

# MEMORABLE MESSAGES RECEIVED DURING FRESHMAN YEAR OF COLLEGE

by

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(Under the Direction of Merrily Dunn)

## ABSTRACT

Memorable messages are “verbal messages which may be remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives” (Knap, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981, p.27). Since these messages are tied to concepts such as hope and resilience (Merolla, Beck, & Jones, 2017; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012), and because the transition to college can be a particularly stressful time for students, I sought to explore the messages and advice received during their freshman year of college through the use of narrative inquiry. While my results reinforced some existing knowledge about memorable messages, I also found that indirect messages received from college environments and policies can have a strong influence on students. In addition, I found that first-generation students might be more likely to seek out advice than those that are not. My findings lead me to suggest that college administrators put an added focus on the types of messages they wish to share with students and whether or not they are successful in sharing in them.

INDEX WORDS: Memorable messages, indirect messages, direct messages, first-generation, mentor

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	v
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vi
CHAPTER	
ONE.....	1
TWO.....	9
THREE.....	26
FOUR.....	33
FIVE.....	62
References.....	73
Appendices.....	79

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1. Participant Demographic Information.....	33

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1. The negative feedback loop.....	18

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Introduction**

Earning a college degree can impact almost every aspect of an individual's life and while pursuing a degree, students learn skills and are exposed to opportunities that often are required to be successful (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Russell, Nazione, & Smith, 2012). Yet only 40.6% of all first-time, full-time bachelor's degree students at four-year colleges that started college in 2010 graduated within four years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017a). While this is a 6.9% increase since those that started in 1996, it is worth asking why this number is not higher since it has barely increased since 2005 while during that same period there was a 3.5 million increase in enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017a; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017b).

Many reasons likely exist for why the number of individuals completing a bachelor's degree has not increased much over the years. However, in this study rather than looking at why more students have not completed a degree, I look at one possible mechanism that may help students finish. This is a study about the impact memorable messages can have on student success. Memorable messages are "verbal messages which may be remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives" (Knap, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981, p.27). Memorable messages are tied to such constructs as resilience (Smith & Ellis, 2001), empowerment (Kranstuber, Carr & Hosek, 2012), the transition to college (Wang, 2014), and the ability to manage difficult and unfamiliar situations (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). My interest in this topic stems from my experience facilitating a one-time



motivational interviewing group over the course of several weeks with roughly ten Upward Bound high school students while pursuing my master's degree. It is important to note, however, that though the group I worked with consisted of entirely African American students, Upward Bound is a program that helps students with financial barriers or no family history of college, regardless of color.

On the surface, participation in a summer bridge program seemed like a great opportunity for these minoritized high school students since they were all from underachieving schools and Upward Bound provided a head start on college and was designed to help them be successful. However, after talking with the students I found something entirely different. In fact, my experience with the Upward Bound students led me to the conclusion that they were actually unhappy about being in the program and this impression came from the fact that they used our group sessions to vent their frustrations. This is not to make a statement about the quality of the Upward Bound program, however, but just a note about the experience of these particular students.

When asked why the students disliked the program, it was revealed that their concerns were not about the content of the Upward Bound program or how it was being run. Rather, they did not believe they could be successful in and after college and therefore did not see the point of being in the program to begin with. This belief came from negative messages about college shared by family and friends such as the impossibility of achieving success as a person of color in a White dominated society and the inability to afford college. This belief also came from observed experiences such as having parents or guardians that never went to college, worked low paying jobs, and spending most of their lives in poor areas of the city. While there were likely other factors that contributed to the students' beliefs about college outside of these interactions

with family and friends, the messages and experiences involving them were directly referenced by the students. This combination of negative messages and observed experiences influenced how the Upward Bound students conceptualized college and their potential for future success. It was this experience that made me reflect on how messages from trusted individuals in a student's life can impact their decisions and led me to further my research on memorable messages.

It should be noted that the students did not discuss institutionalized forms of oppression as reasons for why they believed college to be unattainable. This is important to consider since parents and family are not solely responsible for the messaging students receive about college. Even though institutionalized forms of oppression very well may have influenced how these students viewed college, for the purposes of this study I will be specifically focusing on memorable messages. That being said, throughout this paper the reader should not forget that the participants interviewed and their stories should always be contextualized within the broader society and the time period during which they exist.

### **Problem Statement**

Previous researchers looking at memorable messages explained where these messages come from, as well as how they differ from other messages, can be different in focus based on the source, are tied to control theory and instrumental values, and can influence college success (Ellis & Smith, 2004; Kranstuber, Carr, & Hosek, 2012; Wang, 2012; Smith, Ellis, & Yoo, 2001; Smith & Ellis, 2001). Furthermore, researchers have shown that memorable messages have the ability to influence how students act as often as on a daily basis and whether or not they succeed in college, because they are tied to a student's values and the students therefore allow them to influence their behavior (Ellis & Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2001). Though it has been shown

that memorable messages have the ability to influence student success, some areas merit further exploration.

When reviewing existing literature, the authors had several suggestions for future research. One suggestion was to look at why those who share memorable messages share the ones they do (Wang, 2012). Another was to study a more diverse range of students to explore if memorable messages differ based on demographics (Kranstuber, Carr, & Hosek, 2012). It was also suggested that future research look at messages from families such as those with same-sex parents, since the majority of memorable messages studied came from heterosexual parents (Waldron, Kloeber, Goman, & Piemonte, 2014). In addition, it was pointed out that research is lacking on the connection between student satisfaction and communication received from those other than parents (Kranstuber et al., 2012). This is important to note as interpersonal communication can be a factor behind a student feeling a sense of empowerment in college (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996). One last suggestion was looking at whether students recall multiple memorable messages when assessing their behavior (Ellis & Smith, 2004).

When reviewing the suggestions above, what I believe to be the most important is looking at the memorable messages received in a diverse sample of students. The reason I want to focus on this area is because I have witnessed firsthand how someone's identity has the ability to influence the views they have towards college. Furthermore, since college can be a difficult transition for many students (Nazione et al., 2011), the first six to eight weeks of college are the most crucial for adjustment (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Upcraft, Mullendore, Barefoot, & Fidler, 1993), and research on organizational socialization has shown that people are most aware of the messages they receive from others when entering an organization (Jablin, 1984), I wanted to also specifically focus on the first-year experience. Another reason to focus on the first-year

experience of students is because over half of all students who leave college do so before even starting their second year (Tinto, 1996) and both academic and social adjustment are related to persistence (Woosley, 2003). To broaden this area, I will ask questions during my interviews with participants about memorable messages received from activities as well as the memorable messages students received from situations where a message was expected but not shared. These two areas are not covered in existing research.

Finally, I would also like to try and identify common components among the memorable messages received. This is because this is another area where research is lacking and because I hope to find common structures that can assist college staff and faculty in crafting messages that better support their students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

My goal in completing this narrative research study is to explore the lived experiences of college students related to memorable messages. Specifically, I will attempt to discover what memorable messages students received during their first year, where they came from, and if common components among the memorable messages received exist. During this study, memorable messages are defined as messages that students receive during what they define as important times in their lives that they remember for long periods of time and use to guide their behavior (Kranstuber et al., 2012; Medved, Brogan, McClanahan, Morris, & Shepherd, 2006).

## **Research Questions**

The central research questions for this study include:

- (a) What memorable messages have students received during their freshmen year and where do they come from?
- (b) Are there common components among the memorable messages that students received?

## **Significance of the Study**

My hope is that through the results of my study, I will be able to contribute to the literature on memorable messages not just by addressing the lack of research about the memorable messages received during the first year of college for a diverse sample of students, but by also identifying common elements of those messages, if any, that students received. To help with this effort, I will ask questions during my interviews with participants about not just those memorable messages shared verbally, but those received from experiences as well as when a message was not shared when expected.

## **Research Paradigm**

A paradigm is a set of assumptions that help individuals frame how they view the world, as well as how they think and what actions they take (Mertens, 2010). In addition, paradigms help to define the nature of ethics, reality, knowledge, and how people go about obtaining information (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Because of this, it is incredibly important for researchers to be aware of the different paradigms so they can choose the best one for answering their research questions. For me, the paradigm that I think is best aligned with what I am trying to study is constructivist because of its ties with phenomenology and emphasis on multiple realities

(Mertens, 2010), as well as how it ties in well with my previously described experience with memorable messages during the Upward Bound program.

When it comes to axiology, the constructivist paradigm consists of concepts such as trustworthiness and authenticity (Mertens, 2010), as well as reflexivity, rapport, and reciprocity (Lincoln, 2009). In terms of ontology, researchers with a constructivist paradigm believe that reality is socially constructed and therefore no one objective reality exists, but multiples that are defined by the experiences of different people (Mertens, 2010). Next, when it comes to epistemology, researchers with a constructivist paradigm believe that knowledge construction is an interactive process between individuals (Mertens, 2010). Finally, in relation to methodology, researchers with a constructivist paradigm emphasize methods of data collection such as interviews, observations, and document reviews, as well as the importance of interaction between investigator and respondent (Mertens, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

### **Theoretical Framework**

My research into the topic of memorable messages has consistently led me back to control theory. Control theory describes a method of self-regulation whereas an individual takes action to self-correct behaviors that do not fit with a set reference value (Carver & Scheier, 1982). More specifically, when an input function (condition, action) is sensed by the individual, it is compared against a reference point (in this case memorable messages) and if disconnect exists between the two, a behavior is committed with the goal to reduce said discrepancy (Carver & Scheier, 1982). This behavior impacts an individual's current condition and this new perception is then compared to the reference value again for quality of alignment (Carver & Scheier, 1982). It is important to consider, however, that this feedback system serves to maintain

the reference value or, in this case, the memorable message and not necessarily create new behaviors (Carver & Scheier, 1982).

Comparing this information to my experience described above with Upward Bound students gives an example of how control theory and memorable messages can work to guide behavior and why I should also guide my methodology around exploring the concepts of control theory. It is also important for me as a researcher to be able to talk to my participants in order to gain an understanding of their “lived experience” with this concept. Utilizing interviews will allow me not only to gain an understanding of the participants’ experience with memorable messages, but also see if control theory played a role through questions related to memorable messages and their impact on behavior.

### **Conclusion**

As I have shown through cited studies, memorable messages can have a significant impact on students because of their ability to influence behavior. In addition, a lack of research exists about differences in memorable messages received during college based on one’s social identity. Because of this, I will attempt to fill this gap by utilizing a constructivist paradigm to look at the memorable messages students receive in their first-year of college broken down by the social identities they hold. Furthermore, I will attempt to identify any common elements of the memorable messages received by students. I do this in the hope of finding ways to intentionally shape and share these messages in the future.

## CHAPTER TWO

### MEMORABLE MESSAGES RECEIVED DURING FRESHMAN YEAR OF COLLEGE

#### **Review of Literature**

When growing up, children are susceptible to the influences of others as they develop their sense of self. In particular, they learn morals from their parents through stories and metaphors, as well as messages such as *Treat others how you want to be treated* and *If you do not have anything nice to say, say nothing at all* (Waldron et al., 2014). While parents may be sharing these messages to serve the purpose of a particular situation, “parental messages can continue to support and socialize children long after they have left home for college” (Wang, 2014, p. 270). When students internalize messages and allow them to influence their choices and decisions, these messages become memorable messages (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981). For example, if a student was told that *Successful students get straight A’s* and they are getting B’s, they may first feel badly about their current efforts, but then due to the memorable message be inclined to study harder, get a tutor, and attend extra help sessions to be more in line with the memorable message they received. On the other hand, if students are told that *Only smart kids can be successful*, those students that struggle more may believe they are not able to achieve what they want in college.

It should be noted, however, that while memorable messages often do come from parents (Kranstuber, Carr, & Hosek, 2012; Waldron et al., 2014; Wang, 2014), they can also come from peers and social media (Russell et al., 2012), as well as faculty (Wang, 2012). In addition, since



college is an experience that can be difficult for many students (Nazione et al., 2011), they often seek out the advice of others to help them with their efforts of socialization (Russell et al., 2012) which in turn leads to the receiving of even more memorable messages.

