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PROVIDING SAFE SPACES: AN EXAMINATION OF TRIO SSS STUDENTS’ PERSONAL AND ACADEMIC SELF-EFFICACY DURING COVID-19

By

Matthew McClendon
B.S., University of Kentucky, 2013
M. Ed., University of Louisville, 2017

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
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in Educational Leadership and Organizational Development

Department of Educational Leadership and Organizational Development
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

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A Dissertation Approved on

April 12, 2024

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Dr. Jessica Buckley, Committee Member
DEDICATION

First, I would like to praise my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Without him, I am nothing and would not be here. This dissertation is dedicated to my beautiful wife, Angelica, my late mother, Nichole Evette McClendon, and my Granny, Norma McClendon.

Last, Angelica K. McClendon, my queen, my best friend, soulmate, and most importantly, my wife, thank you for always being there for me during this process. You had to deal with the trauma of losing my mother, taking classes while working two jobs, my up and down mood swings because of this process, and us being away from each other, which was so challenging. You never wavered. In fact, numerous times, I know you selflessly put your feelings aside to be there for me, and I appreciate that. You prayed for me, breathed positive affirmations, and refused to let me quit or think less of myself, which often happened during this process. I am so excited to be done with this chapter of my life, so we can explore what is next for the both of us. I am so proud and honored that God answered my prayers by allowing me to be your husband. I love you more than anything.

To my late mother, Nichole. Ever since I was born, you have always displayed hard work, grit, and sacrifice. You had me at 18, but that did not stop you from working full-time and attending school by taking two-semester classes until you finally reached your goal. I also remember you having to take your license exam multiple times to be
able to work in claims at Allstate Insurance. But you did it! I also remember that whatever you had going on, you always ensured I received the best education available, even if you sacrificed waiting to buy a house or working the election polls or a part-time job at JCPenney. You saw the importance of where education could take me. For that, I am so grateful and proud to call you my mother and best friend. I pray that I have made you proud and that all your sacrifices are worth it. I love you.

Last, Norma “Granny,” thank you for always praying for me even when I did not pray for myself and for helping raise me into the man I am today. I will never forget the countless times you dropped me off and picked me up from school or the numerous summers that we hung out together. I will always remember the day I got accepted into my doctoral program. I was very emotional, and you told me, “Never forget where you came from.” Well, Granny, I have not and will not because of what you instilled in me. Thank you so much. I love you.
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Mr. Jerry “Herr” Walsh Skelly J.D., you were my 6th-grade social studies teacher, and made a year in which I struggled mightily in school, much more tolerable. You assisted me with getting help from the Langsford Center, and you exposed me to my love for cars by participating in a car club, but like Mrs. Wallace, you held me accountable for my studies. You did not care how good I was at athletics; you made sure education came v
first. A prime example I will never forget was this day when you and my two track coaches, Mr. Black, and Mr. Armstrong, spoke to me at recess about how my grades had fallen and told me I could not participate in track until I raised my grades. At the time, I felt like the track was the only thing I was good at, so I was devastated. However, you never wavered, and I EARNED my spot back on the team. Thank you for that life lesson.

As for my doctoral journey, I would like to thank my UK CARES staff members, Mrs. Miranda Scully, and Dr. Stephanie Mayberry. You have both been there for me since the beginning of my first year, and you have been there for me through grades, Greek life, family death, my wedding, and graduations. Even when I was no longer on your caseload, you were always there if I needed you. Thank you.

Dr. Amy Hirschy, thank you for being the extra support I needed through my master’s program and doctoral program. You are one of the very few people who know me both as a student and a person, which can be a lot. But during my time of knowing you, you have always been straightforward, compassionate, and empathic. I thank you so much for your assistance.

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Last, “Brother” Charles Holloway . . . Dr. Charles Holloway to others . . . thank you. You have been there since the beginning, back when I was at Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc., informational. With this information, I distinctly remember you editing my resume with a red pen right before me as a presentation was happening, and I was taken aback. Ironically, 10 years later, you are now editing my dissertation and
conversing with me about how I can strengthen my studies. You were there to help pick me off the ground when my mom passed, and you were there to officiate my beautiful wife’s and my marriage. You have always kept it real and held me accountable, but you never made me feel less than in the process. Thank you, sir.
ABSTRACT

PROVIDING SAFE SPACES: AN EXAMINATION OF TRIO SSS STUDENTS’ PERSONAL AND ACADEMIC SELF-EFFICACY DURING COVID-19

Matthew McClendon

April 12, 2024

This qualitative study aimed to examine the impact of the TRIO SSS Program in increasing the academic preparedness, graduation rates, and personal development of first-generation college students. Specifically, the study examined how TRIO SSS affected students’ self-efficacy through academic performance and personal development during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theoretical lens for this study was the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) in which Lent et al. (1994) presented the SCCT as a particularly appropriate framework for those in the early stages of exploring and preparing for careers. A case study methodology, specifically an intrinsic case study, was utilized to investigate the research questions. The data from the TRIO SSS participants was collected through virtual interviews; the interview questions were semi-structured and open-ended. The participants for this research were selected from TRIO SSS students at the University of Louisville (U of L) who were enrolled between the 2017 school year and the 2021 school year. The research used a thematic analysis approach to dissect the data. The data provided evidence to support Lent et al.’s (1994) framework of SCCT as a framework that looked at how self-efficacy influenced the students’ academic preparedness and personal development. The main takeaway was that TRIO SSS career
development, advising, and planning, specifically advisors, substantially influenced TRIO SSS students. Recommendations for future research included looking at how TRIO SSS first-generation students, low-income students, or students with disabilities, and students’ mental health were impacted.
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BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Over the years, the higher education landscape has endured drastic changes that have become the norm today. These changes include the price hike in tuition and room and board and the increase in hard copy textbook prices due to the current state of adapting and implementing e-books (electronic textbooks), as the value of an undergraduate degree has drastically changed over the years. According to the U.S. Department of Education [USDOE] (2017), "In today's economy, higher education is no longer a luxury for the privileged few but a necessity for individual economic opportunity" (p. 3). Carnevale et al. (2013) indicated that jobs that only require a high school diploma are becoming few, while those that require credentials or a degree are rapidly expanding. These additional credentials include vocational-technical schools and programs (certifications), trade school, certifications, and adult education. According to Eagan (2015), the number one reason students enroll in higher education institutions is to increase employment opportunities that can lead to a financially stable future. Unfortunately, due to an unforeseen worldwide epidemic, higher education enrollment was negatively affected, which, before the pandemic, was increasing. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2022), in the fall of 2020, the first-year fall enrollment may have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic. The total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States was 15.9 million. Between 2009 and 2020, total undergraduate enrollment
decreased by 9% (from 17.5 million to 15.9 million students). In contrast, total undergraduate enrollment is projected to increase by 8% (from 15.9 million to 17.1 million students) between 2020 and 2030 (Irwin et al., 2022).

According to Hussar et al. (2020), from 2000 to 2018, college enrollment rates among 18- to 24-year-olds increased for those who were Black (from 31 to 37%) and Hispanic (from 22 to 36%). The research also focused on the unique challenges and opportunities for first-generation college students (FGCS, which is defined here as neither parent having a bachelor's degree) and their degree obtainment. The terms FGCS or first-generation students are used interchangeably for this study. According to the USDOE (2016), annual earnings strongly correlated with college completion and race and ethnicity. Research also indicated that attaining a postsecondary degree has become increasingly important due to technological changes and increasing demand for skilled workers. In addition to economic outcomes, educational attainment is associated with critical nonpecuniary benefits that impact communities of color. The current landscape of increased enrollment for minority students has then matriculated to first-generation college students and their degree obtainment, which is further explained.

As noted by RTI International (2019), for the academic year 2015–16, the most recent year that the data were available, 56% of undergraduates nationally were FGCS (neither parent had a bachelor's degree), and 59% of these students were also the first sibling in their families to go to college. According to Blackwell and Pinder (2014), many FGCSs sought higher education to improve career opportunities and gain economic prosperity and social mobility. Due to the increase in enrollment from students of color and non-traditional students, the importance of education has been prioritized by families
sending their children to college or enrolling as non-traditional college students. However, the global COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted higher education, potentially jeopardizing the increase in enrollment and retention in the upcoming years. The adverse effects on students, including mental, academic, and social adaptation, have changed the normalized higher education landscape to a new norm of virtual learning and mental health reclamation. These adverse effects have also altered the previous methods of teaching students, and offering resources to students at a time when interacting with students has become more accessible on an online platform.

The research focused on FGCS; however, low-income college students, who were also Pell Grant eligible, were also discussed. The Federal TRIO Programs Prior-Year Low-Income Levels defined a low-income individual as an individual whose family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150% of the poverty level amount (USDOE, 2020). According to the USDOE, Federal Pell Grants (Pell Grant), formerly Basic Educational Opportunity Grants (BEOGs), are usually awarded only to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need and have not earned a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree. The USDOE (2022) stated that Pell-eligible students were indicated as all first-time, full-time, baccalaureate degree-seeking students entering the Summer/Fall 2019 semester. Unlike a loan, the Pell Grant does not have to be repaid. The maximum Federal Pell Grant award was $6,895 for the 2022–23 award year (July 1, 2022, to June 30, 2023). In addition, the amount given to each student depends on their financial need, costs to attend school, status as a full-time or part-time student, and plans to attend school for a full academic year or less. To receive a Pell Grant, one must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
In addition, the research also displays low-income and first-generation (LIFG), which combine ideals for low-income students and FGCS.

