelsen (Faculty Advisor) at (828) 262-8686 at nelsenpj@appstate.edu.

Appendix C: Recruitment Message

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing to ask for your help and support with recruiting participants for my dissertation research title: "North Carolina Community College Student Affairs Relationships with First- Generation Students Influence on Student Persistence, Completion, and Career Aspirations.." This qualitative study aims to gain a deeper understanding of Student Affairs' role in first fostering student persistence and success.

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in a q-sort methodology where you will be asked to sort a concourse of qualities of Student Affairs professionals according to how much these attributes or actions affected their ability to be successful. After the completion, you will have the option to participate in a follow-up interview. The interview will be audio- recorded. All discussions and other materials will remain confidential and stored on a password-protected computer and a secured online server to ensure confidentiality throughout the process.

If you or some you know might be interested in participating in this study, please take a moment to fill out this study participation interest form or share it with others: https://forms.gle/DShp44SBV9fAHeLGA. From there, I'll send more information soon.

Thank you for your consideration and support!

Dena Holman Doctoral Student
Appalachian State University

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

North Carolina Community College Student Affairs Relationships with First-Generation Students; Influences on Student Persistence, Completion, and Career Aspirations

Principal Investigator: Dena Holman
Department: Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership
Contact Information: holmandm@appstate.edu
Faculty Advisor: Peter Nelsen, Ph.D.
Faculty Contact:
nelsenpj@appstate.edu

Consent to Participate in Research Information to Consider about this Research

I agree to participate in a research study that will better understand Student Affairs professionals who play a significant role in first-generation students' success, retention, completion, and career aspirations. I understand I may be one of three participants randomly selected from the names submitted from the q-sort who defined a member of Student Affairs/student services as the reason they completed a college credential.

I agree to participate in a 30-minute interview conducted in a semi-structured format. Each interview will be scheduled at a date and time convenient for the participant. I understand that the individual interview will explore how these individuals use their own experiences to create an environment and atmosphere that supports the first-generation students through their higher education experience. Participants will offer insight into the practices higher education professionals can implement to support the growth and development of first- generation college students.

I understand that there are no foreseeable risks associated with my participation in this study. I also know that this study may help higher education administrators work towards creating an institutional environment that is accessible, caring, and supportive.

I understand that my interview will be audio recorded.

I give Dena Holman ownership of the audio from the interview(s) she conducts with me, and I understand that audio recordings and transcripts will be kept in Dena's possession, securely protected by a lockable desk and password-protected computer. I understand that anonymous information or quotations from audio recordings might be used for future

publications beyond this research project, and all identifying information will be removed, and each participant will be given a pseudonym. I also understand I will not receive any compensation for the interview.

I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I can end the interview at any time without consequence. I also understand that I do not have to answer any questions and can

end the interview at any time with no consequence. Furthermore, I understand that my responses and data will not be shared with my employer.

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Dena Holman (Principal Investigator) at (828) 217-0923 or email holmandm@appstate.edu.If you wish to speak with the faculty advisor associated with this research, you may contact Peter Nelsen, Ph. D. at (828) 262-8686 or email at nelsenpj@appstate.edu. You may also contact the Appalachian Institutional Review Board Administrator at (828) 262-2692 through email at irb@appstate.edu, or via mail at Appalachian State University, Office of Research Protections, IRB Administrator, Boone, NC 28608.

This research project has been approved on XXXX by the Institutional Review Board at Appalachian State University. This approval will expire on XXXX unless the IRB renews the approval of this research.

By continuing to the research procedures, you acknowledge you are at least 18 years old, have read the above information regarding confidentiality, and agree to participate. If you agree to participate, please sign below to proceed with your participation.

I agree to participate in the study.

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature   Date

Appendix E: Participant Confirmation and Scheduling Email

Dear＿,

Thank you for being so interested in participating in my dissertation study to understand better the Student Affairs professionals who play a significant role in student success, retention, completion, and career aspirations. In particular, the study will explore how these individuals use their own experiences to create an environment and atmosphere that supports first- generation students through their higher education experience. I am very excited to begin this project and hope you are still interested in being a participant in the study.

Appendix F: Interview Protocol

Opening Script:

Good morning (afternoon).