Because of the centrality of the concept of memorable messages to my study, I will use this literature review to discuss the makeup of memorable messages, where they come from, and how they influence behavior. I will then talk about memorable message's relationship to organizational socialization and how memorable messages relate to success in college. Finally, I will talk about the background of my theoretical framework and how memorable messages fit into it.

### **The Makeup of Memorable Messages**

In order to fully understand the impact of these messages, they must first be distinguished from normal messages. For this reason, in this section I will discuss common characteristics that define memorable messages including their structure, the context of when they are shared, the content of the message itself, and the relationship with the individual sharing them (Knapp, et al., 1981). This breakdown of memorable messages is borrowed from Stohl (1986).

While the characteristics below are representative of memorable messages and help separate them from normal messages, it is important to note that the only essential criteria for a message to be defined as memorable is that it is significant to the holder of the message and is remembered (Stohl, 1986).

**The structure.** Memorable messages are brief and simple which helps with storing them in one's memory and being able to retrieve them at a later time (Linton, 1975). Examples include *Go to college* and *Be kind to others*. In addition, memorable messages are shared orally

and are often rule-structured meaning they may prescribe a type of behavior that will allow one to align themselves with the message (Knapp et al., 1981, p.31). Memorable messages can also be attached to instrumental values which are desired ways of conducting one's self (cheerful, intellectual, logical, loving) and can impact how students live their lives (Smith & Ellis, 2001). Because of this, whether one feels guilt, shame, or high self-esteem throughout their day can be tied to how close their actions align with their instrumental values (Smith & Ellis, 2001).

For example, when undergraduate students were asked about their experience with moments that either were or were not in-line with their ideal self-image, if memorable messages came to mind during those moments, and the influence of instrumental values, what was found is that instrumental values such as honesty, responsibility, and ambition were remembered during those moments and the students often did recall memorable messages that either fit or did not fit their ideal self-image (Smith, Ellis, & Yoo, 2001). Furthermore, for some, their instrumental values actually influenced the memorable messages that were remembered (Smith, Ellis, & Yoo, 2001).

**The context.** Often the messages that stick for children and become memorable are those that are received during “critical, important, and/or confusing times in their life, often when they [are] seeking guidance in order to make sense of a situation” (Kranstuber et al., 2012, p.46). However, children are not the only ones who internalize messages as memorable messages are also received when experiencing such feelings as being insecure, feeling unsure of what actions to take, and feeling unsure of how to interpret a situation or concept (Knapp et al., 1981) and these are feelings that everyone experiences.

Another time when someone may be receptive to memorable messages is when joining a new organization and this is because of the uncertain circumstances surrounding this process

(Stohl, 1986). It is important to note, however, that it is not necessarily the pre-arrival or orientation stages of joining a new organization that lead to the internalizing of memorable messages but rather once one is actually on the ground doing the work (Stohl, 1986). So for a student attending college for the first time, it would be once they move into their residence hall and start classes that they begin to look for guidance on how to succeed and begin to internalize memorable messages, as well as rely on those received earlier in life.

**The content.** In general, memorable messages encourage some type of action and outline specific behaviors that can be applied to a variety of situations (Knapp et al., 1981). Because of this, memorable messages are typically role-related and focused on the individual being able to acquire a new set of behaviors that will help them succeed (Stohl, 1986). However, the types of messages that are considered memorable vary based on the position of each individual (Stohl, 1986). So a performing arts major may internalize different memorable messages than a business major since their roles and career trajectories are different. This concept can also be relayed back to an individual's instrumental values as discussed earlier. For example, if someone has self-control as a value, they may be more likely to remember memorable messages relating to following the law (Smith, Ellis, & Yoo, 2001).

**The relationship.** Research has shown that the most important individuals involved in an individual's socialization are peers, supervisors, and senior co-workers (Stohl, 1986). The proximity of an individual and how often one comes into contact with them also influences the strength of impact of their communication (Rogers & Rogers, 1976). Because memorable messages are considered important and are received from respected individuals in one's life, they are kept long term and allowed to become a part of one's identity (Wang, 2014). Relating this to the college setting, it could be said that resident assistants, residence directors, professors, staff

members, and older students would be potential sources of memorable messages for incoming students.

### **Where Memorable Messages Come From**

Many students seek support from others since college-related tasks such as choosing a major, dealing with an increased workload, creating a work-life balance, managing finances, establishing independence, and navigating new social relationships can be a significant source of distress (Nazione et al., 2011). Because of this fact, memorable messages become increasingly important during these times of support-seeking since college is a new experience not encountered before, and because students may rely on these messages even more as they try to adapt (Nazione et al., 2011). Students may even rely on them on a daily basis.

For example, students were asked to keep a journal for five days that included one behavior per day that exceeded or fell short of their expectations and any memorable messages that were associated with these behaviors (Ellis & Smith, 2004). What was found is that 97% of the time, the students were able to identify at least one behavior per day that was or was not in line with their ideal self, that 98% of the students reported using a memorable message when assessing their daily behaviors, and that the top three sources of their memorable messages were their mother, parents/home, and teachers/school respectively (Ellis & Smith, 2004). This takeaway is critical since the daily actions individuals take on a regular basis help to define their self-concept and personality (Woike, 1995).

**Parents.** Memorable messages often come from important figures such as parents (Kranstuber, Carr, & Hosek, 2012; Waldron et al., 2014; Wang, 2014). This is important to note as communication within the family helps children in creating their own identities and children

can adopt similar worldviews as their guardians (Kranstuber et al., 2012). For example, if a parent is consistent in motivating their child to go to college, study hard, and pursue their dreams, their child may be more hopeful about the benefits associated with going to college. On the other hand, if parents share the idea that college is not necessary for success and that it has no inherent benefits, their child may decide not to go to college or may enter college seeking to confirm their parents' beliefs.

While memorable messages from parents can influence how students view college, they can also influence other factors such as their moral development. In fact, it was found that some parents, in particular those in affluent communities, will actually allow their children to participate in acts considered morally wrong and not punish them for doing so (Galloway, 2012). This could explain why some students do not seem to understand or care when they take actions that are in contrast with the values and expectations of the university. It is because these students may not care or do not know that what they are doing is against university policies because their behavior would not be violating their own personal values (Smith, Ellis, & Yoo, 2001).

But why are messages from parents so important? Well the relationship between memorable messages from parents and the concepts of college satisfaction, student motivation, learner empowerment, cognitive learning indicators, and relational satisfaction was looked at and what was found is that memorable messages from parents themselves were not predictive of college success based on their content alone (Kranstuber et al., 2012). Rather, it is the importance assigned to the memorable messages, the perception of their parent's intent in sharing it, and the relational satisfaction students have with the parent that allow the memorable messages to have an impact on aspects of college success (Kranstuber et al., 2012). What I gather from these findings is that without a strong relationship with the person sharing the

message, and without giving weight to the message, memorable messages may not have as much of an impact on overall student success as they do on daily decision-making. These findings also further underline that the power of parental and family memorable messages cannot be ignored, especially when one considers that “the impact of college is dependent upon the characteristics of students before they step foot on campus” (Sax & Harper, 2011, p.503). Student affairs practitioners should take note that without first establishing a trusting and respectful relationship with students, the messages of support shared may not be remembered.

**Faculty.** Though memorable messages from parents and family can be impactful, memorable messages can come from other sources as well (Kranstuber et al., 2012). In particular, faculty can have a strong effect on students through mentoring relationships since college is often a time when students start to create their own identity and seek support from others outside the family (Wang, 2012; Orbe, 2008; Orbe, 2004). Common memorable messages received by students from mentoring include achieving academic success, finding value in school, trying to improve one’s potential in the future, making decisions, as well as support and encouragement (Wang, 2012).

Most of the literature on memorable messages is related to how parent memorable messages can help guide student behavior. However, it is important to consider the differences between parental and college mentor memorable messages (Wang, 2012). For example, it was found that memorable messages from parents are used in moral development while memorable messages from college mentors tend to be more focused on academic and career success (Waldron et al., 2014; Wang, 2012). In addition, parents seem to focus on “general advice, encouragement, and emotional support rather than communicating...specific advice” on how to succeed in college (Wang, 2014, p. 272).

**Peers and social media.** “Using advice and experience of others, incoming students can make sense of their experiences and evaluate their fit with the institution” (Russell et al., 2012, p.110). This makes sense since the perception of support from family and peers helps students manage the transition to college (Russell et al., 2012). One way students connect is through Facebook since it offers a way to make connections with others based on similar interests (Russell et al., 2012). Facebook is the most visited website and is utilized by more than 2,000 colleges and universities in the United States (The 1000 Most Visited Sites, n.d.; Stern & Taylor, 2007). In addition, more than one study has shown that at least 94% of college students had Facebook pages (Stern & Taylor, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

So why is it so popular? It could be because it provides an outlet for students to gain a sense of community (Farrow & Yuan, 2011). For example, in response to a University sponsored Facebook message asking returning students to give advice to incoming students, nine themes of messages emerged including “work/study hard, try new things/explore/make the most of your opportunities, make use of campus resources, learn, enjoy/appreciate/be passionate, navigating the campus and surrounding areas, advice on how to succeed, things not to do, and do spiritual/humanitarian things/give back (Russell et al., 2012, p112-113). Since these messages are brief, come at a critical time, and prescribe some type of action, they can be considered memorable messages.

### **Meaning Making Through Observance**

It should be no surprise that obtaining advice has been shown to lead to better decisions (Dallimore & Mickel, 2011) and when better to ask a lot of advice then when you are starting a new job or joining a new organization? While advice can be incredibly helpful, however, sometimes it is not given when it should be. In fact, it has been shown that the majority of

advice given about how to handle quality of life decisions was received from sources outside of work even though these decisions often impact work life (Dallimore & Mickel, 2011). That being said, sometimes advice is never given, even outside of where it is expected, and this is where discursive formations come in. This concept outlines how a memorable message or lack of one can share a meaningful message (Clair & Thompson, 1996) and how in fact, the absence of a message can be just as powerful as the messages actually received (Dallimore & Mickel, 2011).

Keeping this in mind, consider that “children and adolescents learn a tremendous amount about the world of work from interactions with their families” through exchanges such as those that happen at the dinner table or storytelling related to work (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012, p.193). In these cases, messages are not always directly shared. However, they are certainly received and remembered through observance. So while actual shared messages are important and impactful, sometimes it is what is not said or what is observed that provides a memorable message.

### **How Memorable Messages Can Influence Behavior**

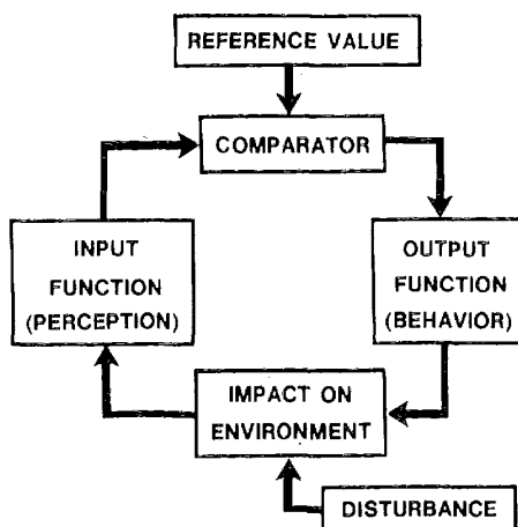
Memorable messages have the ability to influence behavior since they can help shape a person’s beliefs and guide their actions (Knapp et al., 1981). But why do memorable messages seem to have more of an observed impact than other types of messages? One answer is control theory (Ellis & Smith, 2004).

**Control theory.** Control theory describes a method of self-regulation that utilizes a negative feedback loop and this negative feedback loop helps individuals to address and reduce any deviation from a defined comparison value (see Figure 1) (Carver & Scheier, 1982). Tenets



of control theory have been around for a long time, but its creation is typically tied to the book *Cybernetics: Control and communication in the animal and the machine* (Wiener, 1948). Since this book came out, control theory “has had a major impact on areas of work as diverse as engineering, applied mathematics, economics, and medicine” (Carver & Scheier, 1982, p. 111). Control theory has not, however, been as thoroughly researched in the field of psychology and this may be due to the fact that cybernetic concepts were created in a setting outside the study of human and animal behavior (Carver & Scheier, 1982).