According to Soria et al. (2020), COVID-19 exacerbated challenges experienced by first-generation students. For example,

First-generation students were more likely than continuing-generation students to experience financial hardships during the pandemic, including lost wages from family members, lost wages from on- or off-campus employment, and increased living and technology expenses . . . Furthermore, first-generation students were less likely to live in safe environments free from abuse (physical, emotional, drug, or alcohol) and more likely to experience food and housing insecurity. First-generation students also experienced higher mental health disorder rates than their peers . . . Other results suggested that first-generation students experienced more challenges adapting to online instruction by encountering obstacles related to lack of adequate study spaces and lack of technology necessary to complete online learning. (p. 1)

The present study primarily focused on FGCS enrolled in a Federal TRIO program at a Midwestern, large, public, four-year institution of higher learning and the effects that COVID-19 had on TRIO SSS students. However, low-income students are also discussed due to the unique nature of TRIO programs and the specific types of students served by these interventions.

**First-Generation College Students (FGCS)**

FGCSs are defined by the Higher Education Act of 1965 (2008) as individuals whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree or individuals whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree. First-generation students start college at an academic disadvantage as they are more likely to be underprepared and have a high educational need. As explained by Chen et al. (2016) and Saenz et al. (2007), when enrolled, many first-generation students (54% of the population) must take remedial courses due to low or missing ACT or SAT scores or low high school grades. This
evidence further stressed the need for resources and assistance for the underrepresented populations. Academic difficulties, social challenges, and family factors often plague promising FGCSs and end their opportunities to complete their careers. This disadvantage frequently leads to FGCSs leaving college without a degree, as only about half of first-generation students complete a bachelor’s degree (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Unfortunately, studies consistently indicate that a first-generation student completes a bachelor’s degree at approximately half the rate of other students (DeAngelo et al., 2011; Engle & Tinto, 2008).

FGCSs typically do not have the privilege of having parental assistance with applying for college, scholarships, filling out the FAFSA, housing applications, and navigating college. FGCSs are also less likely to achieve their original educational aspirations than their peers from college-educated families (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006), often because they work part-time or full-time during college (Pascarella et al., 2004b).

This study focused on the U of L TRIO SSS Pell-eligible students, who made up 39.6% of student enrollment in Fall 2019. Federal Pell Grants are direct grants awarded through participating institutions to students with financial needs who have yet to receive their first bachelor’s degree or enrolled in specific postbaccalaureate programs that lead to teacher certification or licensure (U of L, 2019a). The U of L has implemented the TRIO SSS program to increase retention for first-generation and low-income students. An overview of the federal TRIO programs is presented first, followed by a discussion of the U of L’s TRIO services, including the SSS program, which is also discussed in further detail.
History of TRIO SSS

According to the USDOE (2011b), over 55 years ago, the Educational Opportunity Act of 1964 established an experimental pilot program called Upward Bound in response to the administration’s War on Poverty. In 1965, Congress passed the Higher Education Act of 1965 that created Educational Talent Search and solidified the importance of a college education for those who were financially capable of attending and for all students regardless of their financial status (University of Arkansas–Little Rock, 2019). In 1968, Student Support Services, originally known as Special Services for Disadvantaged Students, was authorized by the Higher Education Amendments and became the third in a series of educational opportunity programs. By the late 1960s, the term *TRIO* was coined to describe these federal programs (USDOE, 2011b). In subsequent years and reauthorizations of the Higher Education Act, several other programs were added, such as Upward Bound Math-Science, Veterans Upward Bound, Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, and others (Carleton College, 2019).

Federal TRIO Programs (U.S. Department of Education)

The Office of Postsecondary Education through the USDOE (2020) stated that Federal TRIO Programs are federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO includes eight programs that aim to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs (USDOE, 2020).
These eight programs include Educational Opportunity Centers, Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement, Student Support Services (SSS), Talent Search, Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs Staff, Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math-Science, and Veterans Upward Bound (USDOE, 2020). This study focused on TRIO SSS because it focuses on recruiting and retaining the college student demographic, first-generation, low-income students with a disability, and non-traditional students.

**TRIO Student Support Services at the U of L**

TRIO SSS at U of L is a federally funded program that assists first-generation students, low-income students, or students with a disability in graduating with a bachelor’s degree. TRIO SSS also has three objectives that it uses to track student achievement and to see if the program is in good standing with the grant status. The three objective areas in which additional data were gathered are reflected on Table 1.

**Table 1**

*TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) Objectives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective 1: Persistence Rate</th>
<th>Objective 2: Good Academic Standing</th>
<th>Objective 3: Graduation Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>75% of all participants served by the SSS project will persist from one academic year to the beginning of the next academic year or graduate.</td>
<td>80% of all enrolled participants served by the SSS project will meet the performance level required to stay in good academic standing at the grantee institution.</td>
<td>55% of new participants served each year will graduate within 6 years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source.* TRIO, 2020

The U of L TRIO SSS program supports 144 students each school year compared to the non-TRIO SSS general population at U of L, which academically achieves lower than TRIO SSS students. According to Goldstein et al. (2020) from U of L’s Office of
Institutional Research and Planning, low-income TRIO students have a 66.16% persistence rate compared to a 29.82% rate for non-TRIO students, including all degree-seeking undergraduates from Fall 2010 to Fall 2019 (Goldstein et al., 2020, p. 26). As for first-generation students, 65.43% of TRIO students were persistent, and 18.52% of non-TRIO students were persistent.

First-generation students made up 18.83% (6,884/36,559) of all U of L college students, from Fall 2010 to Fall 2019 (Goldstein et al., 2020). During the fiscal year of Fall 2019, TRIO SSS served 144 students (Figure 1): 15% Asian, 34% Black or African American, 38% White, and 13% as two or more races. Most of TRIO SSS students (86%) were in good academic standing. The overall combined Fall 2019 semester grade point average (GPA) for TRIO students was 2.946, and the overall combined GPA for TRIO students’ complete enrollment was 3.103.

**Figure 1**

Current Fiscal Year 2019–2020 TRIO SSS Student Graph by Race (n = 144)


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1 This study’s fiscal year was the same as the academic year.
Purpose of This Study

This study aimed to examine the impact of the TRIO SSS Program in increasing the academic preparedness, graduation rates, and personal development of first-generation college students. Specifically, the study examined how TRIO SSS affected students’ self-efficacy through academic performance and personal development during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Kuh (2009), academic performance refers to a student’s achievements and outcomes in various academic areas, such as grades, coursework completion, class participation, research projects, and overall learning outcomes. It encompasses quantitative measures (e.g., GPA, exam scores) and qualitative aspects (e.g., critical thinking and problem-solving skills). The data were examined by persistence, GPA, graduation rates six years and earlier, and student development through surveys, one-on-one interviews, and data collection software, including BOT for TRIO and ULink.

This study also examined the TRIO SSS objectives that contribute to its students being more academically successful than the U of L non-TRIO SSS students, including graduation rates (within six years), persistence, and GPA. The Office of Institutional Research and Planning defined persistence as continued enrollment (year-to-year retention) and included degree completion (Goldstein et al., 2020). According to Kuh et al. (2006), student success is synthesized from the literature “as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance” (p. 7).
The theoretical lens for this study was the SCCT, described in detail in Chapter 2. Lent et al. (1994) presented the SCCT as a particularly appropriate framework for those in the early stages of exploring and preparing for careers. Looking at SCCT through self-efficacy, academic success, and personal development, the research achieved the goal of displaying the effects that TRIO SSS resources and employees at U of L have on the college experience for TRIO students, their personal development and the academic success that prepared them for life after college and the students’ search for their careers. To gain more insight into the influences of SCCT through self-efficacy, academic success, and personal development, the researcher posed research questions that are answered later in the study.

**Research Questions**

1. How did the TRIO SSS influence program participants’ personal development during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How did the TRIO SSS influence program participants’ academic performance during the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. What role did self-efficacy play in TRIO SSS students’ personal development and academic performance during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study**

The U of L was chosen for this research because of its connection to developing the Commonwealth of Kentucky Higher Education Desegregation Plan through the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in response to USDOE’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR). According to the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education [CPE] (2016, p. 2), in 1982, the CHE developed the Commonwealth of Kentucky Higher Education
Desegregation Plan in response to a USDOE’s OCR finding that “the Commonwealth of Kentucky, in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 failed to eliminate the vestiges of its former de jure racially dual system of public higher education”.

In 2008, according to the CPE, the OCR was “released from the remedial planning process” (CPE, 2016, p. 1). According to the USDOE (2018) and the “Resolution of the Complaint Upon a Determination of Noncompliance:”

If OCR determines that a recipient failed to comply with the civil rights law(s) that OCR enforces, OCR will contact the recipient and will attempt to secure the recipient’s willingness to negotiate a voluntary resolution agreement. If the recipient agrees to resolve the complaint, OCR and the recipient will negotiate and the recipient will sign a written resolution agreement that describes the specific remedial actions that the recipient will undertake to address the area(s) of noncompliance identified by OCR. OCR will monitor the recipient’s implementation of the terms of the resolution agreement until such time as OCR determines that the recipient is in compliance with all of the terms of the resolution agreement and the statute(s) and regulation(s) that were at issue in the case. (pp. 2–3)

However, the CPE (2016) continued to focus on diversity and made it a requirement for the institution to work on diversity plan that focused on “(a) student body diversity mirrors the Commonwealth’s diversity or the institution’s service area, (b) closing of achievement gaps, (c) workforce diversity, and (d) campus climate” (p. 1).

