CHASING A PASSION: THE EARLY-CAREER LIVED EXPERIENCE OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE GRADUATES

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by

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ABSTRACT

First-generation college students (students whose parents have not earned at least a bachelor’s degree) graduate at significantly lower rates than their peers, even when controlling for background characteristics such as race, socioeconomic status, pre-college academic preparation, and so on. Although the challenges and experiences of first-generation college students have been well documented, little has been written, in either higher education or adult education literature, about the work-related experiences of first-generation college graduates. This qualitative, phenomenological study sought to describe the lived experience of six early-career first-generation college graduates. Participants had graduated between two and five years prior to the study, were working full time, and had attended college as traditional-aged students. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed using phenomenological methods of data analysis, reflection, and writing.

Four themes were identified in the college-to-work transition of participants: learning on the job, being in the job, releasing the past, and chasing a passion. Learning on the job highlights participants’ efforts to acquire and master the skills required by their current occupations from a situated learning perspective, specifically participants’ experiences of work-related communities of practice. Being on the job deals with participants’ attempts to incorporate aspects of self and identity into their work—including ideas of work ethic and “being a good employee.” Releasing the past is used to describe the challenge of renegotiating relationships with family and culture of origin, including the struggle to define “real work.” Participants spoke of current and future career plans and hopes in terms of chasing a passion—identifying tensions between the necessity of providing for one’s own needs and the deep desire to be engaged in work that is personally meaningful.
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DEDICATION

In honor of my mother, Shirley,
and in memory of my father, Thorwald.

This document demonstrates that you made it possible for your daughter,
a first-generation college graduate,
to chase her passion.
Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Chapter One outlines background information for this study. In this chapter, I describe my continuing interest in the early-career experiences of first-generation college graduates and the research questions driving this study. I also present a brief outline of the dissertation.

Coming to the Question

I have been interested in the college-to-work transition since my own initial job search, as a new graduate with a liberal arts degree. I graduated during the economic recession of the early 1990s, somewhat location-bound to central Michigan (referred to, at the time, as the “rust belt” because of the challenges facing the automotive industry). I wanted to stay in Lansing for personal and avocational reasons, and I quickly learned that my social science and psychology degrees weren’t really valued by prospective employers.

After four months of job searching and temporary work, I was eventually hired as an administrative assistant at a small computer training company. I remember crying at the end of my second day, because someone had introduced me as “the receptionist” and a few days later after someone referred to me as “the secretary.” I had worked hard to earn my Big Ten college degree, after all. I was qualified to be more than “the secretary.” Granted, I answered phones, made copies, and ordered lunch, but I had graduated from the Honors College—couldn’t my co-workers see that I was under-employed? I also recall being completely exhausted at the end of every day, for probably the first six months on the job. I remember thinking, “no one ever told me” about a lot of things—office politics, self-promotion, and so on.

Looking back at it now, with 20 years of perspective and some additional vocabulary, I can now understand the experience as a “first-generation college student.” No one in my family could tell me about what the college or post-college experience would be like, because it was not
part of their experience. Many of my cousins and two of my aunts have postsecondary credentials (one aunt worked as a registered nurse, the other as a teacher), but these types of conversations were not the norm among my extended family. When I told my high school guidance counselor that I wanted to go to college somewhere out of state, she said, “Well, then, I can’t really help you.” Although my parents were very supportive of my educational aspirations, it was a world with which they had no first-hand experience. I was on my own, without realizing how overwhelming that could be. I guessed a lot, when asked about my plans and decisions; I probably “made up” things along the way, too. Thinking back on it now, I projected more confidence in my decisions and my knowledge than was really warranted.

After I graduated, my experience continued to be unique among my family and friends. Nothing in my mother’s work experience as a medical office assistant or my father’s life as a dairy farmer gave them insight into the challenges I was facing in a disappointing and stressful job. I think they felt that I had found a steady job and should be grateful. On the other hand, my best friend’s (college-educated) father couldn’t understand why I had taken a job with very low pay and very limited benefits. I aspired to the middle class; I had come from the working class. My college education and first job placed me somewhere between the two.

Several recent conversations have assured me that my sense of “being between the two” is not unique. Last fall, a friend referred to her early post-college work experiences as “becoming a tool of the enemy.” She grew up in a working-class family, and her post-college work environment (as a student services professional) forced her to change the way she had grown up thinking about jobs, careers, professionals, and white-collar work. She talked about “[entering] the professional side of things” as particularly challenging.

When I mentioned my interest in first-generation college students and their transition to work to an upper-level university administrator, he said, “You know, there are still times I walk into a meeting or a room and wonder if I belong there.” This uncertainty was expressed by a
highly accomplished man with an earned doctoral degree and significant responsibility at a large university, who also happened to be a first-generation college graduate. Another friend, a talented speaker and writer who has published three popular-press books, said, “Even when I’m speaking at events, I sometimes feel like I should be helping the cleanup crew.” These established and successful professionals (both in their mid- to late-50s) apparently continue to struggle with their identities as professionals.

For better or for worse, globalization and changes in the economy have intensified the call for college-level credentials. At the same time, those who study the institution of higher education are coming to more fully understand the challenges facing first-generation college students. However, the focus of those researchers seems to have been on helping students “move in” and “move through” college (Quinlan & O’Brodovich, 1996). Little attention has been given to the experience of these students once they leave college.

Given my long-term interest in the transition from college to work, my personal experience as a first-generation college graduate, and the lingering challenges expressed by mid- and late-career first-generation college graduates, I conducted this study to explore the experience of recent first-generation college graduates, as they begin working full-time, post-college jobs and begin to make meaning in their work.

Statement of Problem

Shifts in the economy and trends toward globalization have often led to a vague call for “increased skills” among the labor force. Goyette (2008) indicates that the educational expectations of high school sophomores have “dramatically increased” (p. 461) in recent years; individuals seem to be responding to the call for “skills” by aspiring to postsecondary education and credentials. However, students whose parents have not completed a bachelor’s degree (i.e., “first-generation college students”) seem to face challenges while in college. These challenges are
increasingly well documented (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Ishitani, 2006), but the experiences of these students as they graduate and transition from college to work has remained largely unexplored.

First-generation college (FGC) students are less likely to attend college than students whose parents also went to college (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Only 24% of FGC students persist to completion of a baccalaureate degree, as compared to 68% of non-FGC students (Chen & Carroll, 2005, p. iii). Students whose parents did not attend college are often not as academically prepared (Choy, 2001), less likely to complete a degree (Ishitani, 2006), and more likely to have lower grade point averages than their non-FGC counterparts (Chen & Carroll, 2005).

The extra- and co-curricular involvement of FGC students is also notably different from peers whose parents have higher levels of educational attainment. In general, FGC students work more hours each week, take fewer credits, volunteer less, are less likely to be involved in athletics, and are more likely to live in off-campus housing than non-FGC peers (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). In other words, an FGC student is less likely to be involved in activities and experiences (e.g., co-curricular involvement) that have been shown to promote student success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In addition, Brooks-Terry (1988) suggested that FGC students are engaged in the work of “[discovering] and [internalizing] the lifestyle of the college-educated middle class” (p. 123). Brooks-Terry considered this to be an additional “assignment,” requiring additional “work” on the part of the FGC student, requiring time and effort that may also influence the FGC student’s academic experience.

Evidence suggests that when a first-generation college student persists to graduation, his or her employment outcomes are likely to be similar to that of a non-FGC peer graduating under similar circumstances (i.e., gender, GPA, type of institution attended, etc.; Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004). These conclusions are drawn from measures of salary or occupational attainment with little comment on the experience or the challenges that these students may face in navigating the transition from college to work.
There have been explorations of new college graduates in specific occupations, such as nursing (Etheridge, 2007) or engineering (Martin, Matham, Case, & Fraser, 2005), as well as descriptions of the job search (Luckenbaugh & Giordiani, 2004) and attempts to outline the stages of the transition from college to work (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). However, once the FGC student graduates, academic interest in and empirical understanding of his or her experience as a novice employee and as a first-generation college graduate seems to wane. Pascarella et al. (2004) stated that the data suggest with “sufficient clarity” (p. 278) that a new and different model of student success may be needed to accurately understand and represent the factors that foster the persistence of FGC students. Brooks-Terry (1988) and Orbe (2008) discussed the FGC student experience in terms of significant personality and identity changes. Collier & Morgan (2008) suggested that first-generation college students also demonstrate greater challenges in understanding faculty expectations and managing time. London (1989) indicated that the FGC student may be navigating complicated roles and role assignments within his or her family. It seems naïve to suggest or assume that these conflicts, challenges, and differences are somehow resolved at the moment of the FGC student’s graduation or employment. However, given the silence of the literature on this issue—the transition from college to work for first-generation college graduates—one is left with exactly that impression.

Research Rationale

Considerable effort— theoretical, empirical, and practical—has been expended in the hopes of better understanding the undergraduate experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although early theories proposed a somewhat one-dimensional, one-size-fits-all approach to promoting college student success (e.g., Astin, 1977; Tinto, 1993), contemporary approaches increasingly seek to understand the ways in which a student’s background shapes that student’s college experience, including the ways in which parents’ educational attainment may be a factor.
in student success. Among these characteristics, there seems to be a strong correlation between parental education and student persistence, even when accounting for family income, peer influence, parental involvement, or academic preparation (Choy, 2001). Students whose parents have not completed a bachelor’s degree seem to be at a disadvantage, in terms of their own educational attainment and persistence.

First-generation college students exhibit significantly lower rates of college enrollment than students whose parents have higher rates of educational attainment (Choy, 2001). Choy also described FGC students as “one of the most frequently targeted groups” (p. 3) for interventions and outreach programs designed to promote the pursuit of and preparation for college. However, given that FGC students also graduate at a much lower rate than their non-FGC counterparts (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006), the efficacy of these programs and the corresponding expenditure of resources could be called into question. By focusing on the experiences of first-generation college graduates, this study may lend insight into the factors that promote degree completion and college success among this population.

In addition, Liebowitz and Taylor (2004), speaking specifically of adult students at community colleges, suggested that students who “cannot articulate reasons to succeed in college” (p. 20) may find it difficult to maintain the motivation to persist in college. It is possible that FGC students are likewise unable to connect their college experience to post-college outcomes. In light of the ever-increasing cost of college and the calls for “accountability” in higher education, a deeper understanding of how graduates navigate this aspect of the transition from college to work may help employers and educators better understand and facilitate this transition. By exploring employment experiences, this study attempted to uncover the key points of connection between college and work, as experienced by FGC graduates. These descriptions may, in turn, be helpful to both student services and career development professionals who wish to facilitate the success of first-generation college students.
Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the college-to-work transition as experienced by recent first-generation college graduates. In particular, this investigation highlights the ways in which these new graduates make meaning in their work; how they understand this experience; and the meaning they assign, retrospectively, to their college experience. The study focused on FGC graduates who have completed a bachelor’s degree between two and five years ago, who are working full-time, and who graduated without immediate plans to pursue a graduate or professional degree.

The epistemic interest driving this study was crafting a rich and conceptual description of the early-career experiences of FGC graduates, based on the research question: How do first-generation college graduates who have obtained a bachelor’s degree within the past two to five years make meaning in their work? In other words, what is it like for a first-generation college graduate to experience work?

More specifically, the study sought to address the following questions:

- How does the FGC graduate’s work environment (e.g., relationships with co-workers and supervisors, work-related communities of practice, job tasks and responsibilities, etc.) contribute to his or her sense of meaning in work?
- How does the FGC graduate describe tensions or discontinuities, if they exist, between his or her work and the expectations he or she may have had for post-graduation employment?
- In what ways, if any, has the FGC graduate’s relationship with his or her family of origin changed, as he or she has transitioned from college to work?
Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation is presented in seven chapters. This chapter has outlined the research problem, rationale, and questions driving this phenomenological study. Chapter Two reviews research related to first-generation college students, the transition to adulthood, and the college-to-work transition, arguing that the post-graduation, early-career experiences of first-generation college students have been insufficiently explored by the existing literature. In Chapter Three, I outline the basic concepts of phenomenology as a qualitative research method. In addition, although phenomenology calls the researcher to explore the phenomenon with as few presuppositions as possible, chapter three also presents a discussion of situated learning, communities of practice, and social cognitive career theory, which I used as a theoretical framework for understanding participants’ experiences at work. Chapter Four discusses the appropriateness of phenomenology for this particular project and describes the methods I used for collecting and analyzing data. Chapters Five and Six present the results of my data analysis, highlighting the four themes and multiple sub-themes I identified in the data. In Chapter Seven, I outline my conclusions and discuss possible directions for further research.
Chapter 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I argue that although substantial literature explores the experience and persistence of first-generation college (FGC) students, little attention has been given to the college-to-work transition for these students. I begin by reviewing the literature related to FGC students in higher education, including the scant attention that has been paid to the post-college experiences of these students. I continue by exploring the ways in which the literature related to the transition to adulthood, including the college-to-work and school-to-work transition, informs the exploration of early-career experiences of FGC graduates. In addition, I explore several assumptions embedded in the ways this issue has (or has not) been explored. Ultimately, this chapter argues that first-generation college status is an important consideration for both understanding and exploring the in-college and post-college experiences of first-generation college students and graduates.

First-Generation College Students

At first glance, the statistics are startling: Only 24% of first-generation college students who enroll in college complete a bachelor’s degree, while 68% of non-FGC students persist to a bachelor’s degree (Chen & Carroll, 2005). However, FGC students—who comprise 34% of all students at four-year institutions (Choy, 2001)—are also more likely to be Black or Hispanic (Choy, 2001), less likely to be academically prepared for college than their non-FGC peers (Choy, 2001; Warburton, Bugarin, Nuñez, & Carroll, 2001), as well as more likely to earn lower grade point averages and complete fewer credits (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Taken together, these findings seem to indicate that the persistence of FGC students in higher education is complex, potentially confounded by background characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, academic preparation,
socioeconomic status (SES), etc.) beyond parental educational attainment.

Recent studies (e.g., Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004) have used statistical methods to approximate the influence of FGC status separate from the influence of background characteristics, noting that key distinctions remain between FGC students and their non-FGC peers, even after controlling for these background and demographic characteristics. These studies further complicate the issue, however, suggesting that a simple “first-generation college versus non-first-generation college” classification may not be sufficient to accurately explain the persistence of FGC students. Ishitani evaluated student persistence over six years, using four levels of parental educational attainment: two college-educated parents, one college-educated parent, parents with some college education, and parents with no postsecondary education (first-generation students). He suggested that FGC students are more likely to drop out before graduation than other students, indicating that during the second year of college, FGC students are 8.5 times more likely to leave college than peers whose parents have bachelor’s degrees. He concluded that “first-generation students were exposed to higher risks of departure through college years than their counterparts” (p. 880). His analysis further revealed that a student’s likelihood of persistence decreased as parental educational attainment decreased. In other words, students with two college-educated parents were more likely to persist than those with one college-educated parent; those with one college-educated parent more likely than students with parents who had some college education, and so on.

In another study that explored the influence of varying levels of parental educational attainment, Pascarella et al. (2004) used “first-generation college students” to refer to only those students whose parents had no more than a high school education. “Moderate parental post-secondary education” was used where one or both parents had completed some postsecondary education, and “high parental postsecondary education” referred to students whose parents had both earned at least a bachelor’s degree. They identified the most significant differences when
comparing FGC students with students classified as “high parental postsecondary education,” suggesting that parents who have earned at least bachelor’s degrees do, somehow, confer educational advantage to their children—even when the analysis controlled for background characteristics (e.g., income, race/ethnicity, pre-college grades, institutional characteristics, etc.). In fact, Pascarella et al. summarized their findings by suggesting that the differences identified between FGC students and students with “high parental postsecondary education” were “of sufficient clarity that one might hypothesize the possibility of different models of success in college for first-generation students and for their peers whose parents are highly educated” (p. 278).

At times, FGC status seems to be combined with other identifiers merely for the purpose of sample selection (e.g., “low-income, first-generation, adult student,” as in St. Clair-Christman, 2009). However, studies such as Pascarella et al. (2004) and Ishitani (2006) suggest that the persistence and college success of FGC students may indeed be influenced by parental educational attainment. To further understand the experiences of FGC students and graduates, the following sections address the path to college for FGC students, the academic and social experiences of FGC students, the ways family dynamics may shape an FGC student’s experience, the challenge of social mobility, and the career-related experiences of the FGC student.

*The Path to College for FGC Students*

Attending college is the culmination of numerous decisions, made over the course of years. Berkner and Chavez (1997) outlined key steps in the college choice process: identifying bachelor’s degree aspirations, pursuing at least minimal academic preparation, taking entrance exams, applying to a four-year institution, and enrolling in a four-year institution. Choy (2001) indicated that parents’ educational attainment strongly influenced a student’s progress toward college: FGC students were less likely to complete each one of Berkner and Chavez’s steps than their non-FGC peers. Apparently, FGC students are “just not groomed to go to college because
their parents are not aware” (Horwedel, 2008, Signing Up and Keeping Up section, ¶4) of how early decisions shape college plans and options. Aronson (2008) refers to this as “postsecondary education funneling” that results in “cumulative disadvantage” (p. 45) for FGC and low-income students at every stage of the college choice and decision-making process.

Further highlighting the influence and role of parents in the college choice process, McCarron and Inkelas (2006) explored the impact of parental involvement in activities such as helping with homework or discussing college plans, finding these activities to be a strong predictor of educational aspirations for both FGC and non-FGC students. However, they found that students’ “perceptions of the importance of good grades” (p. 544) may be more influential for FGC students than the involvement of their parents. In other words, these findings suggest that FGC students may be more likely to base college-related decisions on their impressions of what is required, rather than on accurate information or information provided by their parents.

FGC students may also be more “on their own” in planning their high school curriculum—a key factor in preparing for college. Less than half of all high school students reported that teachers or school counselors helped them choose classes, and FGC students are less likely to receive parental help than their non-FGC counterparts (Choy, 2001). Fallon (1997) stated that conversations about college life will most likely not be part of either informal or formal interactions with significant adults for the FGC student. Therefore, the FGC student misses out on opportunities to learn about college life and preparation. This pre-college “college knowledge” has been connected to college persistence (Burleson, Hallett, & Park, 2008).

The Academic and Social Experiences of FGC Students

Evidence suggests that as students navigate higher education, differences between FGC and non-FGC students persist. For example, only 27% of non-FGC students enroll in developmental (remedial) coursework, but 55% of FGC students require this academic assistance
(Chen & Carroll, 2005). This coursework often extends the time and expense required to complete a degree and may further marginalize students (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). This increased need for developmental education is likely connected to Chen and Carroll’s finding that FGC students earn fewer credits and have lower grade point averages. In addition, Chen and Carroll (2005) reported that choosing a major may be “a greater challenge to first-generation students” (p. 12).

Learning in college involves more than comprehending course material. “[Mastering] the ‘college student’ role” (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 425) is also critical for success. After exploring the dynamics of faculty-student interactions, Collier and Morgan concluded: “It is the implicit knowledge relating to ‘how to enact the college student role successfully’ that produces systematic differences in academic success between traditional and first-generation students” (p. 442). As Tokarczyk (2004) suggested, college is unforgiving—“not of those who don’t learn the rules, but rather of those who did not know the rules before arriving on campus” (p. 163).

Pascarella et al. (2004) found no significant differences between FGC and non-FGC students on college outcomes such as critical writing. They did report, however, that FGC students were less likely to be involved in extracurricular, athletic, or volunteer activities. These students are also less likely to have “noncourse-related interactions with peers” (p. 265). However, as Pascarella et al. fine-tuned the analysis, they suggested that although FGC students are less likely to be involved in these out-of-class and co-curricular activities, they also “[tend] to derive significantly stronger positive benefits from these involvements” (p. 272) than non-FGC peers. At the same time, however, work, volunteering and intercollegiate athletics seem to be less beneficial (and at times more detrimental) to FGC students.

Family Dynamics and the FGC Student

Underlying much of this literature is an assumption that the family does influence the
student’s experience in college. FGC students tend to ascribe greater importance (than non-FGC peers) to bringing honor to their family, helping out financially, and gaining respect as key reasons for pursuing college (Van T. Bui, 2002). Consequently, the family may expect the student to be available for work or family responsibilities whenever he or she is not in class, neither understanding nor taking into account the out-of-class responsibilities, extra-curricular opportunities, and “uneven pacing” of course assignments (Brooks-Terry, 1988, p. 129). In fact, FGC students have been found to work more hours each week than non-FGC students (Pascarella et al., 2004).

As the FGC student engages in college life, London (1989) suggested that he or she may be assigned a role by his or her family. The student may feel “bound” to the family, expected to stay close to home and maintain dependency. The student may feel like the family’s “delegate,” expected to “[become] successful in the ways we approve” (p. 158) by choosing a major based on what seems best (to the parents) for the family’s status. The student may also feel “expelled” if the family implies that the FGC student’s pursuit of college is a hindrance or nuisance. London also stated that the FGC student deals with “often conflicting requirements of family membership and educational mobility” (p. 144), since this individual achievement and mobility also “[produces] a discontinuity that cleaves families and friends” (p. 168).

Orbe (2008) described the complexity of these student-family relationships in terms of the identity formation of the FGC student along six “dialectical tensions” (p. 84) that must be confronted. Each plays out at home and on campus as the student “[negotiates] the alien culture of the academy against that of home” (p. 81). These dimensions include: stability-change, similar-different, certainty-uncertainty, advantage-disadvantage, individual-social, and openness-closedness. These are not either/or propositions; a student can feel “similar to” while also feeling “different from,” and the tension may vary, depending on the setting. For example, using similar-different as an example, the student may experience tension between feeling “ordinary” and
“special” while at home. In other words, the student may wish to experience home as a place to 
“just be” and escape from the stress of his or her college environment, but that same student may 
have been afforded a “special status” (p. 87) as a role model or example for his or her home 
community, because of his or her college attendance. While at school, however, the student may 
feel that FGC status is “central” to the college experience (e.g., while participating in a FGC-
related program); at other times, FGC status may be only a “peripheral” part of his or her identity 
as a student (e.g., while actively engaged in a group project for class). Orbe concluded that these 
identity tensions are certainly experienced by all students, but “the significance of being the first 
in their families to attend college may make the tensions more explicit for FGC students” (p. 93).

Dennis, Phinney, and Chauteco (2005) explored the impact of the FGC student’s network 
of family and friends on persistence. They found that when an FGC student feels unsupported by 
peers, the student’s cumulative GPA, college adjustment, and college commitment decrease. At 
the same time, the presence of that support did not produce an increase. Dennis et al. also 
observed that FGC students “perceive their peers as better able” (p. 234) than family to provide 
the necessary support for college success. This relatively high importance of self-perception in 
this case is similar to McCarron and Inkelas’s (2006) finding that perceptions about grades 
exerted more influence than parental involvement on the college-related decisions of FGC 
students. Perhaps, in the absence of concrete, personal examples of college success, the FGC 
student finds it necessary to rely on these impressions and perceptions.

The Challenge of Social Mobility

As Orbe’s (2008) work indicates, college is a time of individual growth and transition, for 
both FGC student and non-FGC student alike. For many, college also brings the possibility—and 
often the implied promise—of social mobility. Nearly 50 years ago, Turner (1960) suggested that 
social mobility might occur along different paths. He distinguished between systems of
“sponsored mobility,” where society values schooling for its role in imparting and developing elite culture and access to the system is limited, and systems of “contest mobility,” where education is “valued as a means of getting ahead” (p. 863), access is less tightly controlled, and “elite status is the prize … taken by the aspirants’ own efforts” (p. 856). Turner suggested that higher education in the United States was a system of contest mobility.

If this still holds true, and winning the contest (earning a college degree) is more important (in terms of status attainment) than training for a particular career, there would be no discernible distinction between the academic pursuits of various social groups. Goyette’s (2008) recent finding that the educational aspirations of tenth graders are “more loosely linked to social background and occupational plans” (p. 461) than in previous decades seems to bear this out—the system is perceived as open and available to those who wish to participate in the contest.

However, the playing field may not be level. Only 9% of FGC students enrolled in rigorous high school courses, compared to nearly 20% of non-FGC students (Warburton et al., 2001), decisions that strongly influence college choice and enrollment. Furthermore, although one measure of educational persistence (likelihood of earning any postsecondary credential) shows no difference between FGC students and their non-FGC peers, FGC status was “significantly and negatively associated with lower bachelor’s degree completion rates even after controlling for a wide range of interrelated factors” (Chen & Carroll, 2005, p. 53, emphasis added). Furthermore, Goyette and Mullen (2006) found that students from families with higher SES and students whose parents had higher levels of education were more likely to choose majors in the arts and sciences that were less vocationally oriented than low-SES students. Drawing the conclusion, from this study alone, that all FGC students feel pressured by their families to choose vocational majors or that their ambitions are intentionally “cooled out” by the system (Clark, 1960) would be unwarranted—especially since low SES is not strictly equivalent to first-generation status. However, the differences found in this study and elsewhere (Fallon, 1997; Longwell-Grice, 2003)
suggest that FGC students may be more likely to approach college with the instrumental goal of “getting a job” and “earning their position” (Turner, 1960, p. 863) than their non-FGC peers. Goyette and Mullen, as well as Choy (2001), also noted that FGC students are less likely to pursue graduate or professional degrees. Pascarella et al. (2004) presented similar findings and suggested that students with more highly educated parents might “simply be more aware of the importance that advanced degrees play in one’s occupational life and labor-market opportunities than their first-generation counterparts” (p. 277). Goyette and Mullen (2006) concluded: “Thus, the high-SES students choosing [arts and science] fields and then entering graduate and professional programs may be well poised to enter the labor market in much stronger positions than their counterparts in vocational fields” (p. 525). In other words, they suggested that this tendency actually serves to limit mobility and perpetuate stratification rather than foster mobility as Turner’s idea of contest mobility would predict.

Turner (1960) suggested that systems of contest mobility also require “training in ‘social adjustment’” (p. 864). This training, whether formal or informal, allows the one aspiring to social mobility to learn the “ways of being” appropriate to or perhaps required by the aspired-to status. Brooks-Terry (1988) called this the “double assignment” of FGC students. For all college students, she suggested, the first task of college is to master course material. For FGC students, the second assignment is “to discover and internalize the lifestyle of the college-educated middle class” (p. 123). Reay, David, and Ball (2005) described the journey taken by working-class students entering higher education:

These students, then, unlike their middle class counterparts, were making not one but sometimes two transitions in the move into higher education. Not only were they moving from one stage of education to another, a majority were also engaged in a transition from one class into another—a process that … makes the higher education process qualitatively different to that being engaged in by the already middle class students (p. 96).
These statements assume that a college education either instills or requires middle-class values. Liu and Ali (2008) argued that social class shapes an individual’s worldview, and they suggested that social mobility necessitates wide-ranging and complex transitions. Brooks-Terry (1988) stated that the FGC student most successful at navigating this social mobility “will do so at the cost of weakening their bonds to the family unit” (p. 123). Brooks-Terry’s position echoes Tinto’s proposition that persistence in college is related to a student’s social and academic integration into the college environment—even if this integration requires a break with the student’s family and culture of origin (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnston, 1997). Guffrida (2006) has taken issue with this position, suggesting that such a break may not be necessary, since students who maintain ties to their home communities have access to “essential cultural connections and nourishment” (p. 458) that can provide important support as they navigate college.

Although, as contested in the previous paragraph, an academically successful FGC student who persists to graduation may not find it necessary to break completely from his or her family of origin, there is a sense in which negotiating social position and norms continues after graduation. One FGC graduate called her post-college work experiences as “becoming a tool of the enemy” (C. D. Rill, personal communication, November 17, 2008). Having grown up in a working-class family, “[entering] the professional side of things” forced her to reevaluate the way she had grown up thinking about jobs, careers, and white-collar work. Brooks-Terry (1988) described the family’s experience of this tension: “There is an element of paradox for the union-member parent who is proud that his son will be a manager and look like a manger, but is resentful when the son thinks like a manager and behaves like a manager” (p. 131). Once again, the FGC student’s “changing subculture of reference” (p. 131) further differentiates his or her career experience from the work-life of his or her parents—transitions and challenges that are not fully resolved at the moment of college graduation.
Early-Career Experiences of the FGC Student

Woven through much of the literature related to FGC students in higher education is the assumption that the college experience is closely linked to career development. This may explain why much of the literature related to FGC students seems to focus on college aspirations (Engle & Tinto, 2008; O’Brien et al., 2000), the college experience (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Olsen, 2009; Orbe, 2008), and career choice (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Flores and O’Brien, 2002; Goyette & Mullen, 2006). This focus on higher education has come at the expense of understanding what happens after FGC students graduate and begin their careers. As Goodwin (2006) indicated:

The battle to provide equitable access is hard fought and never ending, yet we know little about what the students in [programs that serve under-represented students] do after graduation. These programs are so strapped for funding that they can’t afford the resources to conduct follow-up tracking of their graduates. (p. 4)

She further suggested that loss of contact between university and student is, perhaps, natural: “As [graduates] move on with their lives, they move away from their college experiences” (p. 6).

Where post-graduation experiences have been explored, conclusions generally compare quantitative labor market outcomes. Choy (2001) indicated that regardless of the degree earned, distribution of FGC graduates among occupational categories (e.g., sales, clerical, etc.) was similar to non-FGC graduates. Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) found FGC students to be “less likely than other students to report taking a job unrelated to their educational training” (p. 46), perhaps because FGC students seem to be more likely to pursue vocational or technical fields (Goyette & Mullen, 2006). Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin also found that FGC and non-FGC bachelor’s degree recipients earned similar annual salaries. Choy indicated that this “salary parity” (p. 27) extended to at least five years following graduation. She further clarified that graduates’ salary “was related to undergraduate major, sex, GPA, and type of institution attended, but not to parents’ education” (p. 27). Both Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin, as well as Choy, found
that FGC graduates are less likely to enroll in graduate school, a finding that held “even after controlling for other factors significantly related to graduate enrollment” (Choy, 2001, p. 28).

Evidently, short of a declaration that starting salaries are similar and graduate school enrollment is lower, little is known about long-term career outcomes related to FGC status. The literature related to FGC students highlights the uniqueness of these students’ experiences in higher education. However, what little mention made of post-graduation outcomes includes only passing reference to FGC status, with no acknowledgement of how variations in the paths through college for FGC and non-FGC students may continue to influence post-college outcomes or career-related experiences. Given that much of the research related to FGC students seems to be found under the umbrella of higher education literature, which focuses little attention on post-college experiences, I now discuss the broader literature that describes the transition to adulthood, specifically the college-to-work transition.

The Transition to Adulthood

Beginning with the recognition that “adulthood” has been defined in many ways, relying on a variety of indicators (e.g., age, residential independence, marriage, education, etc.), “the transition to adulthood” is difficult to define. Earlier work (e.g., Levinson, 1986; Perry, 1999) presented the transition to adulthood as linear, sequential, and staged. More recently, scholars have struggled to understand it, finding it to be an ambiguous “blurry space between dependence and independence” (Settersten, 2005, p. 553). Who is an adult, as defined by whom? When does childhood (or adolescence, or youth) end and adulthood begin? The Network on Transitions to Adulthood (www.transad.pop.upenn.edu) defines early adulthood as spanning the ages of 18 to 34, “recognizing at the same time that there is no simple way to distinctly or defensibly use chronological age to determine where adulthood begins or is fully achieved” (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005, p. 18).
At least two possibilities exist. The transition to adulthood in modern society may indeed be more variable and ambiguous (Arnett, 2000; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999; Mortimer & Larson, 2002; Pohl & Walther, 2007; Staff & Mortimer, 2003). In fact, Stokes and Wyn (2007) argued that the term “transition” is outdated and serves to “limit our understanding of the complexity of young people’s lives in a changing social world” (p. 496) and understates the “complexity of the processes occurring” (p. 508) during this time of life. Others have suggested that this transition has always been complex and ambiguous, but earlier models and analyses did not allow for this ambiguity (Goodwin & O’Connor, 2005; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2005).

*Early or Emerging Adulthood*

There seems to be increasing support for the idea that society has shifted in a way that has significantly altered the path(s) to adulthood. As Furstenberg et al. (2005) suggested, “social timetables that were widely observed a half century ago for accomplishing adult transitions no longer apply in the contemporary Western world” (p. 5). They further concluded that “in the latter part of the last century, early adulthood became increasingly structured by social institutions outside the family, particularly higher education. … Entry into adulthood has become more complex and variable” (pp. 16-17).

Echoing this idea that societal change has altered developmental patterns, Arnett (2000) suggested that “becoming a self-sufficient person” (p. 473) should be used as a more accurate descriptor of adulthood than the traditional markers of age, marriage, or parenthood. Arnett has theorized that social and demographic changes in highly industrialized countries has resulted in a new and distinct developmental stage, which he refers to as *emerging adulthood*. Arnett sees this as a prolonged transition to adulthood, distinct from adolescence, that is a time of identity exploration, “trying out various life possibilities and gradually moving toward making enduring decisions” and forming a durable sense of self (p. 473)—primarily in the areas of love, work and
worldviews. Most explorations of emerging adulthood (e.g., Buhl & Lanz, 2007), including Arnett’s work that began with college students in the United States, have been undertaken in Western, highly industrialized countries. In one of the few non-Western studies, Badger, Nelson and Barry (2006) suggested that emerging adulthood may be less prevalent in China than in the United States, due to the traditional expression of the collectivist nature of Chinese culture, which increases a sense of obligation to others and may lessen individualistic exploration.

Bynner (2005), a British sociologist, has argued that where emerging adulthood appears, it occurs among the more socially advantaged within the society. Based on a study of several historical cohorts, he concluded that more traditional paths to adulthood were “still as common as ever” (p. 377) for the less-advantaged within a society. This raises a question. By virtue of having graduated from college, FGC graduates could, perhaps, be considered among the “more advantaged” within society, and therefore more likely to experience “emerging adulthood” as described by Arnett (2000). However, the finding that FGC students are more likely than non-FGC students to be from the lowest income quartile (Choy, 2001) might lead the conclusion that FGC graduates would be more likely to follow a more traditional path to adulthood, in keeping with Bynner’s conclusions about the transition to adulthood for the less-advantaged in a society.

Based on a search of several research databases, there does not seem to be other literature connecting these two areas of inquiry (FGC students/graduates and emerging adulthood), therefore, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the “most likely” path to adulthood for FGC graduates. One notable exception is Goodwin (2002, 2006) who weaves the influence of social class and family background throughout her ethnography of disadvantaged students studying at an elite university. After talking with graduating students, Goodwin (2006) stated that the “resiliency that is set in place by facing the numerous adversities and detours” (p. 185) during the pursuit of a degree is what enables students to navigate the transition successfully.
The issue of social class and the transition to adulthood seems to be addressed more directly in school-to-work literature, which tends to focus on transitions out of high school or vocational training. Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, and Barber (2005) suggested that both family and individual factors play a role:

The nature of one’s transition to adulthood is strongly linked to the social-class characteristics of one’s natal family. … [However,] our findings also refute any implication that family background is destiny. Despite the strong link between parents’ social class and the transition groups at age twenty-four, the connection of future group membership to academic factors at age eighteen is even stronger. When poor children whose parents have little education succeed in high school and expect to continue to succeed in college, they are just as likely as children of privileged backgrounds to reach age twenty-four on a promising pathway through the transition to adulthood. (p. 344)

Blustein et al. (2002) suggested that “social class seems to be most pernicious during the life space known as the school-to-work (STW) transition” (p. 312). After interviewing young adults who had not earned a college degree, Blustein et al. concluded that “social class impacts the way in which working-class young adults make meaning of their vocational lives” (p. 320). They found that young workers from high-SES families “reported the luxury of working for reasons related to personal satisfaction and meaning,” whereas low-SES individuals “indicated that they were working primarily to ensure their economic survival” (p. 320). They also reported that those who grew up in high-SES environments “seemed to be afforded more opportunities to implement their self-concept in work,” while low-SES individuals “did not tend to have jobs that were consistent with their interests and goals” (p. 320). In addition, high-SES individuals “tended to express greater interest in the personal meaning of work, higher levels of self-concept crystallization and implementation, greater availability of external educational resources and relational resources, and higher levels of career adaptability than their [low-SES] peers” (p. 321).
They also found that “participants from [low socioeconomic] backgrounds were also more likely to have difficult [school-to-work] transitions” (p. 318). Blustein et al. further suggested that this difficulty may have been exaggerated because “the majority … did not have other relational resources to compensate for the disruptions in their interpersonal relationships” (p. 318).

The College-to-Work Transition

Although Johnston (2003) asserted that much research related to graduate employment has been funded by corporate ventures and could, therefore, be subject to claims of subtle and not-so-subtle corporate influence on the research questions that are pursued, she also suggested that research related to the early employment years was “in particular need of further and more sensitive investigation” (p. 423). A survey of literature that specifically addresses the college-to-work transition reveals several key issues faced by men and women as they move from a primary focus on education to a focus on employment. As seen in this college-to-work literature, this is a time of feeling unprepared, a time for a new kind of learning, and a time of tension.

A time of feeling unprepared. As graduates leave college and begin working, there seems to be a sense that something is missing or has been missed. Banerji (2007) reported that 63% of employers indicated that “college graduates lack essential skills to succeed in today’s global economy” (¶ 1). These employers indicated that skills such as teamwork in diverse groups, creativity, innovation, and critical or analytical reasoning would be in ever-greater demand in an increasingly complex, multicultural economy.

Graduates seem ambivalent about this transition. Coulon (2002) interviewed recent graduates in New Zealand who described themselves as “underemployed.” Participants expressed an ambivalence regarding the extent to which higher education had truly helped them: “36 percent of the participants said a degree was a formal entry requirement, 40 percent said the degree was helpful in obtaining the position, while only 30 percent stated that the work [they
were currently engaged in] required graduate ability” (p. 293). Farner and Brown (2008) noted that students did feel ready for the work world—but that underclassmen were more likely to feel confident than those closer to graduation. Martin, Matham, Case, and Fraser (2005) spoke with chemical engineers and concluded that these recent graduates were “adequately, if not well, prepared to face the challenges of work in industry” (p. 178). However, many graduates reported feeling like they were “thrown into the deep end” (p. 178) on the job, unsure of what they should be doing, while at the same time indicating that they “felt confident to tackle new problems and formulate a solution” (p. 178). They felt simultaneously ill-equipped and adequately prepared.

It is, however, unclear how to bridge the gap between what is provided and what is needed to better prepare graduates for this transition. Dahlgren, Hult, Dahlgren, Segerstad, and Johannson (2006) suggested a graduate’s transition to work is strongly influenced by the degree of continuity between his or her academic training and the type of employment he or she secured. This continuity allows for “immediate” (p. 583) socialization and transition to work and accelerated acceptance into the professional community. Borden and Rajecki (2000), surveying graduates who had recently obtained a bachelor’s degree in psychology, found that these graduates did not express a strong connection between the education they had received and preparation for employment and future job prospects. Borden and Rajecki suggested that faculty and administrators could, and perhaps should, “take their responsibilities for guidance seriously” (p. 168) by helping undergraduates develop appropriate expectations for post-graduation jobs. Wedlandt and Rochlen (2008) indicated that career counselors play a key role. However, given the diverse paths along the transition to adulthood, as described earlier, it is unrealistic to aspire to completely preparing every student for every possible post-graduation outcome.

* A time for a new kind of learning. Stokes and Wyn (2007) described the college-to-work transition as a time when individuals make an “active investment” in developing identity and understanding “new meanings of career” (p. 495). Although Wendlandt and Rochlen (2008)
suggested the transition from college to work consists of three stages (anticipation, adjustment, achievement), beginning long before graduation. Nyström, Dahlgren and Dahlgren (2008) argued against developing stage theories specifically related to the college-to-work transition. Nyström et al. suggested, instead, that “graduates’ vision and experiences of their professional trajectories do not seem to follow a specific temporal and logical progression in their career. Rather they appear in different order and at different points in time after graduation” (p. 215).

Regardless, significant changes do happen at this time of a graduate’s life. As Candy and Crebert (1991) indicated, there are notable differences between the structured, formal learning environment and the informal learning that is standard in many work environments. This issue of learning at work as a key aspect of the college-to-work transition has been explored by others as well. Etheridge (2007) indicated that the key challenge for new nurses is learning to apply their formal training in clinical settings, which Etheridge refers to as “learning to think like a nurse” (p. 24). Arnold (1986) noted that introducing a new employee creates uncertainty for both employee and employer, concluding that newcomers benefit most from “stimulating yet safe learning environments” (p. 19) in which they are challenged to evaluate and enhance their own skills. Brown (2004) concluded that the decision-making of recent grads can be described as “ongoing, iterative, and often nonlinear” (p. 377). As Candy and Crebert suggested, graduates can experience a “smooth passage” (p. 588) as they transition to work if they are aware of how the new environment may also shape their patterns and process of learning.

A time of tension. Gardner and Lambert (1992) stated that “being ‘in college’ has been a self-explanatory status and a laudatory one” (p. 4). Leaving college, however, brings a change in that status and with it, quite often, uncertainty; this tension is reflected within the college-to-work literature. Perrone and Vickers (2003) presented a case study of one graduate, who described the transition as “a low time” (p. 69) and a “very uncomfortable kind of world” (p. 72).