The process starts when an input function is received which is representative of the current state of being (Carver & Scheier, 1982). Once the input function is received, it is compared against a reference value and if a discrepancy among them exists, a behavior is performed in the hopes of getting rid of said discrepancy (Carver & Scheier, 1982). Once the behavior is performed, the resulting change and new state of being is then compared with the reference value again to assess whether or not the discrepancy has been properly addressed (Carver & Scheier, 1982).



*Figure 1.* The negative feedback loop (Carver & Scheier, 1982, p.112)

Knowing that control theory utilizes a negative feedback loop to determine when a behavior is necessary to adjust one's current state of being (Carver & Scheier, 1982), the question then becomes how does one know what behavior to perform. This is where a hierarchical chain of control systems comes in (Carver & Scheier, 1982). In this system, a high-level reference value serves to inform all the levels below it in order to narrow down a set of behaviors to perform (Carver & Scheier, 1982). In the next session I will discuss how memorable messages fit into this hierarchical chain.

**Control theory and memorable messages.** Relating control theory with memorable messages, people will take action to amend their behavior when they notice that their observed current behavior is not in line with their desired state as defined by benchmarks aligning with personal values and beliefs (Ellis & Smith, 2004). For example, a student who has few friends but has a memorable message of a successful student having plenty of friends and valuing social interaction will experience a negative feedback loop that will tell them a discrepancy is occurring (Ellis & Smith, 2004). Because of this, they will take action to change to be more in line with the ideal state (i.e. a person with plenty of friends) (Ellis & Smith, 2004).

In situations where students recalled memorable messages while facing college-related challenges, 70.5% of students studied performed at least one behavior after remembering these messages (Nazione et al., 2011). Behaviors included becoming more dedicated or driven in relation to the problem, studying, communicating to others what they were thinking, thinking more positively about a situation, seeking help or additional information, attending class, beginning to do work, changing their schedule, and changing their major (Nazione et al., 2011). In addition, attitude changes associated with remembering these messages included becoming more calm, adapting a more positive outlook, changing how they view school (in a positive

way), having more confidence and faith in themselves, feeling motivated, and learning to accept life circumstances as they are (Nazione et al., 2011). Clearly these memorable messages can have an impact not only on a student's actions, but their attitude as well. But how do students know exactly what changes to make when their behavior is out of line with their ideal state?

In order to know which changes to make, students use reference values associated with control theory (Ellis & Smith, 2004). These three levels include system concept, principle, and program (Ellis & Smith, 2004). When looking at these levels, it is best to start at the top or system concept. The preferred self-image that students wish to achieve is at the systems concept level (Ellis & Smith, 2004). This is the memorable message that is recalled by students when they are seeking internal guidance and it is attached to the instrumental values individuals have (Smith & Ellis, 2001). In fact, "values serve to maintain and enhance the self-concept" (Smith and Ellis, 2001, p.328). In this case the system concept is the memorable message *Be a responsible student that is accountable for their actions*.

When a student remembers a memorable message, however, they need to know what to do next and this is where the principle level comes in (Ellis & Smith, 2004). At the principle level are general guidelines for staying in line with the system concept and examples of how to be in line with *Be a responsible student that is accountable for their actions* are *Follow the code of student conduct* and *Do not break the law* (Ellis & Smith, 2004). While the guidelines at the principle level are more general, they are able to apply to several kinds of behavior (Ellis & Smith, 2004). In other words, the guidelines are able to be used in multiple areas of one's life.

While the principle level contains general guidelines on behavior that can apply to several areas, it is at the program level that specific behaviors to follow based on the situation exist (Ellis & Smith, 2004). In this case, it could be such messages as *Read the code of student*

*conduct, Do not go to parties where alcohol is served, and Do not do drugs.* An example would be a student who arrives at a friend's residence hall room only to find them using drugs out in the open. If this situation conflicts with their personal values, their memorable message of being a responsible student would quickly kick in and remind them that they need to follow the rules laid out in the Code of Student Conduct in order to avoid ramifications that could negatively impact their education. The program level would then provide specific actions based on the situation such as leave immediately and report the violation to residence life staff.

As the research shows, memorable messages are more complex than other messages in that they are tied to an individual's values (Smith & Ellis, 2001) and encourage students to identify action steps for staying in line with their ideal self (Ellis & Smith, 2004). This, in addition to the reasons discussed above for why they are remembered and where they come from, is what makes them different from normal messages.

### **Memorable Messages and Organizational Socialization**

The encounter stage, the point at which individuals enter organizations, is an important time for individuals as they begin to form a relationship with the organization (Barge & Schlueter, 2004). Since newcomers are in new surroundings, they are more aware of other's messages (Jablin, 1984) and these messages help socialize them to things like company values, what behaviors are expected, what they need to know in order to be successful (Brim & Wheeler, 1966), work expectations and rules, and office politics (Barge & Schlueter, 2004). Memorable messages also serve to help individuals build personal abilities and growth, as well as encourage newcomers to give their best work, be organized, be positive and have fun while working, and underline company expectations (Barge & Schlueter, 2004). In other words, memorable messages help newcomers fit into new situations and figure out how to be successful.

Relating organizational socialization to college, newcomers could be considered incoming freshmen/transfer students/graduate students/international students and the encounter stage would be orientation. Because of this, student affairs practitioners should be aware of the types of messages they are sharing, who is sharing them, and when to ensure they are properly socializing incoming students. How student affairs practitioners share messages is especially important because “When the social cost of seeking information is high, newcomers are more likely to use more covert tactics such as observation than overt tactics such as asking a direct question” (Barge & Schlueter, 2004, p235).

### **Memorable Messages and College Outcomes**

Remember that control theory is what allows an individual to know when their behavior is out of line with their ideal state (Ellis & Smith, 2004). Because of this, it should be no surprise that positive emotions result from when a discrepancy between one’s ideal state and their actual state is quickly resolved while negative emotions result when the discrepancy takes longer to resolve (Carver & Scheier, 1990). In other words, the faster the discrepancy is fixed, the happier the holder of the message. This may explain why negative emotions are commonly more powerful in terms of inspiring a behavioral response than positive emotions (Lazarus, 1991).

This combination of emotions and control theory made me wonder how memorable messages are used during difficult times (times with long periods of discrepancy) since the transition to college can be difficult for students and cause them to be more susceptible to experiencing stress (Montgomery & Cote, 2005). What I am imagining is a situation where a student holds the memorable message of *A college education is essential for success* but is

struggling to do well in their classes as well as fit in with their peers. Because of this, below I discuss the concepts of hope and resilience as they relate to memorable messages.

**Hope.** “Hope is a perception that no matter how bleak a situation appears to be, pathways toward positive outcomes exist” (Merolla et al., 2017, p.456). So why is hope relevant to memorable messages and college success? Well, one’s level of hope is shaped by their life experiences, particularly by their early interactions with those who are their caregivers (Merolla et al., 2017; Snyder, Cheavens, & Sympson, 1997). Furthermore, when people receive positive and supportive messages while growing up, these messages can contribute to the development of their self-concept (Little, Snyder, & Wehmeyer, 2006). Tying this to memorable messages and the fact that hope can potentially influence how people interpret and store communication (Snyder, LaPointe, Crowson, & Early, 1998), it is easy to see why it is important to understand the memorable messages students received about college while growing up, as well as those they receive when they start college, especially since these messages from important others can be predictive of their success in school (Cauce, Hannan, & Sargeant, 1992). In fact, it was found that the receiving of positive memorable messages is tied to the development of hopeful thinking (Merolla et al., 2017). This idea is further underlined by the fact that memorable message positivity has been found to be associated with college student learning outcomes (Kranstuber et al., 2012).

**Resilience.** Resilience is not focused on simply processing and moving past incidents but rather “toward creating a new normalcy, crafting a revised identity, and infusing positive emotion to displace or mitigate negative feelings that can diminish productive actions” (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012, p.191). One way this is accomplished is through the use of messaging (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). In fact, when dealing with difficult situations, families use narratives to

explain and understand adversity, adapt positive ways of thinking, share feelings, find humor, and work together to achieve goals (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). In addition, communication processes that encourage resilience include talking about working toward normalcy again and being normal, displaying positive emotions, and presenting oneself in ways that align with how individuals and families see or want to see themselves (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). Through the process of communicating about the world of work and observing parent reactions, memorable messages are received and adapted into one's socialization (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). In fact, parents that are able to communicate in an effective manner when facing economic crisis are better able to solve problems and cope with their situation, as well as build resilience in their children (Conger & Conger, 2002).

For example, when talking with families that experienced financial hardship during the 1980s recession, it was found that messages were used to create both short-term and long-term resilience (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). To create short-term resilience, messages of “numbers talk” were used, specifically around the idea of tightening the belt, sidelining (second sources of income), and preparing (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). To create long-term resilience, parents communicated to children the values and attitudes that are necessary to get through hard times (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). Examples of lessons shared include that you should never go on welfare and that you should always persist through hard times (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). Through the combination of messages and shared, as well as observed lessons, those interviewed received memorable messages that influenced how they would deal with issues within the world of work in the future (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). Relating these findings to college, student affairs practitioners may consider the importance of identifying memorable messages that can help with short-term and long-term resilience including sharing values and attitudes that can help

students succeed. Student affairs practitioners may also consider what learning experiences students should take part in to learn resilient behaviors.

### **Summary**

Throughout this literature review, I have discussed the tenets of memorable messages, where they come from, how they influence behavior, and how they relate to concepts such as organizational socialization and college outcomes. In addition, I discussed my theoretical framework and how it relates to my research questions. My hope is that you now not only have a thorough understanding of memorable messages and control theory, but also their ability to influence to students. In my next chapter, I will walk you through how I conducted my study in order to address my research questions.



## CHAPTER THREE

### **Introduction**

To review, my goal for this study was to identify the memorable messages participants received during their first year of college, find out where they came from, and then attempt to find out if common components among them exist. To accomplish this, I utilized narrative inquiry as my methodology. The reason I chose narrative inquiry is because “Stories are how we make sense of our experiences” and I wanted to learn from each participant’s story about how they acclimated to college and where, if anywhere, they went for support and what types of memorable messages, if any, were received (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.33). To help accomplish this, I asked participants questions not just about if/where messages were received and what they were, but also if they received memorable messages from experiences and/or lack of messages in situations where messages were expected. Before I outline how I conducted the study, however, I will discuss the criteria I used for selecting participants.

### **Sample or Participants**

The participant pool I recruited from was 18-24-year old college students currently pursuing their first bachelor’s degree, holding at least sophomore status. I wanted to look at traditionally aged college students experiencing college for the first time. Also, participants being past their first year meant they would have at least a year of college experience to reference when being interviewed. In order to ensure I had a mix of social identities among participants, I did not initially use specific selection criteria further than this.

## Site

For this study, I started by recruiting students online through social media groups focused around student affairs. When this did not lead to any participants, I added a \$10 Starbucks gift card as an incentive for participation. The adding of an incentive did result in me receiving emails from two potential participants. However, since I needed more participants, I then reached out to personal connections and extended family in order to find more participants. This led me to finding three more participants for the study.

## Recruitment Methods and Procedures

In the primary stage of recruitment, my focus was on recruiting as many potential participants as possible regardless of social identity. The purpose of this was to provide me with a large sample to choose from so that I could ensure I spoke with a diverse group of participants for my study. To accomplish this, I shared a template flyer on several different Facebook groups related to the topic of student affairs (see Appendix A). Once I received communication from a potential participant, I arranged a time for me to interview them over Zoom or phone and emailed them a copy of the informed consent for them to review, initial and sign, and send back. I held all but one of the interviews during fall semester 2018, with the remaining interview being completed during February of 2019. During the interview, I started by making sure the participant understood and could ask questions about the informed consent and the use of a recording device, and then I gathered demographic data and utilized the questions outlined in Appendix B as a guide to conducting the interview. I then used January and February 2019 for data transcription and analysis.