_Closing of achievement gaps, workforce diversity, and campus climate_ all directly correlate to the assistance that TRIO SSS provides its students by increasing academic performance through tutoring, the diverse student population interacting with each other, and workforce preparation. Not only does TRIO uphold the requirements for the CPE, but the program also displays students’ holistic preparation for success in and out of the classroom. CPE planned to guide public institutions and CEOs to collaborate in developing “a process that would help ensure that the significant progress made in
promoting diversity was preserved and further enhanced throughout public post-secondary education” (CPE, 2016, p. 1).

**Definition of Terms**

The definition of terms section has been included to help the reader understand the verbiage that will be used throughout the study. This will reduce the confusion of the reader and increase comprehension of what is being said.

*First-Generation College Student* (FGCS or LIFG) refers to “(a) an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree, or (b) an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree.” (Higher Education Act of 1965, 2008, p. 9)

*Low income* refers to an individual whose family’s taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150% of the poverty level amount. (NCES, 2021).

*Persistence* (for students who enrolled in four-year institutions) is defined as continued enrollment in postsecondary education into the fall term of a students’ second year of college.

*Student success* is synthesized from the literature as “as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post-college performance” (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 7).

*Self-efficacy* is a “dynamic set of self-beliefs” that leads an individual to make a judgment as to whether he or she will be able to complete a specific task (Lent et al., 1994, p. 83).
U of L TRIO SSS or TRIO SSS at U of L is the institution in which the study is taking place and where the TRIO SSS office is located.
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter addresses the academic and social adjustment literature that FGCSs experience when they first enroll in an institution and how students adapt to the effects of COVID-19. In addition, the theory and frameworks that assist FGCS adaptation to higher education are examined. Second, this chapter addresses the different Federal TRIO Programs, TRIO SSS’s specific resources, and how they affect its students.

Academic Preparedness to College

Adjustment to the college environment can be challenging for a student from a familial background with little or no knowledge of the college experience. As noted by Padgett et al. (2012), Reid et al. (2008), and Stebleton et al. (2013), in addition to disconnected expectations, first-generation students often begin college without the skills necessary to succeed academically compared to them. Compared to their peers, first-generation students are less confident in their academic abilities (DeFreitas et al., 2013; Reid et al., 2008), have a lower sense of self-efficacy (Inman et al., 1999), lower educational aspirations (Pike & Kuh, 2005), and received less academic preparation during high school (Atherton, 2014; Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004a). Moreover, even if a student is academically successful in high school, that does not necessarily correlate to academic success in college.

Academic major also affects the familial treatment of the student, especially if the family believes the student is in the health field (doctor, nurse, physician’s assistant) or
majors that lead to more prestigious positions (lawyers, dentist, and engineering).

Conversely, Orbe (2004; 2008) found that some first-generation students experienced
some family members placing unreasonable expectations on them because they decided
to pursue higher education. Although such expectations motivated many students, they
created pressure to perform well. The excessive expectations placed on some first-
generation students by family members create intense anxiety surrounding their academic
performance. In addition to academic challenges, Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) indicated
that first-generation students expressed apprehension about the social aspects of adjusting
to a new atmosphere.

**Social Adjustment to College**

Becoming acclimated socially to a college campus can take time for a first-year or
transfer student. According to Dumais (2002), Pike and Kuh (2005), and Saenz et al.
(2007), first-generation students often lack an understanding of the importance of social
engagement and integration on campus, knowledge of how to become engaged on
campus, and the social self-confidence to pursue social integration. In addition, although
first-generation college students identify themselves as such, they often come to college
with a single-minded focus on their career aspirations (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005;
Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). Collectively, these factors contribute to lower social self-
confidence and alienation of first-generation students (Davis, 2010; Jehangir et al., 2012;
Saenz et al., 2007). According to Falcon (2015), having less exposure to the college-
going culture causes difficulty in assimilating into the college setting, both academically
and socially. FGCS are more likely to need help finding their place and may feel left out
(Stephens et al., 2014).
In addition to academic stressors, many first-generation students must adapt to the new lifestyle of being a college student, aiding their family financially or as an additional guardian, being employed, and living up to their family’s high expectations. Many first-generation students find adaptation to college difficult because of familial resistance (Coffman, 2011; Jehangir et al., 2012; Orbe, 2004). Some first-generation students experience pressure to maintain their familial identity, while others report that their families responded and interacted with them differently after they began college (Coffman, 2011; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Also, first-generation students often do not have parents to help them navigate the college environment (Davis, 2010). Additional research suggested that the cultural mismatch between higher education institutions’ individualistic norms and many first-generation students’ interdependent motives for attending college help explain their at-times relatively lower academic performance (Stephens et al., 2012). According to Hecht et al. (2021), cultural mismatch is the lack of alignment between the independent values of their university (consistent with the culture of higher education) and their interdependent values (consistent with working-class culture). Cultural mismatch comes with significant additional stress because families of first-generation students often need to be more supportive and open about their collegial aspirations. According to Stephens et al. (2019), cultural mismatch can emerge when people from working-class contexts do not enact independent norms valued by institutions or when they do enact interdependent norms that are relatively less valued.

In turn, these experiences exhaust and stress students as they strive for academic achievement while still being looked at positively by their family members (Coffman, 2011; Jehangir et al., 2012; Orbe, 2004; Rendon, 1993). Another form of adjustment is
the acceptance and support students feel they are getting from the university or lack thereof. DeRosa and Dolby (2014) stated that some students believe they do not matter to their university and often feel disconnected from their peers due to their FGCS status. Lower self-esteem or an external focus of control also appears to influence adjustment levels directly (Aspelmeier et al., 2012). Bryan and Simmons (2009) noted the importance of family support and positive peer influences so that students feel like they belong at their university, while Stephens et al. (2014) highlighted that helpful and supportive mentors appeared to increase college success. Tate et al. (2015) learned that student support programs in college were beneficial for students as they moved toward a career goal. SCCT also focuses on methods that increase students’ success in college, which were tested with the introduction of COVID-19 in higher education.

**COVID-19 in Higher Education.** On March 11th, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) a global pandemic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023), a pandemic is like an epidemic but has spread over several countries or continents, usually affecting many people. To combat COVID-19, universities were forced to adjust and address multiple issues that had never been experienced, like emergency remote online teaching, academic and emotional support, mental health services, and student engagement, especially at a rapid rate during the beginning of COVID-19 this time. During the 2020–21 school year, the COVID-19 pandemic required universities to prepare to address numerous issues. Even when quick-responding schools came up with what appeared to be viable plans for dealing with an initial set of problems, developments in federal and state-level pandemic responses made initial plans obsolete overnight (Murakami, 2020;
Quilantan, 2020). New issues arose that required universities to develop creative ways to support students (Collier, 2017). Like many institutions, U of L was in line with federal procedures. Procedures were implemented to restrict the number of people in the TRIO SSS office.

As a result, at the beginning of the lockdown period, Driscoll and Carliner (2005) and Hodges et al. (2020) all agreed that universities had to adopt an emergency remote online teaching approach in which web-conferencing tools, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, were used to facilitate online sessions that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face via a blended learning approach, integrating digital technologies in a variety of ways into the on-campus environment. Unfortunately, Stankovska et al. (2020) reflected that the transformation from traditional learning to complete web-based learning presented several challenges to the academic staff and the students, most notably… the new way of teaching and assisting students, as well as preparation. Tejedor et al. (2020) stated that digital competencies, communication, and teaching were crucial factors enabling students to adapt to the new context. These technological obstructions exposed the ugly truth of digital literacy that affected most students and staff. Pangrazio et al. (2020) defined digital literacies as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for using technology in the context of a discipline or subject. This deficit questioned the legitimacy and quality of the teaching and learning because students wanted complete web-based learning to mirror traditional learning and make accessibility less complicated. However, obtaining those expectations was out of the question during the pandemic.

Hansen et al. (2020) stated that students indicated that during the transition to online learning, they found it challenging to stay engaged with their peers and instructors.
Most felt the online learning experience could have been more practical than face-to-face instruction. The students' academics became more readily available and packaged as remote learning. Nevertheless, virtual learning has increasingly made students more stressed. Brubacher et al. (2021) stated that although distance education programs may increase access, first-generation students may have poorer academic experiences and outcomes than their continuing-generation peers. Distance education programs may exacerbate these problems, with higher dropout rates, in general, than classroom-based programs (Simpson, 2013).

However, the problems went beyond the difference between learning in-person and virtual and began affecting the student’s social interaction. Means et al. (2020) also stated that students reported multiple problems, including needing more opportunities to collaborate with others, difficulty paying attention, staying focused, staying motivated, and not feeling included. As the students’ academic and social interactions were greatly affected, they were finding themselves in a complex mental state that some had never experienced and may have never experienced had it not been for COVID-19.

According to Bruffaerts et al. (2019), amid ongoing challenges faced by students adjusting to the 'new normal,' the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked increased discussions regarding mental health and its impact on college students. The transition to online learning had effects on not only the academic success of students but also their mental health. Patsali et al. (2020) stated that several studies explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of college students, a population already at risk for mental health concerns. X. Wang et al. (2020) stated that one survey study of U.S. college students conducted in May 2020 found that more than 48% of participants
showed moderate-to-severe levels of depression, with as many as 18% having had thoughts of self-harm or suicide in the prior two weeks, over 38% of participants showed moderate-to-severe levels of anxiety, and 71.3% of students also reported increased levels of stress. Unfortunately, universities were not able to fully address mental health because offices were closed, and services were not available. Scofield et al. (2022) stated that the number of students seeking mental health services from counseling centers was down an average of 32% in the Fall of 2020 due to a shift to remote instruction and a subsequent reduction in residential on-campus living, leading to many students receiving care in their home communities or not receiving treatment at all. In addition, students did not feel as connected with virtual mental health services, or students did not confide in mental health services due to being overwhelmed and underprepared for the adjustment from in-person learning to virtual learning.