Holden and Hamblett (2007) followed college graduates for two years, identifying
themes of learning about the job, learning about the organization, and learning about self. Beyond these themes, they highlighted an underlying challenge. Participants expressed a desire to fully participate in the work community in which they were engaged, which Holden and Hamblett called a desire for “cohesion” (p. 572). At the same time, participants acknowledged that they would only begin to understand the rules of their workplace as they failed in some way, labeled by Holden and Hamblett as “fragmentation” (p. 572). In other words, as new graduates were transitioning, they were both seeking to connect and realizing that that connection would only occur after they had experienced a separation of sorts (i.e., failure). Likewise, Vaughan and Roberts (2007) suggested that this is a time of both “security and exploration” (p. 91); they also indicated that an individual’s background (e.g., education, work experience, etc.) strongly shapes his or her approach to the options and the decisions encountered during this time of life.

Taken as a whole, the college-to-work literature surveyed here portrays the college-to-work transition as complex, individualized, and difficult to predict. New graduates often feel unprepared, and they encounter new settings and new modes of learning and being. It is, to borrow Settersten’s (2005) phrase, “a blurry space” (p. 553).

Assumptions and Shortcomings in the Literature

The literature related to both FGC students and the college-to-work transition seems to be built on several key assumptions. In addition, this literature must be interpreted with an understanding of methodological and theoretical concerns. These issues will now be addressed.

There is, first of all, a sense that FGC status matters. Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998), Choy (2001), and Chen and Carroll (2005) presented statistical findings related to FGC students. Pascarella et al. (2004) and Ishitani (2006) built on this to fine tune the analysis of differences between FGC and non-FGC students. London (1989) and Orbe (2008) took a smaller-scale approach, seeking to explain the way in which family dynamics or personal identity shapes an
FGC student. Others (e.g., Kiang, 1992; Reid & Moore, 2008) have taken a more culture-focused approach to the issue. What remains common, however, is the assumption that somehow, the educational histories of the parents influence the educational pursuits of the students.

Moreover, this research assumes that the unique and distinct impact of FGC status can be parsed from the influence of other factors, and it implies that family SES is only an influence for those from low-SES families (Luthar, 2003). Pascarella et al. (2004) and Ishitani (2006) diligently worked to include statistical “controls” to tease out the influence of SES from the influence of parental educational attainment status. However, in the everyday lived experience of the FGC student, it may be difficult to evaluate the relative influence of these various factors.

Much of the college-to-work literature presents this transition as a move from full-time schooling to full-time work, an assumption that seems to fit fewer and fewer students (Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007). This could be a reflection of the pragmatics of finding research participants—the traditional-aged, full-time student may be more easily accessible to the scholars conducting this research. On the other hand, it may also reflect assumptions about the nature of the college experience that no longer fit contemporary realities. Furthermore, the college persistence literature assumes that college success is only measured by graduation.

In addition, many conclusions and recommendations presented in these reports assume that institutions of higher education could (and should) do a better job preparing graduates for life after college—that it is just a matter of developing and offering the right combination of seminars, services, or programs (e.g., Gardner, 1999; Vickio, 1990). However, these interventions are generally self-selecting. In other words, those who are the least prepared for life after college are perhaps the least likely to pursue the workshop or assistance that might assist them after college. The student may not be aware of the issues he or she may face until experiencing the transition first-hand, at which point those programs or services may no longer be accessible.
As Orbe (2008) indicated, much of the FGC-related literature “has used quantitative methodologies to produce generalizations about this heterogeneous group” (p. 82). The qualitative findings and theoretical formulations of Orbe and others (e.g., Brooks-Terry, 1988; Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006; London, 1989) have added substantial depth to the FGC student literature, exposing cultural, socioeconomic, and educational nuances that must be considered when seeking to understand the experiences of FGC students. At this point, however, the literature is virtually silent on what happens after graduation, with only Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) and Choy (2001) making any mention of FGC graduates. Their quantitative findings asserted that FGC and non-FGC graduates experience similar labor market outcomes; any sense of the heterogeneity, family dynamics, identity-forming experiences, or variation found within the FGC student experience is lost. This may be due to insufficient resources (Goodwin, 2006), but it may also reflect an assumption that a college education equalizes any pre-college differences.

There are other limitations that must be considered when evaluating this literature as a whole. There seems to be no consistent definition of “first-generation college student.” Should a student only be considered FGC if his or her parents have pursued no postsecondary education or do the full benefits of non-FGC status only apply to students with two baccalaureate-degreed parents? As both Ishitani (2006) and Pascarella et al. (2004) demonstrated, by incorporating analyses of several levels of parental educational attainment, this definition does matter.

In addition, the literature refers broadly to “parental” educational attainment, but there seems to be no allowance for the ways that variations in family configuration might influence the college plans and experiences of FGC students. Even if a student’s biological parents do not have bachelor’s degrees, a college-educated guardian or stepparent may prove highly influential as a student begins making college plans. For example, neither of Roger’s parents enrolled in college until Roger was a college student himself. However, he described himself as “raised primarily by my grandparents,” (Olson, 2009, p. 14) and spoke at length of the influence of his college-
educated grandparents on his own educational aspirations. By most definitions, Roger would be considered a first-generation college student. However, his experience was heavily shaped by college-educated guardians and was perhaps more similar to non-FGC peers.

Furthermore, much of the literature is based on secondary data analysis. This provides the advantage of large datasets that seek to be nationally representative, but it also creates limitations that must be acknowledged. Perhaps the most significant issue is the delay between data collection (generally in the late 1980s and early 1990s) and these published findings; relatively recent publication dates (e.g., Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004) may obscure the fact that although the analyses are relatively recent, the data is somewhat dated. Policy and programming decisions based on these findings may not prove effective, due to the social and cultural changes since this data was collected (e.g., the growth of the Internet and wireless technologies; the events of September 11, 2001; recent changes in the economy, etc.) that have shaped the college experience, for FGC and non-FGC students alike.

The Crack in the Sidewalk

Perhaps the absence of literature related to first-generation college graduates is a by-product of academic silos. Researchers in sociology are interested in the barriers to college faced by these students, whereas those interested in higher education focus on retention and persistence. Career development theorists are interested in how FGC students choose majors and make career decisions, while student services professionals often focus on out-of-classroom experiences. After the FGC student gets to college, chooses a major, navigates the college environment, and graduates, academic interest in their experience seems to wane. This may seem like an unlikely topic for an adult educator to pursue. Perhaps it is. However, even though these graduates transition away from formal education, at least for a time, they will continue to engage in workplace, informal, and lifelong learning—all of which are foundational to adult education.
Chapter 3: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

In this chapter, I describe the methodological and theoretical framework underlying this study. I first outline the philosophical underpinning of phenomenology, specifically as it relates to phenomenology as an approach to qualitative inquiry. I discuss situated learning, specifically the concept of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), as a framework for understanding how FGC graduates adjust to their workplaces. I also present the key concepts of social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), as potentially helpful for exploring the career development of first-generation college graduates.

The Development of Phenomenology

Phenomenology is not merely—perhaps not primarily—a qualitative research method. Associated most closely with German philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, phenomenology is a philosophical movement (Spiegelberg, 1978) that encourages the exploration of experiences as they are encountered, with the goal of producing nuanced descriptions free from unexamined presuppositions. This section outlines the central concepts of phenomenology, especially as applied to qualitative research. Particularly salient to this discussion will be the concepts of lived experience, essence, intuition, interpretation, and bracketing.

Historians question precisely where, in the course of philosophical history, a discussion of phenomenology should begin (Spiegelberg, 1978). Philosophers debate the meaning and importance of the components of phenomenology (Moran, 2000). Qualitative researchers using phenomenological methods find a dizzying array of “phenomenological flavors” at their disposal (e.g., Moustakas, 1994; Thomas & Pollio, 2002; van Manen, 1997b). However, since discussions of phenomenology are generally framed by the influence of its key players (e.g., Cohen, 1987),
this discussion will begin in the same way, beginning with the foundational ideas of Husserl, the
response of Heidegger, and the subsequent modifications of Gadamer and others.

*Husserl and Transcendental Phenomenology*

Although the term phenomenology has been found in philosophical and other writings as
early as 1765 (Moustakas, 1994), it is Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) who is often referred to as
the “father of phenomenology” (Ray, 1994, p. 118) and the developer of the philosophical
approach referred to as phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl proposed a systematic,
disciplined “study of experience using intuition and imagination to get to the roots, the essence of
consciousness” (p. 20). He labeled this “approach to a knowledge of human experience”
(Moustakas, 1994, p. 28) phenomenology.

For Husserl, phenomenology begins with the tenet that what is there—the phenomenon
that “appears in consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26) for investigation—can be described for
what it really is. However, this is neither simple nor automatic. According to Cohen and Omery
(1994), “to really see what surrounds us requires phenomenological study” (p. 139). The goal is
to describe the essence of the phenomenon accurately and completely: What makes a phenom-

enon what it is, and what, if removed, would result in a different phenomenon altogether?

It is at this starting point that Husserl identified the central challenge of phenomenology:
Our attempts at description are almost certainly tainted by what we think we already know.
Spiegelberg (1978) highlighted this: “Phenomenological description of phenomena was hindered
by the inherent human tendency to interpret, to apply our everyday preconceptions and practical
interests, to the pure experience” (p. 137). In other words, the extent to which the phenomen-
ologist can resist his or her natural inclination to *interpret* and *explain* is the extent to which the
resulting description is likely to accurately *describe* the phenomenon. Phenomenology is
“committed to description of experience, not explanation or analyses” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59).
There is a dialectical tension in crafting description: limiting the description to what could be observed by others were they to take the time to observe and understand without inferences or judgments (Hayakawa, 1963) while at the same time recognizing that “a description … further discloses what is already dimly seen” (Vandenberg, 1997, p. 5). Furthermore, “to be meaningful, a description must be something quite different from a mere repetition in words of what we already know in perceptual experience” (Spiegelberg, 1975, p. 125). It must bring something new that has the potential to change the outlook of others.

To deal with this, Husserl suggested that the phenomenologist work toward a stance of “presuppositionlessness” in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. This requires understanding phenomena “in their modes of givenness” (Moran, 2000, p. 11) without relying on or referring to existing hypotheses or theories. Moran also indicated that the possibility of attaining presuppositionlessness has been disputed by philosophers. After all, the questions that drive the philosopher to initiate a phenomenological investigation are driven by an admitted lack of understanding, a question of why something is or is not as expected. These expectations are derived from either formal or informal hypothesizing and shaped by some intellectual connection with the field in question (Lippitz, 1997). However, Moran continued by suggesting that Husserl did not mean that the phenomenologist would—or could—be free from his or her ordinary language and experiential understanding of a phenomenon. The point, rather, was to “not assume any philosophical or scientific theory and furthermore must avoid deductive reasoning … to concentrate on describing what is given directly to Intuition” (Moran, 2000, p. 126). Spiegelberg (1978) indicated that presuppositionlessness should be understood as “the attempt to eliminate merely presuppositions that have not been thoroughly examined or, at least in principle, been presented for such examination. It is thus not freedom from all presuppositions, but merely freedom from unclarified, unverified and unverifiable presuppositions” (p. 83).
This seemingly passive standpoint, in relation to the phenomenon under investigation, requires a very active process, generally referred to as *epoché* (alternatively: *epoche*) or bracketing. Moustakas (1994) suggested that “what appears in the world is a product of learning” (p. 27). Bracketing, therefore, is the process of setting aside what has been learned (formally or informally) about a phenomenon. It requires a willingness to “see with new eyes” (p. 86), taking no pre-defined position in regards to the phenomenon.

Bracketing is only the beginning. Once the “natural attitude” (Moran, 2000, p. 11) has been suspended, the phenomenologist engages in what Husserl called phenomenological reduction. Spiegelberg (1978) described this as a two-phase process. He suggested that Husserl discussed the first phase, eidetic reduction, with “no elaborate instructions,” but the objective was “to drop all reference to the individual and particular” (p. 134). Moustakas (1994) outlined this as “describing in textural language just what one sees” (p. 90), a process of looking and describing, then looking again and describing again. The goal is to move from “particular facts” to “general essences” (Cohen & Omery, 1994, p. 139). It is, in a sense, separating the description of a phenomenon from the particular instance(s) of the phenomenon that sparked the description.

Spiegelberg (1978) labeled the second phase the “phenomenological reduction proper” (p. 134). The goal is to strip away everything that is not absolutely necessary for a complete and accurate description of the phenomenon—to “free the phenomena from all trans-phenomenal elements” (p. 134). This phase acknowledges that “theoretical stances [can creep] back in to the phenomenological viewing of the phenomena” (Moran, 2000, p. 11), perhaps unconsciously. It also highlights the possibility that the margins of a phenomenon—what truly constitutes that phenomena and nothing else—may be difficult to discern. The “phenomenological reduction proper” calls for the careful, meticulous, and repeated examination of the phenomenon, to assure that the resulting phenomenological description truly describes only one thing.
Husserl set the bar of phenomenology high. The phenomenological investigation begins with personal engagement with a topic suitable for inquiry; the phenomenologist engages in thorough self-examination; the description must be of a singular phenomenon, free of all individualistic or trans-phenomenal characteristics. And this must be done while remaining vigilant against any pre-existing suppositions or theoretical explanations relating to the phenomenon.

As “a philosophy which remained constantly in the making” (Spiegelberg, 1978, p. 76), the boundaries of Husserl’s phenomenology can be difficult to delineate. Moran (2000) suggested that a “transcendental turn” (p. 125) in Husserl’s thinking began after 1903. This led Husserl beyond the pursuit of the “essential structures of all conscious experiences” (p. 215) to a quest for understanding how those structures may be connected to other structures in a transcendental realm. As a result, phenomenology in Husserl’s tradition is sometimes referred to as transcendental phenomenology. Also among Husserl’s later (unpublished) developments was the idea of the lifeworld, the “world of everyday experience” (Cohen & Omery, 1994). This “world of pre-theoretical experience” (Moran, 2000, p. 181) forms a “universal framework” (p. 181) of sorts, which both profoundly shapes our experience and brings coherence to our investigations. van Manen (1997b) suggested that crafting the phenomenological description may be facilitated by exploring the interaction between the individual, their experience of the phenomenon, and their various lifeworlds. He proposed four lifeworlds as “fundamental existentials” (p. 102) as particularly appropriate for phenomenological exploration. *Lived space* refers to the “felt space” in which we experience our surroundings, so that walking in a familiar place “feels” different from walking in a foreign city. *Lived body* addresses the ways in which our physical being (and awareness of that physicality) shapes our experience of the world. *Lived time* speaks to the variations in the experience of the passage of time, as in “time flies when you’re having fun.” *Lived other* is the “interpersonal space that we share” (p. 104) with the individuals with whom we relate. Imagining the ways in which the phenomenon might be experienced in these various
realms allows the researcher to further test the limits and boundaries of the phenomenon, while also adding depth and precision to the resulting phenomenological descriptions.

Discussions of Husserl’s phenomenology are filled with fabricated words like “aboutness” (Moran, 2000, p. 16) and “thisness or thatness” (Spiegelberg, 1978, p. 134). This is due in part to the challenges of translation and Husserl’s propensity to “attach uniquely modified meanings to traditional terms” (p. 75) to make his point. However, these words also demonstrate the challenge of adequately conveying what Husserl saw as phenomenology’s task: finding words to express precisely what has been intuitively understood and experienced.

**Heidegger and the Move toward Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was originally Husserl’s student and actively engaged in his philosophy (Moran, 2000). However, where Husserl focused on the structures of knowledge (epistemology), Heidegger’s primary interest was more ontological (Ray, 1994). Spiegelberg described this as a “shift [of] the center of gravity of phenomenology by making human being, rather than consciousness, its hinge” (p. 303).

Heidegger eventually broke with Husserl, stating that “the phenomena of existence always require interpretation” (Moran, 2000, p. 197). Transcendental phenomenology pursues a misleading target, he suggested, since “an interpretation of human existence cannot be neutral, dispassionate, theoretical contemplation, but must take into account the involvement of the enquirer him- or herself in the undertaking” (p. 197). Human beings “can’t not interpret” what they encounter, and phenomenology must acknowledge and allow for that interpretation.

It is here that phenomenology connects with the art of interpretation—hermeneutics (Moran, 2000). For Heidegger, these interpretations do not arise independently or free of presuppositions, since “hermeneutic interpretations always must be based on … such understandings as we already have” (Cohen & Omery, 1994, p. 146). Furthermore, Heidegger asserted
that even questions are framed by the presuppositions of the questioner, because “even to be able to pose a question we must have some initial pre-understanding of what we are asking about” (Moran, 2000, p. 236). The object and the shape of the question are a kind of presupposing (Moran, 2000), making Husserl’s goal of presuppositionlessness an impossibility (Ray, 1994).

Heidegger’s goal, therefore, was to press this interpretive impulse into the service of phenomenological inquiry, to “[take] the hidden out of its hiding” (Cohen & Omery, 1994, p. 141). The resulting phenomenological descriptions, therefore, “go beyond what is given directly” (p. 146) to seek understanding of the phenomenon in ways that have previously been unarticulated and perhaps unacknowledged—paying attention to the phenomenon as it presents itself, but also recognizing that the ways in which it has been hidden or disclosed may also lend understanding (e.g., understanding a victim’s impulse to expose or protect the perpetrator of a crime would be critical to understanding the phenomenology of surviving a violent crime). Unlike Husserl’s aspiration to pure description, Heidegger’s phenomenology “leads to a new way of seeing rather than a set of philosophical propositions” (Moran, 2000, p. 228).

Gadamer and Others—The Continued Move of the Phenomenological Movement

The story of phenomenology is sometimes abbreviated as the story of Husserl versus Heidegger and perhaps this shortcut is adequate, as the road seems to diverge in many directions after Heidegger. In fact, Spiegelberg (1978) suggested that Heidegger himself may have moved so significantly that “it is, however, by no means clear whether Heidegger belongs any longer unconditionally within the framework of the phenomenological movement” (p. 348).

Gadamer solidified the connection between phenomenology and hermeneutics, drawing an explicit connection between the human experience, the subject of phenomenological inquiry, and its expression in language, the tool and target of hermeneutics. For Gadamer, “language does not just reflect human being but actually makes humans be, brings about human existence as
communal understanding and self-understanding” (Moran, 2000, p. 270). Therefore, since language is the means for interpreting and creating human experience, it must also be central to the description of that experience—which is the primary task of phenomenology.

The connection between language and understanding was further strengthened by Merleau-Ponty, who said, “when I speak I discover what it is that I wished to say” (1973, p. 142, as cited by van Manen, 1997b, p. 32). van Manen extended this connection, explicitly connecting language with phenomenology: “Human science research is a form of writing” (p. 111). At this point, the various schools of phenomenology diverge substantially, as indicated by Spiegelberg’s (1978) history, but the connection between language, interpretation and phenomenology initially forged by Heidegger remains integral to the pursuit and practice of hermeneutic phenomenology.

The Concepts of Phenomenology

With the connection of phenomenology as philosophy to phenomenology as research, book-length treatments of phenomenological approaches to qualitative inquiry (e.g., Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997b) as well as published research that reports variations on the themes of transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology (e.g., Perrone & Vickers, 2008; Sinclair & Milner, 2005; Wells, Bhattacharya, & Morgan, 2008) have been produced. Given the many approaches and wide-ranging interpretations of the central tenets of phenomenology, this section outlines the key concepts of phenomenology as applied to qualitative research.

Lived Experience

In some circles, the phrase “lived experience” has become synonymous with a phenomenological approach to qualitative research. If a researcher is interested in culture, ethnography is the straightforward choice. To understand mechanisms or processes, the choice of grounded theory is equally clear. However, if the researcher is interested in some aspect of an event or
occurrence or the ways that event may have influenced participants’ lives, the only appropriate option may seem to be phenomenology. Phenomenology may indeed be the best choice, but it should not be selected because it has somehow been (wrongly) presented as “more scientific” or “more rigorous” than a general, interpretivist approach to qualitative research that draws its conclusions from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Having said that, lived experience is philosophically and methodologically at the heart of phenomenology. As van Manen (1997b) stated: “Phenomenology is keenly interested in the significant world of the human being” (p. 9). Furthermore, phenomenology is “the study of the lived experiences of persons, [with] the view that these experiences are conscious ones” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Spiegelberg (1975) defined experience as “the kind of individual occurrences in which a potential knower makes cognitive contact with an individualized object” (p. 176). Lived experience is the occurrence that can be described and eventually analyzed to reveal the underlying phenomenon. It is concrete, not an abstraction (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000).

Lived experience goes beyond the chronological details of an event to include the human interaction with and response to the event, “both the thinking subject and what is thought by this thinking subject” (Stanage, 1987, p. 47). This sense of lived experience draws from Husserl’s understanding that “consciousness was the condition of all experience” (Moran, 2000, p. 61). Moran summarized this: “All conscious experiences are characterized by ‘aboutness.’ Every act of loving is a loving of something, every act of seeing is a seeing of something” (p. 16). In other words, a conscious act cannot be completely independent; it is directed at something.

Thus, this “aboutness” is an integral component of the lived experience. However, Heidegger approached phenomenology and lived experience with the stance that “the things themselves always present themselves in a manner which is at the same time self-concealing” (Moran, 2000, p. 229). If the one who has lived the experience cannot express concretely what the experience is “about,” the phenomenologist will face the challenge of helping to bring the
“aboutness” to the surface, which will potentially—perhaps necessarily—shape its expression. Even if the one who has lived the experience can assign meaning to that experience, the meaning is inextricably linked with the language that he or she uses. Therefore, the lived experience is ultimately subject to the hermeneutical interpretation of the phenomenologist.

**Essence**

If the lived experience represents the “particulars” of a phenomenon (van Manen, 1997b, p. 10), the essence of the phenomenon refers to the components that constitute the phenomenon, in its general sense. Transcendental phenomenology aspires to a pre-reflective, pre-theoretical, intuitive, dispassionate portrayal of the “invariant meanings” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 51) of the essence of an experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology, on the other hand, sees interpretation as unavoidable but also fundamental to the work of phenomenology—indispensable and inextricable from the process. For the transcendental phenomenologist, the essence of an experience is uncovered in the work of phenomenology. Essence for the hermeneutic phenomenologist, on the other hand, is what is understood through the interpretive process of phenomenology.

The essence of an experience, therefore, is the “what” of the phenomenon that would be recognized by those who had experienced the phenomenon. van Manen (1997b) defines essence as simply “a linguistic construction, a description of a phenomenon” (p. 39). However, a phenomenon may find expression across a range of lived experiences, and it may only be intuited or grasped through a study of the particulars or instances as they are encountered in lived experience” (p. 10). Therefore, the essence of an experience “has a universal and necessary character” (Strasser, 1997, p. 106); it is what is held constant across those experiences. Cohen & Omery (1994) suggested that the essence is both the goal and the byproduct of phenomenology, “[seeking] to secure absolute insights into the what, or essence, of whatever is given intuitively in
experience. The task is to elucidate the general essence of the phenomena being investigated to yield a concrete descriptive analysis” (p. 138).

**Intuition**

Husserl’s concern was with a phenomenon as it appeared directly in intuition, “in a pure manner, unsullied by assumption” (Moran, 2000, p. 127). Intuition is what is left, after “everyday sense impressions and the natural attitude” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 32) are set aside. Intuition, therefore, is “the beginning place in deriving knowledge of human experience” (p. 32) and a key process in apprehending the essence of a phenomenon.

Phenomena appear to consciousness, untainted by theories or presuppositions; intuition receives them “as they appear” (Moran, 2000, p. 6). However, once received by consciousness, meaning is created as the phenomenon encounters the larger world. Moustakas (1994) suggested, therefore, that “what appears in consciousness is an absolute reality while what appears in the world is a product of learning” (p. 27). The work of phenomenology is to strip away anything that obscures the phenomenon so that the resulting description consisted of only what had appeared in intuition—to un-learn what is “known” about the phenomenon, to see what is there, to uncover the essence of the phenomenon. Moran summarized the challenge of intuition: “Note: It is one thing to intuit an essence and quite another to express that intuition in words” (p. 155).

**Interpretation**

As described earlier, hermeneutics is the art of interpretation (Moran, 2000). While the transcendental phenomenologist seeks freedom from interpretation, the hermeneutic phenomenologist seeks awareness of interpretation that is already occurring. Therefore, hermeneutic phenomenology is dependent on “[going] beyond what is directly given” to “[discover] meanings which are not immediately manifest to our intuities” (Spiegelberg, 1978, p. 695)—it is dependent
on interpretation. As van Manen (1997b) stated: “Actually it has been argued that all description is ultimately interpretation” (p. 25). Any resulting description is, therefore, modified (interpreted) in the telling and interpreted in the listening, not to mention further shaped and interpreted as the phenomenologist crafts the description.

Furthermore, Moustakas (1994) alluded to infinite possibilities of phenomenological discovery, stating that “the essences of any experience are never exhausted” (p. 100). Therefore, any interpretation is and must be artificially bounded—made at a point in time, defined by that point in time (Van der Zalm & Bergum, 2000). Moran (2000) outlined Gadamer’s position: “All understanding, including scientific explanation, is historically conditioned, is partial, and always comes from a point of view. Understanding takes place within the finite boundaries of essentially limited and historically conditioned human living” (p. 252). Without this understanding of the larger context, the researcher has no criteria for deciding what should be included or excluded, and the context that shaped the interpretation is then discarded from the interpretation. Without it, hermeneutic phenomenology is both impossible and meaningless.

**Bracketing**

A camera filter can alter a photographic representation of an object, enhancing the light to make the sky seem bluer and the grass greener. To the untrained eye, the resultant picture is assumed to be an exact representation of the photographed object. The skilled photographer, however, can recognize the influence and effect of various filters, even on a photograph composed by someone else. Furthermore, the trained photographer considers and deliberately selects the filters he or she uses, understanding the effect those filters will have on the photograph.

Phenomenology calls the researcher to an unfiltered approach to the phenomenon under investigation. The phenomenologist is challenged to both recognize and remove his or her preconceptions about the phenomenon. This does not happen passively. Husserl likened this process
to mathematical bracketing, identifying a part of the problem to be dealt with first then set aside, while the rest of the problem is solved. In the same way, phenomenological bracketing (alternatively: epoché or epoche) requires that “prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” are “set aside” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). This creates “an original vantage point, a clearing of mind, space, and time,” (p. 86) from which to observe and explore the phenomenon.

As Vandenbarg (1997) described it, “phenomenological bracketing consciously avoids the use of theoretical, explanatory constructs from the natural, social, and behavioural sciences and metaphysics because it wants to describe in an unprejudiced manner phenomena as they occur in the lived-world” (p. 7). This central discipline of phenomenology is also its fundamental challenge. Without careful bracketing, the resulting phenomenology is nothing other than an impressionistic (Strasser, 1997), self-fulfilling prophecy, where the phenomenologist finds what is expected and describes it in a way that reiterates pre-existing and unexamined assumptions.

If transcendental phenomenology is the attempt to understand phenomena as they appear directly to consciousness (Moran, 2000), bracketing clears away the filters between the phenomenon and the consciousness. For Husserl, bracketing was an attempt to escape the interpretive impulse (Moran, 2000). It was also a first step in the pursuit of presuppositionlessness. This is not setting aside awareness or consciousness (Ray, 1994); it is becoming aware of when presuppositions, theorizing or prejudgments are shaping thoughts or conclusions about the phenomenon under investigation and seeking to remove that influence. It is a “pure state of being required for fresh perceiving and experiencing” that allows the phenomenologist to bring his or her “absolute presence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 87) to the task of describing the phenomenon.

A hermeneutic approach also incorporates the idea of bracketing, although somewhat modified from that of transcendental phenomenology. Rather than a task completed at the beginning of the phenomenological pursuit, bracketing here is more of an iterative process, a back-and-forth between theoretical understanding and phenomenological viewing (Ray, 1994),
consciously aware of the way each is influenced by the other. van Manen (1997a) suggested a “precarious balance between reflection … and an immediate grasping of meaning as experienced in everyday living” (p. 46). It assumes that the phenomenologist not only brings his or her background and existing knowledge to the inquiry, but that he or she is also consciously aware of the influence this pre-existing knowledge may have on his or her research.

The photographer can use camera filters to his or her advantage, but only after becoming aware of the potential effect on the photographic outcome. In the same way, and as Lippitz (1997) suggested, the phenomenologist may eventually incorporate his or her pre-existing ideas or theoretical knowledge, but only after examining (bracketing) those ideas to understand their influence. Bracketing is, therefore, a back-and-forth movement between pre-existing ideas that have been uncovered and emerging interpretations. Both are evaluated and re-evaluated, as the phenomenologist creates, crafts, and re-works the emerging description.

Situated Learning

Theories that fall under the category of situated learning vary widely in focus and unit of analysis. However, these theories begin with the premise that knowledge is neither produced nor stored “in the [individual’s] head” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 253). Knowledge is not a “substance to be ingested and then transferred to a new situation” (Fenwick, 2001, p. 34); it is created in interaction and is, therefore, “located” in the setting (situation) that produced the knowledge. Learning and knowledge can only be understood in the context of these interactions. Therefore, knowledge can be thought of as “a capacity to coordinate and sequence behavior, to adapt dynamically to changing circumstances” (Clancey, 1995, Concerns of Situated Learning section, ¶ 2), rather than as discrete pieces of information that are stored when learned and retrieved when needed.

Furthermore, Handley, Clark, Fincham, and Sturdy (2007) suggested a “central assumption” (p. 187) of situated learning is that “learning is a normal part of everyday practice,
and is therefore impossible to isolate and then research as though it were a discrete process”(p. 187). This requires an inherently social view of learning, where:

learning does not happen in a void, but occurs within a social environment which not only brings with it the history, traditions and “wisdom” of the social environment or particular society, but also provides the student with a resource of other students, each with their own knowledge, experience and expertise, with whom to share ideas, negotiate meaning and work towards shared understandings. (Hodgkinson-Williams, Slay, & Siebörger, 2008, p. 435)

This does not mean that learning takes place only when people are in physical proximity to one another. Rather, “action is situated because it is constrained by a person’s understanding of his or her ‘place’ in a social process” (Clancey, 1995, Concerns of Situated Learning section, ¶ 7).

It does, however, suggest that knowledge is inseparable from the situation that produced it (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Strictly interpreted, situated learning contends that because learning is unique to a situation, it is not portable to other situations, per se. Those who critique situated learning suggest that learning can be transferred, as long as the learner has the “transfer skills” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 255) to facilitate the application of existing knowledge in new situations. Greeno (1997) stated: “The issue is how the question of generality and transfer should be formulated, not whether ‘transfer’ occurs” (p. 12). Therefore, situated knowledge is “transformed and reinvented” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 254) when the learner is confronted with a new situation in which previously acquired knowledge or skills might be utilized. Billett (1996) further suggested that “the nature of the situation and circumstances in which knowledge is appropriated is influential in determining the likely prospect of subsequent redeployment to other situations and settings” (p. 263). Consequently, when knowledge is successfully transferred from one situation to another, it is most likely a “near transfer” (p. 269) to a somewhat similar situation (e.g., from one formal educational setting to another).
A situated approach is, to borrow Sfard’s (1998) metaphor, a participatory approach to learning and knowledge. Learning is an “improvised practice, which unfolds in opportunities for engagement with practice, defined by the social context of learning, rather than determined by the interventions of a ‘master’ or mentor” (Bathmaker & Avis, 2005, p. 50). The knowledge produced is tied up with the practice and the context.

Communities of Practice

As one way to describe precisely how learning is situated, Lave and Wenger (1991) suggested that learning could be understood by recognizing the nature and influence of the groups in which individuals participated. They referred to these groups as communities of practice, suggesting that continued interaction with a group’s activities and pursuits was a key mechanism by which learning takes place. The idea of a community of practice (CoP) as a “[group] of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, n.d., What Are Communities of Practice? section, ¶ 2) was first introduced by Lave and Wenger’s 1991 work, which focused on CoPs in apprenticeship settings. At times, discussions of CoPs—especially critiques such as Hughes, Jewson, and Unwin (2007a)—focus primarily on the concepts presented in Lave and Wenger (1991). This discussion of communities of practice will, however, incorporate both the original work and further development of the theory (e.g., Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). This section begins, therefore, with an overview of the theory related to communities of practice. It continues with a discussion of legitimate peripheral participation as a key construct to understanding how communities of practice can facilitate or hinder learning within a CoP. In addition, I will outline several key critiques of CoP theory.
Communities of Practice

Wenger (1998) suggested that “communities of practice are an integral part of our daily lives … so informal and so pervasive that they rarely come into explicit focus” (p. 7). Perhaps this accounts for the wide-ranging application of the idea that groups of people who pursue a shared goal can learn together (Wenger, n.d.) to groups of swing dancers (Callahan, 2005), miners (Somerville & Abrahamsson, 2003), witches (Merriam, Courtenay, & Baumgartner, 2003), or members of a surf club (Light, 2006). However, identifying where a community of practice (CoP) exists may be easier than concisely defining what a CoP is. Wenger (n.d.) indicated that a CoP has three defining characteristics: its domain, its community, and its practice.

The domain. Membership in a CoP requires commitment to a common interest from which members develop “shared competence that distinguishes members from other people” (Wenger, n.d., What Are Communities of Practice? section, ¶ 3). The domain is a “specific area of expertise that members share” (De Cagna, 2001, p. 7), the space within which the practices of the CoP make sense and promote the activities and knowledge of the CoP. According to Wenger et al. (2002), “without commitment to a domain, a community is just a group of friends” (p. 30).

The community. Wenger (n.d.) suggests that a group only becomes a CoP when “members interact and learn together” (What Are Communities of Practice? section, ¶ 5). The interaction creates the community, where members talk, share information, and help each other in ways that allow them to function more effectively within the domain.

The practice. A CoP develops among groups where members share some sort of practice, a “socially defined way of doing things in a specific domain” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 38). The practice is what the CoP does. It has emerged and makes sense within a particular social and historical setting that gives it meaning (Wenger, 1998). Viskovic (2006) suggested that these practices are “shared histories of learning” (p. 326). Wenger (1998) also placed the practice at the center of the learning function of the CoP: “Learning is the engine of practice, and practice is the
history of that learning” (p. 96). He clarified this further: “[Learning] is what changes our ability to engage in practice, the understanding of why we engage in it, and the resources we have at our disposal to do so” (p. 95-96).

However, Wenger (1998) indicated that within a CoP, the community and practice are so closely linked that they “should be viewed as a unit” (p. 72). A CoP is more than just a “community” that “practices” something; the whole is more than the sum of the parts. Wenger identified three essential “dimensions of practice” (p. 73). A CoP can be identified by its:

- **Mutual engagement.** Members of the CoP must be working together, vitally connected to the practice of the CoP, and “included in what matters” (p. 74) to the community. As the members of a CoP perform their shared practice, the community is more clearly defined.

- **Joint enterprise.** This is the goal toward which the CoP is moving, negotiated by the CoP itself “in the very process of pursuing [the goal]” (Wenger, 1998, p. 77). The CoP develops an identity of itself as an entity that can respond to a situation. The joint enterprise is dynamic and may shift as the CoP grows, knows its members better, and understands its practice more thoroughly.

- **Shared repertoire.** As the CoP interacts over time, it gathers resources, develops routines, and adopts norms that allow participants to make sense of the practices of the CoP, a process that Wenger (1998) refers to as “reification” (p. 58). The shared repertoire refers to the symbols, routines or norms that the CoP has adapted and adopted as its own, and that are central to functioning effectively within a particular CoP.

Participants in a CoP share information and work together in “free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems” (Wenger, 2001, ¶ 3) and that ultimately create knowledge. Given that the CoP is a collective of individuals that Wenger (1998) suggested should be treated as a single entity, the knowledge created by the CoP is rightly both a product and possession of the CoP, situated within the activity and the social relationships that produced it.
Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Thus far, the discussion of communities of practice presents all participants as equally engaged in the activities of the CoP. The three defining characteristics of a CoP and the three dimensions of practice, as described earlier, do not speak directly to the interpersonal workings of a CoP. The definition also does not speak directly to how CoPs facilitate learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) addressed these issues with their idea of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), “the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice” (p. 29).

Understanding LPP begins with identifying the collection of activities, practices and norms that define the boundary of a CoP. Within this boundary, the various members of a CoP display a “continuum of expertise” (Zimitat, 2007, p. 322), with some members more fully engaged than others in the practice of the CoP. For a CoP to function and perpetuate itself, not only must the members of the CoP find value from their association with the community (O’Donnell, Porter, McGuire, Garavan, Heffernan, & Cleary, 2003), the CoP must maintain a permeable border (De Cagna, 2001) that allows newcomers to be incorporated into the CoP.

The newcomer to a CoP is a “legitimate peripheral participant” in the CoP, part of the community but not fully engaged in it. Learning occurs as the newcomer is given access to the domain and practice of the CoP, since “learners, as peripheral participants, can develop a view of what the whole enterprise is about, and what there is to be learned” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 93). Mere proximity to the work of the CoP is “no guarantee of an easy passage into the community” (Rismark & Sitter, 2003, p. 505), and learning about the practice is insufficient. The objective of learning is to become a full participant of the CoP (Fenwick, 2001), and LPP requires that the newcomer is given an opportunity to make “authentic contributions” (Rismark & Sitter, 2003, p. 498) even as he or she is on the periphery of the CoP.

For the newcomer to learn what he or she needs to know and become a full participant, this theory assumes the newcomer will be given “more and broader responsibilities within the
community, and more difficult and risky tasks” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 111). Newcomers must be given access to “all that full membership entails” (p. 100) and must be “recognized by the other participants as an important, trustworthy and skilled future [participants]” (Nielsen, 2008, p. 251). Newcomers also need “access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 101), while also being assigned meaningful tasks that mesh productive activity and understanding. He or she must be practicing, in two senses of the word: rehearsing to gain mastery (practice as learning) and exercising skills already acquired (practice as doing). At the same time, Lave and Wenger suggested that fewer structured demands should be made on the newcomer’s time, to allow time for learning and absorbing the norms of the CoP.

Intuitively, this makes sense; in reality, however, it seems that striking this balance often proves challenging. Viskovic (2006) interviewed new tertiary teachers in New Zealand and found that they actually spent little time on the periphery, because “their inbound trajectories [into the CoP] quickly immersed them in the full demands of practice” (p. 331). Jawitz (2007) also described a CoP in a university academic department in which newcomers found it difficult to access “low risk” tasks. Bathmaker and Avis (2005) suggested that training programs may actually serve to marginalize newcomers, rather than incorporate them, especially where newcomers have only limited meaningful access to old-timers within the CoP.

*LPP and identity.* Lave and Wenger (1991) describe learning as a social practice that is, in a sense, an aspect of both an individual’s current identity and his or her evolving identity. Learning “implies becoming a different person” (p. 53) within the systems with which one interacts. As such, LPP is both an indicator of membership in a community of practice and an “evolving form of membership” (p. 53) within the CoP. The newcomer learns the practices of the CoP and takes on the identity of a member of the CoP “through the continual appropriation of meanings through experience” (Hung & Chen, 2002, p. 248). Through this process, not only is he
or she changed (in terms of both knowledge he or she has access to and his or her identity), but the community is also changed, by the introduction of the new member. Alternatively, Callahan and Tomaszewski (2007) suggested that it may be the individual’s pre-existing sense of identity that shapes his or her engagement in or relationship to a CoP.

**What LPP is not.** Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasized that LPP “is not itself an educational form, much less a pedagogical strategy or a teaching technique. It is an analytical viewpoint on learning, a way of understanding learning” (p. 40). They seemed to resist the idea that LPP could be intentionally implemented or operationalized. Later, however, Wenger et al. (2002) presented a framework for promoting the development of healthy communities of practice, suggesting that LPP could be fostered and facilitated, at least to some extent.

In thinking about LPP, it is tempting to consider the possibility of an “illegitimate peripheral participant,” as opposed to a “legitimate peripheral participant,” Lave and Wenger (1991) argued against this:

“It seems all too natural to decompose [LPP] into a set of three contrasting pairs: legitimate versus illegitimate, peripheral versus central, participation versus nonparticipation. But we intend for the concept to be taken as a whole. Each of its aspects is indispensable in defining the others and cannot be considered in isolation.” (p. 35)

At the core of situated learning is the idea that learning must be understood in context and, to some extent, as a unified whole. Isolating one concept for analysis or emphasis alters the whole in a way that renders it meaningless.

Legitimate peripheral participation, like the CoPs where it is expressed, requires the participant to be an active agent in his or her world. The newcomer engages with the CoP, experiences practices that are new and norms that are unfamiliar, encounters the problems within the domain of the CoP, and begins to explore ways of solving those problems (Billett, 1998). In all of
these activities, the legitimate peripheral participant is both learning and contributing to the knowledge of the CoP. What is learned is inseparable from the context in which it was learned.

Critiques of Communities of Practice

No theory should expect to be free of critique, and the theory related to communities of practice is no exception—numerous critiques have been identified as these ideas have been explored and tested (e.g., Hughes et al., 2007a). An exhaustive exploration of these critiques is beyond the scope of this chapter. Highlighted here, however, are several key critiques, which suggest that Lave and Wenger (1991) present a simplistic view of CoP and LPP, that LPP may not be the only mechanism of learning within a CoP, that issues of power are not adequately explored, and that the focus on the social nature of learning ignores the role of the individual in a way that is unhelpful.

*It’s just too neat.* Reading Lave and Wenger (1991) uncritically, one could conclude that wherever groups of people congregate a CoP can (or should) form to foster learning and further facilitate the work of the group. These groups would be appropriately inclusive, with newcomers always welcomed, shepherded, and brought into the community. James (2007) and Engeström (2007) both critiqued Lave and Wenger’s silence on the influence of the larger institutional or historical context on a particular CoP, suggesting that this oversight limits the utility of the theory to accurately describe the workings of a CoP. James (2007) also suggested that Lave and Wenger’s utopian vision of CoPs ignores the “varying degrees of consensus, diversity or conflict among those who identify themselves, or are identified by others, as belonging to those communities” (p. 132). Wenger (1998) did allude to the potential for conflict, indicating that CoPs are “neither a haven of togetherness nor an island of intimacy insulated from political and social relations” (p. 77). He continued by suggesting that this conflict could ultimately prove beneficial:
“Disagreement, challenges, and competition can all be forms of participation. As a form of participation, rebellion often reveals a greater commitment than does passive conformity” (p. 77).