## **General Methodological Design and Defense of Method Chosen**

When considering which methodology to use with this study, I first reflected on what led me to my topic. Since my interest in the topic of memorable messages stems from how a student's interaction with these messages can shape their views on college, I needed to choose a methodology that would allow me to explore the lived experience of a phenomenon. Since my focus was on the combination of both the lived experience and the varying stories, I chose narrative inquiry as my methodology. Narrative inquiry is focused on the stories or narratives people tell through exploration of their lived experience with a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Subsequently, I did not choose phenomenology since it would mainly focus on the common lived experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Data Collection Methods**

Since "Stories are how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and through which we understand the world around us," my primary mode of data collection was interviews with participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 33). In particular, I utilized a semi-structured approach to interviewing which includes a mix of structured, predetermined questions with questions that are less structured (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I chose to utilize the semi-structured approach so that I could have a basis for comparison between participants but also provide space to ask additional questions as the opportunity arises. As I mentioned in chapter two, control theory describes a method of self-regulation in which an individual takes action to self-correct behaviors that do not fit with a set reference value (Carver

& Scheier, 1982). Being able to ask follow up questions of participants allowed me to identify whether or not control theory came into play as they reacted to the memorable messages and advice received.

### **Protection of Subjects**

When doing research, researchers should be led by the standard of: First, do no harm (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In order to ensure I did not cause any harm to the participants, I started out by providing a detailed informed consent that explained such elements as the purpose of the study, as well as that participation was completely voluntary and participants were free to revoke it at any time. In addition, I was transparent about how the data would be used after the study was completed and how they can gain access to it if interested. I wanted to be as transparent as possible as doing so would help build trust with the participants (Mile et al., 2014).

Next, I made sure I explained in the informed consent the benefits of participation such as adding to the field of research, as well as the potential risks such as reliving difficult moments. I also discussed issues of privacy and that participants had the right to decline answering any questions I had. Next, I discussed confidentiality in that their data would only be used for the purposes of answering the research questions and possible future education of student affairs practitioners, and anonymity in that their names and identifying information would not be attached to the data and results. Furthermore, to help ensure anonymity, I stored all of my information on just one password protected computer and, after identifying the social identity information for each interview, entirely removed any names or other identifying information.

## Data Analysis

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of my data, I followed a detailed coding process and integrated the opportunity for member checking with the participants. Before I analyzed my data, however, I prepared it appropriately which included transcribing my recordings after each interview since in qualitative data analysis the focus is on words as the main source of data and data analysis is an ongoing process (Miles et al., 2014). Once all of my data was presented as words, I put them into an electronic document and added in jottings about my personal reflections next to the text in another column using the comments function (Miles et al., 2014).

While many different types of coding methods exist, I focused on ones that both answer my research questions as well as fit my methodology of narrative inquiry. I started out by using descriptive coding which focuses on identifying general topics and then in vivo coding which focuses on the actual words of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Descriptive coding helped me identify the general themes of memorable messages received such as advice or guidance about life outside of the classroom or life in the classroom, while in vivo coding helped me break down further the specific messages, leading me to discover two levels of messaging, including one-on-one and institutional. These identified themes and specific messages then allowed me to answer the research questions. The themes and specific messages also allowed me to identify whether or not control theory came into play. As I reviewed the stories shared by each participant I asked myself in what ways, if any, did they adapt their behavior because of the messages or advice received. In chapters four and five I describe how the messages and advice received by my participants did indeed influence their behavior.

It is important to note that for in vivo coding I focused more on the words in order to understand the content and intent of the message rather than a specific sentence structure or

certain type of word used. I did this because the themes I found in the data, when attempting to answer my research questions, were readily apparent and, in my opinion, did not require a deeper level of analysis.

The next step I took was to take the themes I identified and bring them to the participants to ensure they agreed since “The analytic challenge for all qualitative researchers is finding coherent descriptions and explanation that still include all of the gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions inherent in personal and social life” (Miles et al., 2014, p.10). Having the participants confirm the themes I found helped me confirm that my own motivations and personal background did not overly influence the data analysis process and that I fully considered the intricacies of participant experience with the phenomenon. Finally, once I had confirmed the themes, I then reflected on and answered my research questions.

### **Trustworthiness and Positionality**

When doing qualitative research, a researcher has the ability to affect the study itself and how data is interpreted because of the influence of their viewpoints, racial identity, and position (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Because of this, it is essential that the identity of the researcher be discussed and considered. In this study, I am the primary researcher and will be conducting the interviews myself. I am a White, middle-class, homosexual male with seven years of student affairs experience including roles such as success coach, career adviser, and director of student conduct. My interest in this topic stems from my experience with Upward Bound students as previously described. Because of my desire to make a difference in the lives of others, especially struggling students, it is important to consider that when coding the data I am hoping to find support for common themes. In other words, I am internally motivated to find

answers from my research. Because of this, I made sure that I took measures such as having the participants review and confirm any themes I found in order to ensure I did not sway the results.

To ensure trustworthiness/rigor in my study I first engaged in reflexivity, specifically about my assumptions related to memorable messages and how I view the world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The goal being to understand where my interest in this study/topic came from and what I believed the answers to my research questions to be so that when interviewing subjects and reviewing data, I was aware of my potential influence on the results. This is essential since it is my belief that it is impossible to remove the researcher from their study when doing qualitative research.

While I will wanted to help co-construct knowledge during the interviews with participants, I did not want to have my voice be the only one heard. To ensure this did not happen I used member checks/respondent validation to ensure that what I was finding was in line with what the subjects were trying to tell me and what we discussed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My hope by taking these steps is that the results I came up with will be significant and reflective of what was really shared.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Summary of Findings and Interpretation

In this section, I provide a detailed description of each participant that includes the memorable messages and advice they received, where they came from, and the impact they had on the participant. After each participant's description I address my research questions by summarizing the messages they received and where they came from. Finally, at the end of this section, I discuss the themes I identified in the data. When discussing the messages received, I note indirect messages (those messages that were received from experience but were not directly shared by others) and direct messages (those messages directly shared by others). The research questions are:

- What memorable messages have students received during their freshmen year and where do they come from?
- Are there common components among the memorable messages that students received?

Each participant has been given a pseudonym to ensure their identity is anonymous.

Table 1

#### *Participant Demographic Information*

	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Year in College</b>	<b>Family Income</b>	<b>First-generation?</b>
<b>Cindy</b>	20	Heterosexual	Caucasian	Female	Junior	75,000-100,000	Yes
<b>Steven</b>	25	Heterosexual	Caucasian	Male	Junior	More than 100,000	No



<b>Joe</b>	22	Heterosexual	Caucasian	Male	Senior	More than 100,000	No
<b>Brittany</b>	23	Bisexual	African American	Female	Senior	25,000-50,000	Yes
<b>Susan</b>	21	Asexual and bi-romantic	Caucasian	Female	Senior	100,000 or more	No

### **Cindy**

Cindy is a 20 year-old, heterosexual, Caucasian, female student in her junior year at Middle State University. Her family income is between 75,000 and 100,000, and she is a first-generation student interested in studying student affairs. Cindy described herself as having come from a more diverse city than where she is currently studying and expressed that due to being first-generation, she started college without much guidance from her parents. In addition, she was sad when she first started college because she only knew one other person coming in. However, she was not very close with them.

An experience that helped Cindy with her adjustment to college was being in the marching band. “There’s like eighty people that I was able to reach out to if I needed them within the first week. So it was really nice.” That being said, she seemed to have trouble taking the friendships outside of the band setting because others would discuss making plans and then never follow up. From her efforts to create friendships, she got the message: “You have to insert yourself” and “be more aggressive to make friends.” This was not a directly shared message, however, but rather one she gathered from her experiences.

As the semester progressed, Cindy eventually had issues with other students. For example, she described a situation where her roommate, who is Hispanic, and several acquaintances misinterpreted something she said and because of this, believed her to be racially

biased. This misunderstanding then led to her roommate screaming at her so she reached out to her resident assistant for help. In response however, “he didn’t really do much about it.” “He was just like ‘room change’.” And once she moved to a new room, she had a roommate who was a foreign exchange student that did not speak English well. Because of this, she again reached out to her residence life staff for help, but this time just to get access to support resources regarding English proficiency. However, they again misinterpreted her situation by telling to reach out to her RA for a mediation. It seems the residence life staff was under the impression there was a roommate conflict, and missed the fact that she was asking for them to help her identify resources.

These interactions with residence life staff seemed to give Cindy an indirect message that residence life staff is not helpful when trying to solve problems. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the way they handled the situation made her “a lot more close minded than I wanted to be at that point. It made me feel I had no power in that situation.” Furthermore, it made her feel unsupported. Unfortunately, other students told her they had the same feeling about their interactions with residence life and housing. This fact, combined with her experience, led Cindy to consider student affairs as a line of work in order to provide a better environment for future students.

Because her parents could not give much advice to her about college, Cindy reached out to friends for general advice about how to succeed. What they ended up sharing were memorable messages and advice shared by their own parents including: “studies come first, then you can worry about making friends” and “having fun in college is good, but your GPA better match that too.” These messages were much more focused on academics than the direct message she got from her parents of “We’re paying for this, so we hope you have fun” and the career

guidance of “whatever you’re happy doing.” The lack of specificity in messaging from her parents made her feel they had lower expectations for her than she had for herself and that “they honestly just thought that college was pretty much a party.” This impression conflicted with how, after she started college, Cindy’s mother would brag about her college attendance to others. At one point Cindy stated that “It’s just crazy that she was just so proud of it, but she couldn’t give me any guidance. So like that was just weird.” When describing the experience, she said “It was embarrassing while I was standing there, but also like it meant that my hard work was like at least making her happy.” It seems that though at first Cindy’s parents’ messaging made her feel they did not value a college education and underestimated her, once she started classes this opinion may have changed at least for her mother.

Since she came into college not knowing anyone, Cindy explained that when trying to make friends, she was open to changing her personality “more than [she] really should have.” “My view when I first got here was to make everybody like me.” As time went by, however, that view changed. Especially when Cindy found a mentor in the band via the color guard instructor. It seems as if the guidance she got from him was the most impactful since, in her own words, “It was nice because he was more of like a father type figure, so like if you had a problem. I felt completely comfortable going to him and trying to discuss it because sometimes you just don’t want to bring those petty things back to your family over the phone. They just don’t understand everything. It made it more comfortable to realize that I needed to make my own individual choices.” Referring to her making her own individual choices, the direct message that she got from the color guard instructor is that she is an individual. This guidance made her more decisive and self-aware, as well as more critical about the positives and negatives

of her options when making decisions. For example, remembering that she is an individual made her make such choices as not going to parties where alcohol was going to be present.

Another impactful experience for Cindy was her first year experience course that was offered just for first-generation students. During this class, she found inspiration in the professor. “She showed me that I could excel and still give back to the community. She seemed very successful with what her background was and being a first-generation student so it kind of made me realize that like I can do it even though I don’t really have a background that a lot of people do have.” It seems like by seeing a staff member that was also a first-generation student be successful, Cindy received the indirect message that she too can be successful.

One last example of a direct message Cindy received was during her first year experience course. During this course, she was told that you need to study two hours a week outside of class for each hour you spend in class. She initially did this and said that it paid off. Eventually, however, she learned that not all classes require the same amount of work outside of class. Even so, she appreciated receiving this message as it at least gave her a guide to start from.

While Cindy received direct and indirect messages from experiences and statements involving others, there was also a time when she received a message from a lack of action. Specifically, at the end of her first year, she talked about how when she was registering for classes for sophomore year that she was “waiting for someone to tell me, like, ‘oh, you should do this major’ because I was undeclared at that point” and she did not know what she wanted to do. The lack of outreach or conversation about career choices with a college staff member made her “feel very insecure about what I was doing choice wise and I feel like I would have changed my major a lot less had I had that one meaningful conversation about ‘hey this is what I want to do with my life.’”