Through practice research from college counseling centers and the work at the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH), Scofield et al. (2022) also found that 94% of students seeking mental healthcare reported that COVID-19 had negatively impacted at least one aspect of life. The most frequently affected areas include mental health (72%), motivation or focus (68%), loneliness or isolation (67%), academics (66%), and missed experiences and opportunities (60%). In responding to COVID-19, 99% of counseling centers reported success transitioning to telehealth, but they still needed help with finances and resources, reliable technologies, and information security oversight. Unsurprisingly, much of the research focused on students' and teachers’ adjustment to teaching and learning online but sparingly discussed the effects of social interaction and the importance of a sense of belonging outside the classroom. However, according to Pei
et al. (2019), many studies found that both the quantity and quality of student interactions were highly correlated with student satisfaction in almost any learning environment.

**Online Student Support Services Pre-COVID-19.** Before COVID-19, using remote learning was familiar to the higher education landscape. Classes were offered, a student could speak with a registrar or financial aid officer via phone, and some advisement sessions were conducted beyond the standard face-to-face format. Prior to the pandemic, most student support services were provided on campus. Although student support personnel tended to have less physical contact with online students, they may not have fully appreciated that population’s expectations and perceptions (Forrester & Parkinson, 2006).

Smith (2005) argued that higher education institutions should provide an online student service that accomplishes three key objectives:

1. Identify the needs of its online and face-to-face learners.
2. Ensure services are available when the learner wants them, rather than when the institution is ready to provide them.
3. Ensure that the virtual services are as good as or better than the in-person equivalents.

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected higher education and the attempts to accomplish the key objectives even with some improvements, yet there was still a long way to go for students and staff to be comfortable with the new look of remote learning and how universities conduct support services moving forward.

**Online Student Support Services During COVID-19.** During COVID-19, university student support services daily operations had to pivot to accommodate the
students to interact virtually quickly. The rapid pivots to remote teaching and learning added weight to previous literature that highlighted gaps in the support services offered to online students since now all students were learning virtually (Barr, 2014; Beaudoin, 2013; Brown, 2017; Forrester & Parkinson, 2006; Hicks, 2016; Jones & O’Shea, 2004; Luedtke, 1999; Mitchell, 2009; Ozoglu, 2009). These gaps in support services greatly affected how some universities could transition and prepare for the new landscape of higher education. Gratz (2020) recommended that colleges must provide high-quality and equitable support services to their online students. These services include retention services (e.g., orientation, advising, coaching, course registration), student engagement (e.g., student activities, athletics, student government), student wellbeing (e.g., student counseling, health services, Title IX administration), and learning support (e.g., library, writing center, tutoring, career services, technology support). Communication between the advisor and students must begin during the advising sessions to introduce the support services.

During the advising meetings, students receive assistance that consists of discovering ways to connect to campus, writing assistance, free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority (KHEAA), major and program Selection/Career Guidance, 4-year plan, and listening to the students allowing them to speak freely. In addition, Graduate School Prep includes assisting with applications/essays, writing letters of recommendation, test preparation (GRE, MCAT, and PCAT), and graduate school visits (LaMarche, 2019b).

Pelletier (2020) highlighted the significance of improving the visibility and accessibility of support services for remote students, particularly during a pandemic when
isolation is a prevalent concern. These efforts are crucial as they contribute significantly to combating feelings of isolation by fostering a strong sense of belonging and connection among students through the utilization of support services. Calhoun et al. (2017) showed that this gap in service between face-to-face and online students might be related to inadequate coverage of online student needs in student affairs preparation programs, suggesting a more systemic issue around service offered to online students in practice.

**The Impact of COVID-19 on Remote Teaching and Learning.** According to Garrett et al. (2020) nearly 50% of faculty, 51% of undergraduate students, and 27% of graduate students had never taught or experienced a fully online course prior to this point in time (Garrett et al., 2020). Lack of remote learning experience is another challenge with working, teaching, and learning from home related to needing more technology and adequate bandwidth (Garrett et al., 2020), signaling the need for additional remote support structures for faculty, staff, and students.

**Expansion of Student Services to Remote Delivery Because of COVID-19.** Realizing that during the pandemic and afterward the effects of COVID-19 forever shaped higher education, universities worked on strategies to accommodate face-to-face students, remote students, and faculty and staff. Burke (2020) and Fishman and Hiler (2020) found that as institutions around the globe continued to respond to the pandemic through longer-term reliance on remote teaching and learning, the support of students at a distance became ever more critical to understand and cultivate. In addition, according to Bouchey et al. (2021), the long-term expansion of online and remote access to student support is a critical point of reflection for institutions of higher education. Bouchey et al.
(2021) found that higher education institutions also had to consider how campus spaces were being built and utilized with a mindset of virtual and remote learners, face-to-face learning, and support services, as well as how they support their students’ social and emotional learning and expand staff that worked solely with fully online students.

**Federal TRIO Programs**

TRIO programs have existed for over 55 years; however, researchers need to conduct further studies to examine the influence of TRIO SSS on first-generation college students’ (FGCS) personal development and academic performance from the perspective of SCCT. Additionally, research that specifically seeks how TRIO SSS enhances student” self-efficacy within the framework of SCCT needs to be enhanced. The research can contribute additional insights to TRIO SSS office staff and the university regarding supporting and accommodating FGCS within TRIO programs. Table 2 provides an overview of the TRIO programs.
### Federal TRIO Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Program Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational Opportunity Centers</td>
<td>The Educational Opportunity Centers program provides counseling and information on college admissions to qualified adults who want to enter or continue a program of postsecondary education. The program also provides services to improve the financial and economic literacy of participants. The goal of the EOC program is to increase the number of adult participants who enroll in postsecondary education institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement</td>
<td>Participants are from disadvantaged backgrounds and have demonstrated strong academic potential. Institutions work closely with participants as they complete their undergraduate requirements. Institutions encourage participants to enroll in graduate programs and then track their progress through to the successful completion of advanced degrees. The goal is to increase the attainment of Ph.D. degrees by students from underrepresented segments of society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Support Services (SSS): TRIO SSS</td>
<td>Through a grant competition, funds are awarded to institutions of higher education to provide opportunities for academic development, assist students with basic college requirements, and to motivate students toward the successful completion of their postsecondary education. The goal of SSS is to increase the college retention and graduation rates of its participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent Search</td>
<td>The Talent Search program identifies and assists individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who have the potential to succeed in higher education. The program provides academic, career, and financial counseling to its participants and encourages them to graduate from high school and continue and complete their postsecondary education. Talent Search also encourages persons who have not completed education programs at the secondary or postsecondary level to enter or reenter and complete postsecondary education. The goal of Talent Search is to increase the number of youths from disadvantaged backgrounds who complete high school and enroll in and complete their postsecondary education.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 (continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Program Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs</td>
<td>Through a grant competition, funds are awarded to institutions of higher education and other public and private nonprofit institutions and organizations to support training to enhance the skills and expertise of project directors and staff employed in the Federal TRIO Programs. Funds may be used for conferences, seminars, internships, workshops, or the publication of manuals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upward Bound</td>
<td>Upward Bound provides fundamental support to participants in their preparation for college entrance. The program provides opportunities for participants to succeed in their precollege performance and ultimately in their higher education pursuits. Upward Bound serves: high school students from low-income families; and high school students from families in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree. The goal of Upward Bound is to increase the rate at which participants complete secondary education and enroll in and graduate from institutions of postsecondary education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upward Bound Math-Science</td>
<td>The Upward Bound Math and Science program is designed to strengthen the math and science skills of participating students. The goal of the program is to help students recognize and develop their potential to excel in math and science and to encourage them to pursue postsecondary degrees in math and science, and ultimately careers in the math and science profession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans Upward Bound</td>
<td>Veterans Upward Bound is designed to motivate and assist veterans in the development of academic and other requisite skills necessary for acceptance and success in a program of postsecondary education. The primary goal of the program is to increase the rate at which participants enroll in and complete postsecondary education programs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These eight Federal TRIO programs were listed to show the grand scope of the services provided by the Federal TRIO programs not just to college students, but also Federal TRIO Program staff members, high school students interested in higher education, and non-traditional students who receive assistance with going back to college and succeeding.
Student Support Services (SSS)

In 1968, the Higher Education Act of 1965 was amended to include the Special Services for Disadvantaged Students program—what is now called Student Support Services (SSS) also; the name “TRIO” was also introduced (USDOE, 2011a, p. 3). The SSS program focuses specifically on current undergraduate post-secondary students by providing “opportunities for academic development, assists students with basic college requirements, and serves to motivate students toward the successful completion of their post-secondary education” (USDOE, 2011a, p. 7). In addition, the SSS program provides scholarships, grant aid, and one-on-one academic counseling. Due to students already being enrolled in the institution, SSS aims to retain its students while preparing them for graduation and the workforce.