Others suggest that Lave and Wenger (1991) portrayed the movement from periphery to center without sufficient complexity (e.g., Hughes, Jewson, & Unwin, 2007b). Hung, Chee, Hedberg, and Seng (2005) described the move from LPP to full participation as having several sub-stages, from novice to observer to participant to active contributor. Wenger (1998), himself, suggested that the original concept of LPP represented only one possibility, an inbound trajectory, where identities of newcomers “are invested in their future [full] participation” (p. 154). Wenger suggested that newcomers may experience one of several other trajectories: a peripheral trajectory, which will never lead to full participation, either by the individual’s choice or the old-timers’ design (Laksov, Mann, & Dahlgren, 2008); an insider trajectory, found among full participants whose identities continue to be formed by the CoP, even after achieving full participation; or a boundary trajectory, where a participant’s role in one CoP is defined as he or she works among multiple CoPs, seeking connections to link the multiple communities.

Furthermore, empirical findings suggest that LPP does not always feel legitimate. Lave and Wenger (1991) wrote of LPP as a positive experience, “an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement” (p. 37). However, Cornford and Carrington (2006) described LPP as “an uncomfortable position” (p. 269) for doctor-trainees, who felt excluded from the core relationships and central experiences of their CoP. O’Donnell and Tobbell (2007) described the experience of adult learners returning to higher education who expressed “an awareness of their position on the periphery” (p. 318), leading to a sense of isolation and “confusion and even anger” (p. 318) at their perceived marginalized status. As O’Donnell and Tobbell suggested: “Although Lave and Wenger (1991) argue for the legitimacy of peripheral participation, this is not necessarily constructed in a positive manner by those experiencing it” (p. 318). Perhaps Lave and Wenger (1991) do present a straightforward vision
for CoPs and LPP, but the work represents an initial, theoretical description. When tested among real groups of real people, it is not surprising that the picture is anything but clear.

*Learning is more than LPP.* The challenge of any theory of learning is to identify precisely where and how learning occurs. Lave and Wenger (1991) assumed that learning is a function of participation in the practice of the CoP, occurring as the newcomer moves closer to full participation. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003) took issue with LPP as the primary mechanism of learning. They observed three teachers in an art department who had functioned as a CoP for 15 years, challenging each other and learning from one another. In this department, “learning is a constant presence” (p. 16), even though all three teachers are full participants and established old-timers within the CoP. For Hodkinson and Hodkinson, this demonstrates that LPP “is not a necessary, or even always the dominant, component of learning” (p. 16) in a CoP.

Furthermore, specifically applying CoP theory to workplace learning, Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, and Unwin (2005) suggested that Lave and Wenger “are overly dismissive of the role ‘teaching’ plays in the workplace learning process” (p. 65). Fuller et al. went on to state that the novice is both learner and teacher, especially in work-based learning. They suggested that “experienced workers are also learning through their engagement with novices” (p. 64), as the novice brings his or her experiences and prior knowledge base to the new setting.

As described earlier, Wenger’s later works outlined multiple trajectories within a CoP and indicated an openness to a more complex understanding of learning within CoPs. In addition, Wenger (1998) would argue that Hodkinson and Hodkinson’s teachers are not a CoP, since the arrival and inclusion of new members is “an essential aspect of any long-lived practice” (p. 99). Regardless, it seems appropriate to acknowledge that newcomer-to-old-timer is not the only interaction that causes change, creates knowledge, or produces learning.

*A power-free portrayal.* As Lave and Wenger (1991) described LPP within communities of practice, they described the CoP as a stable system that has recognized competencies,
appropriately porous boundaries, effective recruiting practices, and established processes for exposing newcomers to the knowledge and practices that are within the domain of the CoP. It is a vision that depends on many things “working right.” Critics of communities of practice suggest that this portrayal ignores the ways power can significantly alter the functioning of a CoP. For example, old-timers often control access to the meaningful tasks that legitimate peripheral participants need to access and master to continue along their own trajectory toward full participation, giving the old-timers considerable power over the newcomers.

To say that Lave and Wenger (1991) did not address power is overstated. Their own discussion of meat cutter apprentices suggested that existing interpersonal norms and dynamics can significantly hinder newcomers’ learning. In addition, Wenger (1998) suggested that power is “a property of social communities,” important in discussions regarding “the negotiation of meaning and the formation of identities” (p. 189). However, Hughes et al. (2007b) concluded that “inequalities and asymmetries of power” are “not dealt with adequately” (p. 173), because this issue, although mentioned, is not sufficiently integrated into the larger theoretical framework of communities of practice. Huzzard (2004) concluded that the role of power was addressed in Lave and Wenger (1991) but lost as the CoP idea has been incorporated into literature related to organizational learning. This position is also expressed by Contu and Willimott (2003), who suggested that the more subtle and nuanced ideas of the theory—including the role of power in CoPs and LPP—have been overlooked as the theory has gained wider visibility. Hughes et al. (2007b) suggested incorporating the contributions of other theoretical perspectives (e.g., social network or actor-network theory) to address issues of power within CoPs more fully.

The community is comprised of individuals. In an attempt to shift focus away from a completely individualized concept of learning, in which a person incorporates knowledge into his or her own mental structures as an individual act (e.g., Fischer, Yan, & Stewart, 2008), Lave and Wenger (1991) have, perhaps, de-individualized learning too completely. Discussions of
communities of practice rarely acknowledge that an individual’s history may profoundly shape his or her experience—and by extension, his or her learning—within the CoPs where he or she is a member. As Hodkinson et al. (2004) stated, there is often only “token acknowledgement of the place and significance of individual positions, dispositions, actions and interactions. Individual differences are marginalised, as the research focuses on workers as types or groups” (Conclusion and Implications section, ¶ 7) in a way that minimizes the importance and effect of those differences. In other words, even though Lave and Wenger (1991) downplay the experience of the individual within the CoP, it is the individual who experiences the CoP.

There is also little mention of how an individual’s membership in a CoP influences webs of relationships outside the CoP (Hughes et al., 2007b). Consider, for example, how a woman’s decision to return to college impacts her relationships with spouse or family members, especially since it is often the “outside” relationships that determine the success of the student, rather than her negotiation of the CoPs found in university settings (Reay, 2003; Steele, Lauder, Caperchione, & Anastasi, 2005). Wright (2007) stated that CoP theory emphasizes the relationship between learners and a social setting and “downplays relationships between individuals” (p. 430) within or beyond the CoP. Wright suggested that the role of these relationships in CoPs, and the associated learning therein, “is not well served in the literature on communities of practice” (p. 430).

Presenting a theoretical framework for understanding learning as it happens, especially from the standpoint that learning is a social process located in the interactions of individuals who may have conflicting priorities or agendas, is challenging. Many critiques seem to be based only on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work, making little if any mention of the further developments of the theory as represented by Wenger (1998), Wenger et al. (2002), or subsequent empirical findings. These critiques seem to highlight the ways in which CoP theory differs from CoP reality. In fact, Hughes (2007) suggested that this disparity may be related to shortcomings in
Lave and Wenger’s original work. He stated that “while Lave and Wenger start out by expressing concern with how learning actually is … the analysis that follows … seems, at times, to be more concerned with prescribing how learning should be” (p. 33). Perhaps Lave and Wenger present a utopian vision of learning in community; perhaps this is what a theory of learning should do.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) presented social cognitive career theory (SCCT) as a framework particularly appropriate for individuals who are in the early stages of exploring and preparing for careers. The theory describes career decision making as a function of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. In addition, based on Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory, SCCT acknowledges the ways in which personal characteristics, environmental factors, and behaviors influence each other and the theory allows for the consideration and influence of contextual (inter-personal) factors in an individual’s career development.

SCCT has been described as “particularly useful” (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2009, p. 92) for addressing career concerns related to persistence when facing obstacles. As such, SCCT has been used as a theoretical framework for empirical research related to FGC students, specifically the career decision-making self-efficacy of Upward Bound Students (O’Brien, Bikos, Epstein, Flores, Dukstein, & Kamatuka, 2000); the career choices of Mexican American adolescent women considering “nontraditional careers” (Flores & O’Brien, 2002); and the career choice barriers identified by a diverse group of students at both a state university and a technical college who were able to identify their own “at least tentative” career plans (Lent et al., 2002, p. 63).

Gibbons and Shoffner (2004) contended that SCCT would be helpful when exploring career development and college options with prospective FGC students. They suggested that prospective FGC students may eliminate viable career and education options based on inaccurate assessments of their ability to succeed in college. Given the high attrition rate of FGC students
(Chen & Carroll, 2005), a prospective FGC student may be aware of others who have gone to college and not succeeded. Bandura (1986) proposed that self-efficacy can be based on vicarious learning; therefore, a prospective FGC student may have “learned” that he or she cannot succeed at college because he or she has seen other fail. Gibbons and Shoffner (2004) indicated that “these foreclosed occupational options may be reintroduced and reexamined so that self-efficacy or outcome expectations may be judged for accuracy” (Perceived Barriers to Success section, ¶ 4). Prospective FGC students may not be basing their career choices and college aspirations on accurate information, and their parents do not have the first-hand experience or knowledge to correct these inaccuracies. Gibbons and Shoffner suggested that SCCT highlights the key factors that influence the career decisions of prospective FGC students. Social cognitive career theory is also an appropriate theory for addressing the career development needs of FGC graduates.

**Self-Efficacy**

Lent et al. (1994) described self-efficacy as a “dynamic set of self-beliefs” (p. 83) that leads an individual to make a judgment as to whether he or she will be able to successfully complete a specific task. Chen and Carroll (2005) reported that FGC students tend to have lower grade point averages, take fewer courses, and complete fewer credits than their non-FGC peers. Although these students often overcome significant barriers to enroll in and persist through college, they may not see themselves as successful students or as successful as they think they should have been. This may impact the student’s sense of self-efficacy toward career entry and success. This trend was noted by Goodwin (2006). She spoke with FGC students nearing graduation who had initially been admitted to an Ivy League school under an “academic opportunity program” (designed to provide access to an elite education for those who were not otherwise academically qualified). Many of these students expressed frustration at their inability to perform academically, even when their grade point averages were above 3.0 on a 4.0 scale.
In addition, given that self-efficacy is defined as “specific to particular performance domains” (Lent et al., 1994, p. 83) the individual who expresses a high level of self-efficacy in one area (e.g., academic achievement) may not feel confident that this success will transfer to another domain (e.g., success on the job). Brown and Lent (1996) suggested that a counselor may be able to identify inaccurate or diminished self-efficacy beliefs by exploring not only the career options that are interesting to the individual, but also paying attention to those areas which are of lower interest. In the case of an FGC graduate, it may be important to understand the graduate’s feelings about the jobs he or she is not applying for, as these decisions may be based on faulty information or an inaccurate interpretation of past events.

**Outcome Expectations**

Described as “the imagined consequences of performing particular behaviors” (Lent et al., 1994, p. 83), outcome expectations also serve to shape an individual’s career choices. Whereas self-efficacy causes an individual to evaluate whether or not he or she will be successful in a given endeavor, outcome expectations form the individual’s projection as to what might happen if he or she pursues that endeavor. For the FGC graduate, any given career pursuit may result in multiple and conflicting outcomes. If his or her family expects the FGC graduate to act as a delegate or to “represent success” in a particular way on behalf of the family (London, 1989), the graduate may be basing his or her career-related and job search decisions on assumptions related to his or her family’s reaction to various career options—the expected outcomes of pursuing various courses of action.

Outcome expectations may have also strongly influenced a FGC graduate’s earlier choice of major. If, as has been suggested (Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Longwell-Grice, 2003), many FGC students approach college as a means “to get a job,” it is possible that a student may have chosen to pursue a particular course of study based on expected employment outcomes, rather than
aptitude or interest. Upon beginning his or her job search, the FGC graduate may find that the available occupational options are not in line with either earlier expectations or current interests. The FGC graduate may also find it helpful to think about expectations regarding work setting, ongoing training, and relationships with supervisors.

**Personal Goals**

Goals allow people to organize and guide their behavior across time (Lent et al., 1994) and play an important role in the development of career plans and direction. Brooks-Terry (1988) suggested that an FGC student, and by extension the FGC graduate, who does not identify clear goals will be “vulnerable to the pulls of his [or her] other role sets” (p. 132). For the FGC graduate, these goals may include independence, employment, and possibly paying back student loans or helping to financially support his or her family. The FGC graduate may also find that his or her goals compete with one another (e.g., wanting to living at home to save money while also needing to live in a major metropolitan area to pursue a particular line of work, or valuing time with family and friends while also needing to work long hours to do a job effectively and be positioned for career advancement) or that these goals conflict with the aspirations and plans of his or her family.

**Contextual Supports and Barriers**

The impact of interpersonal variables and the influence of an individual’s context upon his or her career choice has been described as a “second level of analysis” (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000, p. 36) within SCCT. As such, each of the previously mentioned variables (self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals) can be better understood by evaluating the impact of the context on each of these areas. For the FCG graduate, this second level of analysis would incorporate the impact of social class and class mobility on the graduate’s career.
development. FGC students have been reported as feeling that college is unforgiving “not of those who don’t learn the rules, but rather of those who did not know the rules before arriving on campus” (Tokarczyk, 2004, p. 163). While this statement specifically refers to the rules of academic success on a college campus, Brooks-Terry (1988) suggested that FGC students are also learning the social norms and lifestyle “rules” of the middle class. The FGC graduate leaves the college environment and campus culture behind; moves into a new work setting, which requires learning another set of norms and expectations; and continues to rework a relationship with culture and class—both his or her initial class and his or her adopted (or aspired to) class standing. In addition to managing the new and additional responsibilities of adult life (job search or employment, income and expenses, etc.), the psychological “work” of social mobility may leave the FGC graduate struggling to establish himself or herself and understand the meaning of his or her chosen career.
Chapter 4: RESEARCH METHOD

In this chapter, I argue that the phenomenology is an appropriate method for exploring the early-career experiences of first-generation college graduates. I will also outline issues related to research site and participant selection, data collection and analysis, as well as issues related to ethics and the quality of the study. The chapter closes with profiles of the study’s six participants.

Phenomenology and the First-Generation College Graduate

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of first-generation college graduates as they transition from college to work. As described in Chapter One, this investigation focused on how these new graduates make meaning in their work. The epistemic interest driving this study was crafting a rich and conceptual description of the early-career experiences of FGC graduates, based on the research question: How do first-generation college graduates who have obtained a bachelor’s degree within the past two to five years understand and make meaning in their work? In other words, what is it like for a FGC graduate to begin working?

The experiences of FGC students in higher education have been explored with both quantitative methods (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004) and qualitative inquiry (Brooks-Terry, 1988; Goodwin, 2002; London, 1989). This research suggests that the in-college experiences of FGC students are shaped by a number of factors, including SES, parental educational attainment, academic preparation, as well as out-of-class social and extracurricular pursuits. Where the experiences of FGC graduates have been reported, the literature presents relatively simplistic conclusions that the starting salaries of FGC graduates are similar to the starting salaries of their non-FGC peers (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-
Alamin, 1998). The FGC student’s in-college experience is described as complex and layered, but the after-college experience has not been explored or described with depth and nuance.

While “phenomenology is not a maid of all work” (Spiegelberg, 1975, p. 78), it was fitting for this exploration. Spiegelberg suggested that phenomenology “may at least be a help in facing the data of our world squarely and honestly, without deflation or inflation, without the impoverishment of a reductionist positivism” (p. 79). I began this study with the understanding that it might be quite possible, as implied by the scant research related to the topic, that the post-graduation, early-career experiences of FGC graduates mirror that of their non-FGC peers, indicating that college graduate is the most salient characteristic for understanding their experiences after leaving college. However, I argue that FGC students face post-graduation and early-career challenges uniquely related to their status as first-generation graduates of college, making this aspect of their life histories important to consider. Phenomenology both requires and allows for an openness to “follow wherever it leads” (p. 79), to whatever conclusions the data warrant and to only those conclusions.

In addition, given that little is known about how FGC graduates navigate post-college life, a phenomenological approach was appropriate. van Manen (1997a) suggested that “phenomenology merely shows us what various ranges of human experience are possible, what worlds people inhabit. How these experiences may be described and how language … has powers to disclose the worlds in which we dwell” (p. 52). As students—FGC and non-FGC alike—move away from the college environment, their post-college experiences will be highly individualized, as unique to each person as the combination of factors, traits, and events that led them to college in the first place. Phenomenology, in describing the essence of the early-career experience of the FGC graduate, therefore, is a unique tool for unifying these diverse lived experiences.

Furthermore, phenomenology was an appropriate approach to this research question because of the timing and significance of the college-to-work transition in potential participant’s
lives. Cohen et al. (2000) indicated that “a basic premise of the hermeneutic phenomenological method is that a driving force of human consciousness is to make sense of experience” (p. 59) and that phenomenology is “most useful when the task at hand is to understand an experience as it is understood by those who are having it” (p. 3). Therefore, exploring the ways in which new FGC graduates make meaning of their work as they are engaged in understanding that process is a task well-suited to phenomenology.

Cohen et al. (2000) addressed the value of phenomenology to nursing research, stating: “Only patients can reveal the meanings they create, and nurses cannot assume they understand patients’ perspectives” (p. 4). In the same way, only FGC graduates can reveal the meanings they are creating, in relation to their early-career experiences. Researchers cannot assume they understand the perspectives, conclusions, and experiences of FGC graduates without going directly “to the things themselves” (van Manen, 1997b, p. 184)—directly to the graduates themselves.

Data Collection

This section outlines how I went about collecting data. I begin by outlining my understanding of the appropriate unit of analysis for the study. I continue by describing my target population—including a description and rationale for each of the key criteria of the population. I then discuss the appropriateness of purposeful sampling within this study and outline my efforts to recruit participants for the study. The section closes with a discussion of my data collection, including my experiences with face-to-face and telephone interviewing.

Unit of Analysis

The study, as a phenomenology, aims to create a “shared understanding of an experience that the researcher describes and the reader responds to” (Barritt, Bleeker, Beekman, & Mulderij, 1985, p. 26). Patton (2002) stated that “the key issue in selecting and making decisions about the
appropriate unit of analysis is to decide what it is you want to be able to say something about at the end of the study” (p. 229). Identifying the unit of analysis in a phenomenological study is not without challenge. Although I am interested in the experiences of FGC students as they graduate and begin working, the study seeks to describe the phenomenon of being an FGC graduate. Therefore, while the unit of observation was individual participants, the unit of analysis is the collective of those experiences that constitute the phenomenon, as conveyed by participants.

Purposeful Sampling

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that sampling within a qualitative study should be “based on informational, not statistical, considerations. Its purpose is to maximize information, not facilitate generalization” (p. 202). Therefore, the goal of purposeful sampling is not selecting research participants in the hopes of statistically replicating the characteristics of a larger population. Instead, purposeful sampling selects participants based on potential to contribute directly to the inquiry at hand—what Patton (2002) referred to as “information-rich cases” (p. 242). Furthermore, phenomenological inquiry requires that participants have both experienced a particular phenomenon and are willing to talk about their experience (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Phenomenology, therefore, necessitates a purposeful approach to sampling, to insure that participants have, indeed, experienced the phenomenon in question.

Both Polkinghorne (1989) and Creswell (2007) reported wide variation in the number of participants selected for phenomenological studies. Polkinghorne indicated that “the researcher needs to choose an array of individuals who provide a variety of specific experiences of the topic being explored” (p. 48). Thomas and Pollio (2002) suggested that an “appropriate sample size” (p. 31) for phenomenological studies is between 6 and 12 participants. I conducted interviews (as described later) with six participants.
**Target Population**

The target population for this study was traditional-aged (i.e., graduated before age 26), FGC graduates who have obtained a bachelor’s degree between two and five years ago, who are currently working full-time, and who left college with no immediate plans to attend graduate school. I will now outline these criteria more completely.

*First-generation college students.* For the purposes of this study, “first-generation college student” refers to an individual whose parents have not attained bachelor’s degrees. Specifically, the literature highlights the impact of parental influence on college-related decisions made during high school (e.g., Miller, 2008; London, 1989). Therefore, this study defines FGC status based on the parents’ educational attainment while the participant was in high school.

Before beginning the study, I was concerned about cases where the participant did not live with both biological (or adoptive) parents during his or her time in high school, making the idea of “first-generation” status more complex. I wondered about the influence that a non-custodial, college-educated parent or step-parent might have on the participant’s pre-college, in-college and after-college experiences. However, among my six participants, only Darlene had not grown up in the custody of both biological parents. In her case, neither of her step-fathers had bachelor’s degrees. Perhaps more importantly, Darlene’s stories focused heavily on the influence of her mother, with barely passing references to her first step-father (married to her mother until Darlene was 17) and a few comments related to the influence of her second step-father (who married her mother while Darlene was in college).

*Education and post-graduation plans.* Given that my primary interest is in the experience of participants as first-generation college graduates, I did not focus on to those who pursued a particular degree (e.g., nursing or education). However, I did limit the study to those who graduated without immediate plans to pursue a graduate or professional degree. Given the increasing importance of advanced degrees and graduate credentials, combined with the
uncertainty in the current employment and economic climate, I found that three of my participants were actively engaged in pursuing graduate studies or additional training, and the other three indicated that they had considered further formal education. In fact, I found that talking with participants about post-baccalaureate education and credentials gave insight into their thoughts about their current work, employment, and career.

Age. As described in Chapter Two, I am primarily interested in the college-to-work transition as experienced by FGC graduates. To date, the literature has largely explored this issue in relation to the initial transition from college to work, as experienced by men and women at the beginning stages of their careers. Although the literature related to adult learners in higher education is beginning to explore the unique challenges facing adults who return to college who also happen to be FGC students (e.g., Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008; St. Clair-Christman, 2009), I am interested in the experience of FGC graduates at the beginning of their careers. Therefore, this study was limited to men and women who attended college as traditional-aged students, who graduated before age 26.

Time since graduation. van Manen (1997b) indicated that since phenomenological reflection is retrospective and reflexive, lived experience is, necessarily, an experience in the past. As he stated: “A person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through the experience. … Reflection on lived experience is recollective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through” (p. 10). The “experiencer” must have sufficient distance from the experience to subject it to phenomenological inquiry.

Within the context of this study, therefore, it was important that participants be somewhat removed from their initial transition from college to work. Therefore I limited my investigation to those who completed their bachelor’s degrees between two and six years earlier, anticipating that two years of work experience would provide ample on-the-job experiences and sufficient time for reflection on work and the meaning of work. In addition, by limiting my inquiry to those who are
no more than six years removed from graduation, the experience was “fresh” enough to allow for vivid descriptions. Participants in this study graduated between December 2003 and December 2006, providing between three and five years of experience after college.

*Employment status.* My primary interest in conducting this study is describing meaning making at work. Therefore, I looked for participants who were employed full-time at the time of the first interview. “Full-time employment” was broadly defined to include working at least 35 regularly scheduled hours per week, across one or two jobs. My participants were all working in jobs that contained at least some elements of their academic majors. Two of the six had recently been promoted and one participant was engaged in a career change (moving closer to her college major); talking about these current changes of direction added additional perspectives on transition, work, and meaning.

*Contacting Participants*

As Goodwin (2006) alluded to, following up with first-generation graduates can be challenging, given the limited resources faced by many first-generation-serving programs. In addition, given my interest in describing the phenomenon as experienced by men and women making meaning in a variety of work settings and from a range of academic disciplines, finding participants was not as straightforward as contacting alumni relations personnel for a particular academic program.

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I began recruiting with my personal and professional network. I have been volunteering with the undergraduate student government at Penn State University for the past two academic years, and I had learned that several student representatives are also FGC students. I sent announcement to the student government’s listserv, anticipating that these students may have connections with other FGC students and recent graduates. In the hopes of broadening the study beyond the range of my own
acquaintance and experience, I contacted a staff person at a program that serves under-represented and first-generation college students at Penn State, the College Assistance Migrant Program. I also contacted friends and acquaintances who mentor recent college graduates in several metropolitan areas (Detroit, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Dallas). After explaining the purpose and the scope of the project, I asked these individuals to recommend and refer potential participants. Although these contacts generated some interest, this interest did not result in participants for this study.

I contacted several acquaintances who are currently working at other educational institutions (two are professors and one is an alumni relations coordinator) to ask if they knew of anyone who might be interested in participating. These individuals did make several recommendations, one of whom did participate in the study. Another participant responded to an e-mail that was sent to a “young adults” group at a church I previously attended.

Before beginning graduate school, I worked for a Christian organization, as an educator and mentor for undergraduate students. I have stayed in contact with many of these students through social networking Web sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.), and I used status updates on these sites as a type of snowball sampling (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002), asking my “friends” and “connections” on these sites if they might be interested in participating or knew someone who might be interested. Given that this generation has been described as “[having] grown up with the Internet, e-mail, and [instant messaging]” (Coomes, 2004, p. 27), it is not surprising that social networking generated the most interest of any of my methods of recruiting. Each time I posted an announcement about the study, I had several responses from potential participants. Many did not meet the criteria for inclusion in the study, but most who responded expressed a sense of pride and identification with their identity as an FGC graduate (including one who posted “me, me, pick me!”). The remaining four participants were recruited through Facebook.

After identifying a potential participant, I e-mailed an announcement introducing the
project and further outlining the inclusion criteria for the study. Upon confirming that the participant was indeed an FGC graduate who had experienced the phenomenon in question, I scheduled interviews. Profiles of all participants are found later in this chapter.

Of the six participants in my study, I knew three of them before their involvement in this study. These individuals (Michael, Kylie, and Kendra) had been involved with the Christian campus ministry organization I had worked for prior to pursuing my own graduate studies, so I had gotten to know them during their time as undergraduates. All had graduated from West State University (a pseudonym) before I left the organization in July 2005, and I had maintained only casual contact with each one since their graduation. As I interviewed them, I found that our shared history, as well as my familiarity with the college they attended, served as a helpful starting point for our conversations; for example, I came to our interviews with knowledge of how the college’s education program was structured and a familiarity with the climate of various residence halls.

In addition, these three individuals knew me primarily from my role in Christian ministry at their university. Therefore, although neither the focus of the study nor the interview prompts focused on spiritual or religious aspects of their work and lives, these three participants knew that we shared a common religious and spiritual outlook. At times, I believe these individuals talked about aspects of their lives in a way they might not have without this shared knowledge. After my second interview with Michael, in particular, I found myself struggling to understand this dynamic. I finally decided that it felt like there was an extra measure of trust because we are both Christians—he had entrusted me with important and thoughtful descriptions of experiences that wouldn’t necessarily be “understood” in the same way by someone else. Taking care to not abuse this trust was a challenge during my process of data analysis.
In-Depth Interviews

After identifying participants, I sought to explore their experiences through in-depth interviews. van Manen (1997b) stated that phenomenological interviews are “a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material” as well as “a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience” (p. 66). Polkinghorne (1989) indicated that the phenomenological interviews must “[focus] on specific situations and action sequences that are instances of the theme under investigation” (p. 49), and the interviewer must help the research participant focus on describing the experience, rather than interpreting or theorizing about the experience. Polkinghorne suggested that questions such as “What was it like for you?” or “What did you experience?” will help the participant focus on their own experience and the meaning of the experience, while questions like “What happened?” tend to result in factual or chronological descriptions that may not lead to phenomenological insight. I conducted semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1983), attempting to both develop conversational relationships with participants and to move beyond description to meaning.

With each participant, I conducted interviews after discussing and obtaining informed consent (See Appendix A). I structured my interview guide (found in Appendix B) based on Seidman’s (1998) three-phase approach to phenomenological interviewing: the focused life history, the details of the experience, and reflecting on the meaning of the experience. In each case, I found that the distinction between the “phases” of the interview seemed somewhat artificial, especially during the follow-up interview. As participants responded to my interview prompts and shared their experiences, one vignette would frequently lead into another, and stories were often nested within each other. At other times, recalling a particular situation would cause the participant to comment or expand on a topic they had previously addressed. The semi-structured format gave me the freedom to adapt my interview guide to follow the flow of the conversation. In general, the interviews were structured as follows:
• *The Focused Life History.* Seidman suggested that “people’s behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them” (p. 11). Therefore, I focused on the participant’s life history as related to the research questions, using prompts such as “When you talked with your parents about going to college, what were these conversations like?” or “Tell me about your hometown.”

• *The Details of the Experience.* Here I focused on the “what” of the phenomenon, in this case the participant’s post-college experiences at work. The challenge here, as indicated by Polkinghorne (1989), was to help the participant stay focused on describing their own lived experience, rather than on explaining a generalized sense of the phenomenon. I found that by asking participants to share specific stories (“Tell me about your first day on the job”) or to talk about their job in a way they had not thought about before (“How would you describe your job to my grandmother?”) helped them to focus on the specifics of their own experiences.

• *Reflection on the Meaning of the Experience.* I then focused on the meanings of these experiences to participants. This is in keeping with the phenomenological goal of “[borrowing] other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences … to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience” (van Manen, 1997b, p. 62). For example, I asked participants what they would *miss* about working, if they no longer *had to* work. This question elicited a wide range of responses, from genuine excitement at the prospect of not having to work to a deep conviction that it would be impossible to find fulfillment in life without being engaged in some meaningful task.

My participants were very gracious with their time, with total interview time lasting between two hours and four-and-a-half hours per participant. I was able to conduct five of the six
first-round interviews in person and recorded the conversation using a hand-held digital recorder. All second-round interviews (and one first-round interview) were conducted using Skype to call either the participant’s Skype ID or a phone number of their choosing. This allowed me to use the Pamela Call Recorder to make a direct audio recording of the interview. Given the limitations of my Internet connection, I did not use the video capabilities of Skype. Although the face-to-face interviews allowed for nonverbal cues that made the pragmatics of the conversation a bit more straightforward and natural (e.g., he or she could see when I was leaning in or taking a quick breath to indicate that I wanted to interject a clarifying question), I found that the phone interviews gave me the freedom to make notes and write comments without concern that participants would be distracted by wondering about what I had written down, since they could not see that I had done this. I did not have any sense that conducting the follow-up interviews over the phone limited the depth of conversation between myself and the participant.

In particular, it was interesting for me to interview Bruce. I did not know him before he volunteered for the study, and because of the timing of the interviews, both interviews were conducted over the phone. Unlike the other participants, I do not have a mental image of what he looks like. As we talked, I found that his voice reminded me of someone I had interviewed for another research project. Although I do not think these things hindered our rapport or ability to communicate, it is strange to think that I wouldn’t recognize him if I saw him.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

van Manen (1997b) suggested that phenomenology is essentially a form of writing. As such, writing is central to the phenomenological analysis of data. This writing allows the researcher to make more concrete the results of his or her reflections on participants’ responses. van Manen also outlined several approaches to the data that may help give structure to the writing and reflection process: exploring themes “embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and
imagery” (p. 78) found in participants’ narratives, seeking meaning in themes and examples, asking “what is this example an example of?” (p. 86), and talking through the analysis with colleagues. van Manen’s approach provided general direction for the analytic process. I approached the analysis of data in this study as a hermeneutic, interpretive act, recognizing that my interaction with participants and their transcripts significantly shaped the conclusions that I drew from the data.

Polkinghorne (1989) provided a generalized description of the steps taken by many phenomenological researchers, stating:

(a) The original protocols are divided into units, (b) the units are transformed by the researcher into meanings that are expressed in psychological and phenomenological concepts, and (c) these transformations are tied together to make a general description of the experience. (p. 55)

My data analysis followed a similar pattern, relying at times on steps outlined by Moustakas (1994) to make the process more concrete. Furthermore, although the focused period of data analysis occurred after all the interviews were complete, several “preliminary” steps helped me bracket out my own experience, approach the transcripts with a greater awareness of my presuppositions, and interact with the data intentionally and methodically—all while engaging in writing and interpretation. In general, I would describe my process as preparation, fragmentation, synthesis, description.

**Preparation: Describing My Own Experience of the Phenomenon**

Since beginning this study, I have become increasingly aware that my own experience as a first-generation college graduate fuels my interest in the experiences of FGC graduates. Moustakas (1994) suggested that I investigate my own experience with a phenomenological lens, to “obtain a full description” (p. 122) of how I experienced the phenomenon. Exploring my own
recollections and experiences—well before data collection—accomplished at least two things. First, I began understanding my own presuppositions about the phenomenon. I was deeply disappointed by the low status and paltry salary of my first after-college job. Even my “working title” for this dissertation (“Navigating the Swamp”) betrays the challenges I experienced as a recent FGC graduate. If I had not identified this, I could have easily assumed that my participants were also miserable in their jobs, which could have significantly skewed my data collection and analysis. Much emphasis is made of the necessity of bracketing in phenomenology: “suspending one’s various beliefs in the reality of the natural world” (van Manen, 1997b, p. 175). To whatever extent this bracketing is possible, it begins with a thorough exploration of my own experience.

Second, exploring my own experience informed my interaction with participants. I recently attended several research presentations related to FGC students. In each case, I left frustrated, because the researchers did not address the impact of first-generation status, as distinct from other factors (e.g., SES, academic preparation, etc.). Disciplining myself to explore this phenomenon in my own life provided insight into how these factors have worked together in my own experience and the impact that my own first-generation status may have had. Engaging in this process with self-reflexivity helped to highlight methods of inquiry that may help others articulate their experiences of this phenomenon.

Preparation: Transcribing

As I completed the interviews, I transcribed the data into a Microsoft Word document. Although at times this task was tedious and time-consuming, it provided another opportunity to interact with the data. I listened to each recording and typed the participant’s words verbatim, using the “comment” feature to record my initial reactions to what had been said. This step was particularly helpful in formulating the questions that I would ask in follow-up interviews. Once a transcript was complete, I listened to the recording again while reading the transcript, checking
for errors, thinking further about follow-up questions, and re-reading the notes and comments I had made during my initial transcription.

**Fragmentation: Horizontalizing**

Moustakas (1994) suggested that active manipulation of interview data begins with horizontalizing, the process of “[recognizing] that every statement has equal value” (p. 125). Moustakas suggested that “each horizon of the research interview adds meaning and provides an increasingly clear portrayal [of the phenomenon]” (p. 125). Horizontalizing is similar, in purpose, to the process used by pathologists who prepare multiple slides from one specimen—not for the purpose of creating the slides, but to more thoroughly examine the specimen. The goal of horizontalizing is not fracturing the data. However, this fracturing allows the researcher to more systematically examine that data.

Even beyond the challenge of treating all statements as having equal value, horizontalizing is difficult. The fundamental challenge is in defining “statement.” What constitutes a “statement”? Might a statement contain multiple sentences? Should a statement be defined as “a complete thought”? Even these determinations are subject to the influence, biases, and presuppositions of the researcher, since even inserting punctuation in a transcript is an interpretive act (Bucholtz, 2000). Moustakas does not seem to address this. However, Polkinghorne (1989) described the resulting list of statements as “the concrete, vague, intricate, and overlapping expressions as they occur in the protocols” (p. 52), which indicates that it may not be possible (or desirable) to apply a rigid definition of “statement” when seeking to horizontalize data.

In working with my transcripts, I approached the task of horizontalizing by working with an electronic copy of the transcript. I removed the comments from this copy (in an attempt to bracket out these initial thoughts and reactions and approach the data “without presuppositions”) and inserted paragraph breaks in the document at the completion of a thought, as expressed by the
participant. Horizontalizing represented my third encounter with the data (the first while I was transcribing the interview, and the second while re-listening to the interview to check the transcript). At times, these distinctions were easy to make, such as when a participant said “So, that’s why…” or “To go back to your work ethic question…” Elsewhere, creating these horizons involved a higher degree of interpretation on my part. For example, when talking about the high percentage of students from his high school who went to college, Michael said:

> It’s weird. It’s just the norm. Like everyone went to college, all of my classmates.

> Everybody. We all went to college. I mean the only people who didn’t, were the burnouts who dropped out in 11th grade or something like that. I mean, not everybody finished college, but we all went.

In this statement, I created the following breaks (horizons), which highlight the completion of a thought, the repetition, and the changes of direction:

- It’s weird. It’s just the norm.
- Like everyone went to college, all of my classmates.
- Everybody.
- We all went to college.
- I mean the only people who didn’t, were the burnouts who dropped out in 11th grade or something like that.
- I mean, not everybody finished college, but we all went.

Creating these horizons provided another opportunity for me to engage with the data and resulted in shorter statements to use as I began coding the data. At times, participants told stories that were nested within stories (i.e., describing a second experience before finishing the first, then returning to the first story after finishing the second). I found that indenting these “nested stories” helped me visually follow these stories better. After this process of horizontalizing was completed for each transcript, I imported the document into nVivo 8.0 for further analysis.
Fragmentation: Reduction and Elimination

After horizontalizing, Moustakas (1994) suggested that the researcher further interacts with the data, evaluating each statement for its connection with and contribution to the phenomenon under examination. The medical technician examines each of the previously prepared slides individually, to assess the unique contribution of a particular slide toward an accurate diagnosis. In a similar manner, the phenomenologist weighs each horizon of data, evaluating its potential contribution to understanding the phenomenon. Polkinghorne (1989) suggested that this process is a “linguistic transformation” of the data, turning the “raw data [of the subjects’ words as they appear in the transcripts] to descriptions in the words of the researchers” (p. 52).

As with horizontalizing, these results are inextricable from the influence of the researcher. Moustakas (1994) suggested that invariant constituents are the “unique qualities of an experience, those that stand out” (p. 128). This is more accurately described as “the unique qualities [as identified by the researcher] of an experience [as defined by the researcher and described by participants in response to the researcher’s prompting], those that stand out [to the researcher].” This weaving of researcher and result requires transparency and self-reflexivity throughout the process. It also calls the researcher to humility when drawing conclusions or presenting results. If done well, the resulting phenomenology will resonate with readers, but it is a distinct product of the unique interaction between a particular researcher and a particular dataset at a particular time.

As I worked with my data, I worked electronically, marking segments of the transcripts and creating “free nodes” in nVivo. I approached this step much as I would have if I had been working with post-it notes, highlighters, and a paper copy of the transcript. I read each horizon (statement) of data, creating descriptive “free nodes” (codes) that were “more precisely descriptive” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 52) of what the participant was saying. I found that using nVivo and creating these codes electronically allowed me to create free nodes that would facilitate later searching and identification. For example, each of my participants talked about the
process of choosing their college major. If I had been working with post-it notes, highlighters and paper transcripts, I would have used the same color highlighter to mark these statements. I approximated this electronically by beginning each of these free nodes with the same text (e.g., “career choice—major choice-”) and then adding text that was descriptive of the particular statement (e.g., “career choice—major choice-initial major too structured”). During this process, I was careful to not “force” the codes I was creating into the labels I had already used, to avoid jumping to conclusions before thoroughly examining the data for what it said, not for how it related to what I had already coded. I also gave myself the freedom to create multiple free nodes on any given segment of transcript, to more fully and precisely describe what I saw in the data.

Synthesis: Field Notes and Memos

After interviewing each participant, I wrote out my observations and reactions. These field notes were my opportunity to record details about the individual’s life that would be relevant later (e.g., “she begins student teaching on January 25, so I really need to schedule the follow-up interview before then.”). At other times, these field notes represented my initial reactions to the data (e.g., “quite honestly, I don’t know what I think about his comment that teaching is blue-collar work”) or commonalities that I noticed between participants (e.g., “I liked her definition of work ethic … it sounds very similar to how Michael talked about this”).

I also wrote memos throughout the process. At times, these memos were reactions to patterns I noticed in the data, such as when one participant described three distinct experiences of feeling socially isolated. At other times, these represented an attempt to both explore my reaction to and synthesis of the data, while at the same time “dealing with” these ideas, so that I could bracket them from my continuing analysis, such as the memo I wrote about Michael’s simultaneous identification with and separation from his father’s blue-collar work and life. At times, these thoughts felt like unwelcome intrusions, interrupting the “real work” of coding.
However, I disciplined myself to at least attempt to record my initial impressions on the topic, knowing that too often these types of thoughts are fleeting and easily lost.

**Synthesis: Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents**

At this point, Moustakas (1994) stated that reflection and “imaginative variation” (p. 131) allow the researcher to begin to reassemble and label the data and begin to move beyond descriptions of discrete experiences to an understanding of the broader phenomenon. van Manen (1997b) suggested that a theme “only serves to point at, to allude to, or to hint at, an aspect of the phenomenon” (p. 92). The theme is the starting point, with “phenomenological power” (p. 90) to help the researcher craft a description. The pathologist compiles observations based on findings from multiple slides to craft a diagnosis. The phenomenologist’s task at this point is similar: evaluating the invariant constituents and then arranging and rearranging them in a way that contributes to the larger story of the phenomenon.

In working with my data, I found that even as I was focused on tasks that I have labeled as “fragmentation” (i.e., horizontalization, reduction, and elimination) I was also thinking about the data in more holistic ways. In fact, even as I was interviewing and transcribing, I began to notice ideas that were repeated across interviews or across participants. To avoid drawing premature conclusions that would unduly influence my subsequent fragmentation and coding, I worked to bracket these ideas as I continued the work of coding, by writing memos as necessary.