When asked what advice she would give future students like her, Cindy said “I would share that the people that you meet on the first day of college aren’t necessarily going to be your best friends... Worrying about yourself and what you want for your future is way more important than pleasing the people around you. ...taking the time to sit down and figure out what you want to do with your life based on your morals and what you want to do with your community is so much more important than going and watching that movie with your friends down the hallway.”

The direct messages Cindy received were “college is hard,” that she is “an individual” responsible for her own choices, “studies come first, then you can worry about making friends” and “having fun in college is good, but your GPA better match that too,” and “we’re paying for this, so we hope you have fun.” She also received the direct messages of “whatever you’re happy doing” as related to choosing a major and guidance that you need to study two hours a week outside of class for each hour you spend in class. The indirect messages Cindy received were that you have to make a conscious effort and be more aggressive to make friends, residence life and housing staff is not always helpful, her mother is supportive of her college education, and if another first-generation student has been successful she can too. Finally, Cindy said she would tell future students that you need to “[worry] about yourself and what you want for your future” and that is “way more important than pleasing the people around you”.

When looking at where these messages came from, direct messages related to how hard college is and the importance of focusing on her studies came from classmates, as well as the parents of classmates, and her first year experience course. Indirect messages about making friends, how helpful staff is, how supportive her family is of her education, and whether or not she can be successful, on the other hand, all came from experiences. Finally, the most impactful

message she received came from someone she viewed as a mentor that made her realize she is an individual in charge of her own choices.

Something that stood out to me from my interview with Cindy is that she did not seem to receive any notable direct messages about her ability to succeed in college or how to choose a career path. In fact, she specifically noted how her parents' lack of messaging made her feel they had low expectations for her. In addition, she talked about being frustrated by the college's lack of direct outreach around helping her choose a career path. That being said, her motivation for pursuing student affairs as a career came from her experiences in college and her believing she can succeed came from seeing a first-generation student that was successful.

These findings show that sometimes the most impactful messages received in college are the ones that are never shared, but rather received from experiences. In addition, if students start college without much guidance about how to succeed, they will look to friends, classmates, faculty, and staff for assistance. Because of this, staff and faculty have the ability to have a large impact on students if they are seen as a mentor, just as the color guard instructor made Cindy realize she is in charge of her choices and empowered her to use this guidance to guide her own path.

### **Steven**

Steven is 25 year-old, heterosexual, Caucasian, male student in his junior year at Midwest Public University. His family income is more than \$100,000, he is not a first-generation student, and he is pursuing a bachelor's degree for the second time. When Steven was thinking about where to go to college, he was not involved much in deciding where to go. In fact, his parents found his first college for him. While the college they chose, Private College,

had a great reputation and offered a degree in audio engineering, his desired major, it was private, Christian, and located in the south. Because of this, Steven felt a bit uneasy about going there due to the fact that he did not have a strong religious faith. He ultimately decided to go, however, because of their reputation, the city the college was located in, and the fact that they offered the degree he desired.

When Steven first started at Private College, he attended orientation with his fellow freshmen. However, he said he “didn’t utilize it as much as I should have when I was there.” In addition, he felt the university was very strict and said he was “very paranoid that I was going to be kicked out. A lot of my friends were getting kicked out.” Because of this, he went off campus to make friends. He seemed to have gotten the indirect message that he was not “safe” on campus. This is supported by his statement that he “sought friend groups off of campus because I didn’t really feel safe on campus.” To clarify, however, it was not that he felt physically unsafe, but just that if he spent too much time on campus he may get in trouble for breaking school policies. In fact, at one point he said that he “had friends that were getting kicked out left and right, like over really dumb stuff.” When asked if he felt that because of feeling unsafe on campus he sought more social support than academic support, he agreed.

An example Steven provided was when he came back to his residence hall one night but had to be let in by residence life staff because he forgot his school ID. Upon being let in, he felt the staff smelled marijuana on him even though he did not have any on his person. Because of this, he went straight to his room and got in the shower to get rid of the smell. Soon after, a residence life staff member was knocking on his door to investigate. This is one example of an incident that made him feel the college was not supportive and was trying to get him in trouble. It seems as if the indirect message he got from the policies at Private College was that they were

trying to kick students out. Steven supported this conclusion when he stated that he felt Private College was “actively trying to kick out students and take their tuition.”

As time went by, Steven found himself staying in his room a lot more and feeling a great deal of stress related to class. He said that he felt he “was past the point of no return” and that he did not “think there’s any way I can pass any of these classes.” “I didn’t know what to do and I was just stressed.” What further complicated the situation was that he did not take advantage of the academic accommodations he qualified for. When asked why he did not use them, Steven explained that he “didn’t like the connotation of it.” He seemed to have a sense of shame of using them, and because of this chose not to make his professors aware of his approved accommodations. Eventually, Steven ended up being put on academic probation for two semesters and then decided to leave since he said the high cost of tuition made him feel like he was “wasting it” due to his academic status.

He then moved home and got two jobs. However, he was not making as much money as he would have liked and eventually got the indirect message that in order to get a job that pays him what he wants, he would have to go back and finish his degree. After having this realization, he enrolled at Midwest Public University. His orientation experience there was much different than the one at Private College, however. In fact, he explained that due to him being a transfer student, there was not as much structured support and “they really let me kind of figure it all out on my own.” One of the first things he did to help with his transition was reach out to his grandfather who had attended the institution years ago. Unfortunately, the guidance given was not as helpful as he would have liked mainly because of the time gap between when they attended. Soon, however, he found his academic adviser and since then they have been “the single greatest source of information.” Once he made this connection with his adviser, any



information he needs he has “been able to get from her. So I haven’t really had to seek it out from other sources.” However, he made sure to note that it was not required that he meet with her. Rather, the responsibility was on him to take ownership of his education and reach out for help.

This idea of being responsible for his education was a recurring theme in the interview. For example, Steven wanted to know how accessible the teachers were outside of class. Upon doing research on the university website, he found that the teachers at Midwest Public University were required to be available twelve hours outside of class every week when other colleges only required one or two hours. This was an important selling point for him because it made him feel the college wanted him to succeed. In addition to the office hours, Steven said he found the online class portal incredibly helpful because giving him control of study materials helped him adapt the lessons to his learning style. Another area that was important to Steven was the attendance policy. While Private College had a strict attendance policy that gave him the indirect message that they did not want him to succeed, Midwest Public University had a less strict policy that made him feel ownership of his education. All of these factors contributed to him describing Midwest Public University as having a “Laissez faire sort of attitude. You’re an adult; you need to do your work. But if you need help, ask for it and we’ll help you.” Because of the helpfulness of his adviser and the policies of the school, Steven got the indirect message that Midwest Public University was supporting him in his education. In fact, at one point when describing Midwest Public University, he said “I feel like it’s more up to me to get the grade and less up to them.”

While the policies at Midwest Public University made him feel he was more supported than he was at Private College, Steven also mentioned that the culture was incredibly important.

He talked about how the culture at Midwest Public University made him feel comfortable studying in his residence hall room as he did not have to worry about getting in trouble like he did at Private College. Because of this, he spent more time on his studies, which he feels has contributed to the fact that he is doing better academically than he was at Private College. Another factor that made Steven feel more supported at Midwest Public University than at Private College was the fact that at one point his parents told him there is nothing wrong with using accommodations. This direct message made him more comfortable using his accommodations. One last important factor contributing to the culture at Midwest Public University was his adviser, who “basically acted like a mom...very supportive,” giving him the direct message that a master’s degree is obtainable for him. Before the adviser mentioned this to him, he “didn’t even think about a master’s.” He said he “never really thought about it until she mentioned it. I was like, ‘oh, that might be something that I’m interested in and I want to keep that option open for myself.’”

When asked what advice he would give future students like himself, Steven said “If they were struggling like me, I would tell them that maybe they should drop out immediately and try and live on their own for maybe a year and figure out how money works. And then go back once they realize what it would take if you didn’t go to college.”

The direct messages Steven received were that there is nothing wrong with using accommodations and a master’s degree is obtainable for him. The indirect messages Steven received were that his first college was “actively trying to kick out students and take their tuition” and that he was not safe on campus, that his second college was supportive of him and his education, that in order to make the kind of money he wants he would have to finish his degree, and that his second college had a safer culture. Finally, the advice Steven gave for future

students spoke to the importance of having knowledge of how hard it can be to make the money you want without a degree.

When looking at where the messages Steven received came from, the direct messages he got came from his adviser and his parents. The indirect messages, however, came from school policies, school culture, and work experience. What stood out to me about Steven's interview is that the most powerful messages of support he received did not come from a person. Instead, they came from the policies and culture of the colleges he attended. This finding opened my eyes to the importance of culture. The first college he attended had a culture and values that he did not agree with and did not make him feel safe. Because of not feeling safe, Steven said he sought social support over academic support and spent a great deal of time off-campus. However, his second college has a more supportive culture and because of this, he has made a connection with his adviser, uses the online learning resources, and spends a great deal more time on campus studying than he did at the first college. Another important finding is that much like Cindy, Steven got a powerful message from someone he sees as a support person: his adviser. Her message about a master's degree being obtainable really had an impact on him because he said he had never thought about that option before she mentioned it.

### **Joe**

Joe is a 22 year old, heterosexual, Caucasian, male student in his senior year at Large Midwest College. He is a fifth year student, his family income is more than 100,000 and he is not first-generation. He is pursuing a degree in industrial engineering and both of his parents have degrees in engineering. He does not feel like he fits in at his current college, however, but he also does not believe fitting in is necessary. Furthermore, when asked if he feels he made the

right choice in college, he responded with “I wouldn’t even say that for sure” and “I questioned it sometimes” before then saying the school he chose is “still a great place.”

When Joe first started college, he quickly made friends with the other men in his hall and described the process as “organic” since “everyone was just sort of helping each other out and everyone just kind of kept their doors open and communicated a lot.” In addition to making friends with those in his hall, he also joined social activities like a euchre club. Euchre is a popular card game in the Midwest. Outside of making friends, however, a big part of his adjustment to college was maintaining previous habits such as working out on a regular basis. He did, however, mention that he had to study and work a lot more in classes than he did in high school.

As time went by, Joe said he did not seek much advice from others. However, he did find his resident assistant quite helpful, though he did not mention any specific advice that stood out from them. He also found his academic advisor helpful, but said he only saw them two or three times the entire year. One meeting with his adviser stuck out for him, though, as during it they shared a direct message which was a strategy for taking exams. The strategy was to skip anything he does not know or is struggling with, answer all the other questions, then come back to it later. He found this helpful but said that nothing else really stuck out for him from their interactions.

When asked if his parents had given any guidance on college success, Joe mentioned first that they taught him “how to cook, clean, and take care of myself.” He then went on to say that in terms of academics, his parents gave him the direct message that he has to pay attention and if he needs help to reach out to the instructors. Outside of this guidance from his parents, he said

someone, maybe an instructor or academic adviser, also told him to utilize professor office hours and he found this helpful. And he did make sure to go to these hours when he needed extra help.

Next, Joe explained that his specific department within the college provided some messaging as well as the college in general. The department posted about such topics as potential internships and research opportunities, while the greater college focused on bigger events such as showing support after the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, FL. When it came to the messages about such incidents as the shooting, however, he felt they were unnecessary. “I get why they do it. I know that it helps a lot of people.” However, he said “I don’t need my university trying to comfort me in situations like that.” That being said, the communication from the college about such incidents gave him the message that it is normal to be upset and that the college is there to support students that need help. It is important to consider here that Joe’s privilege may have been what led to him not appreciating more the need for the college to reach out to students.

When asked if there was a time when he wished he had received a message or advice but did not, Joe said that he learned about all the college resources he needed to know about at orientation. “Whenever you start there, they pretty much make it very clear all the resources you can utilize.” He also mentioned that “it was always easy enough to find whatever we needed online via web pages and such.” So really there was not a time when he needed support and did not get it since he knew where to go for help after orientation. The only other message or advice that stood out to Joe was when a teacher advised him he could not save his grade at one point and let him withdraw from the class.