U of L TRIO SSS Resources

TRIO SSS-Individual Support/Advising

While TRIO SSS exists at institutions across the nation, the research overviews the specific student support service programs at U of L, the site of the study in this dissertation. To assist students academically, U of L TRIO SSS provides mandatory advising, which includes meetings with their advisor three times a semester, either in person, over the phone, or via email. These appointments are scheduled for 30 minutes but can go over the allotted time. During the first advising meeting of each semester, students fill out a form that helps map out their semester by writing down three goals and who and what methods can help them achieve them.

More specifically to the present study, at the U of L, the TRIO SSS staff assists students with relationship advice, championing students to advocate for themselves when
interacting with their professors, assisting with having tough conversations with parents and the stressors of family and championing students to get more involved, which can lead to finding friends, networking, and a sense of belonging, and doing random check-ins outside of advising appointments. Having a space in the TRIO office for students to hang out also gives the staff opportunities to see the student and ask how everything is going, especially if staff members can see the student or students are unsettled.

**TRIO SSS Financial Literacy and Financial Support**

Wallace (2018) stated that although college education was widely seen as one of the critical tools for financial success in the United States, a nationwide analysis of the financial education of college students reveals that many need more preparation to make sound financial decisions for their future. TRIO SSS advisors assist students applying for student aid, such as FAFSA, Supplemental Grant Aid, and Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority, helping with and discussing the importance of credit scores and scholarship opportunities through TRIO and outside sources and taking advantage of the university’s emergency funds in a time of need. Also, TRIO provides financial and economic literacy programs and brings in speakers who can specifically talk about savings and 401k’s.

Financial knowledge and stability are just as necessary as a college student’s academic performance. Thus, TRIO financial support focuses on assisting students in three main areas: financial aid, financial wellness, and TRIO SSS scholarships. Table 4 goes into detail with the specific resources TRIO provides its students with financial support. Table 3 reflects the different financial support resources that TRIO SSS provides.
### Table 3

**TRIO SSS Financial Support**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Aid</th>
<th>Financial Wellness</th>
<th>TRIO SSS Scholarships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liaison-Financial Aid Office</td>
<td>Credit management</td>
<td>Based on unmet financial need, TRIO involvement, grades, and essay responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find/apply for scholarships</td>
<td></td>
<td>Anyone in TRIO SSS can apply (Prioritize freshman and sophomores for grant aid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominate students for scholarships</td>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>3 winners @ $770 for Academic Commitment to Excellence Scholarship (3.0 college GPA required)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i.e., U of L, community)</td>
<td></td>
<td>TRIO SSS Grant Aid: 10 winners for Spring 19, 9 for summer 19 (amount varies each year, 2.0 college GPA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help you complete the FAFSA</td>
<td>Budgeting for College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from LaMarche, 2019a.

**TRIO SSS Buddies-Mentor/Mentee Program.** Collier (2017) found that within higher education, mentoring was increasingly seen as a high-impact strategy for promoting student success. Mentors help less experienced students understand the college student role better (Palmer et al., 2015) and “how to use that knowledge to achieve important goals, such as completing their degrees” (Collier, 2015, pp. 37–38). The TRIO SSS Buddies program was implemented to allow incoming freshman and first-year students of the TRIO SSS program to be paired with an upperclassman to help them navigate college. As part of this program, both parties must meet a minimum of three times a semester. The TRIO SSS Buddy goal is for the mentee to feel a sense of
belonging, gain campus awareness, increase their involvement as a new student, and the mentor to guide the mentee on how to maneuver through college. The mentor and mentee’s pairing are based on primary career paths and hobbies. The Buddies program allows students to feel more comfortable asking their peers difficult questions, which allows incoming first-year students or first-year students to have friends when entering college, which is a difficult transition. Most important, this program helps students become more social by learning about more opportunities to get involved with the mentor while connecting with other students through the mentor.

**TRIO SSS Student Development.** Nationally, TRIO SSS sets standards to provide personal and professional services to its students. Specifically, these services include leadership development opportunities, career exploration and workshops, cultural enrichment activities, self-advocacy skill development, referrals to campus and community resources, and professional mentoring (U of L, 2019b). Although the direction to provide personal and professional services is broad, offices implement resources to achieve TRIO SSS’s personal and professional standards.

The U of L TRIO office has implemented the Student Advisory Board (SAB) to increase student involvement so students can participate. SAB is a collection of students connecting the students and staff members of the TRIO. The board oversees programming, TRIO SSS social media pages, and increasing engagement. This board provides the student experience with having responsibility for their elected positions, which will develop their skills to interact with others. One of the office’s most prominent student development activities is taking them on a graduate school tour. Every spring, TRIO takes its students to different college campuses to ask questions about enrollment,
student life, admissions, a guided tour, and academics. For most of these students, the college visits are their first-time leaving home and experiencing new cities without their parents. So naturally, the students have many questions and have a great experience visiting other college campuses.

TRIO students are also exposed to cultural enrichment opportunities that can include the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), Step Show, International Fashion Show, Women’s Empowerment Luncheon, Drag Show at PLAY, a diverse selection at the Actor’s Theatre of Louisville, and the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts. The value of student engagement has attracted the attention of educators and researchers as studies have consistently shown a positive correlation between student engagement and improved learning outcomes, including academic performance, general abilities, cognitive development, self-esteem, psychosocial development, and student satisfaction (Bandura et al., 2000; Carini et al., 2006; Kuh et al. 2005, 2008; Lam et al., 2012; Pascarella et al., 2010).

**TRIO SSS Tutoring.** One of the most used TRIO SSS resources involves the tutoring program in which TRIO SSS students tutor their peers to help them achieve a good grade in their class. If TRIO does not have a tutor for the specific course that a student is looking for, the student will be referred to REACH or the Writing Center on campus.

**Other Institution Academic Support at the U of L**

Thus far, the TRIO SSS office resources have been discussed. However, to expand the TRIO SSS office’s holistic approach to assist the TRIO SSS students, the
TRIO SSS advisors may sometimes offer a referral to another on-campus resource for the student(s) to gain additional assistance: REACH and the U of L Writing Center.

**Resources for Academic Achievement (REACH) Resources**

One example of an additional resource is Resources for Academic Achievement (REACH). REACH provides all students at the U of L with educational support services and retention programs that encourage independent and successful learners. Even though TRIO SSS students use its resources, other students on campus take advantage of REACH. REACH has many categorical resources to assist students holistically, including Peer Mentoring and Workshops. Woolwine (2020) found that REACH supported the academic success of a diverse undergraduate student population. Although REACH has tutoring services that assist students with various classes, the library focuses on students’ writing skills at the Writing Center.

**Writing Center.** Arch and Gilman (2019) believed that academic support was at the core of library services. At U of L, the writing center found in the library provided: one-on-one writing sessions, writing resources, workshops, and a comfortable place to write. The Writing Center helps students improve their current writing projects and offers advice that will help them improve their overall writing abilities (U of L, 2020).

**Summary of Additional Resources at the U of L.** TRIO SSS is a program that strives to assist FGCS students in excelling academically and socially. Though slim, the current research outlined different methods to serve marginalized students who may need additional assistance. However, no study focused specifically on how the SCCT framework, more specifically self-efficacy, influenced the TRIO SSS students’ academic preparedness and personal development, focusing on self-efficacy, could affect TRIO
SSS students. Anfara and Mertz (2016) stated that the identified theoretical framework (SSCT) served as the lens to understand the elements of this phenomenon for FGCS while respecting their unique culture and perspectives.

Using the TRIO SSS resources, the lens of SCCT, and self-efficacy demonstrates how effectively the SCCT framework can assist TRIO SSS student success and personal development. Winfield (2021) stated that SCCT can support understanding students’ goals as academic support staff can identify individuals’ existing determination to achieve their academic and career goals. As these barriers are identified using SCCT, self-efficacy emerges as a factor in how students navigate through and beyond the barriers and support their collegiate experiences.

**Theoretical Framework–Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)**

The researcher used SCCT to examine how to assist college students with social adjustment to college, academic preparedness for college, and personal development, the SCCT framework (Figure 2) helps faculty and staff understand the student’s outcomes and goals during the early stages of their careers by exploring the individual’s self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals.
Figure 2

A Simplified View of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)


SCCT considers the influence of contextual supports and barriers, which may influence the ongoing career development of FGCS students after graduation (Olson, 2014). This framework begins with meeting the student where they are while implementing a plan to help them achieve their goal. Finally, SCCT provides a framework for understanding internal and external factors that influence career development. Specifically, SCCT asserted that both external, contextual (e.g., family influence) and internal, psychological influences (e.g., self-efficacy beliefs) have a significant impact on one's career interests, career choices, and satisfaction with work/career (Tate et al., 2015).

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) consists of five interrelated models. Its original models focused on the determinants of educational and occupational interest,
choice, and performance (including persistence) (Lent et al., 1994). The fourth model is aimed at satisfaction and other aspects of well-being in academic and career-related settings (Lent & Brown, 2006, 2008), and the fifth model highlights processes whereby people manage everyday developmental tasks and uncommon challenges across the career lifespan (Lent & Brown, 2013). For this study, the theoretical SCCT focused on the performance model.

Lent and Brown (2013) discovered that the performance model accurately predicted individuals’ performance levels and persistence in pursuing goals. They also noted that the SCCT’s performance model emphasizes both the quality of achievement in educational and work tasks, such as success measures and the perseverance individuals show when facing challenges or obstacles. This segment proposed that past performance accomplishments influenced self-efficacy and outcome expectancies, influencing performance goals, and leading to performance attainment. In other words, past performance influences self-efficacy beliefs along with the expectations individuals have about the outcomes of their future behavior. These expectations affect the goals that people set for themselves. These goals then affect the level of performance they may attain (Swanson et al., 2014).