Thank you for your participation in my research. As a reminder, I am interested in understanding Student Affairs professionals' role in first-generation student success, retention, completion, and career aspirations. In particular, the study will explore how these individuals use their own experiences to create an environment and atmosphere that supports first-generation students through their higher education experience. Consequently, participants will offer insight into the practices higher education professionals can implement to support the growth and development of first-generation college students. At the same time, they are strengthening the Student Affairs professionals' experience in creating an environment of care through interactions with community college students.

In this interview, I will be asking you a series of questions about your experiences, opinions, attitudes, perceptions, and feelings about your path to your career. This interview will be approximately 30 minutes. Please be aware that your perspectives and viewpoints are exciting and relevant to this research. I would like to audio record our conversation to help me focus on what you are saying in the interview. Is that okay with you?

BEGIN AUDIO RECORDING-GIVE PARTICIPANT AN INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Again, thank you for your willingness to participate in this research. Please take a few minutes to review and sign this consent form. It says that you: agree to be interviewed, to be audio recorded, that your personal information will be kept confidential and that you will not be personally identified in any reports or presentations, and that your participation is voluntary and can be stopped by you at any time. Please let me know if you have questions or need me to clarify anything.

Then let's begin!

Appendix G: Interview Questions

1. How do you define your role as a student affairs practitioner (Student Affairs professionals)?

2. Would you say that you have established relationships with your students (Student Affairs professionals)?

   If yes-how would you describe the relationships that you have with your students (Student Affairs professionals)?

3. Among support staff in the North Carolina Community College System, what are the most needed characteristics of support staff (Student Affairs professionals)?

4. What strategies/practices do you use to construct these relationships (Both)?

5. What do you think you do to maintain the relationships (Student Affairs professionals)?

6. How closely do the desired characteristics match existing skills, abilities, and qualifications currently sought by student affairs professionals in the NCCCS (Student Affairs professionals)?

7. What characteristics of care demonstrated by student affairs professionals do you think have the most significant impact on students' persistence, completion, and career aspiration (Both)?

8. Can the characteristics of care demonstrated by student affairs professionals empower students to achieve their goals be replicated (taught), or are they solely learned thru modeled personal experiences (Both)?

9. How do educational experiences draw the individual's into the altruistic career fields (Both)?

10. What types of relationships motivate, touch, support, and comfort individuals through their educational journeys (Both)?

11. How do these individuals perceive their role in creating an environment of trust and care that creates opportunities for information about careers and college to be shared (Student Affairs professionals)?

12. How do these individuals describe themselves as a caring provider (Both)?

13. What activities, actions, interactions, and relationships do these caregivers engage in throughout their work (Both)?

14. What resources do people who care access, mobilize, or confer for students and others (Both)?

15. What are the intended goals of one's caring? Is there any evidence suggesting these goals are being pursued or achieved by those they connect with (Student Affairs professionals)?

16. What are the characteristics of the cared for as described by the one who provided the caring support to the student (Both)?

17. What experiences help students relate to you as the one deemed supportive and motivating (Both)?

18. What people in your life made or influenced significantly where you are today (Both)?
    For each of those names above, to what extent did they influence your career decisions (Both)?

Vita

Dena Holman was born in Clearwater, Florida. She graduated from Lees-McRae College with a Bachelor of Science degree in Social Studies in 1994. After spending seven years working as a teacher's assistant in a high school setting, it was time for a new career and adventure in academia. She graduated with a Master of Arts in Education from Western Carolina University in 2006 and completed an Educational Specialist in Community College and University Leadership in 2014. Not yet finished with her educational journey, in May 2023, she earned her Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership from Appalachian State University.

Ms. Holman began her career in higher education in 1995 as a circulation desk attendant in the library of Lees-McRae College. In 1996, she joined the North Carolina Community College System when she accepted a position in the Learning Resource Center at Caldwell Community College in Hudson, North Carolina. After a short stint in the high school environment working with at-risk youth, Ms. Holman returned to higher education in 2003, to work with first-generation students with the Talent Search program. She has spent 21 years at the community college in various positions of increased responsibility, culminating in the Vice President of Student Services, a position she has held for 11 years. Ms. Holman is married to her husband Ron, and they have two adult sons, Cody and Kyle, and four beautiful grandchildren, Risa, Zoey, Matheus, and Sophia.