Joe confirmed that due to orientation being very informative he did not find a need to ask for much advice during college. When asked what advice he would give future students, Joe said “keep an open mind. Be a good listener.”

The direct messages Joe received were a strategy for taking exams from his adviser, to pay attention and ask for help from the instructors if needed, to utilize professor office hours, and at one point to withdraw from a class because he could no longer save his grade. The indirect messages Joe received were a message of support and the idea that it is normal to be upset. This indirect message came from his college after the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, FL. Finally, the advice Joe would give future students is to “keep an open mind” and “be a good listener.”

When looking at where these messages came from, the direct messages came from his adviser, parents, and faculty while the indirect message came from communications from the broader college. What stood out to me with Joe is that unlike the other participants, he did not seem to really identify a mentor on campus. In addition, he did not seek a great deal of help with his studies. The most significant takeaway for me, however, is that Joe is the only participant that did not receive, or perhaps chose not to share, any indirect messages that guided his actions. While the others were shaped by the cultures and policies of their colleges, how their colleges responded to key events, and seeing others like them being successful, Joe seemed uninterested in seeking outside advice and did not seem concerned about the culture he lives in. In fact, during the interview he said he does not feel he fits in at his current college, but does not think fitting in is necessary. He also said he does not need the college to comfort him during difficult times. Finally, he talked about how with orientation and online resources, he was able to find any help he needed.

## **Brittany**

Brittany is a 23 year old, bisexual, African American, female student in her senior year at Women's College. She is a fifth year student, her family income is \$25,000 to \$50,000, and she is a first-generation student interested in studying student affairs. Growing up, she participated in an all-girls organization and attended a career-focused international bachelorette high school. The combination of her participation in the organization as well as the IB high school are what led her to pursue higher education. In fact, the all-girls organization has strong ties to Wesleyan and offered her a full tuition and housing scholarship which she accepted.

When Brittany started college, she said she "wasn't like as nervous maybe coming in because I was coming in with my best friend from home. So I wasn't as nervous as maybe like the typical person going off to college." Even with this support, however, she still made an effort to attend a majority of the orientation programming during her first week saying "I was just really excited so I pretty much went to everything." In order to meet more students, she also attended night-time social activities during orientation. Though she said she enjoyed her first week, she did miss her mom a lot because she said they are "really close."

In order to help with her transition to college, Brittany reflected back on the lessons she learned in her IB high school. Specifically, she thought back to her senior seminar class which was dedicated to college preparation and covered such topics as time management. She also relied heavily on the first year experience course all incoming freshmen had to take. As part of this class, different offices from around campus came and spoke to the students. For example, at one point a counseling office staff member came in and gave tips for handling stress and talked about self-care. The first year experience was so helpful to Brittany that she said "I didn't really feel the need to go talk to people individually because we were always meeting with people

during that class.” When asked if there were any messages received during this class that stood out, she said she got the repeated, but indirect, message that “if you needed help it was there.”

Something else Brittany did to help with the transition was not get a job during her first semester. This one of the biggest changes from her life before college since she had had a job since the age of fifteen in order to help her family financially. Because of this, the idea of not working right away was difficult to her. Especially since she got used to the idea that anything extra like movies or going out to eat was something she paid for and not her parents. At one point she said “It was really hard because I knew I wasn’t going to be able to not work for four years... I was worried if I didn’t help out what was going to happen.” However, her parents gave her the direct message that “they wanted me to focus more on school and not worry about things going on at home,” as well as “school is going to be number one” and “don’t worry about us we’ll be fine.” Because of these messages, she agreed to not working during her first semester and said that doing so “helped me kind of get adjusted.”

While Brittany had support from her immediate family for going to college, she had varying experiences with her extended family. For example, she spoke about how her grandmother would give her the direct message that “you’re the smart one in the family” which she felt emphasized the fact that many of her family did not finish high school or stopped after getting their GED. This statement from Brittany’s grandmother made her feel pressure because “everyone’s eyes are on me.” With her cousins, she felt disconnect because she was in college and they were not. “There was kind of this sense of divide in a way that was really based on nothing being said or done. Just me going off to school.”

After learning that Brittany had varying levels of support based on being a first-generation student, I wanted to know how her varying identities played out in her college



experience. In response, she told me that in terms of her sexual orientation, she has “never felt excluded or weird or made fun of or anything. Especially with the people that I’ve surrounded myself with. I definitely feel like the school is very open and accepting of all types of students.” That being said, the school did have issues with race, in particular with Black students. She said she has never received negative messages because of her race, but she knows others have. In particular, Black students have felt marginalized by the class system at their school that had strong ties to the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacy. The class system she mentioned refers to the college practice of giving a name to each graduating class. Looking back at the college’s history shows that often these names referred to racist ideas or practices related to African Americans. That being said, she said the school retired the class names and even hired a new assistant dean for diversity and inclusion. It should be noted that Brittany is the only participant who spoke about her racial identity. This was not intentional, however, as with each participant I followed where the conversation went. Brittany’s discussion of her race as well as attending an all-woman’s college led to my further inquiry into these topics.

Brittany gave a powerful example related to the school’s efforts to support diversity and inclusion. She explained that during the 2016 presidential race, an international student from Nepal had the words “Go home immigrant” written on the board on the outside of her residence hall room door. In addition, someone wrote “Trump” all through the hallways. In response, one of the on-call student affairs staff members came to their floor for support. And the next day, classes were cancelled, there was an assembly in the quad where everyone wore black, and a chapel service was held with a speaker who made it clear that what happened is not acceptable. Brittany said that how the college addressed the incident gave her the indirect message that they

support their students. “The fact that classes were cancelled but they gave us the space to do that on the quad just kind of really showed the school’s support for their students.”

One last identity we discussed was her gender. I asked her if attending a women’s college gave her any messages or had an influence on her. In response, she said “Definitely. I feel like there’s kind of like this atmosphere of finding your voice and not being afraid to speak up and find yourself.” She also said they “don’t shy away from the fact that we are at a women’s college” and that “On campus I feel like everyone feels empowered.” Lastly, she said “I guess it’s been a safe space for women to find their confidence in themselves and find themselves outside of the pressure of what a woman is supposed to be or how she is supposed to act.” When I asked how this support of being a woman has influence her, she said it made her more aware of women’s issues and women’s rights. Furthermore, it has made her more likely to comment and advocate on women’s issues.

As Brittany got further in her college education, her career interests began to change. This was a bit of a concern for her since she described feeling pressure to pursue what she studied in her IB program. In the IB program, the students had the choice of pursuing either a diploma path or a career related certificate. Because of this, she had training in her chosen field of nursing and had already earned her CNA credential. What led her to choose this career path was the direct message from her mother, who works in healthcare, that “Hey, this will set you up.” However, when thinking back on the IB program, she noted that one of her main teachers told the students the direct message to not to be afraid of changing their minds as it relates to their choice of major explaining that when people go to college, their ideas can change. But this is okay because “college is for exploration.” This message is what made her feel comfortable pursuing a different career path.

Once Brittany became acclimated to college, she got more involved and worked with orientation and admissions staff, as well as became a peer mentor. These extracurriculars, combined with the permission of her teacher to be open to other career paths, led her towards student affairs. However, the financial obligation to her family made her question changing her career path. In addition, when talking to her mom and aunts about working in education, she was given direct messages that the money she would make would not be worth it. That being said, she eventually came to the realization she “shouldn’t pick a career just because it is something that my parents want me to do or something I feel could help us in the long run...I didn’t want to be miserable in a career even if I could have more money.”

As Brittany got more involved on campus, she found a mentor in the director of student activities. This individual became a mentor because she was also Brittany’s boss. When asked if there was any important advice from this supervisor that stood out, Brittany described how she did not believe there were many Black students at her school and the ones that were did not get involved very much in leadership roles. Because of this, she felt that others believed she was given her role out of favoritism or being liked by her supervisor and not on her merit. When she brought these concerns to her supervisor, she was told “If you know that you’ve been putting in work for this or successful at that, don’t let peoples’ outside views take that away from you.” This direct message made Brittany realize that she was put in her role for a reason and not because someone liked her. This advice, combined with what she felt was a false impression of her department, made her work to get more people involved on campus. Especially smaller populations such as Black students and international students. She described her efforts as “trying to create space for people to feel like they can be involved in student leadership.” She

also advocated for such causes as getting equal funding and attention to groups on campus that support marginalized populations.

When asked what advice she would give to future students like her, Brittany said “I would definitely tell them don’t be afraid to just try different things or different courses... I would say that you change so much during the course of your four years and to be open to that change. Don’t fight it. And I’d also say to be involved in some capacity even it’s something small. I think that will really help people be connected to the college.” Lastly, she said “the help is out there. You just have to want it.”

The direct messages that Brittany received were how to manage time from her IB high school; how to manage stress and self-care from the counseling office; and “focus on school and do not worry about things going on at home,” “school is going to be number one,” and “don’t worry about us, we’ll be fine” from her parents. She also received the messages that “you’re the smart one in the family” from her grandmother, “Hey, this will set you up” from her mother about working in healthcare, and the messages to “not be afraid of changing their minds” and “college is for exploration” from her IB teacher related to choosing a career path. Lastly, Brittany got the direct messages that “the money she would make would not be worth it” if she chose a job in education, and “don’t let peoples’ outside views take that away from you” from her college mentor and supervisor.

The indirect messages Brittany received were “if you need help, it is there” from her first year experience course, that her school was “very open and accepting of all types of students” from the environment of her college and how they treated her identities, that the school supports their students from how the college reacted to the incident related to immigration, and that her college is a safe space for women because of the fact that they had an emphasis on exploring

women's specific rights and issues. The advice Brittany had for future students was "I would definitely tell them don't be afraid to just try different things or different courses... I would say that you change so much during the course of your four years and to be open to that change. Don't fight it. And I'd also say to be involved in some capacity even it's something small. I think that will really help people be connected to the college." Lastly, she said "the help is out there. You just have to want it."

When looking at where the advice and messages she received came from, the direct messages came from her teachers in the high school IB program, the counseling office at her university, her family, and her college mentor while the indirect messages came from her first year experience course, and the environment of her college and how the administration responded to a discriminatory incident. What stood out to me about Brittany is that the indirect messages from her college seemed to have the most impact on her. While yes she received messages from her parents and teachers about academics, as well as support from her high school teacher about exploring a variety of majors, it was the environment of the college that made her feel supported and comfortable being herself. Furthermore, much like Cindy, the most impactful direct message she received was from a mentor she met once at the college.

### **Susan**

Susan is a 21 year-old, asexual and bi-romantic, Caucasian, female student in her senior year at Small Liberal Arts University. She is a fourth year student, her family income is \$100,000 or more, and she is studying English with a minor in theater. When Susan started college, she said that she "didn't have that hard of a transition time because I've always lived in a college town and had college professors for parents. So I spent a lot of time on university campuses." Furthermore, she had helped her older sister move to college and learned a lot from

her experience. The sister also lived about twenty minutes away when she first started college so that added extra support. In addition, she had participated in a theater competition for a scholarship for several months before officially starting classes. When describing the program and starting college, she said she “made a bunch of friends there so I was nervous but I was glad that I knew people already.”

When asked about her orientation experience, Susan explained that she remembers having been part of an orientation group where the guide was an upperclassman studying theater. She appreciated the fact that she got to be led by someone with similar interests. In addition, she was able to quickly make a friend during orientation that she spent a great deal of time with. Susan described how she tends “to force friendship around people. I will meet a person, and I will interact with them, and I’ll be like ‘we’re friends now’.” She said this strategy has served her well over the years. What further helped with her transition to college life was staying in contact with high school friends and her mother. When asked about the orientation activities she participated in, Susan said she did not remember orientation that well because other events that happened around that time stood out more.