Bandura (1997) commented that “in making career decisions, people must come to grips with uncertainties about their capabilities, the stability of their interests . . . the prospects of alternative occupations . . . and the type of identity they seek to construct for themselves” (p. 422). SCCT’s model of performance also focuses both on the level (or quality) of attainment individuals achieve in educational and work tasks (e.g., measures
of success or proficiency) and the degree to which they persist at tasks or choice paths, especially when they encounter obstacles (Lent, 2020).

According to Lent et al. (1994), SCCT comprises three interrelated aspects of career development: career interest, choice options, and performance and persistence in educational and occupational pursuits. Each aspect of career development focuses on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, and how these cognitive variables relate to the person, their context, and learning experiences that affect their academic and career development (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT posits that personal inputs (e.g., gender, ethnicity) and background contextual factors directly affect learning experiences that influence self-efficacy and outcome expectations, leading to interests, goals, actions, and performance attainments (Lent et al., 1994). Personal development is associated with SCCT’s “Choice Goals,” while academic performance is connected to SCCT’s “Performance Domains and Attainments.”

Self-Efficacy

Increased self-efficacy, as demonstrated by Vuong et al. (2010), is a key factor in academic persistence and student success. The SCCT theoretical framework predicts that an FGCS student with strong family support for pursuing a non-traditional degree choice will likely develop a strong sense of career self-efficacy regarding that degree (Olson, 2014). Mahan (2010) interviewed FGCS students that had participated in a student support services program and completed a bachelor’s degree. Mahan also found that parents—particularly mothers—emerged as significant and positive factors in the participants persistence in college. FGCS described how their parents pushed them to attend college; even when they unsure they wanted to attend. Several of Mahan’s
participants also highlighted the influence and assistance of siblings or extended family members. This resilience and determination of FGCS, coupled with the effective support of TRIO SSS programs, is truly inspiring.

According to O’Brien et al. (2000), SCCT coincided with the goals of TRIO SSS because it has been used as a theoretical framework for empirical research related to FGCS, specifically the career decision-making self-efficacy of Upward Bound students, the college-going expectations of prospective FGCS middle school students (Gibbons & Borders, 2010), the academic performance and college adjustment of FGCS freshmen (Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007), and intellectual success of FGCS sophomore students (Vuong et al., 2010). These student support services mirror those of TRIO, thus having the same goals and care for FGCS who may not receive the support they deserve, which may derail their decision-making with career, social, and or academic choices. Gibbons and Shoffner (2004) suggested that SCCT would help explore career development and college options with prospective FGCS students, proposing that prospective FGCS students may eliminate viable career and education options based on inaccurate assessments of their ability to succeed in college. However, according to Vuong et al. (2010), limitations and further analyses require examining self-efficacy in gender, ethnicity, and first-generation students. Therefore, TRIO continues to incorporate its services to assist students in their career development. Whether students use academic, career, social, or personal resources, TRIO aims to build students’ confidence and skills to create opportunities for themselves that they may not have thought possible before joining TRIO.
Ramos-Sánchez and Nichols (2007) applied social cognitive theory to understand the association between self-efficacy and two academic outcomes for first-generation college students: academic performance and college adjustment. The study results stated that non-FGCS generally performed better academically than first-generation college students (Bui, 2002). In addition, the level of self-efficacy reported by non-first-generation college students was significantly higher than that reported by FGCS. Still, self-efficacy alone did not contribute to unique variance over and above generational status for GPA (Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007). This study further highlights its usefulness in studying processes like those of student support services. Last, no prediction was made about the inquiry of self-efficacy level changing within groups over a school year because the hypothesis was exploratory. SCCT is beneficial not only for FGCS but also for all college students. The framework's focus on career choices influencing self-efficacy, outcome expectations, personal goals, and environmental factors makes SCCT a great tool and measurement for all college students' paths to success during college and afterward in the workforce.

According to Pajares et al. (2001), a conventional student transitioning into freshman year, establishing self-efficacy within a novel environment can pose initial challenges. Moreover, for FGCS, getting an advantage is even more challenging because they may need to be allowed to learn from their parents. After all, they have never attended college. TRIO SSS has implemented resources and counselors to assist their student populations struggling with self-efficacy to assist students who may need more assistance from their parent(s). Lent and Brown (1996) suggested that a counselor may identify inaccurate or diminished self-efficacy beliefs by exploring the career options that
are interesting to the individual and paying attention to areas where they express less interest. Through the SCCT framework, TRIO counselors can guide these students to self-efficacy, which champions their confidence, critical thinking skills about career choice, and the skills to graduate. Olson (2014) reiterated this thinking by stating that if the FGCS graduates struggle to evaluate the options they see, the counselor informed by SCCT will encourage the client to articulate the goals that may motivate their choices or compete for attention. This comprehensive literature review indicated that extensive research has been done about FGCS’s academic and social adjustment in college. However, little research has been done on the explicit outcomes of TRIO SSS programs as they relate to the academic and social adjustment to college during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The next chapter details the methodology used for this study.
METHODOLOGY

The researcher utilized a case study methodology to investigate the research questions. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that case study research involves studying a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting (Yin, 2009). The type of case study used in this research was an intrinsic case study, focusing on a single case study. An intrinsic case study focuses on the case itself (e.g., evaluating a program or studying a student having difficulty) because it presents an unusual or unique situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The unique situation is that the participants experienced a pandemic that negatively affected the world. The case study method fits the objective of understanding how TRIO SSS influenced program participants’ personal development and academic performance during the COVID-19 pandemic while viewing self-efficacy’s effects on the students during COVID-19 at the U of L.

Bounding the Case or Site of Study

The federal objectives for TRIO SSS programs are the primary measurements of compliance that each TRIO SSS program must follow, consistently having 144 students enrolled in the program to maintain funding from the grant. According to Goldstein et al. (2020), the three objectives include students “persist to the beginning of the next academic year” with a federal minimum of 75% of the TRIO population (slide 26a), “stay in good academic standing” with a federal minimum of 80% of the TRIO population (slide 26b), and “graduate in 6 years” with a federal minimum of 55% of the TRIO
population (slide 26c). The TRIO population at U of L in the 2018–2019 school year bolstered a 90.97% rate for students who “persist to the beginning of the next academic year (slide 26a),” 93.75% rate for the students who “stay in good academic standing (slide 26b),” and 67.44% rate for students who “graduate in 6 years” (slide 26c).

Table 4 offers a detailed account of the TRIO SSS program’s pre-COVID-19 impact on its first-generation students at U of L, comparing it to the general population at U of L. The data reveals a significant positive effect, with our first-generation students demonstrating higher rates of persistence and academic standing compared to the general population. This underscores the effectiveness of our program in supporting and empowering first-generation students, a key objective of the TRIO SSS program.

Table 4

Impact of TRIO on First Generation College Students at U of L

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Did not Persist</th>
<th>Persisted*</th>
<th>Persisted*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not enrolled</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
<td>Graduated (6 years or less)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-TRIO students</td>
<td>622</td>
<td>1702</td>
<td>555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>59.12</td>
<td>19.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRIO students</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>64.22</td>
<td>14.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *Persistence for all First-Generation undergraduates Fall 2018 to Fall 2019 by TRIO status.

Table 4 provides insight into how the TRIO SSS students persisted pre-COVID-19, showing TRIO SSS students who are FGCS are enrolled at a higher rate than non-TRIO students. However, something happened where students in TRIO who were enrolled at a higher rate than non-TRIO students were graduating much lower than non-
TRIO students. Unforeseen obstacles can derail a student’s enrollment and graduation date due to the negative situation that affects a student’s progress with personal development, participation, and academic performance, which can lead to the most obvious choice, COVID-19.

**Data Collection**

The researcher emailed the director of TRIO SSS at the time of data collection to see if she, the director, was comfortable with the researcher conducting the study and if the researcher had permission to conduct the study with the TRIO SSS students. The email also included the purpose of the research being conducted, the study’s timeline, the confidentiality between researcher and participant, and any pertinent information that might come up.

During this communication, the researcher confirmed the availability of the participants’ information from the TRIO SSS databases with the director (Blumen Online for TRIO-BOT, 2020). *Blumen* is a fully integrated student data management software that tracks services and controls student databases for TRIO projects. It also generates an institution’s Annual Performance Report required by the USDOE. Blumen includes student information specific to each fiscal year, contact between students and staff members, reports, labels, and data graphs, which allows advisors to examine how many connections students have with their TRIO SSS advisors, how active they are in TRIO, how often students come into the office, and how frequently they attend events.

After the director agreed to allow the researcher to conduct the study, the researcher emailed a script to the TRIO SSS director so that she could send the email to the students. Following this step, the director then emailed the target population of a
potential 144 TRIO SSS students to inform them of the research details. This email included a flyer with information on the study and the participation criteria. After the director sent the first email to the students, a follow-up email was sent ten days later. Overall, the director sent two emails to the TRIO SSS students, with the researcher copied on the email, and one email was kicked back because of an inaccurate email address. After the director sent both emails, the researcher heard from six out of a possible 144 students, or the total population, in TRIO.