Once I had finished my initial coding and worked through all the transcripts, I had created approximately 3,500 free nodes. nVivo allowed me to sort these nodes alphabetically, thereby grouping all similarly labeled nodes together (i.e., all nodes that began with “career choice—major choice” were listed together). I printed these nodes, expecting that looking at the data in another format (i.e., on paper rather than on the screen) might lead to new insights as I began to construct labels (sub-themes) that were more abstract and more broadly descriptive.
Using nVivo, I then entered these sub-themes as “tree nodes.” I also created a Word document where I recorded the initial thoughts and impressions that had led me to identify a particular sub-theme. At times, these notes included references to a specific participant’s story (e.g., “Darlene’s ‘I’m tired and I’m going home’ story”); in other cases, these notes were more editorial (e.g., “I don’t really think this label gets at the point I’m trying to make”). At the end of this initial pass through the free nodes, I had 14 sub-themes, such as “breaking with the past,” “facing finances,” and “moving into the unknown.” Several of these sub-themes also seemed to be comprised of sub-sub-themes, which I refer to as “aspects” of the sub-theme.

At this point, I worked to assign my free nodes to tree nodes. In other words, I was categorizing the data, assigning the data and transcript excerpts, as represented by my initial codes, to broader sub-themes (or sub-sub-themes, where appropriate). Even in making this initial pass through the free nodes, I found that my sub-themes needed to be re-worked, re-defined, re-named, and, at times, collapsed into other nodes. I worked to remain open to the data, not wanting to force data into categories or tree nodes that did not fit. I found that working in both nVivo and Word, simultaneously, was helpful. nVivo allowed me to see hierarchical relationships; to easily arrange and re-arrange codes; to assign, un-assign, and re-assign data to sub-themes. The Word document allowed me to track my thoughts and more descriptive impressions of the sub-themes as I worked through the data.

I worked to assign each free node to a tree node. There were cases where an existing free node did not seem to fit exactly or precisely under any sub-theme. In these cases, I tried to err on the side of assigning the free node to the nearest-fitting sub-theme. Once I had worked through all the free nodes, I then went through each tree node, reading through the nodes that had been assigned to it, referring back to my descriptive notes in Word, moving and re-assigning nodes as necessary to best fit the data as I was seeing it.

This was very much an iterative process, where I found myself working between my
descriptions (in Word) and my “data” (in nVivo). I arranged and rearranged; cut, copied, and pasted; described and edited my descriptions until I felt certain that my sub-themes accurately represented the essence of what my participants had said. I ended with 10 sub-themes, most of which also contained component sub-sub-themes.

At this point, I began to look for themes that might unify the various sub-themes. I approached this using van Manen’s (1997b) idea of “free imaginative variation” (p. 107), trying out various combinations of themes and sub-themes, looking for themes that were sufficiently broad to capture significant aspects of the experience and simultaneously narrow enough to describe the experience precisely and accurately and judging whether these themes were “essential themes” describing “essential relationships” (p. 107) of the data to the phenomenon. Throughout this process I collapsed some sub-themes into others; I promoted some sub-sub-themes to sub-themes. An example of the interplay of themes, sub-themes, and nodes is included in Appendix C.

I am a self-taught user of nVivo, and I recognize that my use of the software and its capabilities may be a bit idiosyncratic. However, I used it, in combination with Word, in a way that allowed me to accomplish the goal of repeated, varied, and extended engagement with my data. I settled on the themes (invariant constituents) described in Chapter Five and Chapter Six, fully recognizing that these themes and sub-themes represent my interpretation of the phenomenon as described by these particular participants and synthesized by me at this point in time.

**Synthesis: Creating Descriptions**

The analytic process now took a more explicitly creative turn: Creating textural descriptions (i.e., what was experienced?) and structural descriptions of the experience (i.e., how was it experienced?), as well as a composite textural-structural description of the phenomenon, which is “a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience” (p. 144). I began crafting
descriptions by writing the participant profiles that are included later in this chapter. I did not begin writing these descriptions until I had done the initial coding of each participant’s transcript; I wanted the description I wrote to be grounded in my data, as well as in my recollection of the participant and our interactions. The goal of these profiles is to give the reader, who has not met the participant, a sense of both the participant and my interaction with him or her. Therefore, I shared these descriptions with colleagues (using participant pseudonyms, of course), asking for comments on the extent to which they felt they “knew” my participants after reading the profile. These comments proved very helpful. For example, I had neglected to indicate that a participant’s comment had been said in a lighthearted manner and with a laugh. Because my colleague did not know this—and happened to comment on quote—he assumed the participant was speaking harshly about the topic at hand.

My next step was to write about the themes I had identified throughout my process of coding and analysis, as described earlier. van Manen (1997b) suggested that “a phenomenological description describes the original of which the description is only an example … an example composed of examples” (p. 122). And yet, at the same time, this description—when done well—both “acquires a certain transparency” (p. 122) and at the same time allows the reader to “see” what can’t be seen. Therefore, my goal went beyond providing evidence to support my themes. My goal, in writing, was to create a phenomenological description of the themes that incorporates my participants’ descriptions of their experiences, my interpretation of those descriptions, as well as my reaction to the data. Whenever possible, I have chosen to rely on my participants’ own words to describe their experience, even while recognizing that my decision to include or exclude text is inextricably shaped by my interpretation of the data.

van Manen (1997b) suggested that crafting the phenomenological description may be facilitated by exploring the interaction between the individual, their experience of the phenomenon, and the individual’s various lifeworlds (i.e., lived space, lived body, lived time, and
lived human relation). Imagining the ways in which the phenomenon might be experienced in these various realms allowed me to further test the limits and boundaries of the phenomenon, while also adding depth and precision to the resulting phenomenological descriptions.

**Synthesis: Creating a Final General Description**

Creating the final general description allowed me to draw together the work done throughout the project. This process further challenged my understanding of the essence of this experience for FGC graduates. Polkinghorne (1989) indicated that one phenomenologist solicited feedback from participants in response to the researcher’s final general description, asking participants to comment on the extent to which the general description matched their individual experiences and to note aspects of his or her experience that had been omitted from the general description. Polkinghorne suggested that “relevant new data” (p. 53) related to the phenomenon might arise from this follow-up interaction. This seemed like a valuable—although perhaps risky—final step, allowing for further triangulation between the participant and researcher. After creating the final general description, I did ask my participants for their feedback. Each one of my participants responded; all indicated that what I had written seemed to fit their experience.

**Ethical Issues in the Study**

From start to finish, qualitative inquiry is undeniably shaped by the researcher. From the big decisions (e.g., “What is the research question driving this study?”) to the seemingly small decisions (e.g., “Should I use a comma or a period to accurately transcribe this participant’s particular statement?”) the endeavor can be ethically challenging. In a general sense, continual self-reflection (Creswell, 2007) and transparency, as well as continued interaction with my advisor throughout this process, helped keep me alert to potential and emerging ethical issues.

I did not anticipate significant ethical challenges while conducting this study. I asked
participants about their past and present experiences, and I asked them to reflect on the meaning of these experiences; I do not think these conversations were unduly upsetting or unsettling. At times, the stories they told did involve the actions or attitudes of family members, co-workers, or employers. I used a written consent form as a way to clearly communicate the goals of the study as well as my plans to protect participants’ privacy. I have stored and archived data in keeping with IRB guidelines, using a password-protected computer. In my own writing and reporting on this research, I have referred to participants (and their employers, where necessary) in a way that shields their privacy—using pseudonyms and removing identifying details (e.g., referring to “East State University” rather than the full name of the institution) where appropriate. My participants trusted me with their stories and reflections; this anonymity allows me to honor that trust.

Quality of the Study

Ultimately, the issue of quality within any study is a question of whether the research was conducted in a way that inspires confidence in the findings of the study. Within qualitative studies, Lincoln and Guba (1986) proposed that the idea of “trustworthiness” is key to the quality of qualitative research, suggesting that the key components of trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Kvale (1983) highlighted that the key issue of a study’s validity is “whether one has in fact investigated what one wished to investigate” (p. 191). Within the framework of phenomenology, Polkinghorne (1989) suggested that quality is related to whether the conclusions of the study “[inspire] confidence because the argument in support of [those conclusions has] been persuasive” (p. 57). This has been referred to as the “phenomenological nod” (van Manen, 1997b, p. 27), where the reader sees, within the phenomenological description, an experience that he or she has had or could have—it resonates.

Creswell (2007) highlighted eight strategies for promoting quality throughout a qualitative inquiry: prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer review
and debriefing, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checking, rich and thick description, and external audits. Creswell further indicated that engaging in at least two of these strategies is necessary for insuring a minimum level of quality. I prolonged my engagement with research participants by conducting multiple interviews with each participant and allowing for sufficient time between first and follow-up interviews (ranging from one to six weeks between interviews) to transcribe the interview, reflect on the data, consider my reaction to the interview and formulate follow-up questions. My process of data analysis, as described earlier, involved repeated, methodical, and careful readings of the transcripts to further prolong my engagement with research participants. Interview transcripts, my own field notes and memos, and journal entries allowed me to approach the phenomenon from multiple directions, allowing me to triangulate the data, so that I have “corroborating evidence” (p. 208) as I drew conclusions and crafted descriptions. The process of clarifying my own bias has been ongoing, as I have reflected on my own experience as an FGC graduate during the process of developing the research questions that drive this study, as I responded to participants’ comments and descriptions during the interview, and also as I engaged with and reacted to the data. In addition, phenomenology requires that I bracket my presuppositions in relation to the phenomenon at hand, and this process has been ongoing. Furthermore, describing a phenomenon, in a phenomenological way, relies on rich and thick descriptions of participants’ experiences, which are crafted from interview and related data and outlined in the following chapter.

Finally, I used Creswell’s (2007) technique of member checking, which he describes as the process of “[soliciting] participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations” (p. 208) of the study. To accomplish this, I sent my final phenomenological description to each participant, asking for their input and clarification, to insure that my summarizing description reflected his or her experience. I received responses from each participant. All expressed agreement and endorsement of the statement, offering no additions. In
addition, I began each second interview by asking follow-up and clarifying questions, based on the prior interview, to “check” my perceptions and descriptions of their experience of the phenomenon. For example, during my first interview with Kylie, she commented that a certain extracurricular activity had been “approved” by her parents. This led me to conclude that she had been involved in clubs or activities that her parents had not approved of. I asked her about this during our follow-up interview. She corrected my assumption, clarifying that the “approved activities” were the activities that her parents were particularly proud of (playing intercollegiate softball, for example) and encouraging of (her continuing pursuit of German language fluency).

Profiles of the Participants in this Study

This section introduces the six young adults who participated in this study. For the purpose of confidentiality, I have changed the names of participants, the colleges they attended, and names of their places of employment (past and current). I have also changed other details where necessary to protect and shield their identity.

The six participants in this study were all from the Midwest, specifically Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin. It is a relatively homogenous sample: all were White, all currently live within two hours of their hometown, all enrolled in college immediately following high school, five identify themselves as Christian, and five were raised by both biological parents. However, there were also interesting variations among this group: one is a single mother, another has three small children; one attended a small private college, another had attended a large research-intensive university; time in college ranged from three and a half to four and a half years; three were currently married, one had married young and divorced before graduating from college, while the other two had not yet married; their hometowns ranged from 200 to 50,000 people; one had made several significant job and industry changes, one was in the midst of a career change, and one was still working for the agency where she had done her college internship.
Michael

Michael grew up in a small town of about 1,000 people in south-central Minnesota. He described it as a town with one wealthy family, where “everybody else” had blue-collar, working-class jobs. As he described it, the town was filled with people who worked with their hands and who worked hard. Saturdays were filled with chores, punishment generally came in the form of manual labor, and classmates who did not work full time in the summers were “just seen as lazy, or stupid for not getting the money” when there was work and money to be had. At the same time, Michael’s high school was small—his graduating class was 46—and had very few electives, so “everybody was on the college track.” He said that most parents thought, “We want our kids to have a better life, and we want our kids to get educated.” College attendance was the norm, the mentality of the school; he estimated that 90 percent of his high school class went to college.

Michael’s father was a journeyman electrician who, like most of the tradesmen in the town, generally commuted an hour to work at jobs in nearby cities. He talked about his father’s primary loyalty being to the union rather than any particular workplace, “because the union was his company.” His mother ran an in-home daycare as a way “to be a stay-at-home mom and still pay the bills.” Michael’s father had attended a technical college for his initial training as an electrician; his mother was a high school graduate. His parents told Michael and his siblings that graduating from high school education was mandatory, and they encouraged postsecondary training, but “they never pressured us” about it. His older brother earned a bachelor’s degree in construction management and is working in that field. His older sister works as a school counselor and has a Master’s degree in psychology.

Michael graduated in December 2003 with a bachelor’s degree in secondary education and now teaches high school chemistry, physics, and physical science. After five years of teaching at two different inner-city schools, this is his first year working at a suburban school in Minnesota, which has been “a big change in wonderful and good ways.” He is coaching the
robotics team, which he describes as a good fit, because, like his father and brother, “[I] like to build stuff.” Michael was married the summer before his last semester in college, and he and his wife have a four-year-old son. Michael is currently finishing up a Master of Arts in Education, which he began as a way of meeting his state’s ongoing licensure requirements. Balancing the challenges inherent in transitioning to a new school, the demands of finishing a graduate degree, and his deep desire to be a good husband and engaged father have, at times, led to stress-induced migraines, but he said that he is learning to manage the stress and prevent the headaches.

I knew Michael when he was a student at West State University and involved in the Christian organization where I worked. At the time, my first impression was of a big guy with big hair and a big personality, who liked big ideas and who had pretty big opinions. Since I had seen him last, he had lost weight and cut his hair. But our conversations were still filled with big ideas, strong convictions, and a desire to make sense of the world as he is encountering it.

Kylie

I laughed a lot during my conversations with Kylie. She did too. I knew Kylie and both of her older brothers while they were students at West State University and involved with the organization I worked for, but had not interacted with Kylie much either while she was a student or after she graduated.

Kylie grew up in central Wisconsin, in a city of about 20,000, surrounded by farming towns. The area’s primary industry, paper mills, has been slowly shutting down in recent years. Kylie described the town as “kind of dying” and “stringing along,” because big companies from other countries have bought out many of the mills and shut them down. Of a high school class of about 600 students, Kylie estimated that “I doubt half” went to college, although she said this estimate did not include those who had chosen to attend a nearby technical college. She talked
about the challenge of getting good information about college: “We asked, back in our school. … Some people knew, but you had to find the right people. … I didn’t know my options, really.”

Kylie’s mother stayed at home, and her father had worked as a pipefitter at one of the paper mills for nearly his entire career. Both of her parents are high school graduates, and her father has done some continuing education, in relation to his work in the mills. She described her parents as strongly encouraging education, repeatedly reminding their children that “you don’t want to work in the mill your whole life.” Her oldest brother has a bachelor’s degree in graphic design and is currently working as a freelance graphic designer. Her other brother graduated with a degree in linguistics and philosophy. After teaching English overseas for several years, he is currently working as a youth pastor.

After starting college to pursue a degree in communication disorders (West State’s program in this field is highly regarded), Kylie said she quickly realized that the structure of the major and several aspects of the work were not a good fit for her. She had studied German in high school and thought it would be “a shame to waste all that” knowledge, so she became a German major. After two years, she added a major in English literature, and graduated in May 2004 with a double major in four years. She studied in Germany for a semester during college, and she was awarded a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship to teach in Germany for a year following her graduation. Her parents, peers, and teachers in Germany, as well as several members of her extended family encouraged her to pursue teaching—even while she was in college; at the time, Kylie said, she was absolutely not interested in being a teacher.

After working as a project coordinator at a leadership development and consulting firm, Kylie and her husband (they have no children) moved back to the city in Wisconsin where they went to college, to pursue a job opportunity for her husband. After the move, Kylie switched jobs at the consulting firm, and she now works from her home, writing and compiling reports. In an ironic twist in her career tale, she recently enrolled in an alternative certification program to
pursue a teacher’s license and a career in teaching German and English literature; she will complete the program this semester. During the fall semester, she taught German to seventh and eighth graders. When I interviewed her, she was about to begin student teaching in English literature at a local high school. Kylie herself laughs at this change of direction. “I was just stubborn,” she said. “Everything I was doing was teaching…. [But] I honestly didn’t want to be a teacher.” Although her first semester was challenging—“I teach monkeys,” she said as she laughed about the demands of managing a classroom of junior high students—she also talked about designing classroom activities that her students really responded to and making progress in classroom management and discipline.

Kendra

Of the people I interviewed, Kendra and I probably had the most shared history. While she was a student, she was very involved in the organization I worked for at West State University. Although I did not formally mentor her over any extended period of time, we talked at length several times during the course of her undergraduate career. In fact, during one interview she said, “I remember you telling me, right before I graduated….‖ Our contact since she graduated from college has been very limited, consisting of a few conversations at weddings and several interactions on Facebook.

Kendra grew up in southwest Wisconsin, in a city of 52,000 people. She did not talk much about her hometown or high school, indicating only that she had “pretty much what I think is a normal childhood.” There was a technical college and a branch of the state’s university system in her city. Kendra planned to go to college from a very early age, and she indicated that this was probably due to the schools she attended as a child where, “everybody in the school talked about college and all my friends talked about college.” Going to college was “almost an expectation,” and her parents were “very supportive.”
The assumption of college attendance that Kendra described was very different from her parents’ experience. College was “frowned upon” in her father’s family. In the late 1980s, Kendra’s one aunt who attended college was “disowned” by her father (Kendra’s grandfather) for a few years because of her choice to attend college and major in English. Her mother enrolled in college but didn’t complete her first semester. Even among her cousins, Kendra said very few members of her extended family have pursued postsecondary education. Kendra’s father is an electrician with a high school degree. Her mother began working as a cook at Kendra’s school once her youngest brother began first grade; she now works at a secretary at the local university. Kendra’s older sister completed a bachelor’s degree in journalism and conservation at a large research-intensive university. She worked with Teach for America for three years and is now employed as a teacher on the East Coast. Although her younger brother “felt like he had to go to college” and he knew that college “wasn’t his thing,” he enrolled in, and excelled at, a diesel and auto mechanics program at a technical institute. Her brother is currently a truck driver, and Kendra said, “He loves his job now.”

Kendra started college as a biology major. She said that she didn’t really have a clear sense of a career direction; she “just liked science.” After a year, she determined that she “didn’t want to do science or math for the rest of my life.” She “liked people,” and friends suggested that she pursue a degree in social work, which she did, graduating with a bachelor’s in social work in May 2005. Her college internship was at a correctional institution and since graduating Kendra has continued to work in the correctional system. She has worked at several facilities and in several roles throughout the state, all under the umbrella of corrections social work. Kendra had recently been promoted to a management position, and our first interview took place four days after she had moved to a new city (close to where she attended college) and begun working in the new location. In some ways, Kendra talks about her current position and location as necessary for her own career advancement, but she also sees it as temporary. She is not married and has no
children. She hopes to complete her probationary year at this location and then transfer back to
the city where she was working before, where she has “a life I love.”

Bruce

Bruce grew up in southwest Minnesota—“rural America,” as he called it—in a town of
700 people and a graduating class of about 35, in a place where “there was one stoplight in the
county.” His father worked at an agriculture supply company, which gave Bruce “a little bit more
contact with agriculture than other town kids,” but there was, at times, a social distinction
between “the city slickers and the country bumpkins.” He indicated that the idea of going to
college to get a good job was “just kind of ingrained,” and he estimated that one-half to three-
fourths of his high school class went to college, and at least two classmates have completed
Master’s degrees at this point.

Bruce’s mother and father both graduated from high school, and they both had “a little
college,” although Bruce did not know why neither parent had finished college. His father grew
up on a farm, and his parents started their marriage working on a farm, but the situation changed,
and that “wasn’t available to them any more.” His parents then moved to town and his father
spent several years working at “whatever he could pick up” before starting to work at the
agriculture supply company. His father still works at the agriculture company and has worked his
way up to district manager, overseeing several stores. His mother ran an in-home daycare for
most of Bruce’s life. Bruce’s twin older brothers both pursued postsecondary education. One
brother attended the same college that Bruce did, earning a bachelor’s degree in youth ministry.
His other brother received a culinary arts degree from a technical college. When I spoke with
Bruce, both of his brothers were currently between jobs, but they had worked in jobs closely
related to their college degrees throughout the course of their careers.

In some ways, Bruce’s experience is very different from the other participants. He began
college with a desire to major in youth ministry—a vocational choice that effectively limited his college options to Christian schools. He chose City Christian College, a small, private liberal arts school in a major metropolitan area. When Bruce was a freshman, his older brother was a senior at this school, and they were involved in several extracurricular and ministry activities together. Bruce and his best friend were roommates their freshman year, a choice that was “bringing some security with me” to this college setting that was so different from his hometown. Bruce began dating his now-wife a few days after they both graduated from high school. They were married between their sophomore and junior years in college and now have three young children. In December 2005, Bruce graduated with a major in intercultural studies, and he said that he and his wife have a deep desire to work in some sort of international ministry. Currently, however, Bruce is working at a hospice agency as both chaplain and marketing coordinator. In addition, as someone who said, “I don’t think I’ve ever had just a full-time job,” he is also working part-time for a direct-sales multi-level marketing company. Bruce and his family now live less than 20 miles from the town where he grew up.

Crystal

Crystal described her central Wisconsin hometown of 220 people as a place with “three rough-and-tumble bars, a couple of churches, beauty salons, and that’s about it.” She went on to refer to it as a far-right, conservative, working-class area with “hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, football, small-town bars, and not a whole heck of a lot else.” It was an area where most people commuted to jobs in several of the surrounding, larger communities.

Crystal’s father worked in construction and was a well-respected bridge builder until complications following open-heart surgery led to Parkinson’s disease and disability. Her mother was primarily a stay-at-home mom, working “little odd jobs, here and there,” most recently being laid off after spending 10 years working for the post office. Both of her parents are high school
graduates. Crystal’s brother, who is eight years older than she is, finished high school and now works as a crane operator. “He followed my dad’s path, career-wise,” Crystal said.

Crystal remembers that even as young as six years old, she “started getting ideas of what [she] wanted to do, and all of them entailed school.” She described herself as someone who excelled throughout her whole academic career. She also indicated that after attending a “College Days for Kids” program at a nearby university she “[knew] that [college] fit me and that’s where I wanted to go.”

It is at this point where Crystal’s story diverges from the other participants in this study. The others spoke of parents who consistently promoted, encouraged and supported the pursuit of postsecondary education. When Crystal was young, however, her parents conveyed the attitude that “school now [i.e., high school] is what you needed, but college was a waste.” Four of the other participants had older siblings who, at least to some extent, blazed the trail to college (the fifth was an only child). Crystal’s brother still “vehemently dismisses” college and tried to talk her out of pursuing further education.

A fourth-grade teacher “pushed her thinking envelope,” and another mentor “believed in education 100 percent” and consistently encouraged her to pursue whatever education might be required for the careers she was exploring. Crystal’s parents eventually “started believing—and my mom before my dad—that I needed to go to college.” Crystal couldn’t recall a specific instance or catalyst behind her parents’ change of heart. However, she did indicate that several of the individuals—including the fourth-grade teacher and the mentor described above—who encouraged her educational aspirations were also highly respected by her parents. Once her parents changed their minds, they were very supportive of the idea and “pushed me in my classes, gave me incentives to get all As.” Only 60 students in Crystal’s high school class of 82 graduated, and she estimated that probably only 10 of her classmates went on to college.
Crystal married at 18. This was, she described, a concession to the conservative culture in which she was raised that “still had a hold over me,” where many of the women she grew up with married young, raised large families, and did not pursue postsecondary education. She and her husband lived in a trailer on her parents’ land—“it was a new [trailer], but…” she said with a laugh—and Crystal started college while her husband worked as a tractor mechanic. Her first semester she attended East State University, commuting about an hour each way to school. Before beginning her second semester of college, Crystal transferred to Central State University, cutting her commute to about 40 minutes each way and finding the campus climate much more to her liking. At Central State, she majored in English with minors in writing and business; she graduated in May 2005. She said that her time in college brought about significant changes in her philosophy of life and social way of being, to the extent that “there was no common ground” between her and her husband; they divorced around the time that she graduated from college.

Crystal is currently single and has a two-year-old son; she lives in central Wisconsin.

Two days before we first met, Crystal had been promoted to associate publisher of a magazine targeting a segment of the collectibles industry. In describing her job, she talked about creating each issue of the magazine from “start to finish. From concept to editing to fine-level editing … orchestrating everything that goes along with seeing that project to completion” with both print-based and Web-based aspects of the publication. The second time we met, Crystal had found the promotion to be mostly a “title increase,” with little change in her day-to-day responsibilities. She described herself as “sort of on auto-pilot” and needing a new challenge at work.

Crystal’s story was compelling to me. She talked about her in-laws’ resistance to her pursuit of education and their accusation that somehow she felt superior, and that’s why she needed to go to college. She alluded to a broken relationship with her brother, due, in part, to his response to the person she had become during college. She even shared a poem with me that she had written when she was 18 or 19, attempting to express the depth of disconnect she felt from
the culture and the people she was surrounded by. It was during my first conversation with
Crystal that I said: “This is a mess. Not a mess in a bad way, but it’s not just about school, it’s not
just about marriage, it’s not just about family, it’s this whole thing, and so very much shaped by
where you started.”

To which Crystal responded, “I know. I know.”

Darlene
darlene grew up on the west side of Michigan, on the outskirts of a city of about 35,000,
which Darlene described as a “small town.” She did not talk much about the culture of the town,
but said that she “moved a lot as a kid,” and estimated that she was currently living in her
fifteenth home. Darlene was born when her mother was young, and she said that her biological
father was never really involved in her life. Her mother married when Darlene was two, divorced
when Darlene was in high school, and remarried during Darlene’s senior year in high school.
Darlene was an only child until she was 20, when her half-sister was born.
Darlene’s first step-father was a high school graduate, and he worked at a warehouse for
most of the time that he and Darlene’s mother were married. Her mother worked at a large
grocery store until Darlene was about five, then chose to be a stay-at-home mom. Darlene’s
second step-father had retired from the military and was working with military recruits in a
support capacity. After remarrying, Darlene’s mother worked at a retail fabric store.

With the exception of fourth, fifth and sixth grades—when Darlene was homeschooled—
she attended small, private, Christian schools throughout her pre-college years. Her graduating
class of 16 was one of the largest in the school. Therefore, Darlene indicated that her interest in,
and eventual decision to attend, a large, public university caused some concern among teachers,
especially since the school she planned to attend had a reputation as a “party school.” For
Darlene, however, the larger institution gave her the flexibility to set her own schedule and
choose from a broad range of classes, and the large classes allowed her to be anonymous in a way she never could have been during high school.

Darlene said that she began college with a strong desire to pursue nursing, specifically labor and delivery nursing. After repeated attempts to be admitted to the university’s nursing program, she reached the point where she had accumulated so many credits that she was required to declare a different major. She said that she had several frustrating and ambiguous conversations with academic advisers about “what would I be able to do with this degree,” before eventually selecting and completing a bachelor’s degree in human ecology; she graduated in December 2006. During her required internship, she shadowed and assisted two foster care caseworkers. Following the internship, Diane was hired as a caseworker at this agency, where she still works. She lives in the same city as her mother and mother’s family; she is single with no children and recently bought a house.

Darlene went to the school that I attended as an undergraduate, and it was fun to be able to think back to my time at Big University while we talked. Darlene described herself as “willing to talk” about her experiences. The four and a half hours that we talked, over the course of three interviews, were filled with stories—at times stories nested within stories. This made for a bit of a challenge as I was later transcribing our conversations, but her willingness to share these stories gave me a new appreciation for a job that I knew nothing about—foster care caseworker—and for her experience as a recent entrant into that profession.

Profiles, Phenomenology, and “The Space Between”

I thoroughly enjoyed my conversations with these men and women. Talking to Michael, Kylie, and Kendra gave me the opportunity to hear updates on their lives since college and to gain a better sense of what they had done and who they were becoming. Listening to Crystal’s story gave me a deep appreciation for the freedom, encouragement, and unqualified support my parents
gave me to pursue any educational desire or goal I dreamed up—even as I now recognize that my
goals probably created significant financial and logistic challenges. I was challenged by Darlene’s persistence, when the door to her chosen career of nursing closed, and Bruce’s commitment to both providing for his family and working in alignment with his gifts and talents, even when this led him to unlikely occupations (we talked about how “hospice chaplain” was an unusual job for someone as young as he is). I am grateful for their thoughtful responses to my at-times-intrusive questions, their willingness to think about their jobs and careers in new ways, even their honesty to say “I don’t know.” I am thankful for their stories and the data created in “the space between” participant and interviewer. To me, more often than not, it just felt like a conversation, where remarkable people were sharing fascinating stories and interesting observations; I could have talked to each one for several more hours. The frustration is that any profile I may write—including those in this chapter—will undoubtedly fall short. My hope is that in providing these abridged descriptions the reader will have a sense of who Michael, Kylie, Kendra, Bruce, Crystal, and Darlene are—incomplete as it inevitably must be.

In the next two chapters, I discuss the four themes I identified in the data. Chapter Five outlines the first two themes, which focus on participants’ on-the-job lived experience. Theme I: Learning on the Job discusses the challenges participants faced in learning the skills and tasks of their job within the framework of situated learning and communities of practice. Theme II: Being in the Job describes the interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges that participants described related to their time at work. Chapter Six outlines the remaining themes, with a focus on how the past and the future affect participants’ current experience on the job. Theme III: Releasing the Past deals with the efforts made by participants as they created a new understanding of “real” work and re-worked relationships with family and culture of origin. Theme IV: Chasing a Passion argues that these first-generation college graduates are striving to for something more in their work—although what this “more” is may not be tangible or well-defined.
During the course of our interviews, I asked participants to think back to their last days of college and to recall how they felt about leaving college and beginning their careers. Kendra indicated that she had been ready “to feel like I’m actually doing something, instead of just watching other people do stuff,” and Bruce said he was ready to “get to do what I’ve been studying how to do for years. … I know I was getting pretty antsy to get out and start doing ministry, instead of just learning about it.” Crystal talked about being “through-the-roof-excited that I was going to be a real live editor, and be able to work on an actual magazine.” They had graduated; they were ready to go.

However, there is more to leaving college and beginning a career than simply finding a job and learning how to do the tasks that are required within a particular job. As these FGC graduates talked about their work, they described their places of employment as places of significant challenge, learning, and investment. These men and women work in a variety of settings, ranging from a home office to a state prison; from a small, rural, for-profit hospice agency to a suburban high school; from a publishing company to a non-profit human services agency. They expressed a wide range of commitment levels to their current careers, ranging from Michael who said “I honestly believe I could retire from [this school district]” to Kylie who will be ready to begin a new career within a few months. All the while, they express a clear sense that they are new to their career or profession, and they know they have a lot to learn—as Darlene said, “I’m quick to admit, basically, that I am a baby in this field.” Therefore, I identified Theme I: Learning on the Job to express how these FGC graduates talked about doing and learning the tasks required by their jobs. Trying to capture the breadth of how they talked about
their jobs led me to identify Theme II: Being in the Job, to highlight participants’ experiences of relationship and identity formation in the context of their work.

Theme I: Learning on the Job

Given the phenomenological nature of this study, I sought to explore the experiences of these young workers without any theoretical preconceptions about the nature of learning at work. I was curious, however, about the extent to which these FGC graduates’ workplaces might exhibit characteristics of a community of practice (CoP; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) as outlined in Chapter Three. In talking about the first days, weeks and years on the job, their internship and early-career experiences seem to fall short of the theoretical optimism of CoP and do not seem to approximate legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) in the way that Lave & Wenger (1991) described it. Their examples, stories, and experiences highlighted that they were engaged in interning as a prelude to later jobs, uncovering necessary knowledge required to do their work, and desiring continued development.

Sub-theme: Interning as a Prelude

Five of the six participants talked about significant pre-graduation internship experiences. For some, this was a required internship that was relatively structured—Michael’s student teaching, for example. Darlene approached her internship as an opportunity to make connections that might eventually help her find a job, and Kendra intentionally shadowed co-workers working in various areas of the prison, “Because I wanted to get everything I could out of it.”

These internships proved to be helpful preparation for the jobs and work settings that participants would later encounter. For Darlene, her internship provided exposure to a work setting much different from any she had encountered before:

This place was union, I didn’t even know what that meant. They had staff meetings; I
didn’t know what that meant. And there’s still so many things in a workplace environment, I had no clue. I worked in retail!

Kendra indicated that because she had used her internship as an opportunity “to ask questions and understand the ‘whys,’” she had been able to draw on that knowledge several times during her career, most recently in the context of her latest promotion and expanded responsibilities.

Michael said he had been well-prepared for the challenges he would face as a teacher—especially as a first-year teacher—because his teacher education professors “did a really good job at scaring the crap out of us.” Michael talked at length about his student teaching experience, indicating that “I came home a couple of times and just cried.” Of his supervising teachers, Michael said:

I had some rough cooperating teachers … who very much felt that baptism by fire would be the best way to learn how to teach. And they were right, I mean, it trained me well, but … this one guy, he’s like, “Okay, so last night I went home and I was talking with my wife. And I told her what I said to you yesterday, and she said, ‘You have to apologize.’ And I think she’s right. So, I’m sorry I was too hard on you.” I’m like, “Oh, good. I’m glad somebody agrees with me. Tell your wife thank you.”

He went on to indicate that this “baptism by fire” had been good and effective. “You need to be put through a boot camp,” Michael said, because teaching is “really, really hard.” He continued:

Because you’re going to work your butt off and put your heart into what you think is just this great lesson, and [students] will whine and complain, and they will just spit on what you did. And they’ll say it’s boring and it sucks, and you think it’s the most amazing, interesting, wonderful thing you’ve ever done. And you have to be able to deal with that.

And so, even though he later described the first year of teaching as “torturous hell,” Michael said, “I feel like they prepared you better than most jobs … I pretty much knew what I was going to-, I knew what it would be like. And I feel like my degree really prepared me for that well.”

These internships and pre-job experiences provided at least some exposure to the settings
in which participants would find themselves after they graduated. Lave and Wenger (1991) theorized that newcomers to a community of practice (CoP) begin as outsiders and are incorporated into the CoP as old-timers give them meaningful tasks and expose them to the practice of the CoP. In these internships, newcomers were treated as legitimate peripheral participants in the CoPs where they were working: Michael was given increasing responsibility for the classroom over the course of several semesters; Darlene’s internship supervisors were very willing to assign her varied and tasks that were increasingly central to the work of a foster care caseworker; Kendra had few assigned job duties at her internship so she took it upon herself to interact with people working in many aspects of the correctional facility. For these individuals, an internship was a valuable step in apprenticing the profession for which they were training.

Sub-theme: Uncovering Necessary Knowledge

Curiously, however, the guidance and assistance received during an internship was not always replicated once participants began working at full-time, permanent jobs. In terms of learning how to do their jobs, these men and women were given very little direction when they began working. Kendra, who had been hired to start a treatment group for alcohol and other drug abusers (AODA) in a correctional facility, described her first day on the job. She said:

I got there, and my supervisor took me to the morning meeting, where all the supervisors get together and talk about what happened the previous day. … And, so, I got introduced to all the supervisors. Then he took me to the office, where I shared with two other social workers and said, “These are your co-workers. Here’s your desk. These are all the books that you can use to start your group. You start group January something.” And it was November. So, and that was it. Then I sat down at my desk. … Pretty much no direction, and I was just like, “Huh. I don’t know what to do.”

Even after she had observed AODA groups led by others, talked to other social workers “who
were all very willing to help,” and structured the group curriculum “to fit my personality, using material that I thought would help [the inmates],” she still felt as though she was moving forward with very little guidance. The first group was “very scary,” because the reference material she had been given was outdated and “the inmates knew way more about drugs” than she did. Wondering if she had any kind of ongoing support through this process, I asked her if she had anyone to debrief with, after facilitating the AODA group. She said:

I felt very alone afterwards. By the time we started our group in January, one of the other social workers in our office transferred to a different facility, so it was just me and the male social worker. And we got along very well, but, when we were in our office, we never talked group stuff, because it was just not what he wanted to talk about.

Kendra talked about experiencing these types of “left to herself” situations at each of the correctional facilities where she has worked.

Kylie described a similar experience by saying “at the time [I started], they had no on-boarding, they just kind of plopped me there. I didn’t know anybody, didn’t know how to operate anything in there. I had no idea what was going on.” She later told me that she went home crying that first day. I also had gone home crying several times when I started working at my first job out of college. For me, being referred to as “the receptionist” or “the secretary” caused my strongest emotional reaction. Kylie described her response by saying, “I pretty much went home crying for the two years that I worked there, because I hated it.” She then continued:

But the first day, I had no computer, absolutely no computer, didn’t know what I was doing, didn’t know anyone. My boss put me at a desk, in a corner, and said, “Okay, here you are. I’ll come back.” And she never did. And so, people kind of looked at me. They were like, “Oh, you’re the new assistant? Here do this.” And I’m like, “I don’t know who you are. I don’t know where the copy machine is. I don’t have a computer. I can’t make that presentation for you. I can’t even log on, if I had a computer.” … I worked for
anybody, because I’m like, “I don’t know who is who. And I have some names here, that I’m supposed to be working for.” And then I went to meetings, to meet with the people that I was supposed to be working for. And the first day, they take you out for coffee, because that’s the corporate thing to do, and, um, you think it’s all great. And they’re like, “So what do you know about this [client]?” I’m like, “I don’t know anything. I don’t know who you are. I don’t know who they are. I don’t have a computer!” <laughs>

I asked Kylie how long it took to feel like she “kind of knew” what was going on. She laughed again as she responded: “Huh. Never.” Some of this was due to her lack of knowledge about the business of the firm: “People calling me for random stuff,” she said, “that I’m like ‘What? Was that English?’” She did continue to estimate that it took about a month to get to the point where she knew enough to perform the tasks of her job.

The sense of being dropped into a job and left to figure it out seemed to be a common experience for these recent graduates. I asked Michael if there were co-workers who had been particularly helpful. “No!” was his initial, emphatic response. He continued:

My first job … they didn’t really give me much. I really had to reinvent the wheel. … [One woman] was sweet as all get out, but not very helpful in the ways of giving me material. Like, I had to create everything from scratch. … Um, the other physical science teachers at that school were all brand new, too. So, we were all screwed, basically.

Darlene’s first full-time job after college was at the agency where she had completed her internship, so the setting was somewhat familiar. Even so, she said:

That first week, I remember kind of not really knowing what to do next. Um, the phone—nobody called me. I was like, “Okay, do I send letters to people? Like, what do we do? What does an everyday kind of look like?

Things picked up pretty quickly, however. On her second day on the job, one of the children on her foster care caseload ran away. She remembered thinking: “What do I do now? … What do I
do? Do I have to go look for her? Like, I maybe met her once, you know, I don’t really know what to do.”

As Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) described it, a community of practice (CoP) is a structure within an organization that should alleviate this sense of being “plopped” into a job. In the theory, newcomers would approach the CoP and be incorporated into the work of that CoP as a result of the assignments and tasks given to them by old-timers. They are legitimate peripheral participants in the CoP, valued and nurtured by the CoP as vital to its continued existence. This utopian view has been critiqued (e.g., James, 2007; Hughes, Jewson, & Unwin, 2007b; Cornford & Carrington, 2006) in the literature, and newcomers in this study described their first days and weeks on the job as anything but intentional, structured, or welcoming. Rather than being intentionally incorporated, they were quite often left to fend for themselves.

However, in spite of this sense of being left alone to “figure it out,” participants’ stories supported the claim made by Hodgkinson-Williams, Slay, and Siebörger (2008) who stated:

‘Learning does not happen in a void, but occurs within a social environment which not only brings with it the history, traditions and ‘wisdom’ of the social environment or particular society, but also provides the student with a resource of other students, each with their own knowledge, experience and expertise, with whom to share ideas, negotiate meaning and work towards shared understandings.’ (p. 435)

Within the context of this study, although there seemed to be no evidence of intentional or highly developed communities of practice, as theorized by Lave and Wenger (1991) or Wenger (1998), participants did describe their co-workers as a source of assistance and job-related knowledge.

After graduation, Bruce combined a part-time job in youth ministry with a full-time position at the tractor salvage company, at a store managed by his uncle. Bruce’s father was regional manager. Not only was there a father-son relationship, Bruce said his father “also took me more as a business relationship,” taking time to intentionally help Bruce understand and
respond to situations he encountered on the job. He even gave Bruce advice such as “Well, if you’re complaining about that, [the manager, your uncle] is going to get this impression or whatever. This would be a better way to handle it.” As Bruce summarized it: “[He] definitely taught me a lot just while working there.” At the hospice agency, Bruce asks his co-workers a lot of questions. He said:

I’m always asking nurses and social workers questions that I really do not need to know as a chaplain. … I guess every job that I’ve been in, I’ve always asked questions. … Just trying to learn, um, I don’t know. I probably even annoy people sometimes by asking why. I haven’t noticed anyone say that, but I just learned as much as I can, because I never know when it’s going to be valuable or useful.

Two weeks after beginning her full-time work at the foster care agency, Darlene was sent to an eight-week, state-sponsored training session. She described the second month of the training as helpful (much of the first month covered what she had already as an intern). However, when I asked her about the support and assistance she had while trying to figure out how to do her job, she highlighted co-workers as her primary source of support, rather than talking about the content she received through the training. Darlene found the competence and confidence of her supervisor to be quite helpful. In talking about her first supervisor, she said:

She was very self-confident, and I was still very intimidated and trying to figure things out, so she was on my side … like, “Oh, I’ve got her on my corner, so I’m fine. If I have a problem, I can just go tell her and she’ll call them up and tell them what they should-, tell them off.” You know, I couldn’t do that. And I had a lot of other co-workers that were just as supportive. … I had the support of basically the entire staff at the program. She also indicated that if she were faced with a completely new situation, unlike anything she had ever encountered, her first step would vary “depending on the situation or who might be able to assist or what possible similar situations there have been—definitely … going to supervisor or to
co-workers.” During my first job out of college, I also found that I asked specific co-workers for help based on their knowledge (e.g., expertise in a software program I was trying to use) and overall helpfulness. Darlene said her co-workers’ willingness to offer practical assistance might “depend on the person and what mood they’re in that day.” This was also true for me, although I did find that since I also did the payroll, people were generally very helpful near payday.