After orientation, Susan became involved on campus by becoming the editor for the university literary magazine and joining an improv group, as well as joining both an interfaith and an LGBT group. Because of her high level of involvement, experience growing up with two college professors, and her older sister living nearby, I asked if she felt those factors helped her adjust more so than participating in orientation and she agreed. What also helped, however, was the environment of the college. Susan said that she felt “100%” that she made the right choice in choosing Small Liberal Arts University. What she especially liked is because it is a small liberal

arts college, she “never feel[s] like [she] is in a huge crowd of people” which is important because of her claustrophobia.

As Susan began her classwork, she mentioned that she utilized a memorable message from her mother about studying. In particular, “for every hour you spend in class you need to spend at least two or three hours a night of class study.” She said that though she did not always follow the advice, it was “extremely helpful advice and definitely let me know how heavy the workload was going to be, which I think was something I was kind of a little unprepared for.” Another piece of advice related to academics that she received was that it is important to make use of office hours. She got this direct message from her English faculty and followed it saying that the office hours were “very helpful.” When asked what made her trust this advice, she said it was because it came from college professors and because “if all these people agree that this is a good thing, I should probably do it. They’re supposed to be smarter than me.” One last piece of guidance she received was also from her mother. However, it was not a particular piece of advice or a message, but rather just her mother letting her know about the disability resources center. “It definitely just helped having my mother. It helps to have her as a person in your corner.” This knowledge from her mother about the disability resources center is what led her to the tutoring services available on campus that she found very helpful.

Susan then talked about the messages and advice she received regarding the aspects of college that were outside of class. One of the messages that stood out the most to her was from her mother. Her mother gave her the direct message that she should “figure out what [her] alcohol tolerance was.” She said “that was the weirdest advice [she] thinks [she] got” because she was not one to go to parties in high school and she had not had any alcohol before. After one particular night when she had too much to drink, she got guidance from her mother and friends

about how to not have alcohol affect her as much (i.e. make sure to keep eating while drinking) and how to recover from having too much. Another message she got regarding the aspects of college outside of class was that you should “always take care of your mental health” and “take care of your mental state before anything else.” This direct message came from one of her friends when she was in high school and was dealing with an anxiety attack. Because of this advice, she took part in activities like meditation.

When asked if there was a particular individual or group that had a significant impact on her, she said her theater friends really stood out. And though no advice or messages from them were easily recalled, she said that just them being there to support her and asking her if she is okay when she seems stressed out gave her the indirect message that they supported her. She said she “always felt supported by them no matter what and that was always just a really nice feeling.” A particular example of her getting the indirect message that they support her was when she fell down a flight of stairs in the theater and they helped her over to a couch and assisted her in wrapping her injured foot. At one point I asked her if one of her biggest sources of support was just having the theater group in her life and she agreed.

When the concept of receiving messages from the college environment came up, Susan explained that one message she got from her college experience was that “you can be yourself more in college than you can in high school” and the “people are not going to judge you.” She said she got this message from being around a diverse group of people on a regular basis as well as having a strong friend group. At one point she said these experiences gave her “this feeling that suddenly I was never going to be judged if I wanted to be my slightly wacky, out of step self because I definitely have a very out there personality just as a person in general and I just definitely felt very welcomed and just very supported. I had some really good friends freshman



year and I just felt really loved.” An element of the college that helped her feel she could be herself was the existence of an LGBT organization because she “didn’t really come out until [she] was in college.” She also found the interfaith group helpful and supportive.

When asked if there was a particular experience she had in college that made her feel supported, she referenced the first time she had too much to drink. She said her friends helped her walk back to her room. “I was stumbling a little bit and then they made me drink a bunch of water, despite my protests.” She appreciated that though she was refusing their help, they still persisted in trying to help her. “I was trying to walk outside and my friends were like ‘get back here. You’re not sober right now.’ And then one of my friends was just like ‘come on.’ He put his arm around my waist and helped me walk back to my room.”

Next, Susan talked about an experience where the university responded to a national event. After Donald Trump was elected president, the university held a town hall meeting where students could come in and get “an opportunity to speak their mind” about any concerns they had. Though she could not attend this town hall, Susan said that the university holding it showed that “they understood that there were going to be a lot of people who were upset and they wanted to make sure that everyone was able to voice their concerns and just sort of like have a space” to do so. She said that the university holding this town hall meeting showed that they were trying to support students, though some people, she said the campus republicans, were “really mad about it though.”

Finally, when asked about what advice should would give future students like her, Susan said “always be prepared.”

The direct messages Susan received were about how much time to study outside of class from her mother, that it is important to utilize professor office hours from her English faculty, that the disability resource center is a helpful resource available to her from her mother, and that it is important to figure out what her alcohol tolerance is from her mother. She also got advice about how not to have alcohol affect her as much from her mother, as well as how to recover when she has had too much from both her mother and friends, and the messages to “always take care of your mental health” and “take care of your mental state before anything else” from friends. The indirect messages Susan received were that her friends in the theater group supported her from how they treated her, “you can be yourself more in college than you can in high school” and “people are not going to judge you” from her college environment, and her university supported their students from how they responded to the 2016 presidential election. Finally, the advice Susan had for future students was to “always be prepared.”

When looking at where these messages came from, the direct messages came from her mother, professors, and friends while the indirect messages came from friends, the college environment, and her university’s reaction to a political event. What stood out to me from my interview with Susan is that the messages that made her feel she was supported and that she could be herself came from experiences, and not direct messages from others. In addition, unlike the parents of other participants that focused on academic messages and success, her mother provided a message about her life outside of class related to learning her alcohol tolerance.

### **Themes**

When reviewing the messages received by participants, some themes stood out. First, every participant received a message about academics from their parents or the parents of other students. That being said, Cindy stood out in that being a first-generation student, her parents

were not the ones sharing messages about academics with her. She actually sought out the advice of other students and they shared the advice their parents had given them. It should be noted that with the exception of Susan, none of the participants mentioned impactful advice or messages coming from their parents related to topics outside of the classroom.

Another theme is the participants got messages of support, or lack thereof, from experiences with staff and witnessing how their college reacted to major events. In fact, for Cindy and Brittany, their experiences with college staff are what led them to pursue careers in student affairs. Similarly, some of the participants mentioned receiving messages from their college policies and even from hiring practices. For example, Steven felt “unsafe” on campus at his first college because their policies made him believe that college staff were actively trying to remove students. At his second college, however, the policies made him feel supported and safe which he said contributed to him spending more time on his studies. In addition, Brittany saw the act of her college hiring a new staff member in charge of diversity and inclusion as the college showing they are taking steps to improve the campus environment.

Another theme is that though each participant went through an orientation program that may or may not have given education on disability resource offices, parents were the ones that gave messages about, or encouraged them to use, accommodations. An additional theme related to orientation is that the participants that were not first-generation students did not seem to utilize it as much. Or, if they did, they do not have much memory of it. Furthermore, these participants seemed more self-sufficient when approaching problems. For example, Steven took ownership of connecting with his adviser at his second college, Joe said when he had an issue he just looked up the relevant college resources online, and Susan said all it took for her to reach out for resources was getting a poor grade on an assignment. On the other hand, with the two first-

generation students, Cindy sought social support and advice through the marching band and friends, while Brittany reached out to her mentor/supervisor.

Also, the two participants that are first-generation students talked about finding mentors on campus: Cindy had her color guard instructor while Brittany had her supervisor. The messages from these mentors seemed to have a larger impact than any other messages they received. On the other hand, the three other participants who are not first-generation students did not mention having a mentor on campus. That being said, Steven did describe a supportive relationship with his academic adviser who he said was almost like a mother figure and made him believe for the first time that a master's degree was obtainable for him. Another theme related to the first-generation students is that they seemed to seek more social support than the other participants. This theme is further underlined when you look at Steven, the only participant that attended more than one college. In his first college he felt the college was not supporting him and because of this he sought support from friends and did not use college resources. At his second college where he felt more supported, however, he spoke more about the use of academic resources and less about looking for help from friends.

One last theme is that when asked what advice they would give future students, every single participant spoke to life outside of the classroom from being your own person, to appreciating the value of a degree, keeping an open mind, not being afraid to try new things or to ask for help, and always being prepared.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **General Discussion**

Through conducting this study, I was able to confirm some information about memorable messages that was already known including that they often come from important figures in an individual's life during a critical time (i.e. parents, faculty, friends) and that parents often share general advice with their children rather than talk to them about how to succeed in college (Kranstuber et al., 2012; Wang, 2014). What I did not expect to find, however, is two levels of messaging: one-on-one messaging and institutional messaging. One-on-one messaging describes the messages directly received from others and is extensively covered by existing research while institutional messaging describes the messages received from college policies and how administration responds to key events. There is not nearly as much research on institutional messaging. In chapter four, the direct messaging I refer to is one-on-one messaging while the indirect messaging I refer to is institutional messaging. I will now discuss the important takeaways from both levels of messaging.

#### **One-on-one Messaging**

The first important takeaway is that the first-generation students I interviewed, Cindy and Brittany, seemed to have a different relationship with memorable messages and advice than the other participants. Specifically, they were more likely to seek out mentors as well as social support from their peers; Cindy found a mentor in her color guard instructor while Brittany found one in her student life supervisor. These mentors then shared with them memorable

messages associated with values such as self-sufficiency and determination that communicated a way of being. The fact that the memorable messages shared by these mentors communicated a way of being is important to note because research has shown that resilience can be tied to how one presents themselves (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). In addition, control theory involves making adjustments to one's behavior in order to be in line with a desired image (Carver & Scheier, 1982). And this is just what happened. Cindy's mentor encouraged her to see herself as an individual and this new mindset helped her make decisions moving forward that were based on her personal values. She also used this messaging to help her avoid activities that could jeopardize her education like participating in underage drinking. Brittany, on the other hand, found encouragement to persist in her efforts to make spaces for smaller student groups on campus when her mentor told her to trust that she deserved her role and ignore the negative opinions of others. Both participants persisted and showed resilience because of the messages they received. What is also interesting is that both of these participants went into college with a career goal in mind, but switched to pursuing student affairs after their experiences. Cindy's lacking experience with her residence life staff and Brittany's enjoyment for helping smaller groups feel involved shaped their career goals. This was really interesting to me because the rest of the participants who were not first-generation continued with the career goals they entered college with.

For the rest of the participants that were not first-generation, the one-on-one messaging they received pertained mainly to academics and included advice about test taking, as well as recommendation to use office hours and other campus resources. While Susan did receive a message from her mother about learning her alcohol tolerance and Steven got messages about using accommodations and pursuing a master's degree, these messages did not seem to have

nearly as big of an impact on them as the direct messages received by Cindy and Brittany from their mentors. In addition, these messages were not about a way of conducting themselves.

### **Institutional Messaging**

Throughout data analysis, I noticed that often the messages the participants received that guided their actions were not directly shared but rather internalized as they reacted to the culture and policies of their institution. An individual's values can influence which memorable messages are remembered (Smith, Ellis, & Yoo, 2001). This is important to note because the participants showed that an incongruence with the culture of one's college can lead them to not ask for help, seek social support more than the college's, and gather an impression of whether or not the college supports them. Interactions with staff and hiring practices were also shown to give the participants messages about how supported they were. Maybe the reason why Brittany enjoyed her time at Women's College was because of their focus on empowering women and the fact that this value had been internalized through her experience with an all-girls group growing up.

The next thing I noticed is that the students I interviewed that were not first-generation were more self-sufficient in seeking help, needed less guidance from staff and faculty, and were less likely to have identified a mentor on campus. That being said, the culture of the college seems to have had an impact. For example, Steven did not ask for help in his first college and attributed this to "not feeling safe" on campus and feeling as if the college was trying to get rid of their students. Relating Steven's situation back to control theory, it seems as if receiving the message that the college was trying to get rid of their students influenced his decision to disengage from the college, as well as not seek help and eventually leave. When he started at his second college where his and their values aligned better, however, the experience was

dramatically different and he became much more self-sufficient. This stood out to me since the receiving of positive memorable messages is tied to the development of hopeful thinking (Merolla et al., 2017) and at one point Steven said he just felt his situation was beyond help at his first college and this led him to remove himself from the situation.