The data collection method for this study was interviews via digital recording using Microsoft Teams (MS Teams). Each interview, which lasted approximately one hour per interview, was digitally recorded on the researcher’s personal MacBook laptop, and the questions were semi-structured and open-ended. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), semi-structured interviews have a mix of structured questions; all the questions are used flexibly and are asked in no order. In addition, Husband (2020) stated that the semi-structured interview offers additional depth to questionnaires or a fully structured interview by inviting dialogic exchange. In so engaging, the researcher actively constructed knowledge in partnership with the respondent, who created answers to questions that could require them to consider issues in-depth and not explicitly engaged. The dialogic exchange also helped with the interview’s flexibility, allowing participants to grasp their thoughts and ideas from different areas. Unstructured interviews included open-ended questions structured more like a conversation. The goal was to learn from these interviews so the researcher could formulate questions for future research, and it helped the participants create options for responding and voicing their experiences and perspectives. In qualitative research, open-ended questions are
administered so that the participants can best voice their experiences unconstrained by any views of the researcher or past research findings.

An interview protocol was also implemented for individual interviews to assist the process. Furthermore, Creswell (2012) stated that “an open-ended response to a question allows the participant to create the options for responding” (p. 218). Finally, having the participants feel that they were having a casual conversation and not being interviewed helped with data collection and richness. The interview transcriptions were coded for student involvement, academic achievement, positive student experiences, and program and staff satisfaction. During the case study interviews, the researcher used field notes and documented the research experience and the communication the researcher had with the participants before the interviews. The purpose of the field notes was to record significant themes, ideas for the research process, comments, and observations concerning the participants.

**Researcher Positionality**

The researcher was the former U of L TRIO SSS program coordinator for almost three years but was not an FGCS or low-income student. However, his mother sometimes had to work two jobs to help pay for his private school education. As he grew up, the researcher found himself in the 1% minority at all educational institutes from K–22 and faced academic challenges. He attended a private middle school and a private Catholic high school, where he primarily interacted with White students due to the school’s demographics. Later, in college, he joined a Black Greek letter organization (BGLO), Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity. Due to the researcher’s previous personal experience and interactions with the students, the researcher sometimes viewed the data from an etic and
emic perspective. According to Peters (2021), the etic perspective is the outsider’s perspective, and the emic perspective is the insider. Also, the emic helps us to understand local realities, and the etic helps us to analyze them (Peters, 2021). Furthermore, the etic perspective, for example, is an outside perspective of the UofL campus, and the emic perspective could be the perspectives on FGCS involved on campus. So, during the study, the researcher had an etic and emic perspective because the researcher could see themselves in their TRIO SSS students, based on their resilience and stories that were discussed, while also helping the students in the past as a TRIO SSS advisor.

This background indicates that he experienced many challenges students face in TRIO and could relate to them on various levels as the Program Coordinator. In this position, the researcher oversaw semester advisory meetings, implemented academic and enrichment programming, supervised the mentoring program, and supervised the tutoring program. Outside of the TRIO SSS office, the researcher also attended programming in which the TRIO SSS students were involved for additional support. The researcher further built the relationships through additional conversations outside of the mandatory advising meeting. Although he did not disclose the specific details of these conversations, he knew that the relationships formed by the students and the researcher, previously the program coordinator, were more substantial through in-depth and sometimes impromptu discussions. Due to the strength of the relationship, the students’ trust in the researcher grew enormously over the years, which made way for more in-depth conversations.

In the present day, the researcher and those students keep in contact with one another by periodically connecting with the students included in the study to see if they need any assistance with navigating undergraduate and graduate school, graduating,
getting into the workforce, or having casual conversations about life in general. The researcher believed that the relationships built over the years allowed the students to feel comfortable reaching out with any questions or concerns because they knew that respect, expectations, and advocacy were at the core of their relationship with the researcher and previous program coordinator.

Having known and interacted with the TRIO SSS students before the study, the researcher increased the chances for students to have a deeper connection with the researcher, which increased the richness of the interview and gathered data. Despite concerns about potential biases stemming from being a previous employee of TRIO SSS, the researcher took the proper measures to prevent biases from conflicting with the research and data. The researcher achieved a non-biased approach by maintaining neutrality during the interviews, so the researcher did not influence the participant's responses. Ensuring the participants know their information and data are confidential and accurate was another form of a non-biased approach. In addition, the researcher did member checking, in which participants were given the transcripts to read so they could voice their opinions on edits needed for clarity, accuracy, or comfortability. Also, making the participant feel accepted and safe while answering and asking questions during the interview.

Sample and Participant Selection

The participants for this research were selected from the U of L’s TRIO SSS office, also called the population or target population. The target population was the specific, conceptually bounded group of potential participants to whom the researcher may have access that represents the nature of the population of interest (Casteel &
Bridier, 2021). The researcher distributed the research opportunity broadly to all TRIO SSS, the target population. Also, focusing on the importance of having a diverse participant pool allowed for a wide range of students to recruit and choose from compared to a strategy that only focused on a population-specific classification, culture, race, or ethnicity group when selecting participants.

Afterward, the researcher emailed the participants the confidentiality form and answered any questions the students posed. At the time, only six students were interviewed; however, if the researcher felt additional information was needed, the director of TRIO SSS was again contacted and asked that she send out another email to the students.

**Interview Protocol–Confidentiality/Ethical Considerations**

To reiterate, the interviews were recorded on a MacBook Pro laptop via the Microsoft Teams software that recorded and transcribed the interview, a tape recorder, and field notes. The researcher interviewed the participants via teams virtually. The participants were also asked to interview in a private room away from distractions and noises that could distort the recorded data. Table 5 displays a breakdown of the study’s participants.
Table 5

*Participant Demographics Enrolled From 2017 to 2021*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant’s Gender</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Joined TRIO</th>
<th>Classification (as of Fall 2023)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>Fall 2018</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethel</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Public Health</td>
<td>Fall 2018</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Politics and Advocacy</td>
<td>Spring 2018</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briana</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>Fall 2015</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>Fall 2016</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Healthcare and Leadership</td>
<td>Fall 2018</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), "Data analysis is systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to enable you to come up with findings" (p. 159). This research used a thematic analysis approach to dissect the data. According to Scharp and Sanders (2019), thematic analysis is a qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within a data corpus. This analysis guided the interpretation of the data. The process of thematic analysis, developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, consisted of "six steps: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating coding categories, (3)
generating themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) locating exemplars” (Scharp & Sanders, 2019, p. 2).

Using the thematic analysis, the process began with reading the transcript two to three times to make sure the recorded statement was accurately depicted in the transcript. Following that step, the deductive coding method was used for statements deemed essential to the data and were highlighted, compiled into one Excel Spreadsheet document, disseminated into different code groups, and then redefined based on the patterns in the statements that were made in the interview. For example, the SCCT framework believes that students receiving an increase in self-efficacy will increase the likelihood of an increase in academic persistence, affecting student success. Ethel stated,

Yes, I will say coming in (college), I lacked much self-confidence, especially being in a new environment and having like the staff of TRIO be there to push you kind of and believing you even when sometimes you do not believe in yourself definitely builds self-confidence.

This statement focused on self-confidence and support from TRIO, which was coded under self-efficacy and support. Self-efficacy is paired with the theme of Career Development, Advising, and Planning for the research because of the focus on the advisor's influence on the participant(s) due to the positive words of encouragement during their interactions. Bingham and Witkowsky (2022) and Crabtree and Miller (1999) stated that deductive or a priori coding involves creating codes prior to data analysis and applying those codes to the data. Deductive analysis can be used to organize data or sort data into predetermined categories created from literature or theory (Bingham, 2023).

The researcher used deductive coding before adding the SCCT framework so that the researcher could insert a few code ideas but not so many that the researcher felt could be biased and devalue the data. The researcher began to connect the codes to the SCCT
framework to see what the codes, which would then become themes, have in common with the different internal and external influences of SCCT. After the codes were established, they were then organized into themes. At this time, the researcher used the themes and their descriptive codes to match the internal and external influences of the SCCT framework, which would help answer the research questions. For example, one of the themes was a sense of belonging, which matched with SCCT's proximal environmental influences because the students feel a sense of belonging when they go to the TRIO SSS office and interact with peers and staff. The TRIO SSS office is associated with the proximal environmental influences because the TRIO SSS office, which students frequent, is an environment in which the students can be influenced. In addition, quotes by the participants were used to support the connection between the found themes and SCCT's internal and external influences (sense of belonging). The concluding chapter presents a summary along with conclusions, outlining the discoveries, practical implications, and suggestions for further research.

**Study Limitations**

Interviews in qualitative case-study research have both advantages and disadvantages. The six participants in the study, who identified as female, were all enrolled at one institution, a large Research I public state university. Due to the institution at hand, the results could look vastly different if the research were conducted at a dissimilar institution, such as an HBCU, liberal arts college, or an Ivy League university. The sample size was also a limitation of the study because it lacked diversity—meaning cultures, races, or nationalities were not as well represented, and six students were interviewed from a possible 144 students in the TRIO SSS program at U of C. However,
the collected data on GPA, retention rates, and graduation rates accurately depicted the difference between TRIO SSS students and the general population students.

The researcher also knew the participants before the study began. The cons of this bias could be seen by how the participants do not fully or honestly answer the questions for fear of hurting the researchers’ feelings or thinking that they, the participants, are talking badly about the TRIO SSS employees or the program. However, if the researcher has a positive prior experience, the data richness will outweigh the possible risk of bias. Another limitation could be that the participants may have opted out of the students if they did not have as strong a connection with the TRIO SSS office or staff, leading to their critical voices not being reflected in the study.