Michael also talked about his experience of learning from co-workers. Perhaps in an attempt to help incorporate newcomers to the school, Michael’s current school assigns a mentor to each teacher when they begin working there. Michael indicated that his “official” mentor has offered to help, but that “his offers are not really needed,” since Michael is now at his third school, with more than five years of teaching experience and a relatively well-developed repertoire of curriculum from which to create his lesson plans. However, at this school, Michael has been encouraged by the efforts of a fellow chemistry teacher who Michael referred to as “the old dude who’s going to retire.” This teacher has helped Michael transform and reinvent his pre-existing knowledge (Fenwick, 2000) about how to teach chemistry, to better fit his new situation. Michael said:

He’s been very helpful. He’s like, “Hey, I have a lab on this.” That’s really, really helpful, because I don’t have all the same lab materials that I used to have, so my labs don’t translate, just because I don’t have the material. And he’s like, “Here I have this lab, already set up and all ready to go, and here it is on the cart.” That’s been really helpful.

Beyond this, Michael indicated that he has been challenged by this senior teacher’s approach to the classroom and to continuing his own development. He continued:

He’s going to retire this year, right? But this is what he said to me. He’s like, “Oh, so what are you doing in there?” And I’m like, “Oh, I did this … and I have this one activity, and they love it.” He’s like, “E-mail it to me. I want to take a look at it. I think
that’s really good; I may want to try that.’’

After this conversation, Michael told this teacher, “I hope that when I’m this close to retirement, as you are, I still have that openness and that willingness to look at new things with that attitude.”

It would seem that the informal peer-to-peer conversations have had more impact than the formalized mentoring program mandated by the school. In addition, to use a CoP framework, Michael’s interaction with the “old-timer” has given Michael information that is concretely connected to being a chemistry teacher (“I have a lab on that”), situated within the context of this particular school (“my labs don’t translate because I don’t have the material”).

Furthermore, Lave and Wenger (1991) theorized a connection between learning and identity, where learning “implies becoming a different person” (p. 53). Michael’s interaction with this senior teacher, as a newcomer interacting with an old-timer, suggests that Michael’s sense of what it means to be full participant within the CoP of teaching may be changing. Michael gained more than information on how to do his job more effectively; he observed—and was personally challenged by—this teacher’s approach to continuing his own learning. As a result, Michael “hopes to [keep] that openness and willingness” to new perspectives throughout the course of his career, pursuing the identity of a lifelong learner, as a result of his interaction with this teacher. It is important to note, however, that this interaction happened informally and outside of the school’s formal CoP structure (i.e., the “official” mentoring program).

At the time of our first conversation, Kendra had recently been promoted and had been working in her new role for four days. The job change had required a move to a new facility, a change from union to non-union status, and an increase in authority and decision-making responsibilities. During our first conversation, she hadn’t been at the new location long enough to talk much about that job, and we focused on previous roles and jobs she had had. When we talked the second time, however, she had been there nearly a month and had a better understanding of the scope of her job, much of which involves making disciplinary decisions related to inmate
behavior. She indicated that one of the key challenges had been “wondering if I’m being too harsh, [or] if I’m not harsh enough” and learning to balance the actions of the inmates, the expectations of the corrections officers (who write the disciplinary reports) and the typical responses of other unit managers. She found this challenging: “I keep second-guessing myself. All the time.” I asked her if she felt like she had the freedom to talk to the other unit managers, to gain their perspective on these situations. She said:

Yeah. And I’ve been doing a lot of that. … They’ve been really helpful, and they’ve given me some really good ideas on what to do. And, like, they are split—some go way harsher than others and some don’t … it all depends on who I call.

Since the response would vary, based on the person she asked for input, I asked her how she decided who to call. She continued:

I kind of rotate. So, if I called the one person before, I’ll try to call a different person, so that one person doesn’t think I’m always calling them, or always asking questions.

<laughs> So I just rotate who I talk to.

In addition to asking her co-workers questions related to specific situations, Kendra, like Michael, had found an unofficial mentor. She said this particular co-worker’s offers of assistance and willingness to answer questions had been helpful. I wondered how the mentor-mentee partnership had developed, and I asked her if someone had assigned him that role. She said:

He was the first one to spend any time with me, and he’s actually been the only one to spend any large amount of time with me. So, I think he just felt like it was part of his job to make sure I’m trained. And our housing units are right next to each other, and we’re the only two on the west side of the fence. So, we’re each other’s cover … I think that all plays into it, because he says, “We’ve got to stick together.”

At first glance, the experience of feeling abandoned during the first days on the job, described by these FGC graduates, does not seem to match with their stories of encountering
generally helpful co-workers and eventually being able to learn how to do their jobs and accomplish what they needed to do. It also does not seem to fit the Lave and Wenger’s (1991) description of LPP within a community of practice. Rather than finding a community, intentionally engaged in nurturing newcomers toward full participation, they were more often than not “thrown in the dark” (Martin, Matham, Case, & Fraser, 2005, p. 178), left on their own to learn what they needed to know. For the most part, however, these novice workers were eventually able to find and utilize the channels—co-workers, supervisors, outside resources, and so on—to uncover the knowledge that they needed, and to do what they had been asked to do.

Wenger (1998) indicated that the movement within a CoP may occur along one of several trajectories—inbound, peripheral, insider, or boundary trajectories. He described LPP as the *inbound trajectory* followed by those newcomers to a CoP who are “invested in their future [full participation]” (p. 154). It is possible that LPP broke down when these FGC graduates were not interested in becoming full participants in the CoPs where they were currently working. After all, Kylie indicated that she “hated” her job, and Bruce had been looking for a way to work in full-time ministry and leave behind the tractor salvage company. Or perhaps, as Hodkinson, Hodkinson, Evans, Kersh, Fuller, Unwin et al. (2004) argued, the theory needs to include more than “token acknowledgement of the place and significance of individual positions, dispositions, actions and interactions” (Conclusion and Implications section, ¶ 7). For example, Michael described his efforts to assist a frazzled new teacher, serving as a sounding board, making copies, and sharing curriculum. As he talked about his interactions with this new teacher, Michael said, “I just wanted somebody to help me like that [when I was a new teacher] … I have trouble asking for help. [But] I want somebody to come offer.”

However, as Kylie and I talked about her first days as a project coordinator, she did mention a peer who “taught me everything she knew” and who was “extremely helpful, because the same thing had happened to her.” This seems to suggest that the lack of “on-boarding,” as
Kylie referred to it, had more to do with the organizational climate than the individual. This woman was the “unofficial lead” of the project coordinator team, and Kylie indicated that she was helpful, not only because she recognized that Kylie needed assistance, but also because she “wanted the work to get done, because it needed to get done.” Kylie further described the experience of learning from her co-workers: “You just kind of use the people around [you].” However, she added, “I didn’t know who I was asking, half the time.” This co-worker was later given the role of “official” lead of the project coordinators. One of her initial responsibilities was to create a training curriculum and process. Kylie was very involved in the process of creating the training materials and orientation process, and she described the outcome:

What’s included now is- <laughs> … actually, there is something, tangible. There’s a big binder filled with things like, “okay on the first day … and then the second day.” … But also, it’s going to be a formalized procedure, so it’s not like, “Hey— who are you?” … Basically everything we did, written down step-by-step, and then put in kind of an organized form. At the beginning you don’t really need to be doing advanced stuff, so, day one just meet your consultants and get to know who they are, and then talk to us about the company in general. Because it’s kind of a confusing concept, what we do here. Which took me a while to learn, because no one ever took me aside.

I asked Kylie how the process had worked. She said:

It’s very beneficial now to the people who worked there. … I got to see the process, and be like, “Wow, you’re on this page now, like you’re doing this stuff. I wish I would have known that my second day.” … I think it went smoother for them to get an understanding of what the organization did and their role within it.

This process begins to take on the shape of LPP, with tasks mapped out and an intentional process designed to introduce more basic and straightforward tasks before exposing the newcomer to more advanced tasks. In addition, Kylie indicated that this type of training helped newcomers
understand “what the organization did and their role within it,” giving them a greater sense of the community, its domain, and its practice.

Sub-theme: Continuing to Develop

Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) also suggested that the inbound trajectory continues, beyond the initial approach of the newcomer to the CoP. The move toward full participation shuttles the newcomer from the periphery to active participation and then toward full participation. As my participants talked about their work, they also shared stories of ongoing learning on the job. For the most part, they were left to fend for themselves, much as they had been during their initial days on the job.

Michael indicated that he had very limited opportunities to get feedback on his teaching, and the only observations that had been done were “high-stakes, literally they’re used for promotions and whatnot, and hiring and firing,” conducted by an assistant principal with very little developmental feedback. He said, “It doesn’t feel like they’re coming to your classroom to help you become a better teacher. It feels like they’re coming to a classroom to find out where you’re weak and yell at you about it.” Furthermore, he indicated that he knows of teachers who had not been observed by an administrator for years. He continued:

And that’s not a good thing. That’s a, that is kind of a dirty little secret of teaching. …
We need more observation. Not for accountability, but just, like, to get a little feedback?
You know? I mean, it’s weird … we’re so isolated, in many ways. … I’d like more informal, “Here’s where you’re doing good, here’s where you can improve” observations.

Just stuff like that. I think most teachers would, even though they don’t want to admit it. I wondered about peer observations; Michael indicated that teacher-to-teacher observation was an option, but that any such observations would be purely voluntary and would need to be conducted during the observer’s prep period. Given the considerable out-of-school hours that many teachers
already invest in their work, it is not surprising that they may be resistant to “giving up” this time for the purpose of observing another teacher.

When I asked Bruce about his working relationships with his supervisors (he currently has three bosses, because of his various areas of responsibility), he talked about his ongoing development at work. He said:

[They’re] very encouraging, and probably not challenging enough. I guess I do probably wish I was challenged a little bit more. I get a lot of support and … if I ask questions, I get input. I guess I do wish I had a little bit more initiative on their parts to challenge me, or help me grow in different areas.

He went on to describe a previous supervisor who very intentionally supervised and challenged him. As a youth pastor, one of the lead pastors at the church worked with Bruce and his wife to restructure the youth ministry, moving to a model of leadership that involved church members more fully in the youth ministry. Bruce described the process the lead pastor used:

He would put clear tasks out there for us to complete or things to work on. We had a kind of a volunteer team, but he really had us build it up and equip and teach them more. … [When we left the church] they said we’ve actually changed their view and they even changed the title from a youth leader to a youth pastor, because they saw it, you know, that filling that pastoral role of equipping the church to do ministry. [That] definitely was a learning experience for us, and a growing process of the church, too.

Within the framework of communities of practice, this pastor (an old-timer) gave Bruce (the relative newcomer) a series of tasks (allowing him to engage in LPP and learn the practice of the CoP) that allowed him to develop as an employee and minister (moving him closer to full participation). In addition, this interaction between newcomer (Bruce) and old-timer (lead pastor) fundamentally changed the nature of the CoP, making it possible—necessary, in fact—for more participants to engage in the practice of the CoP (sharing the leadership of and responsibility for
the youth ministry). Furthermore, since the interaction between newcomer and old-timer created a model of practice that equipped other newcomers, this interaction also made the boundaries of the CoP more porous, which in turn broadened the scope of the youth pastor’s role within the CoP, as he would find it necessary to train and manage more ministry volunteers.

More often than not, however, participants perceived their own ongoing development as much less intentional and less effective than what Bruce described. Darlene’s experience was “having to kind of be left up to my own to kind of figure things out” in both professional and personal realms. Kylie said that learning what she needed to know about her job was most often “trial by fire.” She had quickly learned that “classroom management is always trial by fire,” and she told me that she had just recently asked experienced teachers for ideas on how to quiet a class down or deal with ongoing misbehavior. She said their suggestions hadn’t really worked all that well, but she was optimistic that classroom management would eventually get “easier for me to manage it, because I’ll have more effective methods as I go on and collect them.”

**Instability and the Invisible Apprentice**

Lave and Wenger (1991) formulated their initial theory of legitimate peripheral participation after observing relatively structured and easily recognizable apprenticeship settings, and Wenger (1998) refined the theory by observing both formal and informal training and interaction among workers fulfilling a well-defined role within an organization. In these situations, the roles of newcomer and old-timer are readily identifiable, and the skills required for full participation are clear (e.g., a tailor is a full participant when he or she can competently construct the range of garments that a customer would reasonably expect).

However, while the men and women in this study may have been participants in various communities of practice at their workplaces, nothing in the way they talked about learning to do their jobs or growing in their proficiency at work indicated any conscious awareness of being part
of a larger community of practitioners. Many times, their conversations about facing novel challenges or solving unique problems did involve seeking the input of friends, co-workers, and supervisors. Boud and Middleton (2003) suggested that “stability may be conducive to the emergence of a community of practice and the temporary nature [of] contemporary work practices may be an inhibitor to their growth” (p. 201) and indicated that the “tightness” of the community is a function of how frequently knowledge is transmitted among the community’s members. Given the high employee turnover described by Kylie (as a project coordinator) and Darlene, those environments may not be stable enough to foster the emergence of a CoP. In addition, Michael, Kendra, and Kylie had recently begun working in new settings; Boud and Middleton might speculate that their recent personal instability (in terms of their employment and work history) could be hindering their own discovery of any CoPs that may exist. The non-existence or invisibility of CoPs may be a function of the sample—I only spoke with newcomers and, therefore, got only their perspective. With the exception of Bruce’s story about his past supervisor’s intentional guidance and mentoring, most sharing of knowledge seemed to happen at the initiative of the newcomer, rather than by design of the old-timers.

Theme II: Being in the Job

In addition to the considerable amount of time that each participant spent telling me about the effort it took to learn how to do their jobs, their experience as early-career workers had another dimension. Wenger (1998) referred to “the lived complexity of identity” (p. 146) and indicated that “issues of identity are … inseparable from issues of practice, community, and meaning” (p. 145). The second theme I identified in the data, “Being in the Job,” highlights the broader interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences they have encountered and learned to navigate as early-career workers; it speaks of participants’ identity-shaping experiences in the
context of their work. Within this theme, three sub-themes seem particularly salient: making work ‘work,’ working out a work ethic, and expressing self in work.

Sub-theme: Making Work ‘Work’

As described earlier, these men and women faced a wide range of experiences, in terms of learning how to do their jobs. This sub-theme, “making work ‘work,’” focuses on navigating the aspects of a job that do not appear on a job description—the people at work and the place of work in relation to the rest of life. Participants talked about their work in a way that indicated this transition also challenged their understanding of the relationships they would have with supervisors and co-workers. They also talked at length about the surprise of encountering politics in their workplaces. Furthermore, they described their struggles as they learned to manage multiple demands and set boundaries around their working lives.

Working together. As participants talked about their co-workers, the quite often expressed surprise with those relationships. Kendra, who said, “When I was in college, it was all about my friends,” later expressed frustration at the difficulty of maintaining relationships with her college friends. When talking about the job she had recently left, Kendra said:

It was just those friendships [at work] is what stands out to me the most, and that’s what I value the most. So, as far as the work went, I did my job and it was okay, but the friends that I had were a blast.

Having recently transferred to a facility in a different part of the state—approximately five hours away from those friends—Kendra was just getting settled into her new role. When I asked her if this job had the potential to be a “good job” (defined in any way she saw fit), she said:

I think it has potential. … So, it’s just kind of just figuring each other out and seeing what we’re really about. And, you know if you say one thing and do another. So, because that
takes a little while. So, it’s got the potential, and I see that I could have friendships here, but right now, I don’t.

For Kendra, therefore, trust and friendship with co-workers may well be the determining factor as to whether the job is “good” or not.

Kylie’s job as a project coordinator, in an environment that was “kind of like a big circus there, juggling everything at once,” required her to provide administrative support to several demanding consultants. Describing her working relationships with these consultants, she said:

Everyone at that level were a bunch of babies, the PhDs. Because they want it their way. They are experts at their field, so you don’t tell them any other [words], you’re just a worker, type of thing. That’s the attitude you get from a lot-, some of them are fair, and see your potential and realize, “Hey, I started out somewhere, too.” But, we had quite a few run-ins with people. … It’s like babysitting adults. <laughs> Making sure their diapers are dry, when they start to cry. <laughs>

Kylie later expressed respect for the knowledge and expertise of the “PhD people,” as she often referred to the consultants. She was “there to serve their needs,” which made them “more important” than her direct supervisor, in terms of her day-to-day experience at work. As she said, they are clearly experts in their field; they are full participants within one of the CoPs in the company—primarily by virtue of their subject-matter expertise, more than their tenure with the company. However, full participation requires specific academic credentials; in her role as a project coordinator, she was on a “peripheral trajectory” (Wenger, 1998, p. 154) within this particular CoP. Being on a peripheral trajectory does not mean interactions are necessarily superficial, however. She went on to describe a particularly intense run-in with one of these consultants. She said:

I got screamed at for nothing. The woman had a bad day (and she was known for this) and brought me in her office. And I’m like, “Okay, what do you need?” … She screamed
at me for not doing [a particular task] sooner. And I said, “But you said it was due tomorrow. It’s ahead of time.” And she just went off on me, and I was shocked. I’m like, “What did I do?” I did nothing wrong. And so, I went to my office, and I’m like, I just broke down, I started crying. I’m like, “What did I do?” … And so, I wrote her up, very objectively. I tried to be as objective as possible, sent it to my boss, one of my bosses who’s the general manager—who was also her boss. And she came in to talk to me, and she’s like, “I could tell that, you know, this is objective. You didn’t put in any personal bias,” because what’s the point, I had to work for her. [Later] my boss said, “Would you like her to apologize to you?” And I’m like, “Ah, yes. … Yes, I deserve an apology for that behavior.” And so, she came in and had to apologize to me. And after that, all she needs is someone to stand up to her. … She knows, she had a bad day and took it out on me. I’m like, “Yeah, but that’s not how you treat people.” And I’m sitting there, thinking, I can’t believe I’m saying this to somebody who’s 60, you know? And acting like the mother here, or whatever.

Wenger (1998) highlighted the challenges inherent in what he referred to as “multimembership” (p. 105), indicating that participation in multiple CoPs could create conflict within the individual as he or she negotiates various roles and “situations” within those CoPs. Kylie was both a legitimate peripheral participant in relation to other project coordinators and on a peripheral trajectory in relation to the consultants. When treated badly by the consultant (in one CoP), as she described in this situation, she called on the resources of the other CoP (her direct supervisor) to resolve the situation. “Multimembership is not just a matter of personal identity,” Wenger (1998) stated. “The work of reconciliation is a profoundly social kind of work” (p. 161). Given this, I wondered about the fallout from this situation, so I asked Kylie about her relationship with this woman, following the confrontation. “She sucked up to me,” Kylie said. She continued:

She was really nice to me. And I was always civil after that. I’m like, well, we have to
work together; there’s really no point. And apparently, I’m the adult in this relationship

<laughs> so, I guess I have to keep a straight face with you. But, yeah, after that, she was
really, really nice to me. And I think a lot nicer to her subsequent employees.

Even though the situation proved to be productive, Kylie ended her story by saying, “That time I

did not like.” She still works for the same company, but works from her home: “[It] was great to

get away from all that.”

In talking about relating to co-workers, Kendra mentioned surprise at trying to figure out

how to deal with “all the social interactions that are going to take place that nobody prepares you

for.” In addition to “all the back-stabbing and the politics of it all,” she had encountered friends

and co-workers with varying morals and values. She described this by saying:

Nobody tells us what reality’s actually going to be like. Because, [I was] just so naïve

with it all. And especially because, well, I went into my first job, the guy I shared an

office with had a girlfriend, and then he was also sleeping with a married woman. And,

throughout my four years of working, I’ve noticed that that is more of a trend, like, that’s

more the rule than the exception to the rule. And, especially being involved in so many

Christian groups, well-, you don’t even realize those things happen other than in the

movies, and now you’re friends with people who do it—all the time. And, it’s not my

place to place judgment. And so like, just learning how to be friends with people who

have completely different values than yourself. But, when you’re limited on the people

you can be friends with, you know, you learn. And, you learn where they’re coming from

in it, and not that that’s the excuse, but, I mean, it’s what you talk about. … And, so just

all those weird things that people go and do, that my friends in college would have never

thought of [doing], or never verbalized thinking of doing. Um, that that’s the reality, and

that’s what we deal with.
Although my time in the residence halls at Big University had exposed me to many situations and worldviews that I had never experienced during my relatively sheltered childhood in a small Christian farming community, I, too, remember being surprised when I learned of the moral choices of some of my co-workers—especially when I first started working. It’s probably not an exaggeration to say that I was disgusted by some of the stories that I heard. Thinking about my own reaction, I asked Kendra if she thought that it was even possible to prepare someone for these social interactions. She said, “No, I don’t think so,” and continued:

It’s all the stuff that I wonder if my parents deal with, but don’t tell me, because they don’t want me to see what it’s like. … Because I talk about this with my cousin and my friend [Jackie] a lot. And we all three see it happen all the time. So, I wonder how could my parents not be seeing it happen? If this is completely the norm, for the three of us to watch happen, how did they not know that that’s happening? Like, because I really grew up thinking all this stuff was just in the movies. But now, [I] realize it’s real life, and it’s what people deal with all the time.

Part of the experience of “making work ‘work,’” therefore, is encountering, responding to and relating with co-workers who, at times, do surprising things.

*Working for someone.* Participants talked at length about their relationships with supervisors. Above all, these FGC graduates want to be comfortable with and trusted by their managers. Several mentioned frustration similar to Kylie’s statement: “Don’t tell me what to do; don’t micro-manage me.” As Bruce described it:

Give me a set of tasks and responsibilities, but then trust me to kind of work my schedule or work with my strengths. You know, I know doing this in the morning is my best time, and that aspect would better in the afternoon or whatever.

Darlene talked about text messaging with her supervisor, as an indicator of both his trust in her (he communicates with her by text message when she is working outside of the office) and the
comfort level in their relationship. When I asked her how she would handle a completely new problem situation at work, she said her first step would be “walking in [to my supervisor’s office], not caring what he’s doing, and totally freaking out.” She continued:

I’ll [say,] “You will not believe what just happened. I got this crazy phone call....” And it’s just, yeah, me pretty much barfing on his desk. … The relationship that we’ve had has become a lot more comfortable to be able to just walk in there, take my shoes off and just say, “Hey, this is how it is.” There’s not really this formality any more with things. There’s become this kind of getting to know them, in a way that’s being treated respectfully, as well. … We kind of know how each other think at this point. We kind of know each other’s strengths and weaknesses, what we’re good at, what we’re not good at.

Darlene spoke very highly of her boss. His years of experience and his training as a therapist have given him a broad base of knowledge and skills on which Darlene relies. She said: “A lot of times … I’ll say, ‘This is what I’m thinking of doing; what do you think?’ And there’s other times where I’ll say, ‘Can you please call this person for me and just work your magic?’” However, the relationship also “works” because, as she said:

He knows that I’m always willing to do whatever’s necessary. … I would take action whichever way I knew how. It wasn’t just, I don’t know how to do this, throw my hands up. It’s “well, we’re going to get our hands dirty and do something.”

In her relationship with her boss, the trust seems to move in both directions. She is a participant, willing to do what she knows to do, but also reliant on his input and expertise.

Michael described his current supervisor, an assistant principal, as “awesome.” This man had recently completed an observation of Michael’s teaching, giving him a four out of four in every category and saying, “That was one of the best lessons I’ve ever seen.” In stark contrast to this positive relationship with a supervisor, Michael described his experiences as a summer temporary worker. He said:
They treat me really bad. They treat me like dirt, basically. … They treat you like you’re
dumb; they treat you like you can’t follow instructions. And I understand why. Because
I’m working with the people that caused that behavior in the first place, and they frustrate
me, too. So, I understand, but at the same time, it’s like, ah, don’t be so quick to judge.
Like, maybe ask if I’m an idiot first?

Wenger (1998) suggested that “in communities of practice, the definition of competence and the
production of experience are in very close interaction” (p. 214). As a participant in two distinct
communities of practice—at the school during the year and at a temporary job in the summer—
Michael has experienced this: he is assumed to be competent as a teacher because others in the
community know of his experience and education. In his temporary jobs, he is assumed to be
incompetent, because the experience of the CoP is that many who have previously engaged in the
work of the CoP have, indeed, been unable to complete the work. As he has worked in these
settings, Michael has discovered a strategy for dealing with this frustration. He said:
I try to get it out quickly that I teach physics and chemistry. … They completely change
how they treat me. And what they allow me to do, what they ask me to do, what they
think I’m capable of. … When they find out you teach physics and chemistry, they’re like
“Oh, I could never do physics and chemistry. That stuff is too hard for me. I didn’t even
try to take them in … high school.”

In other words, Michael draws on his membership in one CoP (his identity as physics and
chemistry teacher) to ameliorate his frustration in the other CoP. As Michael described it, “It’s an
interesting little social experiment, [but] not one that I prefer to go on for too long.”

Not only did participants want to be trusted by their supervisors, they needed to know
they could trust their boss. Darlene talked about her supervisors, past and present, in a way that
highlighted her respect for their years of experience, in comparison to her novice status in the
field. She also said she had “used my supervisor as leverage” on some of her cases. Kendra was
encouraged by a recent “pep talk” from her new boss, which communicated that “he really wants me to succeed”; he is working to make sure that she feels comfortable in the new environment.

These relationships had not been entirely positive, however. Kylie referred to one of her former supervisors as “just a placeholder,” because “he was young, he came from finance, and pretty much the general consensus was that he was there to suck up to the consultants, and not really work for his people.” Kendra talked about a supervisor who was “very much intimidated by me,” and another who “wasn’t competent enough to write me up, and I should have been written up for insubordination a couple of times.”

In discussions about supervision, Michael talked about appreciating his bosses as individuals. He said, “I loved all of my administrators. I’ve thought they were all, you know, good people, and I’ve enjoyed then.” However, especially at a previous school, “the administration” worked in a way that frustrated Michael and his fellow teachers. He described the actions of the administration as being a key reason the job was challenging. He said:

I think I would have been fine if it were just the kids, but the administration was doing some very-, it wasn’t even like shady or manipulative, it was just bad decision, you know? … And then when they’d screw up … they would never apologize and try to fix [it]. It was <sigh> it was just a really, really frustrating situation. My last year there, we were joking like, “Oh, let’s figure out what the most logical thing to do would be, and then we’re just going to assume the opposite will happen.” And, it was funny, until that was the best method by which to predict the administration’s decisions. I’m not kidding.

We stopped joking about it, because it was working too well.

At the same time, Michael described himself as “the book follower” in his school. “If they make a rule, I’m going to follow it, even if I hate it,” he said. As he talked about it, he described tension—he didn’t always like the administration’s decisions, but he could often see their perspective. His adherence to school policy also “doesn’t win me a lot of favor with the teachers,”
and “my kids hate it.” Ultimately, however, he saw his loyalty as critical to the success of the school: “Just because I know … we have to be united. And if we’re not, we’ll fall.”

**Maneuvering politics.** In talking about jobs and co-workers, participants described experiences and circumstances that were relationally challenging and at times frustrating or confusing. Quite often, they used the phrase “workplace politics” or “politics” in talking about these situations. Learning to recognize, respond to and, at times, manipulate the politics of the workplace was an important aspect of the lived experience of these FGC graduates.

As we neared the end of our first interview, Crystal made a comment about “learning all the politics of the corporate world.” I had wondered if this topic might be part of our discussion, because other participants had mentioned politics. When I assured her that workplace politics would be something we talked about during our follow-up conversation, she said, “Well, I have a lot to say about that next step,” suggesting that dealing with politically challenging situations might constitute a significant aspect of her work-life story. I will structure my discussion of how these participants learned to maneuver politics primarily through Crystal’s description of her experience, augmenting with the experiences of other participants to illuminate different aspects of the experience of learning about politics.

The idea of politics in the workplace was one of the first topics of my follow-up interview with Crystal. I asked her what it had been like to learn the inner workings of working with people in an office kind of corporate setting. She began her story by saying:

> When I started out of college, I was very idealistic and, sort of, uncompromising and believed in standing up for what’s right. And if you’re right, obviously people are going to see that this is the common-sense solution and look at it from all perspectives, and [make] informed decisions. You know, based off of performance [and] talent, skill, and how hard you work, those sorts of things. I believed that’s what would work. It was just sort of that straightforward approach. But what I learned is that there are the lovely thing
called politics, and at [Specialty Magazines] … I kind of refused to bend, or I didn’t bend very much. So, for instance, when situations arose, and I would try to explain what happened from an intellectual perspective and expected my boss to understand.

Earlier in our conversation, Crystal had talked about how her first boss out of college was “really intellectual … even though I was working with a ton of people who weren’t.” She saw him as a mentor figure and indicated that his approach, especially in contrast to the mentality of many of her co-workers, helped to ease her transition from college to work. She continued her story:

But instead there was this … one person who sort of has this inordinate amount of power here, that doesn’t actually align with her position. And the owner he continually, time and time again, takes her side. And I kept thinking, he reaffirms and like sort of grows her power. She unofficially runs the company.

Kendra also encountered this mismatch of political power and organizational authority, in two of the facilities where she worked. She said:

[At the first location] the people that had the power were not the people in the powerful positions. They were just like the cool people. And people in powerful positions were not competent in their jobs. And, so I think the balance of that was all just out of whack there. And I didn’t get into what the cool group was down there. And then, at [the second location], the people in the powerful positions were also the cool people, and right away, I became friends with them. So, yeah. It’s very, very political. And at, the last job, you couldn’t get promoted unless you were friends with them.

At that facility, Kendra was friends with the “right people,” but she said that she had not wanted to be promoted because of her friendships; she wanted to advance only if she had the necessary qualifications.

In Crystal’s experience, repeated attempts to get her boss to see “how wrong it was and how messed up it was” did not work. She left the small publishing company and began working
for a larger publishing house. What she found there was, “a whole different level of ruthlessness, and manipulation, and deceit at the corporate level [that] was super disillusioning.” The person she reported to had a lot of political power and “for some reason, I was his little pet, so he … made sure I wasn’t exposed to it,” but the experience and the environment were “a huge turnoff to me.” She eventually was recruited back to Specialty Magazines, where a change in leadership was expected to change the political environment. Even though the new leadership was “ousted” after three months, and the “old, kind of chaotic disorganization came back into being,” Crystal has continued to work at Specialty Magazines. What changed was Crystal’s approach. She said:

   It had a different color to it. … It just wasn’t nearly as ruthless or dark. And so, I decided to learn how to play the system. … And, that’s what I’ve been doing. I no longer, you know, sort of stand up and do that straightforward fighting that I used to do. But I have learned people’s personalities and what makes them happy and how to work within those parameters … I hope without sacrificing too much of myself yet. There are times where I’ve realized, “Wow, I would have never, ever done this, like I would have never pushed a certain button to make sure that this thing happened four years ago. … That would have been sacrificing who I was. And today I do it because it’s survival. It’s how you keep your job and keep your sanity.

Crystal’s experience of workplace politics led her to leave and then later return to her first employer. She indicated that she had learned that “straightforward fighting” wasn’t effective. Lubrano (2004) highlighted the challenges faced by men and women who grew up in blue-collar households who are now working in white-collar jobs, generally after attending college. He referred to these individuals as “Straddlers,” and Crystal’s story echoes one of Lubrano’s conclusions: “Soon enough, Straddlers learn that straight talk won’t always cut it in shirt-and-tie America, where people rarely say what they mean. Resolving conflicts head-on and speaking your mind don’t always work. No matter how educated the Straddler is” (p. 10).
When I noticed that these young men and women consistently mentioned politics in discussing what it was like to work in their jobs, I began asking them when they first became aware of these kinds of workplace dynamics. In responding to this question, Kylie said that her dad had often spoken about “the mill and the politics going on with the unions there,” and that her mother, who did not work outside the home “dealt with familial politics, with her in-laws.” She also observed these types of dynamics in her own early work settings. She said:

Even when I worked when I was younger, even in high school working for corporations, I knew people were involved in shady business, or this person doesn’t like that person, or this department hated that department, or those ideas, according to that person, were just awful and just couldn’t live with ‘em. And I just thought it was really dumb, then, but since I was part-time and a student, I didn’t care. … When it becomes your job, and essentially your life for eight hours, then, everything affects you.

I asked Crystal whether she had ever talked with her parents about politics in the workplace. Earlier in our conversation, she had indicated that her father disliked unions and that his choice to work independently, apart from union affiliation or support, had probably significantly reduced the wages he earned as a bridge builder. She said:

My dad, he had politics, but a different kind of politics. You know, being working class, construction worker, I guess it would be, probably like a much cruder, more blatant version of what I go through. You know, just think about it, all these big, strapping, young- to middle-aged, who work with their hands, you know, central Wisconsin kind of men, engaging in politics. It’s a different game, but yet, it’s probably some of the same rules. <laughs> I certainly remember Dad talking about things that were frustrating, you know. … But also, I think my dad was sort of at the top of the pecking order, because there was a lot of different things he had going for him. So, it seemed to me that, although it frustrated him sometimes, like he sort of had this power, because of his
strength, because of his intelligence, because he was scary to a lot of people.

With the exception of Crystal, who said that she had “worked out an ethics that I’m okay with in my head” as a basis for dealing with these types of situations, my conversations with participants seemed to only register an awareness of and frustration about workplace politics, rather than any well-defined strategy for dealing with them. Darlene said that her approach to many political situations at work has been: “I’m fine. I don’t care. I just came to do my job; I’m not here to be political.” At our first interview, Kendra described her new team of co-workers as one where “everything is divided,” and where she knew she would be the fifth vote—the tie-breaker. She said:

“I want to figure out, as soon as I can, the basics of the institution, so that when it comes down to making big decisions, I can make them for myself, and know that it’s something that I need to make. Because if I have to be the tie-breaker, I can’t be influenced by either one of the sides.”

When Kendra and I talked again, more than a month later, she had not yet gotten comfortable enough to make big decisions. In fact, she said that the whole team had not yet met together, and each individual member of the team and pulled her aside to warn her about one of the others—warnings that seemed to point in different directions (i.e., Bob warning her about Jim, while Jim was telling her to be careful around Tom, etc.). She had also observed that within a correctional facility, maneuvering politics was a high-stakes task that had a lot to do with trust. She said: “If you piss off the wrong person, you could stand at a gate for five, ten minutes, because you have to push a button to get through a gate, and somebody else controls that gate.” During college, she had not been prepared for the political aspect of her work, and she commented: “Nobody tells you that. … There’s no Social Worker 412 class: Dealing with Politics of Your Job.”

In beginning this exploration, I expected that maneuvering politics would emerge as a significant challenge for these FGC graduates. I anticipated that the settings where they found
work, presumably different from their parents’ work environments, would present unfamiliar situations and challenges. I worked to bracket this presupposition, avoiding phrases like “politics” or “workplace politics” as I crafted my original interview prompts. However, this idea seemed to emerge as an important aspect of these FGC graduates’ early-career experiences that needed to be described, to understand the experience of being an FGC graduate.

I was surprised, however, at the extent to which their parents had talked about political situations in their own work. I remember my father and godfather having long conversations about “the creamery,” “the school board” or “the insurance companies,” but these talks never registered to me as anything other than long, boring conversations that always seemed to follow the same conversational pattern: description, frustration, resignation. “Workplace politics” had not been part of any conversation I ever remember having with my parents or hearing my extended family talk about. I am a first-generation college graduate, and in many ways, my experience mirrors the challenges, frustrations, and triumphs I heard my participants describe. Therefore, since my family never discussed these types of things, I expected the same would be true of my participants. It was only in talking with the participants in this study that I realized that my father, as a farmer, did not “go to” a workplace or encounter “co-workers” on a regular basis. However, the creamery, the school board, and the insurance company—the very entities my father and godfather fuss about—were the entities that controlled their incomes and expenses. I hadn’t realized it, but they were talking about a type of workplace politics.

*Living with the job.* Another component of “making work ‘work’” was evident in how these FGC graduates talked about their jobs—coming to terms with the demands of a job and the impact that it might have on life outside of work. Dealing with multiple demands was nothing new. Crystal, Bruce and Michael had all been married during at least some portion of their college careers, and most of my participants had managed jobs and extracurricular activities alongside their coursework. As Darlene described:
To have that lifestyle, as far as a full-time job, was no problem, because [as a student] I was working 16-20 hours a week at the retail place; I was putting in 16 hours a week at the internship, and then I had 12 credit hours of class. So between that and my social life I was constantly doing something.

Darlene had been looking forward to the time when “my job and my school were all in one,” so there would be just one place to focus her attention. However, once she began working as a foster care caseworker, she found that it was still difficult to concentrate on the task at hand. She mentioned that she had stopped answering her work phone because of how phone calls interrupted her day, indicating that for the past two years all her calls had gone directly to voicemail. This seemed like an unusual and drastic move for someone working in a human service agency; I asked her why she had adopted that strategy. She said:

[It was] as a result of a hostile client that I had. She kind of scare[d] me. … I did not like having to see her and talk to her and having her blow up at me every single time I [saw] her. She yelled at me in court; she barked at me all the time on the phone. She was very angry, and mean in person, and just, very negative. And she knew how to work this system. … And I’m thinking, “Yeah, I really don’t know what I’m doing here.” … But, the whole anxiety of that situation, literally started to make me ill. … I would start to have a lot of anxiety on Sundays, and I couldn’t understand why. And I started to put together that, well, I’ve gotta go to work on Monday, and maybe she called, and I don’t know if she’s going to show up, or what’s going to happen. … A co-worker of mine said, “Yeah, I sometimes just turn off my ringer, so I can actually get some work done.” … And so I turned off the ringer. … I just couldn’t meet everybody’s needs at the same time. And so it was like I kind of had to pick and choose who was I going to help and who was I going to call back.
Kylie also indicated that she had struggled to keep her job from becoming overwhelming. Once she started her work as a project coordinator, she quickly realized that it was expected that she would eat her lunch at her desk “because we still need you.” I asked her how that expectation had been communicated to her. She said:

Oh, well, with colleagues, and my boss, too … they kind of, they practiced it. And they said, “Well, a lot of times you have to take lunch at your desk.” Even though, technically, by law you’re not supposed to work that long. Just to get everything done, and so people aren’t calling you at home or things like that, you kind of have to—like an unwritten rule. And then all the consultants are very, just workaholics … this is the nature of these people. And, you know, getting e-mails all hours, and I still do, but I don’t answer them. And I used to give in to it before.

As with Darlene’s decision to stop answering her phone, I was interested in knowing what had led Kylie to stop answering e-mails during “all hours.” She said:

Oh man. Um, well, it took a while. I was, I knew that I needed to, and I talked to people about doing it and how to do it. Even my direct bosses, the consultants, said it was very important … because work-life balance is one of the little competencies that people should meet. But, you know, on the flip side, they were also like, “But we need you to do this, in…”

When Kylie said this, I commented that each person making a request for her time was saying “have balance by saying ‘no’ to everybody else.” She said, “Yes, exactly,” and continued:

But, I had to learn, kind of the phrase … “Your emergency cannot become mine. If I’m going home, that’s it. You just have to deal with it.” So, it took, ooh, it took a while. But I think, especially what nailed it home was when I did get married, which was a year, about a year and a couple of months after the fact. Like, just can’t, I can’t do this anymore. Before, I could, so it was a little easier to go home later. But, yeah, then I’m
like, “Nope. Sorry. Not going to.” And, by then, I had learned the ropes at the place. I knew who to watch out for, and I knew the people who were going to ask me things that were not within the realm of my responsibility. So, I was more comfortable just saying no, by then. And standing up for myself, I guess.

Kylie learned to navigate the demands on her time as a result of changes outside of work—she wanted to spend time with her new husband. In addition, after she and her husband moved to the suburbs, Kylie relied on public transportation to get to and from work and the structure of the metro system schedule helped her set some boundaries around her time at work. She had also gained knowledge about “who to watch out for,” which gave her further confidence to take control of her schedule.

I had asked Michael how his expectations for life after college differed from his after-college reality. He responded by describing his hopes that “there would be more of a separation between work and family life. And that work would be done during the day, and then at night, I’d be able to work on personal life, family life stuff.” He had expected the first few years of teaching to be challenging, but he was surprised by the “hours upon hours” it took to do his job well.

The incongruity between the formal and informal requirements of his job had been highlighted by recent contract negotiations between the teacher’s union and the administration. As he described it the negotiations had been “very contentious,” and the teachers had voted to engage in a “rule-to-work” action against the school, in which they agreed to adhere strictly to the requirements of their contract, working only during school hours and completing only the tasks for which they had been contracted. My first interview with Michael took place five days before the rule-to-work period was to begin. He talked about how this would drastically change his “normal” work patterns. He said:

But yeah, who strikes by only doing what the contract says they’ll do? I’m like, what kind of a moron? <laughs> If you don’t agree to my terms, I’m only going to do what I
agreed to do. … But the thing is, the school stops. Like, I’m going to have to show a lot of videos, because I need to do all my grading during school. Because right now I do all my grading on the weekends. I grade it Friday night, and I enter it Saturday night. That’s just the way it is, ‘cause there’s not enough time in the day.