### **Participant Advice**

When asked what advice they would give future students, all of my participants focused on life outside of the classroom and none shared advice they received from parents and faculty such as study habits and putting education first. This stood out because if a student is looking to friends for advice because they do not feel comfortable asking the college for help and do not have family members to look to, that peer advice may have the potential to have a stronger impact than expected. Especially since, as previously noted, research shows that peers, supervisors, and senior co-workers are the most important individuals when it comes to an individual's socialization process (Stohl, 1986).

### **Implications**

While below I discuss several recommendations for college administrators based on my research, the implication I think to be most important is that a college's culture, policies, and how they respond to major events can communicate impactful indirect messages to their students. Furthermore, these indirect messages can then serve to guide a student's behavior specifically around how likely they are to seek help when needed. Like I said above, I went into this research focusing on shared, direct messages. I was not expecting to find that some of the most impactful messages my participants shared were indirectly received. For example, Cindy felt unsupported when residence life staff did not take time to truly understand her issues and her



college did not directly reach out to discuss her career path. However, she felt she could still be successful when she saw a first-generation student teaching a class. Steven felt unsafe being on campus because of his first college's policies and withdrew himself until he had to leave the college. But his second college communicated different messages with their policies that helped him achieve success. Joe learned it is okay to be upset from how his college responded to the Pulse nightclub shooting, even though he was not looking for support. Brittany learned it is okay to question the status quo from how her college focused on empowering women and felt the college administration supported their diverse student base in how they responded to racist behavior on campus. Finally, Susan learned her college supported their students in how they reacted to the 2016 presidential election.

In one way or another, each of the participants received an indirect message from their college's policies, how college staff responded to their needs and provided outreach, and how administration responded to key events. Due to this fact, I want to emphasize my belief that the culture and environment of a college needs to be intentionally created and curated by college administration. Consider the case of the college Brittany attended. Their tradition of using class names led to the persistence and reinforcement of racist beliefs. Upon outcry from students and society, however, they did away with this system and even hired a new staff member focused on diversity and inclusion. The situation with Brittany's college is a great example of how colleges need to be active in assessing their policies, culture, and environment and what messages they are providing to students.

To help colleges be successful in building cultures that share the messages they want, I suggest that college administrators refer to Bronfenbrenner's Person-Process-Context-Time Model which looks at the "influence of person-environment interactions in an individual's

development” (Renn & Arnold, 2003, p.266). In this model, Bronfenbrenner places the student in the center of a microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem believing that their interaction with each level is integral to their development (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Because of this, I suggest college administrators make efforts to understand the type of messaging students receive at each of these levels and, to the extent they can, intentionally shape the messages received in ways that support student success. This could include providing education to students, staff, and faculty on what types of messages support student success and encourage persistence so they can share them with others. Other efforts could include giving training on how to provide messaging to students after significant campus events such as the one Brittany experienced when her fellow student experienced discrimination. Another key point is that “Students are shaped in part by the era in which they attend college” (Renn & Arnold, 2003, p.272). Knowing this, I suggest that as college administrators are working to create their ideal culture for students, they keep in mind any broader societal events. An example is with Susan when her college proactively took measures to give an outlet for students that may have had a negative reaction to the 2016 presidential election.

A key point to consider when reviewing these suggestions, however, is that it may not be possible to create an ideal culture for every single student since, as previously discussed, the messages that stand out to students often change based on their values (Smith et al., 2001). Given this, if college administrators are struggling to craft messages that help all students, it would be best to use assessments and data analysis to figure out which student groups may need additional support and work to provide supportive and intentional messages to them to increase their persistence.

## Recommendations

My first recommendation is related to first-generation students. The first-generation students in my study showed that they were more likely to seek a mentor as well as social support from their peers. Because of this, I would suggest that student affairs practitioners and college administrators take time to really think about what efforts are being made to reach out to first-generation students, as well as other students that fit into what would be considered small and/or marginalized groups, and intentionally share messages that will guide them toward college success. These messages should address areas not covered by peers and mentors such as specific guidance about how to succeed in classes. In addition, I think student affairs practitioners and college administrators should identify potential mentors on campus and then provide training and education on how to guide first-generation students towards success. Education should include topics such as the varying experiences and views related to higher education based on demographic and cultural background, as well as listening skills. That way when students reach out to mentors for support, whoever they talk to is able to first understand their concerns and then give advice and messages based on a more holistic lens of the student in front of them.

Next, I suggest student affairs practitioners and college administrators pay extra attention to the feedback of smaller and/or marginalized groups on campus. I say this because the two first-generation students I interviewed ultimately chose to pursue a career in student affairs rather than their original paths because of their college experiences. If these two students used their experiences to make situations better for future students, imagine what positive changes could be made in real time if feedback was intentionally sought from students that may not have as positive of an experience as others.

Another suggestion I have for student affairs practitioners and college administrators is to create a mentor program on campus that involves participation from students, as well as staff, faculty, senior and graduate students, alumni, and local or industry business professionals. Through this study, I was able to confirm that memorable messages can come from different sources and the messages can differ based on the source. Because of this, I think it would be good to have a program where students can choose different mentors with differing experiences and qualifications so they can get a variety of advice. Another reason to involve faculty, staff, senior and graduate students, alumni, and local or industry business professionals is because, as shown by Cindy's experience, there is the potential that if these individuals represent the smaller and/or marginalized populations on campus, their involvement may give the message to these student populations that they too can be successful.

My next recommendation for student affairs practitioners and college administrators is to be intentional about what messages they want students to take away from their policies and how they react to major events. I say this because my participants have shown that even if practitioners and administrators say nothing, they are communicating messages about their values and if/how they support their students in how they create rules and how they react to major events. I do not mean to say, however, that practitioners and administrators should abandon their values in order to please students. Rather, I suggest that when they make or share policies and when they decide how to react to an incident that could impact the entire campus, they take time to truly talk about the message or messages they want students to receive. It may even be good to work with their student government or other student voices on campus to get their feedback.

One last recommendation is that practitioners and administrators make sure to accurately depict and share their school culture on their website and admissions tours so that students can judge whether or not the college environment is the right fit for them before they put down a deposit. As shown in my study, there is a potential that if a student does not match the culture of their university, they may withdraw or even decide to leave. Furthermore, practitioners and administrators should integrate training into employee and faculty orientation about how to communicate the messages they want students to receive. That way, even if giving bad news to students in settings such as conduct hearings, staff and faculty are able to share messages in line with the university brand.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

When reviewing the themes outlined above, what stood out for me as being aspects not thoroughly covered by existing research are that memorable messages can be received from experiences and policies, first-generation students may be more susceptible to outside advice than students that are not first-generation, and the participants I interviewed shared advice about life outside of the classroom.

Because of these takeaways, I first recommend that future researchers take time to speak with both college administrators and students to understand the intention of policies and reactions to major events, and how they were ultimately received. The hope being that a blueprint for how best to create policies and react to major events that share the intended messages from university administrators can be created. Second, I recommend that researchers look at the success rate of first-generation students that receive advice from administrators and friends compared to students that are not. Third, I recommend that researchers look at the concept of mentorship on college campuses and if there are differences in college success rates

between those students that have them and those that do not. Fourth and finally, I recommend that researchers look at the impact of messages shared by peers on college success rates.

If future researchers are looking at the tie between memorable messages and student success, however, it is important to keep in mind that memorable messages alone may not be enough to ensure student success. Because of this, it is critical for researchers to contextualize the memorable messages students receive within their overall college experience so that other influencing factors can be considered as well.

One last important consideration for future research is asking the question of how to make talking about the concept of memorable messages more compelling for participants. I say this because I struggled to find participants, even when offering an incentive. Future researchers may do well to ask themselves how to make the topic more interesting for students. One way may be to ask participants to prepare a response to a prompt about memorable messages, as well as bringing a personally significant item in their life, related to memorable messages, to the interview. That way the interview can be more focused and hopefully lead to more detailed responses about a specific content area.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the memorable messages my participants received were related to such topics as academics, persistence, self-authorship, use of support services, and level of support from their college and others. These messages came from parents, teachers, and staff; interactions with peers; college's policies and how their college's responded to key events. Furthermore, the notable themes are that my first-generation participants had a different relationship with messages than those that were not first-generation; the participants that are not

first-generation were more self-sufficient than those that are not; messages can be received from policies, how staff respond to student concerns, and how college administrators respond to major events; and my participants gave advice about life outside of the classroom and not about academics. The most notable takeaway from my study is that the culture and policies of a college or university have the ability to share indirect messages with students, even when none are directly shared with students. Because of this institutional level of messaging having had a large impact on the two first-generation students

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Appendices

Appendix A

# College Can Be a **BIG** Adjustment



**BUT YOU CAN HELP!**

**By Participating in My Study, You Can Help College Staff Understand the Types of Messages Freshmen Receive, So They Can Hopefully Make the Experience Better for Future Students**

**Interested?** Email Benjamin Bigalke at [bdb24887@uga.edu](mailto:bdb24887@uga.edu)

**Required Criteria:** Ages 18-24, currently enrolled and pursuing your first bachelor's degree, have already completed freshman year

**Time Commitment Required:** One hour

**Type of Study:** One-on-one audio-recorded interview

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

When conducting each participant interview (one interview per participant), I did so synchronously (in real time) over the internet or phone depending on what worked better for participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I preferred them to be synchronous and over the internet so that I could mimic the experience of an in-person interview as much as possible. In addition, this method helped with building rapport with the participants, which is a helpful first step in interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once I built rapport with the participants, I then started going through the questions I prepared in advance because “The key to getting good data from interviewing is to ask good questions” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.117).

Since the type of questions I ask should be guided by my study, and my study is based on narrative inquiry and the experience of memorable messages, I focused on understanding the story of participants as it relates to my topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because of this, I started with pre-set questions about each student’s experience during their first year in college and then got more specific towards memorable messages as the interview continued. Once I had gone through the pre-set questions, I then asked more open-ended questions that met one of Strauss, Schatzman, Bucher, and Sabshin’s (1981) four major categories which is hypothetical. By asking open-ended, hypothetical questions about how participants would respond to memorable messages, I hoped to get more in-depth answers and data that I would not have gotten if I solely focused on prepared, structured questions.

How I began each interview:

Hello. My name is Benjamin Bigalke and I am a doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of Georgia. Through this study, I am trying to identify the memorable messages students receive during their first year, where they come from, if they differ based on social identity, and if there are common components among both the positive and negative messages received.

Today I will be asking you a series of questions in order to help me understand your experience with memorable messages. However, please note that there is no right or wrong answer. In addition, there may be times when you do not have an answer and that is completely fine. If at any time you wish to stop participating or skip a question, please let me know.

To start, however, I was hoping you could tell me more about who you are and what made you decide to participate in this study.

Questions I used as a guideline:

- Tell me about your experience in the first week of college
- Do you feel like you had to adjust to college life?
- How did you go about adjusting to college life?
- Did you seek advice from anyone about how to be successful in college?
  - Who did you seek advice from?
  - What type of advice did you seek?
  - What advice did they give you?
  - What about this advice made it positive or negative?
  - Did this advice influence you in any way? How?
  - What feelings did you have associated with this advice?
  - Can you tell me how and how not the advice fit with your values?
- Was there a particular individual or group that had a significant impact on your beliefs related to your ability to succeed in college?
  - What messages did you get from them?
  - What impact did they have on your behavior, if any?
  - What about them/the group caused a significant impact?
  - What feelings did you have associated with this individual or group?
  - Were there parts of this group that did or did not align with your values?
- Did you receive messages about college from experiences during your first year?
  - What experiences gave you messages?
  - What messages did you receive?
  - What feelings did you have associated with these messages?
  - Can you tell me how and how not the messages fit with your values?
  - What impact did these messages have on your behavior, if any?
- Was there a time during your first year when you anticipated receiving a message or advice but did not? Did this experience lead you to believing something about your ability to succeed in college?
  - What were the beliefs?
  - What feelings did you have associated with these beliefs?
  - Can you tell me how and how not the beliefs fit with your values?



- Can you give me an example of how you would use memorable messages received during your first year when facing a challenge?
- If you could share a message with future students like you, what would it be?