Our second interview was conducted after the rule-to-work action had been completed. He described rule-to-work as “sweet.” He continued:

That was nice, because I didn’t do anything at home. And [my wife] enjoyed that. … I usually do all my grading on the weekends. [And] then I’m always stressed out about when it’s going to get done … and she doesn’t like it, because, whenever it’s family time, but my mind is elsewhere a lot.

Rule-to-work had only lasted one week, but it had forced Michael to confront the extent to which his school responsibilities really were impacting other areas of his life. He said:

I don’t know, I thought I was better at that-, I compartmentalize pretty well. But <pause> you know how like, when there’s something you need to do, and you have a mental alarm that keeps ringing. I’ve got like five of those, for different aspects. I got like these alarms for Master’s class … alarms for robotics that I should be doing, alarms for my job that I should be doing, and then just like the day-to-day stuff, like, “I’d like to be on Facebook and talk to people.” <laughs> I’d like to catch up on my e-mail and, um, I don’t know. Like, spend time in relationship, and discipleship stuff. I’m in a discipling group, which is cool, but, it’s just another-, like right now, it’s just another alarm to go off. And so, when I’m playing with [my son] or talking with [my wife], my brain often switches gears and starts thinking about something else, another problem that has to be solved. But yeah, [rule-to-work] was nice, because I was able to switch off a few alarms during that week. And just say, “I can’t do that.”
Beyond his own self-awareness, the week of rule-to-work had helped him understand the work patterns of some of his fellow teachers. On Friday, Michael showed a video in all of his classes, so that he could finish his grading before the weekend. He said:

That’s what made the weekend the best, because I could throw in a video and not feel guilty about wasting the day, because I had cover. Some teachers do that every Friday—it’s “video Friday”—and they grade papers.

When Michael said this, I replied, “And now you understand why.” Michael continued:

Yeah. I’ve always-, I’ve always looked down on them. But I’m like, “Man, that just totally improves your quality of life. Your weekend just becomes so much better. … I had already finished my grading, so it wasn’t, like, looming over me, and I had to keep pushing it out—I was done with it.

Michael had talked at length about balancing his desires to be an engaged husband and father, the demands of being in the last semester of his graduate program, and the challenge of investing the necessary time and energy to be an effective teacher and robotics coach. Even as we talked about these challenges, Michael expressed optimism about his ability to manage these demands. He was looking forward to finishing his Master’s degree and turning off one of the “mental alarms” he had talked about, and his current school setting is much less stressful than his previous jobs.

As I talked to these recent graduates, I kept thinking back to my first job and the countless Subway sandwiches I ate for dinner, while sitting at my desk at work, trying to catch up and keep up with tasks that all seemed very important at the time. I remember trying to explain to my parents that although I didn’t earn overtime or “comp time,” I had the “freedom” to work as many hours as I wanted to work. I even went back and read the journals I had written during my first few years out of school, where I had recorded my frustration as it was happening. Looking back, I am not certain that I ever really mastered the balance between life and work. My participants seemed much more competent at “living with the job” than I had been at that point in my career.
Making Work 'Work’

These men and women were navigating new professional, relational, and political landscapes. They were encountering new challenges and frustrations and, at the same time, trying to understand who they would become—as individuals, as professionals, and as employees—within those settings. As Wenger (1998) stated: “We not only produce our identities through the practices we engage in, but we also define ourselves through practices we do not engage in” (p. 164). Learning to relate with co-workers and supervisors, maneuver politics, and balance work and life are important aspects of this emerging identity.

Sub-theme: Working out a Work Ethic

I asked participants to describe what it means to be a “good” employee or to have a “good” job. It did not take long before the idea of “good work ethic” was mentioned, spontaneously and in those terms, by most participants. As my participants talked about what it meant to have a good work ethic, they indicated that doing a job thoroughly and completely was something they had seen modeled throughout their lives.

Learning from hard workers. Michael described a culture of hard work in his hometown. He was expected to help his father chop wood in the winter and weed the garden in the summer. In addition, “[doing] manual labor was always the punishment” when he and his siblings misbehaved. I asked Michael if this correction worked. He said it was “effective” and continued:

They’d double it every time, if we got caught for the same thing. You’d have to do four hours; it was like four hours of hard labor. And if you got caught doing the same thing, eight hours, and then 16. And if you were dumb enough, <laughs> it went to 32.

<laughs> Something’s wrong with you.

He told me he was young when he got his first job, after thinking to himself, “Well, I’m 12 now. I need to get a job.” But, he said, this was the mentality of everyone in his town—all the kids had
summer jobs, and most worked 40 hours a week. He said, “You were just seen as lazy or stupid for not getting the money. Like, there was money to be had, what were you doing?” Michael, who told me that he had done a lot of partying his first semester in college, also said that “without that [self-discipline and work ethic], I could have easily gone into self-destruction. Without that upbringing. Like that’s what really made it possible” to turn things around, do the work that he needed to do, and graduate.

The approach to work and work ethic that these FGC graduates described often mirrored the approach of their parents and extended family. Michael’s grandfather, a farmer, had said “you’ll never get ahead only working 40 hours a week”; Michael talked at length about the extra, out-of-school hours he now invests in being a good teacher and providing for his family, as well as his full-time, temporary work each summer. Crystal speculated that her father would define a good employee as “somebody who … works like crazy and doesn’t stop working until they go home. And does a good job at it.” She then talked about someone who’s “not performing their job” as “just taking advantage.” Bruce defined a good work ethic by saying:

Not being afraid to work hard for something. Working hard to make a living, to accomplish a task, not trying to find an easy way out, but doing the task that needs to be completed without complaining about it or without trying to find a way out of it, but just doing it.

When I asked Bruce how his parents instilled their work ethic to their children, he attributed it to them “just not giving us everything that we wanted [and] probably explaining why, somewhat.” He and his brothers were encouraged to get jobs if they wanted spending money. He indicated that “it wasn’t just given to us. I never grew up with an allowance. My parents got us stuff and took care of us, but there was never free money just for the heck of it.”

Kendra defined work ethic by saying:

Being efficient in what you do. If you can do more with your time, doing more with your
time; doing things efficiently. And being proud of what you do. Doing it so that you can be happy with the outcome, I guess.

When I asked her to think about where these ideas had come from, she talked about the chores she had been assigned as a child. She said, “If it wasn’t done right, we’d have to redo it. … That was really emphasized.” She continued:

My dad, it [was] just really instilled in us: Anything we did, we had to make sure that we did it to the best that we could, and, you know, if it only took an hour and we took two, we’d get in trouble for wasting our time.

Apparently, Kendra had not wasted much time. She had worked many nights and weekends during high school, and she told me that she had met her goal of having $10,000 in the bank before beginning college, so that she wouldn’t have to work while she was a student.

_Carrying the work ethic forward._ Once out of college, participants had continued this pattern of hard work. “I’d rather be busy than not,” Darlene said when talking about her current foster care caseload, which is larger than required or allowed by her union contract. Bruce summarized his work history by saying, “Since I’ve graduated, I don’t think I’ve ever had just a full-time job” and then outlined the combination of full- and part-time jobs that he has engaged in simultaneously, throughout his career. For example, he currently works full-time at the hospice agency, splitting his time between chaplaincy and marketing, and, after hours, he is working as a sales consultant and recruiter for a multi-level marketing company. Kendra volunteered for task forces and committees at work, “because I get bored really easily.”

Darlene indicated that work ethic meant “committing yourself to your work … following through” and working consistently. She added, “Work ethic, doing what I’ve been asked to do, makes my job so much easier, and I feel like that makes a good employee.” As she talked about her job, she happened to mention that the nature of her caseload often required her to work with a wide range of attorneys and judges, across several counties, each with its own preferences and
systems. In this environment, because turnover among caseworkers was generally much higher than among attorneys and judges, Darlene said that “making sure you have a good reputation as a worker” was critical to being able to effectively advocate for the foster children she was responsible for. Essentially, having a good work ethic fostered the reputation that made it easier to do the job. I asked her how she had become aware of this; she described a network where information and reputation travel quickly. She added:

I’ve heard [that] you have to keep in mind that your professionalism speaks a lot more than what you think, beyond the people that you see and that you know. Because, there are a lot of people behind the scenes. … If you set a particular reputation, you know, that’s going to carry with you.

To me, this seemed to put a lot of pressure on the caseworker. Darlene said:

I’ve been told if you do your job and you know your stuff, and you’ll be fine. And so I’ve just made it a point to do everything right that I could possibly do. … And all eyes end up turning to you in court. … Everything falls on our shoulders. … And that is where your reputation comes in. … I’ve heard people say “Oh, you know, we’re really glad to have you on this case. I’m really glad you have it, because nothing would be done if it was with someone else.” So, they kind of tell you what your reputation is, which is kind of weird—you don’t really determine it, they do.

I was curious to know whether this knowledge (about reputation) had influenced how Darlene approached her job. She continued:

Even how you testify in court can make your reputation. If you’re in court, and they’re asking you a question and you’re flipping through your report, you’re automatically going to be looked at as “you don’t know this case.” I usually go into court-, I take all my stuff with me, and I have it in front of me, but I rarely ever look at my stuff. I try to have everything memorized; I try to know everything about my kid, and I can say, and whip
out answers about these kids to, then I feel comfortable about it.

Throughout the course of our interviews, Darlene talked about building her self-confidence as one of the key challenges of adjusting to her work after college. She recounted several situations where she didn’t know what to do and at one point she had referred to herself as “a baby in this field.” It was encouraging to me, therefore, to hear her talk about her growing in confidence and comfort within her role. This confidence had come as she had grown in her mastery of the skills (e.g., testifying effectively in court) and knowledge required to do her job.

At times the ideals of work ethic and responsibility seemed to be pitted against the reality of less-than-ideal work settings. Crystal said she was “on autopilot, because it’s sort of ‘learned it all,’ and I need a new challenge.” Kendra talked about a period of time when she “hated going to sleep, because I knew that when I woke up the next morning, I’d have to go to work.” These descriptions mirror Lubrano’s (2004) definition of the well-developed, blue-collar work ethic: “The kind that gets you up early and keeps you locked in until the job is done, regardless of how odious or personally distasteful the task” (p. 17). Things may have been difficult or felt like a dead end, but these FGC graduates did not quit—there was work to be done.

Kylie indicated that during her time as a project coordinator “it was easy for me to go in with a bad attitude and leave with a bad attitude. Even though I tried really, really, really hard not to have one.” Her supervisors had tried to help her, giving her more challenging tasks and allowing her to explore other aspects of the business. She said:

Since it is a leadership development, career development-type firm, they would always ask me, sit down and ask me my goals and what I’d like to do, and try to find things that matched, even though <laughs> they didn’t quite understand me, because they’re like, “Well what do you want to do with your career?” And I said, “I’d like to retire.” <laughs> And it wasn’t a joke, and they’re like, “Yes, but in the meantime…” I’m like, “Um, do something that I like so I can retire as fast as possible.” <laughs>
So, when I began to ask her “if you didn’t have to work any more...” it is perhaps not surprising that she interrupted by saying, “Mmmm, yeah?” with genuine excitement in her voice, before I could finish the question. We both laughed at her involuntary reaction. When I did finish the question, asking her “…what would you miss about working?” she said:

People. … Just seeing people and interacting with people, is, I don’t know, that’s like a life-force for me. … But I think that if I were retired and were active in my community—because what else are you going to do?—that would help. <laughs> That would definitely help. But yeah, the people, I would miss the people and the interaction, the daily interaction, and kind of like, the structure of I get up now, I have responsibilities, I’m accountable for something, that I would kind of miss.

Even her image of retirement involves being active in the community, “because what else are you going to do?” Being active, having structure and responsibilities, having something to “do” is embedded in her response—even in the context of not having to work.

Being a hard worker. Working out this work ethic is not without difficulty. As Darlene and I discussed the prevalence of burnout among foster care caseworkers, she talked at length about the perpetual change in paperwork and processes that led to a sense of frustration and exhaustion among caseworkers. However, she indicated:

The biggest thing that I’ve seen-, the thing that I’ve heard, and then the thing that I’ve actually seen: The better job that you do, the more work that you get. And that stinks.

And I see it first-hand, because it’s happened to me.

When Darlene said this, I referred to it as “the curse of the competent.” She responded with an “mm-hmmm,” and I made the note “her tone of voice indicates that she’s not very impressed by this.” She values her work ethic; she believes her reputation and work ethic have made it easier to do her job. Yet, at the same time, she feels that her willingness and ability to do her job well
result in additional responsibilities. She did not say that she felt taken advantage of, but it is not difficult to imagine that she could feel this in the future.

These young men and women were not only living according to the habit of hard work they had seen modeled, they were trying to live up to it. On the surface, they may speak of work ethic as a combination of traits, such as endurance, persistence, and skill. However, their experiences in work and of work suggest that “good work ethic” is also a value that they are taking as their own—doing (well) and being (good) becoming intertwined. For these FGC graduates, a good work ethic is more than a personality trait—it is central to being a good employee. Crystal said it directly: “I think a good employee has to have a good work ethic,” and someone who isn’t doing their job is “just taking advantage.” Bruce said it was important “that you’re not going to try to just do the minimum amount possible, but you’re going to try to do your best at every job that you’re given.” For Kendra, “the people that you have to tell them to do their job” are “bad” employees. She then described a good employee by saying:

Someone who, I would say, goes above and beyond what they’re supposed to do. So that, you know, something has to get done, but it’s not assigned to anybody, that they’re willing to do it. Not just, “Oh, I’m supposed to do A, B, and C; I did A, B, and C.” And, ones that do it without being asked, and that want to know more and want to figure out how to do something better.

At the same time, however, Kendra described a situation with a former co-worker who had taken on tasks outside of the scope of her job description, in a way that raised the expectations of inmates in the facility. She continued:

And then they’d come down to a different housing unit and expect that of me. And then when I talked to her about it, she said she was on autopilot. Well, you’re on autopilot going the wrong way. Like, so it just made everybody else’s job more difficult, because she was doing hers wrong.
So, it would seem that a person with a good work ethic may be willing to take on tasks for which no one else will volunteer. However, Kendra’s definition of good work ethic highlighted the value her father had placed on efficiency. Therefore, it is equally important, at least according to Kendra, that this extra effort does not create more work for others.

Having a good work ethic, working diligently and efficiently, going “above and beyond,” and “doing things right” are all values I grew up with. They are words that a hired hand used to refer to my father, more than 30 years after they worked together. I am not sure I can put into words what it means to me to be referred to as a “hard worker,” but it is deeply affirming. For these FGC graduates, having a good work ethic was something they both pursued in their own work and valued in others. And as Bruce said:

I was raised with a work ethic, [but] I’ve just had to live out my work ethic more now, because I have more responsibilities, and therefore, you know, needed to work harder to pay for those, or to accomplish those. … I guess I’ve appreciated it more, appreciated my parents’ work ethic, as now I’m having to live it out and see how difficult it is.

At times, the drive and habit of working hard creates tension with the desire for and necessity of developing healthy boundaries around one’s working life. This tension may account for the presence of these seemingly conflicting sub-themes. As FGC graduates are transitioning from college to work, they want to work “hard enough” to fulfill their responsibilities and do their jobs well. At the same time, they are learning to strike a balance between work and life, and develop healthy boundaries. And so, the challenge of “working out a work ethic” will likely continue for these FGC graduates.

**Sub-theme: Expressing Self in Work**

The fundamental research question driving this study was “How do first-generation college graduates make meaning in their work?” This sub-theme—expressing self in work—
seems to address this question most directly. As participants talked about their work, they talked about themselves. In telling stories about their jobs and their lives, they highlighted the challenge of being in their occupations, above and beyond the doing of the tasks of their particular job descriptions. For some, they seem to be a bit “at odds” with their current profession, others are finding a better fit between what they do and who they are. These men and women also described occasions where they had been given the freedom—or taken the opportunity—to use their work as a means of expressing who they really are.

*Being at odds with current profession.* As expressed in the previous sub-theme, these participants were willing to work hard, and they had seen their parents model determination and endurance in jobs that were not always ideal. In addition, as first-generation college students, they had survived in an environment that was unfamiliar to themselves and their families—this persistence may have prepared them to navigate work settings where they would have to “figure things out” on their own, as described in Theme I: Learning on the Job. However, there were times when they shared experiences at work that indicated a sort of fundamental mismatch between core aspects of the individual’s personality and central components of his or her job.

For example, Darlene works as a foster care caseworker. Her primary responsibility is to ensure that a child placed in foster care, and the immediate and extended family members as appropriate, receive the necessary support and services to bring some sort of permanency to the child’s living situation, whether that be a return to the home of biological parents or a move toward severing parental rights and the pursuit of adoption. The people-to-people part of the job requires compassion, concern, and discernment. However, the job also has a heavy administrative component, where the caseworker must inform, involve, and report to multiple entities, at the state, county, and agency level. Darlene suggested that often it is the ever-shifting changes in reporting requirements and documentation processes that lead caseworkers to burnout—perhaps
even more frequently than the heavy emotional investment made by many caseworkers in the lives and welfare of clients.

As described earlier, Darlene has a reputation among county agencies, judges, and attorneys as a caseworker who does her job well and who will follow through when necessary. She also said she is frequently referred to as the one who has “figured things out” (generally related to learning administrative procedures) before others in her agency. As she emphatically said it: “I love paperwork. I love doing all the forms and filling out this and figuring out all the paperwork that I need for this project and that project and whatever.” She added:

I would much rather just be in the office and do the office part of my job, rather than doing the people part of my job. And “people” meaning the kids and dealing directly with the issues and the problems. I don’t mind dealing with the department [within the state government that assigns cases and sets the policies with which her agency must comply] and their stupidity sometimes. … I don’t mind going to court. I don’t mind dealing with the professionals. It’s the clients and the kids that I just-, I don’t really thrive on at all.

She later said, “I obviously like the paperwork part so much, there must be something wrong with me.”

I found these statements to be confusing, given the nature of her job and her original interest in a career in labor and delivery nursing. I asked her when she realized that she “[liked] the paperwork more than the people,” repeating the phrase she used to summarize this idea. She said even when she was considering a career in labor and delivery nursing, “I didn’t want to work with the kids; I’d rather work with the babies that couldn’t talk. I liked working with the very, very small children; children under the age of one, really.” She then talked about her approach to home visits with clients. She said:

I’m not much of an interactor. Um, the little kids they like to come up and talk to you. Especially if they’ve known you for a while they come sit on your lap and they color, and
they do things with you, and that’s totally fine with me, but, other than that, I just kind of sit, listen, get what I need and go. I’m not much to come, hang out and really spend time. … I try to show an interest [in the kids] and try to remember things for them, that I said I would do. And, basically just do what I have to do to get through it, without letting them see that’s my weak spot. I do so much better when I get back to the office and I can just work on stuff. I’m energized, especially, there.

At this point in our interview, I wrote “clinical approach” in my field notes. I later expanded on this idea: “She really does approach her job with a sort of triage mentality—take care of the most critical thing first, regardless of what the deadlines or external demands might otherwise dictate.” I wondered if this kind of approach to her clients and caseload was related to her interest and experience in nursing. She attributed it more to the independence she had developed as an only child and to the fact that she had no children of her own.

Even with this seeming mismatch between her job and her personality, she indicated that her work at this foster care agency had been a good experience. She said:

As far as that transition [getting this job] … I am a religious person, so I say it’s a God thing for me. It was an opportunity, and I was able to take the door-, or walk through the door when it was opened. And I’m grateful for it.

Our conversation eventually returned to Darlene’s longer-term career plans. She said that knowing of her own preference for paperwork over people was helping her as she considered possible graduate programs. However, although she had explored several areas of study and talked to “very high professionals that are in the field” about her best next step, she said:

[I’m] kind of second-guessing myself with just sitting and working for this company for the rest of my life. So, this is the part where, most people in college are thinking “what am I going to do with my life?”—that’s where I’m at now. I’m always feeling like I’m a step behind in life. So, where kids are normally in college, trying to figure this out … I’m
kind of at that stage where I’m asking what am I gonna really do? Am I going to just work here and get by, and have a paycheck and be content, and then get married and have a family? Or, am I going to go back to grad school and try to do more career focused, and then get married, and then have a family? There’s that “eennh.” I don’t know what’s next.

When she said this, I was reminded of a similar dilemma I faced after I had started thinking about leaving the computer training company. I told Darlene a little bit about this time in my life, remembering that I had talked about it with a friend, saying that “that first job is just your first job out of college. Your second job is your career, in a weird way.” I referred to “that weird sense of, like, oh, yeah, now I’m choosing to either stay in this field or choosing to go somewhere different,” which made the decision seem much more important. Darlene replied, “Exactly.”

It is also interesting to note that her thoughts about her career also display an assumption that marriage and family will eventually shape the direction of her career. Unfortunately, I did not notice this assumption while we were talking, and Darlene made these comments during our last interview; I was not able to explore the meaning of this comment. Not only is Darlene at odds with her current profession, she is unsure where to go next. She said: “It’s tough I guess. I don’t know, exactly, still, what’s out there entirely. And I guess I feel like there’s so many times where you can kind of create whatever job you want, depending on who you know.”

Kendra also talked about her career and echoed this sense of not quite fitting with her profession. In some ways, working in corrections is an ideal environment for her. She said:

Because having a bachelor’s of social work is a lot more secretarial work than anything else. And then, group work, the population I worked with is the only population I could have with social work, because I’m not very sympathetic. Um, and I hate it when people cry. And with inmates I can flat-out tell them, “This is what you did. This is why you’ve got the consequence you’ve got.” Or “You’re in prison. You’ve got to wait for an answer, be patient.” And I can be very, very blunt with them. … I couldn’t work with women,
because they cry a lot. That’s stereotyping them, but they do! <laughs>

Kendra has worked as a social worker since her graduation, and all of her experience has been within the correctional system. This has given her a broad range of exposure within this particular aspect of social work, and it has prepared her well for her latest move into management. However, she has also found her one-dimensional experience to be a limitation as she has looked for work in other areas. She said: “I couldn’t get hired anywhere else, because they asked, ‘Well, do you know this policy and this policy?’ and I didn’t have a clue what they were talking about, so, I got stuck.”

I find it discouraging that a young woman who is only 26 years old refers to herself as “stuck” in a particular field or industry. She said, “Before I got this promotion, I looked at going back to college. And I would read through Master’s programs and see if anything interests me. And I just have no idea what I want to do.” She also mentioned that she tells people “my biggest regret in college is my [undergraduate] major.” I told her to imagine that she had to go back to college and start over, and I asked her what she would choose for a major. She said:

I have wondered if I should have stayed in biology to … become a doctor or something.

That would be more interesting to me. Because I really like learning, a lot. And I’ve found that, especially because I have to keep up CEUs [continuing education units], and I love going to training. And I love the ones where I feel like I’m learning something new.

Her move into management is sort of an experiment; she wants to “see if being on the end of making decisions does something.”

Throughout the course of these interviews, several comments have struck me as particularly important in understanding my participants. As we were talking about this topic, Kendra made one of these comments: “I’m still convinced that the perfect job for me is something I’ve never heard of.” Kendra and Darlene are struggling to make meaning in their jobs, because these jobs don’t fit quite right. Darlene joked that “there must be something really wrong with me,” and
Kendra feels “stuck.” They both talked about exploring other jobs, careers, and graduate programs, but, as yet, have been unable to select any one option as better than all the others.

*Finding the fit.* I asked participants to talk about their “best day” on the job, to describe a good job, and to talk about what they would miss if they no longer had to work. Responses to these questions, as well as aspects of other anecdotes they shared, indicated that these men and women were actively working to negotiate a relationship with their job that fits with who they are coming to understand themselves to be. Arnett (2000) described the years of “emerging adulthood” as a time of identity exploration, and one aspect of Super’s career development theory highlights the importance of “[implementing] self-concept” (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2009, p. 43) in the context of work. At times, these FGC graduates spoke about their jobs—or what they wished their jobs could be—in ways that connected meaning making at work with who they saw themselves to be.

Crystal now describes herself as a “people person.” However, she only came to this understanding after a conscious and deliberate decision in college to break out of her shyness. “Imagine being a shy extravert,” she said. “Like, you’re not being yourself, so you’re frustrated because you’re not you, because of this fear or whatever.” Now, she says, “I feel like I am who I really am.” Two days before our first interview, she had been promoted to associate publisher, and she hoped the role would give her more opportunities for leadership and working with people. At our second interview, she indicated that the promotion was seemingly more of a semantic, title-only change. However, she did mention other aspects of her job that were an especially good fit. Although a graphic designer is primarily responsible for the layout of the magazine she edits, she has developed a good working relationship with this designer. She said:

> If I feel like a story’s really important, or I have a specific idea of how it will look graphically, I communicate it to him, and he interprets it beautifully. I have [an] interest in fine art, and have done a lot of different types of fine art in my past, and still do as a
hobby. So, I guess I think I’m sort of unique as an editor in the level in which I do get involved in sort of the aesthetic look of the product. And he kind of respects my artistic vision … he’ll take my input or whatever. But that’s not, really, official; it’s just sort of something that we’ve created together and we work it up.

Working with this designer has been “a treat,” she said, and it has provided a way to incorporate her artistic skills and interests into the responsibilities of her job.

Even Darlene and Kendra, highlighted earlier as being at odds with their professions, have, at times, found elements of their work that fit well. At one point, Kendra had worked at “the worst housing unit in the state” correctional system, where she was responsible for organizing and filing the required forms and documents for processing inmates who were being released. She stepped into the role at a particularly intense time for that particular housing unit—all of the inmates were scheduled to be released in the near future. She said:

[The inmates] all had this short-timers’ syndrome. … So, they all were getting locked up, throwing fits; they’re like, “It doesn’t matter any more.” So, they were terribly behaved, so it was a ton of paperwork. Well, I excel at paperwork … I loved it. I absolutely loved it, because I got organized. And, that’s what, what actually got me a lot of notice in that institution, because I could handle it, and it was calming down a lot of other staff. … I did great! And, so they loved me.

Darlene, too, had found that her proficiency as a writer got her noticed, even as an intern. She talked about this skill in terms of her identity. She said:

Typing, writing, and then creating the words and all that, and expressing that way was … that expression of who I am. I’m very, generally, reserved and quiet and I was always the shy kid, so I think it was one outlet that kind of carried on, as far as a strength for me, way more than oral, I would say, at the time. And so, most of my work that I ever did as an intern was all reflected in either what I wrote, than what I did. Because anyone can
file, and anyone can make a phone call, but when you write a report, there are not very many interns who are actually able to write a report.

Not only did writing provide a way for Darlene to express herself, as with Kendra, being assigned to and excelling at this task set her apart from others.

As indicated earlier, five of the six participants in this study are practicing Christians, and this aspect of identity was evident in how these FGC graduates talked about the fit between job and person. Although doctrinal interpretation may change the details of the concept, many Christians believe that God gives a “spiritual gift” to a believer at some point following his or her conversion—an ability that should be used to serve others, particularly within the church. Exercising the gift is both a responsibility and an expression of Christian maturity. Michael described his understanding of gifting. He said:

Everybody has a gift. … Maybe you’re not the greatest at it, but that’s what … you’re the best at that, you know. Of the things that there are to be good at, your best thing is this, so we should go with this, you know. I don’t know, I just think it’s just going to be difficult for you to enjoy your job … just be able to get up and go there, if you’re not doing at least some of your gifts for your job.

However, being in a job that fits one’s gifting doesn’t guarantee that everything will be easy or good. Michael continued:

It’s hard though, because like, I gotta tell you, I was really looking to get out of [the urban school district where he previously taught]. I was teaching. It was my gift. But man that was just a bad situation that I desperately wanted to leave.

Michael recently moved to a different school district. He is still teaching—expressing his gifts—but in a setting that he described as much less stressful.

Kylie, too, expressed a desire to use her gifts in the context of her job. She said, “I need a job that I am passionate about and aligns with the gifts that I’ve been given.” She is currently
making a career change, to better express and use her gift of teaching. However, she talked about her previous jobs as expressions of this gift, as well. She continued:

For me, being a Christian, I think that God provides … even if they seem impossible. Take German, I mean, what kind of job can you get [if you don’t want to be a teacher]? But He’s always provided, strangely. And even this random German [teaching] position I don’t have a license for, why would they ever take me? Bam, I get it. Or, like, the Fulbright scholarship. How easy is it for people to get that? It’s really not, and [God says,] “Here you go, have it. You’re good at German. I’ve given you this gift; I’m giving you opportunities.”

Furthermore, Kylie suggested that understanding and exercising spiritual gifts had both short-term and long-term ramifications: “So, I don’t know, denying them, I guess is, in a way, wrong and stunts a career.”

Crystal told me that a good job was “all about creativity and challenge,” and Kylie mentioned that a good employee is one who can “show that they have a zeal for what they’re doing. They want to keep doing it, and they want to grow with the company.” A meaningful job “fits” with who the individual sees himself or herself to be—as an employee and as a person.

*Interpreting self in work.* The previous two ideas—being at odds with the current profession and finding the fit—speak of the individual responding to his or her job. Several participants described experiences that went beyond responding to the job as they encountered it. In talking with my participants and working with the data, I identified a third approach to their meaning making at work—shaping or interpreting their job (or some aspect of their job) in a way that allowed for greater expression of self in their work.

Crystal edits a magazine devoted to a segment of the collectible market. In addition to managing all aspects of the production of the monthly, print-based magazine, her job has expanded to include Web-based text and multi-media development as well writing a blog and
working with other social media. During our second interview she indicated that she had been hoping for a new challenge at her job, but that things do not seem to be changing. Speaking specifically of the writing aspect of her job, she said:

I write so much, and I’ve written so much over the years, and it’s a lot of the same formula, you know, you just sort of have to push yourself through it. It’s like brushing your teeth every morning or something. [It’s become] mundane, with some glimpses of coolness and creativity of it all, but it’s more of a discipline, you know.

And so, when I asked her to talk about her best day at work, she struggled at first, saying “nothing is standing out.” She later described attending an event held by a prominent doll designer the previous fall. Meeting the designer “was incredible to me, because I’ve long admired his work and think he’s a creative genius.” Her assignment was to write about the event “from a journalistic perspective.” She continued:

When I wrote this story, like I felt like everything I had ever done was in preparation to write this story. Like, I was destined to write this story, and all that discipline and all that practice, that’s what it was for, so that I could write this perfect story.

Our interview took place as the Winter Olympics were being held in Vancouver, British Columbia, and we both laughed when I told Crystal that it sounded like her “Olympic moment.” However, she did talk about the experience as a culmination of her efforts, saying “when I completed it—that was probably my best moment, at least within the last few years.” Writing this story had given Crystal an opportunity to draw from all of her experience and skill as a writer, her knowledge and familiarity within her field, and her respect for this particular designer to create the “perfect story,” as a moment of meaning in her work.

In talking with Bruce, I found it interesting that a younger man would be working as a chaplain for a hospice care agency. From my experience with hospice agencies, chaplains tend to be older, quite often working in a second or post-retirement career. Bruce is in his twenties, and I
expected his age might make it more difficult to communicate with his much older clientele. In fact, his experience was just the opposite: “Sometimes I think being a younger chaplain, there might be a little bit more safety for them, just to be open and talk, you know. A little less intimidation, almost like they’re just talking to a grandchild.” I also asked him to talk about “bad days” on the job. He said:

I’m also trying to separate bad from sad. I mean, there’s just some very sad days in my job, obviously—losing a patient that I’ve grown connected to, or, um, seeing a struggling family member that you’ve tried to offer support to, and they’re just not accepting it.

That’s not necessarily bad, but it is a difficult, or a struggling day.

His best days—admittedly a confusing concept when working with patients at the end of life—are days “where I really felt like I really helped someone who was really grieving—just brought them comfort and someone to talk to, that they might not have had otherwise.”

Bruce is not only a young hospice chaplain, he is a “chaplain-slash-marketing-director,” a combination of job duties that still bewilders me a little. He began working part-time as the chaplain, and for a while his wife worked part-time as the volunteer coordinator at the same agency. When the part-time marketing position became available, he combined the two to create a full-time position. This combination also provided a sufficient salary to allow his wife to stay at home full-time with their three children. The marketing side of his job involves community education and advertising, as well as business-to-business marketing and managing contracts and relationships with hospitals and nursing homes. As he said:

There’s a lot of misconceptions with hospice. People think it’s for the last hours of life, when really it’s for the last months of life, and the longer that we can work with someone, the better we can serve them. And especially the family, because we build that relationship, so we can help them with the grief afterward. So, a lot of education to the community, trying to get people to not feel like hospice is such a bad word.
Bruce had previously mentioned that he had really enjoyed working in sales and customer service while working at the tractor salvage company. He was also “really surprised by how much I enjoyed marketing.” In addition to these responsibilities, Bruce is also working part-time for a multi-level, direct-sales company. Based on a home-party model (similar to traditional Tupperware® parties), he spends evenings and weekends engaged in both direct sales and recruiting sales personnel.

I imagine that someone hearing Bruce’s work history might really wonder how one person could reconcile these three distinct aspects of his work life. However, as Bruce talked about these jobs, the connections he made also uncover the meaning he finds in his work. Bruce graduated from college with a desire to be involved in full-time ministry. His salary as a hospice chaplain allowed him to leave the tractor salvage company where he had been working full-time (in addition to working part-time in youth ministry) and focus more intently on ministry. However, even in adding the marketing responsibilities at the hospice agency, he has been able to find a connection between marketing skills and what he had done in ministry. He said:

The teaching really related to the giving presentations on hospice and who qualifies [for hospice] and stuff like that. So the teaching aspect I was doing in youth ministry related to the marketing side. The management side of youth ministry training, and equipping volunteers and stuff really related to that. Just, really [a] salesman, just talking to people, finding their needs and finding out how my solutions can fit their needs.

Furthermore, he sees that his multi-level marketing endeavor draws on many of the same skills. He continued:

There’s the sales aspect and then the recruiting aspect, because you make a commission off the people underneath you. So, once again, I’m using the sales things and the training and equipping aspect. So, I’m really enjoying the recruiting and training people to do the sales and stuff. … Career path-wise, that’s kind of been what surprised me.
When he made this comment, I could see the connection. I said, “There are elements of that kind of part of who you are in really different jobs.” He agreed with this, and said:

      Exactly. You’ve summed it up very well there. Like, I’ve learned more about job skills, or, not just job skills but personality traits and skills, rather than a specific career path. You know, like, what do I enjoy doing? How can that relate to different occupations? Instead of looking at, you know, I want to be in youth ministry—I still really enjoy youth ministry, but I really enjoy doing a lot of different things. So, is my focus youth ministry, or is my focus working with people and public relations and customers? Things like that. So, that’s kind of been a real learning experience for me, opened my eyes a little more widely to what I want to do in life.

Bruce expresses meaning in his work not only in the specific assistance or comfort he might be able to bring to a patient or family member, but also in his interpretation of the various tasks in which he works. He is beginning to focus on the ways in which his jobs express who he is, rather than the specific nature of the tasks to be accomplished or the skills to be mastered.

When I talked with Michael about what he would miss, if he weren’t teaching, he mentioned the grading and “the tedious stuff.” But then he added, “I would miss creating PowerPoints and stuff, which some people would be so confused by that.” Before I could ask him to explain what would cause confusion, he continued by mentioning that his spiritual gifts were teaching, preaching, and craftsmanship. Michael is a Christian and, given what I know about him from our acquaintance while he was an undergraduate and our interviews, it did not seem strange to me that he would list these as his gifts. What did seem odd was that he followed up a comment about PowerPoint with a description of his spiritual gifts. Again, before I could ask him to clarify, he continued:

      I like building stuff, which is why I love robotics. It’s awesome; it’s a perfect fit for me. [I] like building stuff, and I like problem solving. But I like to create; I like to have
something to show, and that’s probably why I don’t use the whiteboard, because I don’t want to erase it at the end of the day. … I want to have something to show for my effort. … Without PowerPoints and worksheets, I would have very little to show. I do enjoy creating, I enjoy building, even if it is in a virtual situation. … I force [craftsmanship] into my job by creating PowerPoints and labs and stuff.

At other points during our conversation, Michael had talked about “how blue-collar teaching is.” In general, he made this comparison when talking about the paradox of working in a profession that not only required a college education but also necessitated the protection of a union. It is possible that Michael’s connection to the tangible and creative elements in his job, as described here, could have some connection to the blue-collar culture of doing “real,” skilled work that he was surrounded by as a child. However, Michael framed this discussion of craftsmanship in terms of his faith and his gifting.

Michael’s discussion indicated that his actions are more than simply seeking a fit between his gifts and his job. He has infused what he sees as his gifting into the practice of his profession, shaping his job to more fully express his identity. Building, creating, and crafting—as aspects of his gift of craftsmanship—are expressions of his faith and central to his personal sense of satisfaction and accomplishment as a teacher. Earlier in our conversation, Michael had said:

I love seeing the light bulb come on. I really do. And I think most teachers do. I think that’s why we keep doing it for those moments where, where the kids just want to know, they want to understand, they ask questions. And they just, they don’t get it. Or, you’re blowing their mind.

However, Michael also “wants to have something to show” for his effort as a teacher. The student learning, even the “light bulb moments” that he described as fulfilling are not tangible, they can’t be touched, and they can’t be shown to someone else. The way he teaches is very much shaped by his gift of craftsmanship—he talked about several creative labs and building projects that he had
used in the classroom in the past, and he said, “I’d like to get into more building stuff, more craftsmanship, more hands-on learning.” Furthermore, he makes meaning as his work increasingly becomes a vehicle for expressing himself and his gifts.

Apprenticing a Profession

This study focused on the interplay of FGC status and first jobs—learning to do and be in the context of entering a profession. In talking about their jobs, participants highlighted the value of internships, the annoyance of inadequate training and orientation, and the challenge of balancing life and work. As participants talked about their early-career experiences, they described situations that were often confusing and isolating. A situated learning perspective, as suggested by communities of practice and related theories, begins with an assumption that knowledge is inextricable from the situation that produces it. Therefore, it is to be expected that newcomers to any setting will not—cannot, in fact—bring the necessary knowledge “with them” to the new situation, since the knowledge resides in the practice and the community that utilizes it. Some degree of discomfort or under-preparation is to be expected.

The stories of being “plucked” in a job vividly portray how unsettling this can be. In talking about how they appropriated the knowledge they needed to do their jobs and the strategies they developed for approaching and solving new problems, these FGC graduates clearly demonstrated that recognizing their co-workers as a source of situated knowledge that is critical to doing the work they have been asked to do. However, Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) theorized that these communities would also be engaging in legitimate peripheral participation, intentionally helping newcomers appropriate the knowledge of the CoP in manageable and meaningful ways. The work settings described by these FGC graduates demonstrated very little of this intentionality.
Furthermore, as outlined in Chapter Three, much of the literature related to communities of practice and situated learning focuses intently on the social situation and minimizes the experience of the individual. Hodkinson et al. (2004) critiqued this approach:

From such a perspective there is a risk of seeing only the social, because the individual is subsumed within it. This can be seen, for example, when Wenger (1998) constructs a cipher ‘Ariel’ to stand in for all workers in the insurance claims office he describes. By doing so, he removes any sense of workers as individuals, who have differing as well as similar values, histories and practices. (Individuals and Social Structures in Workplace Learning section, ¶2)

As demonstrated within Theme II: Being on the Job, participants’ responses to challenges at work were strongly shaped by aspects of their individual histories such as a family’s work ethic, an individual’s sense of his or her talents and gifts, or the extent to which an individual has the freedom to shape his or her job to better “fit” an emerging identity.

I chose to title this chapter Experiencing the Job—Apprenticing a Profession to acknowledge the connection to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) exploration of the mechanisms of social and situated learning within formal and intentional apprenticeship settings. These FGC graduates were, indeed, newcomers at their workplaces and their experiences on the job were shaped by the influence (or absence) of knowledgeable old-timers. In addition, Wenger (1998) indicated that engagement within a CoP would also result in changes to identity, as the newcomer incorporated more of the practices of the CoP and began to see himself or herself in terms of relationship to the community; participants in this study did talk about how job and identity were being simultaneously understood—most notably in discussions related to work ethic. However, the “apprentices” in this study were more often than not left to learn the practices and assume the identity of the CoP without the intentional guidance of a “master craftsman.”
Chapter 6: REFLEXIVE RECONCILIATION—THE PAST AND THE PASSION

Hodkinson et al. (2004) called for a greater understanding of “the reflexive ways in which people’s lives are shaped, bounded or change direction as they engage with education, labour market and workplace organizations” (Individuals and Social Structures in Workplace Learning section, ¶8). The themes in this chapter, Theme III: Releasing the Past and Theme IV: Chasing a Passion, outline the ways in which my participants were presently and actively creating new understandings of and relationships with their past and forging expanded hopes and expectations for the future.

Theme III: Releasing the Past

I began my conversation with each participant by asking him or her to describe his or her hometown, the educational attainment of various family members, and a little bit about his or her college experience. I wanted participants to talk about the past to help me more fully understand their present experience. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that dealing with the past emerged as a strong theme within the context of our conversations. However, the stories they told and the sub-themes I identified—coming to terms with where I came from, moving away, and redefining “real” work—reveal an uneasy tension between honoring their upbringing while at the same time moving beyond it.

Sub-theme: Coming to Terms with Where I Came From

As participants talked about their hometowns, although they often began with terms like “small” and “rural” to talk about where they grew up, the conversation quickly became more
descriptive. Kylie described her home town as a “mill community” that was “kind of dying” and Darlene labeled her city in terms of its racial and ethnic homogeneity. Bruce talked about the fact that there was only one stoplight in the county where he was raised.

However, embedded in these descriptions is a sense that even though they may not have been aware of it at the time, their upbringing was, in some significant way, different from many of the people they have since met. Michael initially described his town as “very lower-middle class” where, “with very few exceptions,” most everyone held “working-class, blue-collar jobs.” I was intrigued by his use of labels like “very lower-middle class” and “blue collar,” since these are terms I only recently started thinking about in relation to my own background. I asked him when he first began to think about his growing-up years in this way. He said:

Ah, yeah, good question. I guess, growing up when I was a kid, I knew [my hometown] was blue collar. I didn’t really know what that meant. But I grew up thinking of it as a very positive connotation. My dad and all of my friends’ dads, they all worked with their hands … versus “pencil pushers.” … You know, it’s like they, they worked for a living, where I was raised. … It’s just what everybody did. I thought that was what middle-class America … that those were the jobs that the majority of Americans worked. And in college, I really started to realize those were kind of lower-paying jobs. Um, you can still make it, but it was a lot harder.

He went on to tell several stories describing his family’s financial situation, indicating that they were “always on a budget.” He continued:

I was very aware [of finances] growing up, but I thought that was normal. I just thought that’s what everybody did. Because it was not that different from my friends’ experiences. … I mean, I didn’t have nice stuff, but I wasn’t that much worse than the people around us. So, comparatively, we weren’t doing bad. And there was always a lot of people doing worse … as long as you’re not the poorest kid, you’re not poor.
As he said this, I added, “That’s how it was in my little country school with a whole bunch of farm kids. I knew that there were kids that were poor. And it wasn’t me.” He replied: “Exactly. And that’s all you need to know. And you don’t ask more questions than that.”

This sub-theme of “coming to terms with where I came from” is expressed particularly clearly in the experience Michael described after he said, “In college—that’s when I found out I grew up poor. Like, I’m not kidding.” He then talked about an in-class exercise where “they were trying to show us that we were all privileged.” I have participated in activities like the one he described, where the facilitator reads a statement such as “Did your parent or guardian attend college?” and instructs participants to step forward if the statement is true of them. By the end of the exercise, depending on the composition of the group (in terms of racial and ethnic background, SES, etc.), individuals are distributed through the room, based on the privileges—conscious or unconscious—they experienced. At the end of the exercise, as Michael told this story, he and an acquaintance were set far apart from the rest of the class. He said:

I’m not kidding. It was me and [Julianne] standing next to each other, and everybody else was on the other side of the room. And there was a woman behind us who felt the worst in the room, but she was an orphan, so most of the questions didn’t even apply. But [I said to Julianne,] “Did you know we grew up poor? Because apparently, we’re poor.”

For me, this was a point of connection with Michael. After he told this story, I shared with him several experiences from my own time in college that exposed the difference between my own upbringing and that of friends and classmates. For both Michael and myself, this awareness of difference led to a sort of re-evaluation of our own childhood. Michael said, “I didn’t know I was poor,” and I can also recall moments during college where I became acutely aware of having come from a different set of circumstances than my friends.

Liu and Ali (2008) argued that one’s worldview is shaped by one’s social class. They further proposed that “individuals live in economic cultures (ECs) that exert demands and
expectations on them,‖ with the EC of any particular individual comprised of the unique combination of “any group, neighborhood, or community the individual values and in which he or she seeks a social class position or status” (p. 168). Furthermore, Liu and Ali continued:

The demands and expectations the individual experiences in his or her EC may come in the form of cultural capital (aesthetics important in the EC), social capital (important relationships), and human capital (important physical or intellectual skills). Not all capitals are equally valued in an EC and the capitals are types of resources to be used by the individual to maintain his or her social class. (p. 168)

For these FGC graduates, college caused them to re-assess assumptions about their backgrounds as they encountered friends, classmates, and professors and their varying ECs. Darlene suggested that meeting “all sorts of people here at [Big University]” challenged her to think about how the “White society” of her hometown might have influenced how she saw the world. For Bruce, it was not only the coursework in his intercultural studies major, but also the urban setting where he attended college that gave him an opportunity to “step back from my own cultural glasses and see that a little bit better.” In the context of new people, new settings, and new experiences, these men and women were confronted with their past.

*Sub-theme: Moving Away*

From Kylie’s comment that moving back to her hometown “doesn’t intrigue me … I don’t want to live there”; to Kendra’s indication that she had lost interest in attending her first-choice college, once her sister decided to go there; to Darlene’s recollection of the point where her mother sat down and said “I’m not going to be able to help you” (academically), these FGC graduates talked about both past and present in ways that suggest that not only did they come to terms with where they came from, their transition from college to work involved moving away from at least some aspects of that past.
For some participants, “moving away” happened as he or she moved beyond a parent’s education or intellectual comfort level. Michael talked about a time in college when his mother offered to help him with calculus homework. The content was several levels beyond any math his mother had learned in high school, 20 years earlier. He said:

At the time I thought I was being as gracious as possible, but I’m sure I insulted her—but basically, I’m like, “Do you know how to do calculus?” I tried to be nice about it, because I knew it, she was offering help, but it was weird. It was an awkward situation. … I mean [my parents] were proud, and happy for me that, they were like, “Hey, he gets science. That’s awesome.” … I’m sure there is some twinge of, I don’t know, jealousy maybe, or regret, that you didn’t-, I don’t know, that you never got that? Like got that education.

Crystal also indicated that her brother’s enduring and negative response to her pursuit of college and the person she had since become may have been rooted in this sort of jealousy. She said:

There came a point where he was just disgusted with my choice in life, and who I’ve become, and doesn’t talk to me. And that’s sort of aggravated by his wife, who’s [of the] same mentality, basically. And I think there’s bitterness, too, because both of them are the first siblings in their family. And, so like my parents’ attitude changed so much … what he went through and what I went through [were] two different experiences, and I think there’s some jealousy there. His wife went through the same thing, in that his wife’s sister [is] an opera singer … working on her PhD and she’s incredibly talented. … But, his wife feels-, they have the same feelings toward us. Basically our parents supported us and never supported them. And there’s bitterness and jealousy, but at the same time, like, supposed loathing for education.

Orbe (2008) suggested that FGC students may encounter both support and resistance from family, as they pursue education. Michael’s understanding of this “awkward situation” and Crystal’s
suspicion that her brother’s reaction may have some roots in jealousy highlight what Orbe described: “The reality that family members may be both proud and envious of the student’s opportunities” (p. 90). Further, these stories demonstrate that these emotions may be experienced simultaneously and in conflict with one another.

In some cases, this educational “moving away” began long before college. Darlene was homeschooled by her mother in fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, but she returned to a traditional classroom at a private school for junior high and high school. The decision to stop homeschooling was part social: “It wasn’t a good setting, because I kind of wanted to be out, and I needed to be with people. I was an only child who lived in the country. I needed to get out,” Darlene said as she laughed. But there were also academic considerations, especially looking ahead to high-school-level work, about which Darlene’s mother said, “You know you’re going to be on your own. You know, I will try to help you with what I can, but I guarantee you I’m not gonna-, I just don’t do good with this kind of level work and stuff.” Darlene indicated that the adjustment to seventh grade was “a bit of a struggle for me at first,” because the structure—with multiple classes, multiple teachers, and new kinds of authority—was so different from her homeschool experience and “because I didn’t know how to really ask for help.” However, being forced to figure out these challenges, mostly on her own, allowed her to develop a pattern of “[taking] an initiative for my own education,” which she carried with her through high school and college, and it also seemed to influence her approach to learning how to do her current job.

There is another facet of “moving away” that was a bit of a struggle for me to understand at first. I think the best way is to describe it is “moving away from my culture.” In talking about his co-workers at the factory where he works during the summer, Michael, who is a chemistry and physics teacher during the school year, said, “They drive me nuts.” When I asked him to explain this, he indicated that their limited interests were not among his interests: “All they want to talk about is football and hunting and fishing.”
Before I could ask him to clarify, he added, “Very low-brow and-, not low-brow, but I, I definitely associate it with redneck-type thinking. And, maybe that’s just because I was raised redneck, and I want to get away from that.” I knew Michael before our interview and felt comfortable pushing him on this point, so I asked him to clarify what he meant by “redneck-type thinking.” I didn’t notice it while I was talking with him, but when I listened to the recording of his follow-up answer, I made the following note:

He was really thinking through this as he said it. Trying to figure out what he meant, but also trying to choose his words carefully, I think. Not so much “for the tape” … he was really struggling to put into words something he hadn’t thought about concretely before.

And so, his response is very much one in which he is “thinking out loud,” about a complex, confusing, and perhaps taboo topic. He continued:

I’m very biased against rednecks. Just, unintelligent people who, like what’s the deal, mouth-breathers. Um, unintelligent. Like, they don’t care about intellectual pursuits; they don’t care about-. <pause> They don’t listen to NPR [National Public Radio]. Um, you know, like, they just-, they just like life simple. And by simple, it’s like, go to work, come home, watch the game, drink beer, hunt, fish, and that’s all they really care about. I don’t-, like, they don’t give a crap about big ideas. They don’t really care about-, stuff like—is that enough? It’s just, that’s, <sighs> very simple outlooks on life. I mean, you don’t have to have a complex outlook on life, but from what I’ve noticed, life seems to be fairly complex. The world seems to be very complex, with a whole lot of moving parts in it. And just to be like, “Those people over there are evil, and these people over here are good.” I’m like, “Yeah, I don’t think we can break it down that simple, guys. I just don’t think it flows that-, that-, that easily.”

Michael indicated discomfort with his own attitude: “My bigotry against rednecks is something that I’m not comfortable with, and I’d like to try to correct, but <sighs> it’s hard when you live in
a culture that reinforces it and allows for it.” Orbe (2008) described the FGC student’s in-college experience as a process of managing a series of dialectical tensions (e.g., similar-different, advantage-disadvantage, etc.). Likewise, Michael’s comments betray an uneasy friction between past and present: “I try to escape that, because I was raised that way.”

Crystal’s experience of moving away put her directly at odds with the beliefs and values of her immediate and extended family. Crystal said that she became gradually aware of what she repeatedly referred to as the “redneck culture” of the area where she grew up: “As the years passed and different experiences happened, I started to become aware of the bigger world.” With this awareness came a sense that she “never felt like [she] was part” of the culture that surrounded her. However, she also described several attempts to fit in, hunting with her dad, for example, in an attempt “to get his approval or acknowledgement.” Even at the time, though, she said “I felt like it wasn’t authentically me.”

Perhaps exaggerating Crystal’s desire to separate from this culture, in her attempt to become “closer and closer to myself defined by me and not defined by the culture that I was raised in,” was her growing discontent with her parent’s religious worldview and their very active involvement in what she referred to as a “fundamentalist Christian sect.” Crystal got married before beginning her freshman year at East State University, and she said, “The whole marriage thing is part of the very conservative culture I was raised in” where many of the people she grew up with married young. And yet, at the same time, her commitment to furthering her education meant “I was already diverging quite a bit … and sort of being a maverick in that culture, in that very conservative culture.”

Although initially resistant, her parents had become supportive of Crystal’s educational aspirations, and her new husband “didn’t fight it.” Her in-laws, however, “weren’t supportive at all,” and would make “snide … underhanded, cutting comments [saying, ‘Crystal] thinks that she’s going to be somebody.’” Crystal speculated that her pursuit of college was embarrassing to
them—she was “breaking these rules of what I should be doing” and “making a hardship on their son by going to college instead of making an income until I started having babies.” Ultimately, she suggested, they couldn’t understand “why do you need to be better than everybody and go to school?” She described her years in college as “such a dichotomy,” commuting to school three days a week and then “[trying] to be the good little housewife that I was raised to believe that was what I was supposed to do” on the days she was at home.

By the end of her time in college, the gap between her husband’s experience and her own had grown significantly, demonstrating London’s (1989) assertion that individual educational attainment and mobility can “produce a discontinuity that cleaves families and friends” (p. 168). Crystal said of her relationship with her husband: “There was no common ground. We were two sooo different people … complete strangers.” In a further expression of moving away from the culture in which she had grown up, she and her husband divorced. Even with the complexity and challenge of this situation, Crystal said:

I feel really lucky … because now I have a totally different ideological perspective and a completely different place than I was back then. But, I feel really lucky to have everything that happened to lead me to college, because that’s what opened the door to my life now. Had I not gone to college, I would never been exposed to so many things and ways of viewing the world and perspectives and understanding of different cultures and people … I would have never even have had a chance because, I just, I didn’t know.

Thomas and Pollio (2002) suggested that the phenomenologist should pay special attention to metaphors used by interview participants. In listening to the recording of this interview, therefore, I found it particularly interesting when Crystal’s next statement was “and so, the English major, that’s what opened the door for me, like opened Pandora’s box.” As I asked Crystal to expand on this idea during our follow-up interview, she described both her choice of
major and her time in college as part of her process of moving away from a culture that no longer fit her. She said:

Well, I think there is truth to a lot of clichés. … There is like a fundamental truth to them, so they’re over-used and then become clichés. So, one of those is “ignorance is bliss.” … Even though, the thing is I wasn’t happy, though not-, before I started thinking from a wider perspective and a more informed perspective. I wasn’t happy then, either, so I can’t say that I was blissful. So, I don’t know that that really applies. I mean, I was incredibly discontented, but the thing is when I started understanding a lot more things, learning a lot more things through this English major and a.k.a. Pandora’s box … I guess things became more complicated, and I then had to make the decision to separate myself from that culture that I was raised in, that conservative culture. And I guess that was just a difficult step to take, you know. My parents, for instance, today, I confuse them. They don’t understand the way that I think and where I’ve gone. And to them, I’ve lost my way; I’m not doing what God wanted me to do, sort of thing. You know, so to learn about different ways of thinking and ideologies and perceiving the world, and to really start believing those, and then there’s sort of a wedge, I guess, that came between what my parents expected of me, who they wanted me to be. Like that’s-, that’s sort of a big sacrifice. So, I guess, that’s the Pandora’s box. I mean it’s wonderful-, I mean, I love the way that I can think about things and perceive the world. Yet, you know, I miss that sort of simple acceptance from my parents, pre-Pandora’s box.

Both Michael and Crystal, through the stories they shared with me, talked about wanting to distance themselves and separate from elements of their upbringing that they now find ill-fitting, inappropriate, or ignorant. They had, indeed, moved away from the past. And yet, at the same time, who they are now, as individuals, is significantly defined by their opposition to or
distance from that past. Furthermore, there is, at least to some extent, an awareness that their movement away from the place and culture where they grew up has come at a cost.

Sub-theme: Redefining “Real” Work

I began this exploration with the expectation that the kinds of jobs these college-educated young adults held would be different from the jobs held by their parents, and it is not surprising that I found this to be the case. The daughter of an electrician now manages a housing unit in a state correctional facility. The son is a chaplain at a hospice agency, but his father worked his way up from “out-in-the-yard guy” to regional manager of a tractor salvage company. The daughter of a bridge builder now edits a magazine dedicated to the collectibles industry.

However, as these men and women talked about their transition from college to work, their stories unveiled yet another point of tension between past and future: understanding and describing the nature of work. More precisely, it seems that this transition causes a re-working—for both the FGC graduate and his or her family—of the idea of “real” work.

“You sweat to earn your way in life,” Crystal said of her brother’s approach to work, and for her parents, “you worked with your back.” In other words, work is only “real work” if it is physically demanding. As Michael described it: “My dad and all of my friend’s dads, they all worked with their hands.” Beyond this, however, “real work” contained an element of skill or expertise. Michael described this mentality: “Even in my town, even factory workers were kind of, not necessarily looked down upon, but it was more like, ‘Oh, well you work in the factory, anybody could do that. But, you, you’re not a tradesman.’”

Darlene also talked about the idea that “real work” should be tangible. At the beginning of each school year, Darlene’s mother would ask her what she wanted to be when she grew up and record the answer in a scrapbook. When asked this question, Darlene would say, “Okay, well last year I was going to do this, so this year, I’m going to…” thinking that she had to choose a
different career every year. As she continued to consider her career path, she described her thought process:

The professions were so, like, point blank. And I think, going into high school, when somebody said, “Oh, what are you going to be when you grow up?” you just kind of think, “Well, I don’t want to be a teacher. I don’t want to be a police officer. And, well, I really like nursing.” … I didn’t really think that there was such a major as art history. I mean, that wouldn’t have crossed my mind in high school that people go to college for art. We took it in eighth grade as a class—big deal. Of course, people paint pictures and do sculptures, but I don’t think of that as going to school or going to a big college, and spend all kinds of money and, and try to learn how to draw.

As a college student, Darlene struggled to gain admission to the nursing program at Big University. After repeated unsuccessful applications over several semesters, she had earned so many credits that the school required her to choose another major. With her long-time goal of becoming a nurse seemingly blocked, she struggled with this decision. After talking to advisors, she became interested in the school’s human ecology program, but this departure from her long-time aspiration of becoming a nurse was unsettling. She said:

What kind of major was it? Is it going to be something that’s going to give me a job in the future? What does it look like? I was concerned that I was going to end up with, basically, a cheap major. … Like, nursing is challenging, and it’s reputable. And it’s like, when somebody says, “I’m a nurse,” you know what they do. If I say I graduated in human ecology, people are going to be like, “What do you do?” And I’m going to be like, “I don’t know. I got a straight 4.0 on some easy major.” … So, I was kind of concerned about what did it mean, where was it going to take me … [I] based the value of the career on how difficult it was for me.

Darlene’s description not only highlighted her desire to understand and be able to explain her
major and to find a job eventually. Her response also exposed another characteristic of “real”
work—it should be challenging. The value of a job—to herself and to society, she later
clarified—is based on the degree of difficulty, as she perceives it: “Because I felt like the harder it
was, like, maybe the better the career.” She did eventually choose the human ecology major, and
she is now working as a foster care caseworker for a human services agency, which she later
described as a “good job … challenging … rewarding … [with] room for potential.”

Michael also talked about the distinction between “desk work” and “real work” in a way
that connects work with at least one aspect of gender identity. As Michael described it, the idea of
“blue collar” and “working with your hands” also “kind of got tied up with macho manliness.
Like, that’s what a real man is.” He continued by saying, “And, even our culture, to an extent,
like nobody looks at a guy in a cubicle, like Dilbert, and says, ‘Now there’s a man.’”

“Real work” was also supposed to be tangible or recognizable. Kylie told me that her
parents reacted strongly when her oldest brother changed his career direction away from
dentistry. As she described it:

They didn’t understand what graphic design was, and they fought with him all the time to
get a “real” job. You need to go into something real. And in their mindset, it’s like
doctors, lawyers, nurses—concrete, you know, you have a job when you’re done. And
graphic design, to them, they didn’t get it at the time. So they fought with him.

Her middle brother went on to major in philosophy and linguistics, and Kylie chose German and
English literature (but, at the time, without any desire to pursue a career in teaching). She said,
“By me, they were kind of like, ‘Whatever. It’s your life; it’s your money. You find a job after
college.’” She went on to say:

But I think their mindset was more “you need a job.” And jobs are what you see in
reality, not just like a gas station attendant. But, you need a job and you need to support a
family someday, or support yourself, so, these are what make money: lawyer, doctor,
nurse, teacher. And the other, more creative jobs, I don’t think that they were really
exposed to, and since [my hometown] is so small, there’s really not a lot of that there. So,
they tried to promote what they could. They were happy with dentist and [my oldest
brother]. But then he went to graphic design. And with [my middle brother] they just
always shook their heads.

I did not get the impression, as I talked with these FGC graduates, that they saw the work
their parents had done, this “real work,” as unimportant or “lesser” in any way. Darlene did refer
to her mother’s retail jobs as “not really career-focused jobs,” and Kendra indicated that she had
been bored when her dad, an electrician, told stories about figuring out how to turn off a fire
alarm or almost getting electrocuted. However, Michael described blue-collar work as “honest
work. It’s necessary work, and—in many cases—it’s skilled labor.” Crystal talked about the
“insane” amount of hours her brother works, and Bruce valued his father’s input as mentor and
manager, because of the wide range of jobs his father had held at the tractor salvage company.
However, their time in and after college, which had brought with it exposure to a broad range of
occupational and career options, also required a broader understanding—for FGC graduate and
family alike—of what “real” work was or could be.

Talking about work. As these FGC graduates moved into white collar jobs, the funda-
mental differences between their jobs and the jobs their parents held sometimes led to misunder-
standings. I asked Crystal if her parents understood her work at the magazine. She replied:

I think they probably do on some level. I mean, unless you’ve done something, how can
you truly understand it? So, you know, maybe a little bit, but there is really a huge
disconnect between a professional and a working-class person.

This disconnect had also affected another relationship in Crystal’s life. She continued:

I just got out of a five-year relationship with somebody. And he works at [a grocery store
chain’s] distribution center, on the floor, and it’s an extremely physical job. This was sort
of a contention between us, because he [would] constantly be angry that I didn’t have the same challenges that he had, like physical challenges. Yet, he didn’t really understand the other challenges that go along with a professional job. And no matter how hard I tried to explain to him, he couldn’t understand it, because he’d never done it.

When Michael and I talked about the extent to which his parents understood his work, specifically the challenges he had faced while working in inner-city schools, he said that his sister, a school psychologist who works in “a more impoverished school,” had a pretty good sense of what he was experiencing, but that “the rest of my family really doesn’t know; they have no experience with that; they really can’t grasp that, you know? Other than just movies.” He began by attributing this lack of understanding to the differences in their experiences. However, when I asked him if he and his family talked about work, he said:

They want to know what’s going on, but factually, but not like actual what’s happening emotionally, mentally. … My family doesn’t really, I don’t know, they don’t really seem to show any interest in that aspect. They really, they haven’t really asked those questions; they don’t really know. I mean they just [ask], “Oh, so how you liking [suburban school district] now?” [And I say] “Oh, it’s good; it’s way better.” … If I go into detail, or start going off on it, then, I don’t know, they kind of [look at me] like, “That’s not what I asked.” They just kind of get this look in their eyes, like “that’s not what I asked.”

The “just the facts” mentality Michael described sounds similar to another of Orbe’s (2008) dialectical tensions described earlier. Orbe described a tension between “reveal” and “conceal,” indicating that the FGC student must “simultaneously negotiate a desire to reveal certain aspects of their collegiate experience and a need to keep some matters to themselves” (p. 91). “Other students are quick to learn that any response other than ‘fine’ is less than appropriate” (p. 91) when talking about school, Orbe indicated. Michael’s post-college conversations with his family
about his work suggest that this reveal-conceal negotiation may continue after graduation and extend to conversations about work.

As Darlene considered the major, she struggled with how to talk about her field of study. As described earlier, she said: “When somebody says, ‘I’m a nurse,’ you know what they do. If I say I graduated in human ecology, people are going to be like, ‘What do you do?’ And I’m going to be like, ‘I don’t know.’” As she began working as a foster care caseworker, the challenges continued as she struggled to help her mother understand her job. Darlene recalled:

Even when I was interning, she’s like, “I don’t really know what it is that you do.” And she always had a problem with it. “I don’t really understand what it is that you do, so I just tell people that you work with kids that are in foster care.”

As Darlene recounted this conversation, I found myself thinking back to my attempts to describe my work-related challenges to my mother, when I was working as a network administrator. I remember being especially frustrated that I couldn’t adequately express the stress of trying to figure out a particularly annoying problem on the computer network. I explained that I really needed to solve it quickly, and she started talking about how frustrating it was when her computer wasn’t working right and she couldn’t get her work done. It wasn’t until I said, “But mom, when my computer [the network server] doesn’t work, 250 people can’t do their jobs” that I felt like she really “got it.” And so, I asked Darlene what it was like, when her mom said she couldn’t understand Darlene’s job. She said:

I don’t mind telling her and educating her in it, because I got excited about my own education. And so I spent a lot of time, you know, talking to her about what I do. And she’ll just listen. … She’s like, “I could not-, I don’t know how you do your job.” And she talks about, to my family, about what I do [wondering], “How do you not get emotionally attached?”
Moving beyond talking to being heard. One common thread, across the stories I heard related to this process of redefining what “real work” means, was the idea of really being heard by parents and significant others. Consistently, participants shared stories and comments that indicated that helping family members understand their jobs, and in particular their frustrations at work, was important. Bruce clarified that his freedom to talk about his work is limited by both federal regulations and the realities of working in a close-knit community. However, he said that while his family members “get the overall concept” of his work as a hospice chaplain, he said that occasionally “they’ll be like, ‘Oh, I didn’t know you deal with stuff like that in your job.’ … They still get surprised from time to time.” Darlene indicated that sharing more “grown-up stuff” about her caseload has helped her mother develop a greater understanding of and appreciation for the work that Darlene is doing.

Kylie highlighted the frustration of not being heard and her subsequent relief when she was finally able to communicate a particularly stressful situation to her parents. Her first job at the leadership development firm required that she manage multiple demands and juggle tight deadlines in a high-stress, fast-paced office. She currently writes summary reports out of her house; even though she is away from the harried office setting, telecommuting has introduced other challenges and stresses. Several years ago, she found that attempts to talk to her parents about the frustrations of this job were “not so successful.” She said:

Um, they knew—they’ve always known that I’ve not liked it. But … their line is, “Well you should be thankful that you have a job. You could be working in a mill your whole life” is what my dad’s common phrase is. I’m like, “I know, Dad. I’m thankful. I’m getting great money, and I’m thankful for it. I’m just so frustrated.” And I could never express my frustration to them, because I don’t think they understood the line of work. They just thought, “Hey, there’s money and security in that, and you have a job whereas other people don’t.”
Several times throughout our conversation Kylie mentioned her dad’s statements about “working in a mill your whole life.” He had worked at the same job for more than 30 years, and Kylie said that his work as pipefitter had “never been a passion of his,” but that he stayed with the work because of his mentality that “this is my job. I need to provide for my family and that’s what the job is for.” Kylie’s frustration with her job grew, to the point where it “just got overwhelming” and “I just didn’t see a way out.” During this time, she visited her parents’ home. She said:

I was talking about my job to the point where I was crying, and they finally, I think, got it. Like, this is making her really unhappy. So, then they saw less of the dollar signs and more, this is our daughter, we need-, we want her to find something better for her. … [He] finally got it when he saw an emotional reaction.

In re-reading this transcript, I responded pretty strongly to her comment that “they saw less of the dollar signs and more, this is our daughter.” As I explored my own reaction to this statement, I wrote the following:

I love this statement. It’s simple and elegant. It speaks so much of the tension she experienced. She had a good-paying job, for which she truly was grateful. But her parents (dad) thought her frustrations were ingratitude or, perhaps, slacking (that might go a bit too far). All her father could see—from Kylie’s perspective, at the very least—was that she had a “good job” that was steady and that allowed her to provide for her needs. I think it also speaks of the high hopes he had for his kids to have a better life, with a more fulfilling job that wasn’t “working in the mill your whole life.” He had worked hard, in the only way he knew how. They had encouraged education, and it was supposed to lead to better lives for their children. Perhaps he “couldn’t hear” her frustrations, because that might mean that his faith in a college education had been misplaced. He sacrificed, she went to college, she found a job … and the job didn’t lead to the kind of life they all wanted for her. And perhaps it was easier to keep the frustration at bay during a phone
conversation. But seeing her—both looking at and really seeing her—broken, crying, unhealthy (she was on anti-depressant medications at the time), weak … even as I sit and think about this, this must have broken a father’s heart, and I’m tearing up. Here was his baby girl, crying, unable to handle a frustrating job. And, perhaps (although I don’t know her father), he might have been ashamed that he hadn’t “really heard” her before, when she had talked about the challenges and the frustrations.

London (1989) identified “delegate” as one of the roles that a FGC student may be assigned by his or her family. Such a delegate “[goes] out into the world to promote the interests, wishes, or needs of another rather than one’s own, unless, of course, they coincide” (p. 154). Kylie indicated that her parents “wanted better for us than they had” and college was the assumed next step after high school along that road to “better than.” London suggested that the parent’s “sense of well-being” (p. 154) requires the compliance of the child and conformity to the role of delegate. Kylie and her brothers had been compliant, successfully earning their degrees—albeit in fine and liberal arts rather than “what you see in reality.” Kylie had found a steady job, earning “great money,” which should have fulfilled her role as delegate, sent into the world to “do better than” her father had done. However, although she was thankful, she was also frustrated, miserable, and unhealthy. Extending London’s in-college framework to Kylie’s post-college experience, the interaction she described forced her father to recognize the effects of his “delegation” on his daughter. Kylie continued her story:

So, he finally got it. And then, then, it was kind of like—I know it was always in him to express this, he just never did—he’s like, “Well, you know,” given his lovely swear words, “then you need a new job. Those people don’t appreciate you. … And it’s good that you’re making money, but you need to get out of it; people don’t need to suffer their whole life.” I’m like, “See, this is the affirmation that I needed the whole time.”
Lubrano (2004) described moments of “life-changing benediction” (p. 38), where a parent expresses validation and respect in a way that speaks deeply to the son or daughter, and Kylie’s story echoes this idea. I hesitate to add any further interpretation to Kylie’s closing statement, but I wonder if her father’s comment about “not suffering their whole life” is both a commentary on Kylie’s frustration at work as well as his own career. As mentioned earlier, she is actively pursuing a career as a German and English teacher, and she had recently dropped to part-time status at her job to focus on her coursework and other licensure requirements. Although she has continued with the work for now, she did tell me that “the day I can quit that job will be joyous.”

*Releasing the Past*

As described earlier, Lubrano (2004) used the term “Straddlers” to describe men and women who grew up in blue-collar families who are now working in white-collar settings. He writes of this phenomenon as a challenging negotiation, in which the individual is continually moving between two worlds—each with its own way of talking and being, its own set of expectations, and its own aspirations. This sense of living between two spaces is very much reflected in the stories that my participants shared with me. This is not “rejecting the past” or “ignoring the past” or even being “tied to the past.” It is simply understanding the past and negotiating a new relationship with it, what Lubrano reported as being “facile in both realms” (p. 68)—navigating the norms and expectations of both culture of origin and culture of aspiration. And in the case of these men and women, even though their parents were supportive (eventually, in Crystal’s case) of their educational pursuits, there were still misunderstandings and miscommunications. This theme of “releasing the past” represents a necessary step for first-generation college graduates, as they move (or aspire to move) into new work settings and toward new challenges.
Theme IV: Chasing a Passion

It did not take long, as I talked with participants, to get a sense that even while they were apprenticing their professions and reworking their relationship with the past, there was another dynamic embedded in how they were experiencing work and career. Michael talked about promises that society had made that remained unfulfilled. Bruce framed much of his discussion about work history and future aspirations in terms of his current student loan obligations. Crystal indicated that “her heart was in” a major that had very limited employment opportunities, so she had chosen something else. In labeling this theme, I borrowed the phrase that Bruce used: “chasing a passion.” Within this theme, I discuss three sub-themes: hoping in college, reconciling practicality and pragmatism, and discovering my passion.

Sub-theme: Hoping in College

Long before high school, these FGC graduates had come to the conclusion that attending college was something they wanted and needed to do. For Michael, the assumption of college was embedded into the culture and curriculum of the high school he attended. For Crystal, although she eventually had the endorsement of her parents, her desire to go to college set her apart from the norms of the religious sub-culture in which she was raised. For these FGC graduates, however, college was an institution in which to place their hope.

Grasping at the promise. The message had been clear, as Bruce indicated: “You need a four-year education to get a good job.” These men and women went to college, because they had been told, or had observed, or had assumed that it was the most direct path to success—defined most often in terms of fulfilling employment and financial freedom. As Lubrano (2004) described it: “To lots of blue-collar moms and dads, college is simply a crowbar to pry money out of some corporation so the kid can have a better deal in life” (p. 59). Kylie’s father repeatedly told her and
her brothers, “You don’t want to do this all your life” when talking about his work in the paper mills. Her parents were very encouraging of the pursuit of college. She described it:

They’ve always wanted better for us than they had themselves. Which I think they’ve instilled in all of us, because, then, we can instill that in our kids, too. So every generation can get a little better, or have access to more things, more security.

Therefore, she said:

I just kind of assumed I was going to college, because I needed to do [it], to get further in life than I could have without college. So I knew you needed the degree to get certain jobs, or better jobs. … To have more opportunities in life, to meet people and to do things across the globe, and to have more experiences besides get a higher-level education.

When I asked her what her life would have been like, if she hadn’t been able to go to college, she replied, “Gosh. Um, that would have sucked.” She continued:

I don’t know—if I hadn’t gone to college, ugh. I’d probably be bored out of my mind. Working in a, you know, in a daily job that doesn’t take you anywhere, or maybe takes you to lower-level management. But, since I’m not interested in that, it would have been like, “Okay what am I doing?”

Kendra also expressed this sense that a job that required a college degree would not, or perhaps should not, be boring. Darlene, too, considered the outcome of college, as she was choosing a major. She said, “I didn’t want to just be somebody who filed papers all day, and [found myself asking] ‘I went to school for this?’ you know. I wanted to be something I was going to get something out of.”

Michael, as well, had placed a lot of hope in the promise that college would lead to something better. He said it simply: “I’m pretty confident my brother, my sister and I all grew up not wanting to have money issues like my parents did. … That was the drive to go to college.” As we discussed this during our first interview, he talked at length about the financial challenges he
and his wife have faced in the years since college. “I was angry,” he said, “because I felt like I did everything our society said to do, in order to get the financial rewards.” I asked him where he had directed this anger. He said:

A lot of it at God. Very unnecessarily. Um, that was kind of the problem. <laughs> There was nowhere to direct it. It was just kind of at society at large. And it’s like, great. What are you going to paint for the picture on the punching bag, you know?

Facing unexpected financial challenges and dealing with things that had not turned out according to the promise of a “better life” that Michael had adopted was repeated throughout the course of my interviews with him. At the end of our second interview, I asked Michael, “Did you think it would be easier than it was, because you were going to college and getting a degree? Did you assume it would be easier than your parents, because of college?” He responded, “Yes. That’s [it] exactly. You hit it on the head.” He continued:

Yes! Because that’s not even like generally or kind of vaguely what I was told, but I was explicitly told: “If you go to college, you will make more money than your parents. You need to go to college, or else you won’t make enough money to survive. If you don’t go to college, you’ll end up like your parents, struggling to get by.” And my parents never said that, you know. But I mean that was, that was very, very, very clearly the message growing up. From society, teachers, counselors, college people. I mean, everything, everything, everything said, “If you don’t get a degree, you are screwed financially.”

And, I’m like, “Okay. I’ll go get a degree.” And then I’m like, “Thank you very much, World. I’m still in trouble.” The ironic thing is that’s actually, that’s kind of par for the course for everyone in my generation now. I mean, there’s a lot of us out there … with college degrees [who] can barely make it.

Setting Michael’s experience in Turner’s (1960) framework of social mobility, as described in Chapter Two, Michael had entered the “contest,” had believed that education would be the
“means of getting ahead’ (p. 863), and had successfully completed his college degree. However, when Michael graduated, he discovered that the reward structure (the “prize” in the “contest”) had changed, and he was still struggling. However, with the completion of his graduate degree within the next few months and the additional pay from coaching the school’s robotics team, Michael anticipates that things will get better financially. In addition, his five years of teaching in under-resourced and inner-city schools allowed him to qualify for a loan forgiveness program; he and his wife made the last payment on their undergraduate student loans last summer.

It is interesting to note that Michael said that if a student were trying to decide between a career as an electrician or as an electrical engineer, Michael’s response would be different from his fellow teachers. He indicated that while his fellow teachers would instinctively encourage the student toward engineering and a college degree, Michael would first ask a lot of questions, because “that may not be the best fit for the kid.” At the same time, however, Michael recognized the challenge of trying to provide for a family on an electrician’s salary. “College” may not have fulfilled all the promises “it” made, but the alternative seemed to hold no greater hope, in Michael’s experience.

Bruce also indicated that the necessity of earning a four-year degree was “just kind of ingrained.” He talked about the cost of college, and expressed frustration that his financial obligations—specifically the student loans he and his wife were working to repay—had effectively eliminated several job and career options. He and his best friend, who lives 10 miles from Bruce and who has a degree in youth ministry, have talked about the cost of the colleges they had attended, “wondering the benefit of the education or not.” I asked him about the conclusions they had arrived at, during these discussions. He said: “I really, really enjoyed my education, and I really, really hate all the debt I have right now.” He continued:

I think I put education, actually, towards the bottom of my resume, and at the top of my resume I have skills and experiences and things like that. So, I have learned, it’s more the
education that I got during my years in college that is effective and helping me to get jobs or occupations that I enjoy, and not so much the piece of paper itself. … A degree in itself does not guarantee you a good job or a good-paying job. It’s the taking what you’ve learned in those years and applying it, as well as just skills that you learn outside of the classroom that’s more effective in the work world.

Looking back, he wonders if he could have found a way to complete some of his degree requirements in alternative (i.e., less expensive) ways, taking advantage of dual-enrollment programs in high school or community college classes. He said, “I wish that would have been, probably, shown to me better.” We speculated together on ways this might have worked. He concluded:

Would my 18-year-old self have been able to do that? Not sure. But had I had a real strong mentor that was willing to kind of take me through that and teach me those steps, then, I think yes. … I could have hodge-podged it together, and gotten just as good, if not better, of an education. Um, but I definitely think it would have taken a mentor-type figure in my life to walk me through that process. I don’t think it would have been something that I could have done on my own.

Bruce did mention that his school experience in what he labeled as the “formal American western education” system might have made it more difficult to see alternatives to formal postsecondary education as the vehicle for reaching his career goals. Also missing from Bruce’s conclusion that he could have “hodge-podged” together a sufficient education is the value that is often placed on the credential itself, as issued by the institution of higher education (Dore, 1976; Bourdieu, 1986; Bills, 2003). Regardless, it was an interesting thought experiment during our conversations.

Missed out. As these FGC graduates reflected back on their time in college, they often expressed a sense in which they had missed out on experiences that may have been helpful—experiences that others seemed to “just know about.” These types of omissions began before
college, at times. When I asked Darlene if she had taken any Advanced Placement (AP) classes at her small private high school, she said:

I didn’t even know what that was growing up. Those opportunities weren’t widely known or presented to us like I felt they should. I felt a little gypped, because I think there was like two other people in my class that did something like that. And they’re like, “Oh, we’re doing AP classes at [City Public] High.” Why didn’t I know about this?

I asked her how those students had learned about AP classes, and she said:

Family, probably. I mean they [were] from educated families, or … families that have used the public school system in a different format, or they had different connections. And, I mean, there’s an in crowd and an out crowd. And I wasn’t necessarily the popular crowd at school, so, I just thought, “Oh well, you know, I missed my chances, but I’m doing fine. You know. I’m not going to be that far behind. I can take it up at college.”

Michael also expressed this sense of having missed out on some “common knowledge” regarding college admissions. He described his decision to attend West State University as “a good decision, but it was a very uninformed decision, that turned out to be a good decision,” primarily because it never occurred to him that he could research options and programs available at different colleges. Michael’s brother and sister had both worked through the college application process before Michael. Looking back, especially when college preparation programs are presented to his current students, Michael said he wonders, “Why didn’t my mom and my siblings…? Somebody, somebody should have helped me out.” Later in the interview he said, “I wish somebody had at least handed me a brochure on how to apply for college. … I really feel like I missed a memo on that whole thing.”

This sense of missing out extended to participants’ in-college experiences, as well. For Darlene, this happened in practical things—using the campus bus system, for example—but also in broader ways. She said that she went to college focused on getting the knowledge that she
would need to become a “successful” nurse, who “would be able to, basically, have a really good job at a hospital somewhere, after college.” When I asked her if going to college was primarily related to getting knowledge that she would need to do the job she wanted, rather than pursuing experiences or “broadening her horizons,” she said:

Exactly. I didn’t really even know that college would present such opportunities. … I looked at college as “that is my link to do nursing, and I’m here, basically, to get my education and to leave.” Like, I’m not here to try out other sports or things or people or opportunities … because I didn’t really know any of those other things existed, for me. I knew that they were there, and that they were present. But I didn’t know that it was for me to actually think outside the box of, “Well shoot, I can double major, or I can specialize in something, or if I want to become a professional sailor, I could, you know?” I didn’t think of any of those things, because I never thought that I would have the opportunity to make my own choices, like, to that extreme.

She said that she felt “a little bit like the oddball” when observing her classmates’ casual approach to both academic and social aspects of school. Even after college she has struggled with feeling left out. In talking about a state-mandated training session she attended when she first began working full-time as a foster care caseworker, she said:

My experience, through high school and everywhere I go, is that somebody always goes to class with somebody else; they always know at least one other person. So I’m always the one, and I’m always the one that does not know what the heck is going on and I’m left there to try to make friends.

The opportunities existed, but Darlene did not know about them or have a friend to help her figure them out. Furthermore, she did not know they were “for her.” She knew the opportunities “were present” but, for some reason, she did not see herself as part of the group (whatever that group was) that was allowed to take advantage of those opportunities. Her statement also suggests
that she did not realize that it was “for her”—that it was “up to her,” in a sense—to pursue these types of opportunities (double majors, specializations, etc.) on her own behalf.

Crystal also sees opportunities that she missed. To a large extent, her availability for extracurricular involvement was limited by her commute to campus and by her attempts to balance her academic pursuits with her home life—the “strange domestic thing” that she later referred to as “trying to be married.” However, she wishes that someone had “[stressed] the importance of more involvement in campus life, and that extracurricular and organizations … not making it all about the academics.” She said this would have “enriched” her college experience and given her the opportunity to meet more people. Furthermore, she said that she missed out on opportunities to build her leadership skills, and “[develop] a sense of service in me … building my community values”—skills and values that she said would be helpful in her current job.

**Hoping in college.** Before beginning college, these men and women placed a lot of faith in what a college degree would accomplish, in terms of their career aspirations. Turner (1960) described higher education in the United States as a system of “contest mobility,” where it is the individual’s efforts (i.e., educational attainment) that lead to the reward of more elite status. College held the promise of a better salary, a more fulfilling or engaging job, and greater opportunity than had been available to parents and peers who did not pursue additional education. College had not always lived up to its promises: money has been tight, jobs have been uninspiring, social norms have been confusing. However, even though the promised—or assumed—rewards have not always been forthcoming or accessible, there is still a sense that life after college is better than life without college would have been.

**Sub-theme: Reconciling Practicality and Pragmatism**

Given the primary focus of this study on the experience of being an FGC graduate in the workplace, I limited this study to individuals who were working full-time. I did not select
individuals based on either their academic major or the extent to which their current employment aligned with their course of college studies. However, I was interested in how they had chosen their major. The hope of college, as described earlier, was strongly tempered by a dose of practicality, a trend noted in earlier literature (Longwell-Grice, 2003; Goyette & Mullen, 2006). Embedded within this idea of being practical was a strong message received from parents and extended family: You need to be able to provide adequately for yourself. None of these FGC graduates wanted to find themselves in what Crystal referred to as the “classic horror stories that working culture is riddled with”—earning a four-year degree and then working at McDonald’s.

As Michael said, getting a college degree “for the sake of the degree” and then returning home to work in a factory would be “pretty crazy.” Rather, the goal, as Kendra described it, was selecting a major they would enjoy that would lead to enjoyable work. This proved to be challenging.

As described earlier, Darlene went to college for the purpose of learning what she needed to know to have confidence and get a good job as a nurse. When those plans did not seem to be working out, she got frustrated at the input she received. She said:

I started then talking to advisors about career planning, [asking] “What’s out there?” and nobody could tell me. [They would say,] “Well, [the human ecology major is] really broad, you could do anything you want.” [I said,] “Don’t tell me I can do anything I want. Tell me what’s out there.” Like, in the medical field, I can be an RN, I can be this, and it was very logical, very clear. [Human ecology] and psychology is not logical, they’re all right-brained, and that’s-, I hated that. <laughs> I’m like, “There’s got to be [an] answer.” It might not be the one that I want, but it’s at least an answer.

After further exploration, Darlene did choose the human ecology major, finding a specialization in health promotion that was interesting to her, given her strong attraction to the medical field. But then, after her fifth application to the nursing program, she was admitted. She declined the
spot in the nursing program, a decision that confused her mother and created conflict between them. However, Darlene’s telling of the story highlighted this as a practical decision. She said:

This was a big turning point for me. … [Big University had] introduced the accelerated nursing program. If you have a degree in any other major, you can take the accelerated nursing program and have your four-year RN nursing degree in as little as a year to a year-and-a-half if you wanted to. So, I’m like, “It would make sense to me, that, in two years, I could either have one degree in nursing, or two years, technically, I could have two degrees, because I’d take one year to do this [human ecology], and one year to do the other [accelerated nursing], and then have both degrees.”

She completed the human ecology degree and is currently working at the agency where she did her required internship. Darlene has not pursued the nursing degree, although she did talk about finding ways to pursue some sort of medical-related work and career.

Crystal changed her major several times, beginning as art education and then switching to English education, even though “my heart was in art.” She then selected an art major, but remembers thinking to herself, “Why am I doing this? I won’t be able to get a job.” She changed her major again, to English education, but her classroom observation experiences convinced her that she would only want to teach at a college level. She eventually decided on an English major. She described her reasoning behind this choice:

English was always, of everything, that was just super-easy, and I did it super-well. And so I knew I would succeed at it. And I liked it. I wasn’t crazy-passionate over it. I was sort of passionate over it, but it had enough going for it. And also, I figured I’d be able to get a job. It was not that much more practical than art, but I thought I’d be able to get into journalism or something. So, that’s sort of why.
She also added a business minor, but “hated it,” because “the classes were orchestrated in a way that you could easily get around learning.” However, she made this choice, “forcing herself to be practical,” as she described it. I asked her about this phrase, and she said:

I always did sort of make concessions to what was expected of me. And, I think that that was like, my nod to being not a dreamer, <laughs> to thinking about my future based on, kind of like cultural terms that I was used to. But, you know, at the same time, I always do have a drive within me that I think is internal to be practical and to make decisions that aren’t solely based on, you know, a passion or an interest, but hopefully a combination of liking it and … finding some kind of happy medium between being pragmatic and pursuing a passion.

Crystal was able to find the “happy medium.” Her current job as a magazine editor seems to be a blend of these three areas. However, she mentioned that when she talks about her degree, people are generally most impressed by the business minor. She said:

It’s funny to me, when people ask what I majored in or whatever. They always take the business more seriously than the English. To them, that was like a goof-off thing.

Whereas, I learned way more about thinking and communication through my English and writing than I could even imagine in the business. Like, the business was a total waste of my time.

Crystal indicated that based on her academic experience, “I thought I hated business, right? I get into the business world and, turns out, I love business.” Although she eventually determined that it was “completely unrealistic” given her current salary and financial obligations, she had been planning to begin an MBA program when I first interviewed her.

Providing adequately. When I asked Crystal what her father’s definition of “good job” might be, she said it would be something that “gets a paycheck, pays all your bills. Something that, you know, hopefully is at least somewhat interesting.” For these FGC graduates, parents and
other family members modeled a mentality that providing adequately for the family's needs was the primary purpose of a job. Ideally, it would be something that was “somewhat interesting,” as Crystal indicated, but this was to be a secondary consideration.

Kylie indicated that her brother and his wife had returned from teaching English overseas “without a plan” and with a baby on the way. Her brother had worked at a customer service job, even though “he really felt trapped there” and the job didn’t really fit his personality or his gifts, because “he was the breadwinner and had to do it.” Kylie faced a similar situation after returning from her year-long Fulbright teaching fellowship in Germany. After looking for a job for several months, she was offered a job in a city approximately six hours from her parents’ home, and it was a job that she didn’t think she was going to like. I was curious about the factors that she had considered before accepting this job offer. When I asked her about her decision process, she said, “It was like, ‘Yes I need this money. Yup.’ That was my decision process.” As she talked about it, there really was no other consideration. She needed a job; she needed money; she didn’t want to live with her parents “forever.” Although she expected it to be less than ideal—and, in fact, it turned out to be a job she “hated”—her need to provide for herself was the one and only deciding factor in her acceptance of the job.

In talking about the college majors that he and his siblings had chosen, Michael said they had all picked “very practical degrees.” I asked him if this was something his parents had advocated for or required. He replied:

Um, no, not necessarily. It was a product of how our parents raised us. They never specifically said, “You know, if you’re going to get a degree, you better be able to use it.” Maybe they did, I don’t know. … We were just raised that way … “Yeah, yeah, get a job that you love, but if it doesn’t pay the bills, who cares if you love it or not, you’re going to starve to death.” Like you have to put food on the table. And try to put food on the table, doing something you enjoy, but number one, put food on the table.
I wanted to push this idea a little, so I picked an extreme example and asked Michael how he thought his parents might have reacted if he had declared a major in musical theater. He said:

I think they probably would have said, “Um, that’s great, if that’s what you want to do, you should do that. But, um, just make sure you can figure out how that’s going to provide a living. Like, if you can make it work, and you can provide a living doing that, then great—go for it. But if there’s no future in it, if it just can’t work, then you might want to reconsider, or do something related” is probably what they would have said. They wouldn’t have just been like, “That’s awesome!” I feel like that’s what they would have said, like “That’s awesome, if that’s going to work for you.”

Furthermore, Michael said that the idea of providing was always framed in terms of being able to sustain a family on whatever salary he might earn, since being a husband and father had been “a huge life goal” even when he was a teenager.

The idea of providing was also part of conversations that Bruce recalled having with his parents, as he pursued a major and career in youth ministry. He said:

They were very supportive. Of course, there was questions about—or not questions, but discussions on … being able to support yourself, you know, it paying well enough. That they were always in support of it, but, I know there was discussions on, “Well, you know that’s not going to be a very high-paying job, as long as you’re okay with that.”

Further complicating Bruce’s ability to provide for himself and his family was his desire to serve in youth ministry in rural Minnesota. When it became clear that his internship would not turn into a full-time position, he thought to himself, “Okay, now I gotta find a job, you know, to support my wife and I. … Real life is coming. I need to start handling this.” He continued:

Could I have gone to a larger urban area and found a full-time ministry job? The odds would have been better, but to find a decent paying, full-time job in a rural area has been hard. And so I’ve had other jobs. To be in the area that I wanted to be in, I’ve had to take
other jobs that weren’t related to my field, and so that’s been surprising, but a good
learning thing.

At the same time, I asked Bruce to talk about one of his worst days at work, and he said:

I think the bad days at previous jobs is just realizing I wasn’t working in the field that I
was trained for quote/unquote, but knowing that I had to be there just to pay the bills at
home. Um, there’s days where I was happy with that and—or at least could get along
with it—but there was days where it was just really frustrating and, yeah, upsetting. But
… that is kind of where the work ethic comes in. I really hate this job, but I know that I
need it to pay the bills. And that doesn’t mean I won’t keep my eyes open for other
opportunities. But, I’m going to keep going; I’m going to keep doing my best or at least
trying my best.

Bruce summarized the balance and the tension expressed by these FGC graduates: persevering
and performing as required by one’s current job; providing adequately for the needs of one’s
family; and pursuing, somehow, the things that fuel one’s passions.

Sub-theme: Discovering My Passion

As I interviewed participants, they talked about life, career, and work with a bit of
discontent and with a deep sense that there must be something more “out there,” and they talked
in terms of finding and pursuing a passion. These FGC graduates never explicitly defined what it
meant “to be passionate” about their jobs. In fact, it is worth noting that Darlene and Kendra—
who seemed the most unsettled about their career paths—did not use the word “passion” at all.
However, the way this term was used, in the context of these interviews, indicates that
understanding this idea is a key aspect of the college-to-work transition for FGC graduates.

As has been stated several times, Kylie did not like her first job out of college. Working
long hours and managing assignments from several demanding supervisors and “workaholic”
consultants made for a stressful and frustrating situation. She talked about “always kind of [admiring]” one particular co-worker. She said:

He went there for eight hours a day, to get his money and to go home. And he doesn’t have aspirations for his life. … I don’t know how he can compartmentalize it like that, but he did. And I’ve always kind of admired him for that. I wish I could do that. Just come here, do my job, go home, not think about it. But that, to me, seems too robotic. So, I need a job that I am passionate about and aligns with the gifts that I’ve been given.

As she talked about this, I remembered my first job out of college, where I was rewarded, in a sense, for the long hours I worked, because I was paid hourly. I said to Kylie, “It was this weird self-reinforcing cycle [where] I had too much to do, and I didn’t want to work that much, but when I did, I got paid more.” She replied, “Exactly” and continued:

Yeah. If it would have been a job that I had loved, I wouldn’t have minded the overtime. But, you know, I didn’t like it, so I worked overtime specifically for the money, and that’s it. Even when I reassured myself, like “Oh, I get extra money,” I’m like, “I don’t care; I hated to work until 7:00.” So, it didn’t take long until I’m like, “That’s enough I don’t want overtime anymore.”

She was frustrated by the demands of her job and worked more than she wanted, but if she had “loved” the job, she “wouldn’t have minded” the extra hours. She said of her current role:

Yes, it’s good pay, and it’s probably better pay than a lot of the jobs in [this] area, but it’s really not worth it to sacrifice my … sanity and my self-respect, knowing that I’m not going anywhere in this job, I’m not passionate about it, I don’t want to move up in the company. What’s the point?

Now that she is pursuing a career in teaching, she recognizes that future jobs will most likely involve long hours and low pay. When talking about the components of a “good job” she said:

[A good job includes] equitable pay for what you’re doing, although teaching doesn’t
really offer that, but that’s okay. … But for me personally, I want to do something I’m passionate about. Which I’ve learned, I can accept less pay for doing that.

Michael also talked about the long hours required by his job and added, “I’m a teacher, for crying out loud. It’s not like I’m pulling in the big bucks for my four-year degree.” At the same time, he consistently, clearly, and repeatedly talked about his passion for teaching and said “I feel like I’m always going to be teaching, in one way or another,” although perhaps not always in a public school setting.

When describing work-related conversations with her friends, Kylie mentioned that her contribution to these conversations is “a lot more positive,” now that she is making the move into teaching. She tells funny stories about her students, talks about her ideas for teaching, and tries to get her friends to remember what it was like to be a student—so that Kylie can be a better teacher. She told me that when she worked as a project coordinator, in a frustrating and overwhelming situation that she didn’t want to relive, she did not say much to her friends about her job. She just “shrugged my shoulders and [said,] ‘Yup. I did work today.’” She continued: “You know, when you’re not passionate about something, you really don’t want to bring it up.” By contrast, as we neared the end of our final interview, I asked Kylie to describe her “perfect next job.” Not only did she talk at length about her desire to be involved in advocating for early-childhood, second-language education, she said, “That’s where I’m passionate about, is languages. And to get people to understand how important they are, that would be kind of cool.” She also described her vision in ways that clearly echoed ideas and experiences she had described throughout the course of our interviews. She is passionate about helping others learn a second language, and she had been “bringing it up” during the three hours we talked. Furthermore, she is currently training for a job and career change that will bring her closer to this passion.

Passion for the job is central to Kylie’s definition of a good employee. Not only does a good employee meet the expectations of his or her job, Kylie said:
Are they passionate about their role, and [do] they have energy for it? Are they exciting the people around them? Are they constantly coming up with new ideas? Or, you know, they show that they have zeal for what they’re doing. They want to keep doing it, and they want to grow with the company. [That] is my idea of a good employee. That, plus they do their jobs, you know.

As she described it, passion is primary; “doing their jobs” is added almost as an afterthought.

Bruce, who talked about the realization that he was not working within his passions and training (while working at the tractor salvage company) as one of his “worst days” at work, made a direct connection between pursuing a passion and having a sense of career direction. He highlighted the importance of “knowing what your career path is, what [are] your desires and passions in life.” He continued:

But, if overall your occupation or your career path is not in something that you’re pursuing a passion, then you’re never going to be happy in life. I mean, you spend 40 hours a week or more in your job, and so if it’s not in something that you feel fulfillment from or chasing a passion, then eventually you’re going to be unfulfilled in life. Or, you know, it’s going to weigh on you.

This process of “defining a passion” has been neither straightforward nor simple for these FGC graduates. Darlene and Kendra are still working to clarify it. Kylie is making a career change to get closer to it. Bruce is beginning to look beyond the specifics of his current job description to identify it. Crystal has begun wondering whether a new job or a new challenge might help her better express it. Michael endures the time commitments and administrative challenges of his job because of it. These FGC graduates may each have a unique relationship with their passion, ranging from bewilderment to deliberate pursuit, but that relationship is an important factor in their relationship with their work and career.
**Chasing a Passion**

I think I expected these young men and women to be a bit more settled than they seemed to be. Kylie is changing careers, Kendra and Darlene are convinced that they have not yet even heard of the job that would fit perfectly, and Bruce is making moves to create a job for himself that is “not a set-in-stone, this-time-to-this-time job that I have to gear the rest of my life around. But, instead a job that I can gear around my life.” Michael can envision retiring from his current school district, but at the same time talked about wanting to teach overseas. Crystal is “ready for the next thing, and I’m slightly discontented, but not like super-super-discontented. But, I need a new challenge and I’m ready for the next level.” However, as Stokes and Wyn (2007) suggested, most concepts of transition are steeped in assumptions of “linearity” and “normative assumptions” (p. 498) that tend to result in a simplistic and over-simplified understanding of this time of life. Hearing the experiences of men and women currently living through—and trying to make sense of—this time in their lives make one thing (and perhaps only one thing) clear: Although these are the stories of individuals that cannot possibly represent the experience of all first-generation college graduates, their stories argue strongly against a simplistic conceptualization of their experience.

Perhaps unlike their parents, these FGC graduates expected to both give something to and get something out of their jobs. This desire shaped how these early-career employees talked about their work. It is at the heart of the experience of making meaning at work. These FGC graduates went to college, hoping for a better life. They faced decisions that set their passions at odds with the practical realities of hard work and responsibility that had been so much a part of their growing-up experiences.

For me, the most significant question is one that is, as yet, unasked and unanswered: Where did the expectation that work was supposed to allow for the pursuit or expression of one’s passions originate? For their parents, work had been a means of providing a living. College was
the vehicle to “a better life,” but for these men and women, their college degrees had been, for the most part, practical and instrumental choices, selected as a means to “a better job.” However, along the way, their experiences—the family messages received and rejected, the academic coursework studied, the classmates and co-workers befriended, the cultures encountered and evaluated, the jobs worked—both sparked a passion and created the expectation that the passion could and should be pursued.

Reflexive Reconciliation—The Past and The Passion

The themes in this chapter speak to the deep struggles and disappointment expressed by my participants. Neither the influence of the past nor the pressure of finding a job that allows for fulfillment and expression of passions is addressed in the literature related to first-generation students. It may be possible that these are issues that come to the forefront after the FGC student graduates and finds that “college” did not necessarily live up to the graduate’s expectations. Much of the FGC literature is rooted in secondary data analysis, a research approach that is necessarily limited to asking questions that can be answered by the existing data. There is also the possibility that the discontent and disappointment is a function of the current economic climate or these FGC graduates’ life stage, more than it is attributable to the educational attainment of their parents. However, if the parents expected that college would lead to increased freedom, choice and fulfillment, it is not surprising that the FGC graduate is struggling with “where they are right now.” When given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences related to these issues—a rare occurrence within the context of some of their families—these men and women attempted to reconcile their present reality with the past history and the future hopes.
Chapter 7: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, I summarize the findings of this phenomenological study of six first-generation college graduates, who graduated between two and five years ago, and who are currently working full-time. This chapter presents my conclusions regarding the insufficiency of the existing literature related to FGC graduates as well as concluding thoughts on the complexity of being a first-generation college graduate. I close with suggestions for further research on this topic and comments on the limitations of this study.

The Lived Experience of the First-Generation College Graduate

This study sought to answer the question “what is it like for a first-generation college graduate to experience work?” In a phenomenology, the concluding hermeneutical exercise is to produce a “final phenomenological description” that summarizes and synthesizes the essence of the experience, as described by those who have experienced the phenomenon and interpreted by the phenomenologist. The following paragraph represents my final phenomenological description, the result of conversations with participants, my analysis of and reflection on the transcripts, and the hermeneutical process of expressing in words the themes I identified in the data.

To be a recent first-generation college graduate working full-time is to be negotiating new relationships with past, present, and future. Interactions with culture and family of origin (the past) are simultaneously a source of pride (e.g., “I learned my work ethic from my parents”) and ambivalence (e.g., “I am trying to get away from the redneck culture I was raised in”). The present reality of work is uneven; workload, supervisors, learning, and personal fulfillment are balanced and managed only with great effort and evolving skill. Meaning is made in work as the FGC graduate is given the freedom to shape the job
to match his or her skills, personality, and gifts. The future holds out the hope for “something more”—a better job, more balance, greater alignment between work and identity—all of which currently seem just out of reach.

I sent this statement to participants, asking them to comment on it, in relation to their experience. Each one responded. Michael indicated that “It looks great!” Bruce said, “I think it looks good Joann. It must have been hard combining such varying accounts. You did a good job.” Darlene’s comment was “Wow I think it’s great!” and Kylie said “the description below looks good to me (although I personally wouldn't apply myself to the ‘I am trying to get away from the redneck culture I was raised in’ maxim, but I can understand how others would.)” Crystal responded by saying, “Generally speaking, I believe this statement rings very true. I particularly like the part about negotiating relationships with the past, present and future, and also the conflicting feelings an FGC has toward his/her origins.” Kendra said: “My reaction is that you nailed it. I think everything you said fits me except for the redneck comment.”

FGC Graduates and the Existing Literature

As outlined at the end of Chapter Two, there are gaping holes in the literature related to first-generation college students. One key issue is the varying definitions of “first-generation college student” across various studies and articles. In addition, much of this literature relies on secondary data analysis of dated datasets. To repeat Orbe’s (2008) condemnation, the FGC literature “has used quantitative methodologies to produce generalizations about this heterogeneous group” (p. 82). With the exception of Orbe’s work, many of the frequently cited works on this topic (e.g., Brooks-Terry, 1988; London, 1989) were published more than 20 years ago, potentially leading to the conclusion that FGC status may no longer be a relevant issue.

Themes identified through this research suggest that FGC graduates face complex issues as they begin careers—issues that have not, as yet, been extensively discussed or explored in the
literature, especially as related to the experience of FGC graduates. As I talked with participants, the most significant challenges they described were also the ones they struggled to verbalize. Michael revealed a deep ambivalence toward his “redneck” past and both Kylie and Crystal indicated that parental affirmation had been fleeting (although for very different reasons) since they left college and began working. Kendra and Darlene struggled to identify work and career options that really “fit.” Bruce struggled to reconcile the value of his education with the continuing limitations of its cost (and the resulting student loans). These men and women were seeking to do well and be good in their jobs, working out for themselves what it might mean to have a good work ethic. This, too, is a construct not directly addressed in the FGC literature. Add to this the drive to work in a job, occupation, or career that connects to some area of personal passion—that may or may not be well-defined. These are real struggles, and they are not the types of issues generally explored or raised by secondary data analysis—upon which much of the FGC literature is based.

Furthermore, as outlined at the end of Chapter Five, this study suggests that although these men and women valued their peers, co-workers, and supervisors as central to their job-related learning, there seems to be very little of the structure or intentionality in the working/learning environment that Lave and Wenger (1991) or Wenger (1998) would predict. The foundational literature related to communities of practice seems to highlight the community as the unit of analysis; I have chosen to focus on the individual within the CoP. In doing so, my participants’ discussions validate the conclusion made by Hodkinson et al. (2004): It is important to recognize that the values, histories and practices of the individual will shape his or her experience as a member of a community of practice.
FGC Graduates, SCCT, and Phenomenology

As outlined in Chapter Three, social cognitive career theory (SCCT) has been recommended as a useful framework for understanding the career development dilemmas and decisions made by prospective FGC students (e.g., Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Several studies have used this framework to identify the influence of an individual’s career self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals on his or her career development and career-related decisions (e.g., Flores & O’Brien, 2002; O’Brien et al. 2000). In fact, my initial explorations of the literature related to FGC students and graduates occurred while writing a paper about SCCT. I wanted it to work; I wanted it to explain simply and neatly the early-career experiences of FGC graduates as well.

At one point in this process, as I was thinking about the theoretical framework of this study, I wrote the following in my research journal:

SCCT is there [in the data]. I have heard it, in what Michael talked about especially, but I think also in the others. … Going to college was supposed to alleviate the financial strain; “society” promised that going to college was the way to the better life. Michael went to college, he chose a profession that matched his gifting, he even steered away from [specific career options] because of the expected outcomes.

I continued this train of thought, recognizing that I had also heard participants discuss their careers and jobs in ways that demonstrated a high degree of self-efficacy. For example, in talking about her academic experience in college, Darlene had said:

[I was] gaining self-confidence throughout the way, and realizing that no matter how hard the class can be, I can get help and I can figure it out and I can do it. Because I did it in high school, and I can do it now.

Participants also mentioned personal goals that had guided their career-related decisions: Michael and his wife hoped to pay off their student loans before turning 30 (and they had done so) and
Darlene set a goal of paying for her own college tuition, for example. In addition, several participants talked about major choice and career decisions in ways that emphasized an underlying goal of providing adequately for self and family.

Theme III: Releasing the Past may also speak to SCCT’s “second level of analysis” (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000, p. 36), which is the exploration of contextual factors (both supports and barriers) on an individual’s career development. This aspect of SCCT has been described as having “received limited inquiry” (p. 48), compared to other aspects of the theory. Participants spoke of the challenge of understanding the culture in which they grew up, renegotiating their relationship with that upbringing, and reworking their understanding of “real” work, all of which potentially relate back to the larger social and cultural contexts in which they were raised and in which they are currently living. Clearly, some aspects of participants’ experiences did seem to mesh with the three primary tenets of SCCT.

However, phenomenology requires actively setting aside precisely these types of theoretical preconceptions, and I worked to do this, during both the collection and the analysis of my data. Could I have found support for career self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals as important to the experiences of these FGC graduates? I believe so. However, I have resisted the urge to view my data through the lens of SCCT, pursuing, rather, one of the central goals phenomenology—a presuppositionless exploration of a phenomenon. Therefore, the themes I have identified do not map directly to SCCT. The final theme, chasing a passion, may be most closely related to the “personal goals” aspect of SCCT, which has been defined as a “determination to engage in certain activities to produce a particular outcome” (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2009, p. 91). However, in talking about the pursuit of their passions, my participants seemed to be talking about something deeper, and at the same time more ill-defined, than SCCT would suggest. Therefore, the freedom to explore this phenomenon apart from rigid adherence to
the constraints of a particular theory may, indeed, have uncovered a previously unidentified aspect of the early-career experiences of first-generation college graduates.

On the Road to “Better Than”

The participants I spoke with are very much at the beginning of their careers, and very little of what they said had the ring of “conclusive.” These men and women, who gave freely and graciously of their time, are and will continue to be first-generation college graduates. By virtue of their educational attainment, alone, they are distinct from the generations that came before them. Research (e.g., Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004) suggests that their while their decision to pursue college is noteworthy, their ability and determination to persist through college truly sets them apart, since only a fraction of FGC students persist to graduation (Chen & Carroll, 2005). And although the literature describes the experience and challenge of being a first-generation college student, this study highlights the unsettled and unsettling experiences of the first-generation college graduate.

Throughout this process, I have been repeatedly asked whether FGC status really matters after graduation. Perhaps in some of the day-to-day interactions on the job, the experience of an FGC graduate is similar to his or her non-FGC peer. Jobs are overwhelming, unfulfilling, and surprising, regardless of the education one’s parents may or may not have had. First-generation college graduates may find themselves in similar occupational categories (Choy, 2001), and they may earn similar salaries (Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998) as non-FGC graduates. However, the lived experience of these FGC graduates exposes phenomenologically what quantitative findings can never express statistically.

To some extent, FGC graduates are defined by the past. This is a definition by association—an FGC student is identified as such because of his or her family’s past educational attainment. My participants were defined by a strong identification with and emulation of the
work ethic they saw modeled growing up. But it is also a definition by dissociation, where the
participant intentionally sets himself or herself apart from that past, pursues postsecondary educa-
tion and, in the process, is significantly changed. Graduation brings, as Goodwin (2006)
suggested:

Reentry into the world that they left to enter college [and] challenges as they tried to fit
their new identities and dreams into a space that might not have grown and changed in
parallel ways during their absence. (p. 152)

The realities of these two worlds are often held in dialectical tension. For many of my
participants, college was painted as the road to a better life—better than the life of parents and
better than the life of peers who did not pursue college. At the same time, although college holds
the promise of a life “better than fill-in-the-blank,” in at least one case (Crystal), the desire to
pursue college was interpreted as an arrogant attitude of being “better than your roots.”

As early-career workers, they are dealing with the present realities of their jobs. Their
working conditions may be better than that of their parents, but not better than they expected—in
fact, things are not even as good as they expected. They spoke to me about hopes for meaningful,
creative, flexible, engaging employment. They longed for occupational choices and career options
that were “better than” the choices and options available to their parents. At the same time, they
described the reality of overwhelming hours, insufficient finances, unmet expectations, and
unsuccessful attempts to express their frustrations. Their lived reality was not “better than.”

And yet, there is the hope that things will, at some point in the future, be better than they
are now. This “better than” may be as near as the completion of a graduate degree (Michael) or as
far away as retirement (Kylie). It may be as concrete as turning a part-time job into a flexible full-
time career (Bruce) or as ephemeral as the sense that the “perfect job,” as yet undiscovered, is out
there somewhere (Kendra). “Better than” sets lofty goals: the freedom to be completely authentic
(Crystal) and the freedom from always feeling one step behind everyone else (Darlene). The future will allow for an expression of gifts and passions, “better than” the present does.

Things were supposed to be better. They’re not right now. But they will be. To let go of this hope is to let go of the hope.

Future Directions and Further Research

First-generation college graduates are left to navigate the road to “better than” without a map. This study represents a first step at charting a varied and ever-shifting territory. It addresses a shortcoming in the existing FGC literature by exploring the post-graduation and early employment experiences of first-generation college graduates. It provides a phenomenological description and demonstrates that greater understanding of the post-college experiences of FGC students could be useful to academic affairs and human resources professionals alike, lending insight into the tensions experienced by FGC graduate as student and as employee.

This study should be followed by research that explores the early-career experiences of FGC graduates from a broader range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, a variety of family structures (e.g., the influence of being from a single-parent family, the presence of college-educated siblings or other relatives, etc.), as well as students from immigrant families or those who grew up in urban settings, to test the limits of the findings of this study—in particular the notions of work ethic and “real” work. Is the notion—the value—of good work ethic central to the experiences of other first-generation college graduates? Is it an aspect of a Midwestern or rural upbringing?

Participants in this study were, for the most part, working in jobs closely related to their areas of academic study; further research could explore the experience of an individual who is unable to find work “in their field,” or who finds himself or herself working in a job that would not have required a college degree. Furthermore, Crystal’s experience, as someone whose parents
were initially resistant to her pursuit, suggests that it would be informative to interview FGC graduates whose parents remained resistant to their pursuit of a college education. It might also be helpful to explore the experience of first-generation college students and graduates who pursue technical training (as opposed to bachelor’s-level credentials) or to compare the experiences of early-career workers who did not attend college.

In addition, research related to adult students in higher education is only now beginning to explore the extent to which FGC status influences the adult learner’s experience in postsecondary education. Much of this exploration highlights the confluence of factors for students who happen to be both low income and adult learners. As this phenomenon is better understood, there will be a need to research and understand the post-graduation experience of a first-generation college graduate who also happened to be a nontraditional student.

Furthermore, as I was recruiting participants for this study, I was surprised at the extent to which first-generation college graduates, even those in their 40s and 50s who had attended college as traditional-aged students, continued to identify with this aspect of their background. Further research could explore the dynamics of “being FGC” for those who are established in their careers. In addition, one potential participant indicated that while he was a first-generation college student when he attended college, both of his parents had since completed bachelor’s degrees. Given that several studies have highlighted the importance of relational support for adult learners who return to higher education (Edwards, 1993; Merrill, 1999; Samuels, 2005; Steele, Lauder, Caperchione, & Anastasi, 2005), it might be interesting to explore the experiences of families like this, to further understand the various ways in which family support may promote college persistence.
Limitations of the Study

As a phenomenology, the goal of the study has been to describe and explore, rather than explain and conclude. It is a description of the descriptions I heard (van Manen, 1997b); it is my interpretation of the interpreted experiences shared with me by my participants. If I have done my job, the reader is left with a sense of understanding the experience in a new way. If I have done my job, the reader also may have more questions than he or she had before reading this dissertation.

Furthermore, it is a small, qualitative study. Participants were all White and from small, rural settings in the Midwest. All grew up in Christian households; five of the six continue Christian practices. Their parents were all (eventually) supportive of their pursuit of postsecondary education. The goal of the study is clearly not statistical replication to a larger population. Rather, the goal is a phenomenological description that “rings true” to those who experienced the phenomenon and that lends insight for those who have not.
REFERENCES


Nyström, S., Dahlgren, M. A., & Dahlgren, L. O. (2008). A winding road—professional trajectories from higher education to working life: A case study of political science and


Olson, J. S. (2009). *At the end of the moving walkway: College-educated young adults and the transition to work*. Unpublished manuscript.


Appendix A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: The Early-career Experiences of First-Generation College Graduates

Principal Investigator: Joann S. Olson, Graduate Student
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Advisor: Dr. Fred Schied
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(814) 863-3499; fms3@psu.edu

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research study is to explore how recent college graduates understand the meaning of work and career for their own lives. The study also seeks to better understand the transition from college to work.

2. Procedures to be followed: You will be asked to participate in two or three interviews. The first interview will focus on your experience as a college student, your choice of major and career direction. The second interview (and third, if applicable) will focus your work and career-related experiences. Benefits: You might learn more about yourself by participating in this study. The questions might help you to reflect on your own career development and your own transition from college to work.

This research might provide a better understanding of how college students transition to life after college, especially in their jobs. This information could help plan programs and make student services or career development services more effective. This information might assist students in getting used to life after college.

3. Duration: Each interview will last approximately one hour.

4. Statement of Confidentiality: Your participation in this research is confidential. Interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. The data will be stored and secured in the principal investigator’s office (off campus) in a password-protected file. Only the principal investigator will have access to the recordings, and the recordings will be destroyed three years following the completion of the principal investigator’s doctoral studies at Penn State. (Completion of her studies is anticipated in August 2010.) In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

5. Right to Ask Questions: Please contact Joann Olson at 814-237-1874 (home) or 630-639-9723 (cell) with questions or concerns about this study.
6. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to participate in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

_________________________  ___________________
Participant Signature     Date

_________________________
Person Obtaining Consent  Date
Appendix B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Phase One Interview (focused life history)

Background information: Tell me a little bit about…
   your hometown
   the college you attended (How did you choose this college?)
   your major (How did you choose your major?)
   when you graduated; where you’re living now

Tell me about your family
   parents’ level of education; siblings’ college experience
   family involvement/input in your choice of major
   Did you feel like your family was encouraging (or resisting) your pursuit of college?

What happened the first time you talked to a parent or family member about going to college?
   How did you decide to tell them? What was the response?

Tell me a little bit about your first day at college.
   (Prompt: moving in, finding classes, meeting people, etc.)

Let’s talk about your time in college.
   What was the hardest part? What did you adjust to best?
   Were you involved in any extra-curricular activities?
   What was the academic side of college like for you?
   Did you have any jobs while you were in college? Tell me about one of those jobs.
   Did you volunteer or have any internships? Tell me about one of those experiences.

During your last week at college, what were your feelings about leaving school?
   What did you think about transitioning to work?

What do you wish someone had told you before college, before choosing your major, before you graduated from college?

Phase Two Interview (details of the experience)

Tell me about your current job.
   (Prompt: How would you describe your job to someone who didn’t know anything about what you do? How do you spend a typical day at your job? Have you had other full-time jobs since graduating?)

How did you get this job?
   (Prompt: What was your job search like? Did you turn down any other job offers, before accepting this job? Was accepting this job an “easy” decision?)

What happened when you told your parents (or family) about getting this job?

Tell me about your first day at this job.
Do you talk with your friends about your job? What are these conversations like?

Do you talk with your family about things that happen at work? (Could you give me an example?) If so, what do they say? If not, why not?

How would you describe your relationship with your boss? Has there been a time when he or she encouraged you? Or corrected you?

Have any of your co-workers been particularly helpful to you? In what ways? Can you recall a specific time this person helped you?

Have any of your co-workers been particularly frustrating or difficult? Would you describe a particular situation with this person?

Who are the “important people” at your job? Why are they important? How do you know (or how did you learn) they are important?

**Phase Three Interview (reflection on the experience)**

Tell me about your best day at your job. What made this day your “best day”? Tell me about the worst day you’ve had at this job.

If you “knew then what you know now” about your current job, would you have taken the job? Why or why not?

If you no longer had to work, what would you miss about working? What would you not miss?

What makes a job a “good” job?

What does it mean to be a “good” employee? Do you have any examples of this (from your own work or others)? Have you encountered co-workers you consider to be “good employees”? What is it about them (or their work) that led you to that conclusion?

In what ways do you think your definition of “good employee” or “good job” might be different from your parents or family? If I asked your father/mother what it means to be a “good” employee, what do you think he or she might say?

Is your job what you expected? Do you have an example of how it is what you expected? Or maybe an example of how it is different from what you expected?

What did you think after-college work and life would be like?

Do you think your experience in college has influenced the way you think about your career? In what ways? Or why not?

Have you thought about what you want your next job to be? How would it be different from the job you have now?

Have you thought about pursuing graduate school or further formal education? Under what circumstances could you see yourself going back to school?
Appendix C: EXAMPLE OF THEMATIZING

THEME: CHASING A PASSION

❖ Sub-theme: Hoping in College
  ➢ Grasping at the promise
    • career choice—parents endorsing college
    • college academics—moving beyond parents’ education
    • college outcome—four-year degree not automatic path to success
    • college outcome—‘opened the door to my life now’
    • college outcome—working at McDonald’s was ‘classic horror story’ in working-class culture
    • college=better life...better than whom?
    • educational opportunity—‘And if you want to go, you should be able to go’
    • father’s occupation—‘You don’t want to do this your whole life’
    • post-college—‘really felt cheated and angry’
    • post-college—‘using your degree’
    • pursuing college—conversations ‘wondering the benefit of the education’
    • pursuing college—if I hadn’t gone, ‘I’d probably be bored out of my mind’
    • pursuing college—‘if you don’t get a degree, you are screwed financially’
    • pursuing college—to have ‘a better shot at better jobs’
  ➢ Missing out
    • feeling socially ill-equipped and out of place
    • college academics—‘I was always worried I’d miss something, or I’d get in trouble for not having it’
    • college choice—‘good decision’ but ‘uninformed’
    • college choice—‘I didn’t know my options, really’
    • college choice—no ‘college prep talk’ from high school counselor
    • college choice—no conversation with family
    • college experience—‘missed the memo’ on application process
    • college experience—‘somebody should have helped me’
    • educational opportunity—‘I never thought that I would have the opportunity to make my own choices to that extreme’
    • extracurricular—wishes someone had pushed her to get involved
    • school pre-college—perhaps too sheltered, removed from the reality of college life
    • socially—outsider—‘I’m always the one...that does not know what the heck is going on’

❖ Sub-theme: Reconciling Practicality and Pragmatism
  ➢ Contemplating obligations
  ➢ Providing adequately
    • blue collar—‘pulling good money, but can’t make ends meet’
    • career choice—must be able to pay the bills
• career choice—parents—‘that’s not going to be a very high-paying job, as long as you’re OK with that’
• career choice—providing is more important than fulfillment
• father’s occupation—never had to choose between providing and doing something he liked
• finances—‘I need money. Yes’ I’ll take the job
• financial challenge—‘What are we going to cut? There’s nothing to cut’
• good job—benefits, consistent paycheck
• good job—stability—to provide for family
• graduation—‘Okay, real life is coming. I need to start handling this’
• job transition—would have stayed in bad situation, rather than take pay decrease
• parents’ definition—good job ‘pays all your bills’
• providing—he and siblings didn’t want money issues ‘like parents had’
• started Master’s degree to earn more
• transition to work—contradiction—knew I hated job, needed the money
• worst day—‘realizing I wasn’t working in the field that I was trained for...that I had to be there to pay the bills at home’

➤ career choice—added business minor ‘forcing myself to be practical’
➤ career choice—jobs—‘don’t tell me I can do anything I want. Tell me what’s out there’
➤ career choice—major—‘Is it going to be something that’s going to give me a job?’
➤ career choice—major choice—‘Why am I doing this? I won’t be able to get a job’
➤ career choice—practical degrees—‘my nod to not being a dreamer’
➤ passion—a decision ‘solely based on passion or interest’ won’t be practical choices
➤ passion—‘finding some kind of happy medium between being pragmatic and pursuing a passion’
➤ passion—may need to take ‘jobs that just pay the bills’ for a time
➤ practical degrees—‘a product of how our parents raised us’
➤ practical degrees—if ‘can providing living doing that, then great’
➤ practical degrees—will this choice allow me time for family?

❖ Sub-theme: Discovering my passion

➤ aspiring to something more
➤ career path=desires and passions in life
➤ good employee—passionate about their role
➤ good job—not going to sacrifice sanity and self-respect for job she’s not passionate about
➤ job talk—‘You know, when you’re not passionate about something, you really don’t want to bring it up.’
➤ passion—I can accept less pay for doing’ a job I’m passionate about
➤ passion—if not ‘chasing a passion’ you’re going to be unfulfilled
➤ passion—I’m not passionate about the job...what’s the point’
➤ passion—‘my heart was in art’...but won’t be able to get a job
➤ passion—necessary for someone to be a good employee
➤ passion—‘need to be able to pursue passion in your job’
➤ passion—‘what do you want to do in life, and then finding jobs that somehow fit’
➤ passion—‘where my heart is, but jobs are not as profuse’
➤ passion—‘you’re never going to be happy in life’ if career path isn’t pursuing a passion
VITA
Joann S. Olson

Education
The Pennsylvania State University, Ph.D., Adult Education, 2010
Michigan State University, B.S., Employment Relations and Psychology, 1990

Teaching, Research and Advising Experience
- Project-based research assistance
- Develop and pilot PSU-OLLI: Adult Student Mentoring Program

Teaching Assistant: Adult Education, The Pennsylvania State University
- Perspectives on Adult Learning Theory (Spring 2010), face-to-face, graduate
- Introduction to Adult Education (Fall 2008), online, graduate
- Teaching Adults Responsibly (Fall 2008), online, graduate

Educational Consultant: First-Year Testing, Counseling and Advising Program (FTCAP), The Pennsylvania State University (Summer 2008)
- Conduct individual educational planning interviews with incoming undergraduates

- Faculty support and research assistance; occasionally facilitate undergraduate class
- Class discussion leader for Personal Spiritual Formation, face-to-face, graduate

- One-on-one training, mentoring and discipleship relationships with focus on leadership development and equipping college students to mentor and disciple other students
- Coached and trained new student leaders; presented workshops, retreats, and talks

English Teacher – Chung Tai English Ministries, Taichung, Taiwan (Summer 1990)

Peer-Reviewed Publications and Refereed Conference Proceedings