Convenience sampling is sometimes used in qualitative research. According to Lopez and Whitehead (2013), convenience sampling is the most common form of qualitative sampling and occurs when people are invited to participate in the study because they are conveniently (opportunistically) available regarding access, location, time, and willingness. This could negatively affect the research because the students participating in the study may have similar backgrounds or think similarly, which skew the data. Lopez and Whitehead (2013) stated that the main limitation of using convenience sampling is that it could suffer from under-representation or over-representation of groups within the population. It could also potentially be that the sample is unlikely to be representative of the population being studied, limiting researchers’ ability to generalize the findings to a broader population (Creswell, 2007).

Though convenience sampling can alter rich data, this was different. The researcher wanted a broad scope of participants, but that did not happen. The researcher
communicated twice, looking for participants, but because the research was during the summer, students responded more sporadically, if at all, and the researcher wanted to avoid hounding the participants with the risk of stressing them out more because of COVID-19. However, this convenience sample did not negatively affect the students because the researcher focused on accurate data collection, making the students feel comfortable during the interview and making the interview environment welcoming so that the students feel comfortable giving in-depth details in their answers.

The researcher asked the participants "Point-in-time design" questions, which could negatively affect the data. According to Creswell (2017), point-in-time design is a research methodology that captures data at a specific moment or period, providing a snapshot of information rather than longitudinal data collection. Point-in-time questions can be complex because if a participant does not remember a specific time or period, the information being given may skew the data. Furthermore, asking the student to remember from 2017 to 2021 could be difficult and leave some answers to questions less comprehensive because the participants may have needed help remembering everything that happened years ago. The interviews provided only information filtered through the participants' views (i.e., the researcher summarized the participants' views in the research report). Also, like observations, interview data may be deceptive and provide the perspective the participant wanted the researcher to hear. Last, though one cannot tell someone how to feel, the trauma that COVID-19 caused society, specifically the participants, could have warped their thinking, memory, and emotions that are hard to recreate in the present to remember what happened in the past. However, in this study, the event that took place, COVID-19, was so current and fresh to the questions being
asked at the time of the study that the participants should be able to recall significant events and feelings that happened during COVID-19 accurately.
RESULTS

This chapter discusses the study’s findings and how they relate to the overarching research questions. The results were obtained through qualitative research through a case study involving individual interviews guided by semi-structured and open-ended questions. This study examined the impact of the TRIO SSS program in increasing the academic preparedness, graduation rates, and personal development of first-generation college students. Specifically, the study examined how TRIO SSS affects students’ self-efficacy through academic performance and personal development during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

This section displays the connection between the themes and theoretical framework. The visual connection between the study’s themes and the theoretical framework is reflected in the SCCT framework image (reflected in Figure 2). The main themes that came from this study included career development, advising and planning, financial knowledge, literacy, monetary assistance, a sense of belonging and community, consistent outreach and communication, and resource offerings. The visual connection between the study’s themes and the theoretical framework is reflected in the SCCT framework image (Figure 2). The main themes that came from this study included career development, advising, and planning, located in the Proximal Environmental Influences and Self-efficacy of the SCCT framework; financial knowledge, literacy, and monetary
assistance, located in the Background Environmental Influences and Proximal Environmental Influences of the SCCT framework; a sense of belonging and community; located in the Proximal Environmental Influences of the SCCT framework; consistent outreach and communication; located in the Proximal Environmental Influences of the SCCT framework; and resource offerings, which is located in the Interests and Proximal Environmental Influences of the SCCT framework. To reiterate, the SCCT framework (Figure 2) helps faculty and staff understand the student’s outcomes and goals during the early stages of their careers by exploring the individual’s self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Olson, 2014).

**Themes**

The key themes for this study were chosen after an analytic process of coding, categorizing, and identifying themes within the data presented. In addition, the theoretical framework, SCCT, was also examined to see how the themes were connected to the framework and if the theoretical framework answered the research questions along with the themes. The themes are (a) TRIO SSS career development advising and planning, answering research questions two and three; (b) financial knowledge, literacy, and monetary assistance, answering research questions two and three; (c) sense of belonging and community; answering research questions one and three, (d) consistent outreach and communication, answering research questions one and three, and (e) the resource offerings, answering Research Questions 1, 2, and 3.

**Career Development, Advising, and Planning**

The first theme, TRIO SSS career development, advising, and planning, was identified because of the relationship that all participants expressed that they gained from
TRIO SSS staff members based on advising meetings, general conversations, and academic assistance. Having a consistent, safe space where the students felt like they could talk about their relationships, grades, and life struggles or unwind with their advisors was expressed throughout the interviews.

Although all participants spoke about the effects of the TRIO SSS advisors and staff members, three main variables from the SCCT framework directly connect with TRIO SSS career development, advising, and planning. These variables included self-efficacy and expectations, proximal environmental influences, and outcome expectations. Self-efficacy, or self-confidence, as presented in some interviews, was established as one of the main reasons for students to achieve their goals. For some participants, obtaining self-efficacy occurred through numerous conversations that helped establish a relationship between the students and the TRIO SSS advisor. Participants expressed that the advisors would always listen and incorporate confidence, increase self-esteem, and equip them with the tools to obtain self-efficacy instead of just giving motivational speeches. Ivy, a graduate student in politics and advocacy, stated,

I mean helping someone step out of their comfort zone on that way, . . . just in separate advising sessions like individual advising sessions, improving confidence that way because just having those type of conversations . . . to help me get through certain things and just to help me, you know in certain situations. . . I think the support is just always there, and they helped bring out the confidence in people by just telling them to like to go for it and just giving them like, say, hey, I am gonna be here for you regardless of what you do or what you choose."

Ivy’s statement further shows how important the proximal environmental support that the TRIO SSS advisors offer is in assisting the students in forming self-efficacy through positive conversations, advocacy, and empathy in case a student fails at a goal they feel they have high self-efficacy. In addition, participants also spoke about TRIO
advisors’ level of expectation for the participants, which some students may have never experienced outside of the TRIO SSS office. The increase in expectation not only assisted the participants in spaces that pertained to social interactions with peers, relationships, relationships with professors, study habits, focus, etc., but the advisor’s expectation also increased the student’s work ethic because they did not want to let their advisor down or the staff. Ethel, a Public Health graduate student, stated,

So, once I was in, I was able to, you know, talk to other students who shared similar experiences. And then talk to the staff to help guide me on what to do and how to do it, like at the university and the importance of going to class and studying and how to study and then like once we developed like. Professional student-staff relationships. And then there were expectations, and I did not want to let anyone down or disappoint because that was the first time, I ever had academic expectations from anyone outside of myself.

Ethel’s statement displayed how she learned from her peers and TRIO SSS staff members how to be a college student. She also spoke about never receiving expectations or “buy-in” from others. However, she did appreciate and thrive from the expectations that TRIO SSS provided her through the advisors. Participants also spoke about the knowledge and confidence they gained from TRIO SSS advisors on how to communicate with their professors, which, for some college students, can be intimidating and overwhelming. Students can increase their chances of earning a good grade in the class by understanding the importance and strategy of a good relationship with their professor(s). Katherine, a mechanical engineer graduate student, said,

Go talk to your professor. I think that was such a big thing that a lot of first-year students or first-year students are afraid to do that TRIO promotes, and I think it is where it is all embedded in self-confidence, and I think it does promote it.

Last, participants also spoke about their success, knowing that others were invested in them, and they did not want to let them down. They always knew that no
matter the situation, a TRIO SSS staffer would hold this student accountable because the staff members advocated, educated, and were there for the students to instill that confidence that they may be lacking. Briana, a communications graduate student, expressed that she received encouraging words. I believe that they were up on the walls like messages. So, my self-confidence was tremendous, and my self-efficacy was huge from my mentor because he pushed that a lot on me even though I did not want to be it. But he did. But yeah, for sure, tell you.

The accountability shown by the TRIO staff members went beyond the academics of the class, which created additional conversations that stemmed around financial literacy and how the choices made in college can have a lasting effect on the student, both good and bad. The student quotes also showed that the students experienced support and mentorship when interacting with TRIO SSS staff advisors, which connects with SCCT’s Proximal Environmental Influences and Self-Efficacy because the students are learning from the TRIO SSS advisors in the TRIO office environment, where they are gaining knowledge, confidence, support, and mentorship through advising sessions.

**Financial Knowledge, Literacy, and Monetary Assistance**

All participants mentioned the second theme, financial knowledge, literacy, and monetary assistance. They expressed that the financial support from TRIO SSS via receiving emergency funds during COVID-19, at a time when students were not going to be able to enroll, needed extra cash because working was almost obsolete, financial literacy workshops and advising conversations, and TRIO SSS scholarships or general scholarships.

The data from this research about financial support primarily focused on the bottom line for many college students: scholarships, which is financial support. Annually,
the TRIO SSS office has scholarship opportunities not based solely on academics but also on the writing prompt and involvement in TRIO. The participants spoke about getting financial assistance because of these scholarships. In addition, participants also talked about how they lacked the self-esteem to apply for the scholarship but eventually did, and they were awarded. Ethel stated,

I would say academically, umm, for sure academically because there was times where you know they look like someone will come to me from the office for like hey thank you would be great for this scholarship program or this meeting with this individual or this program that's coming up and have you like I do not think they are gonna pick me I don't think I'm qualified and then lo and behold like they pushed me to apply I apply and I would get it.

As stated previously, the study’s themes are interconnected. Ethel’s example of receiving a scholarship, resource offering theme, clearly reflected how the advisor showed the student they cared by pushing the student to apply for the scholarship, which involved the themes of TRIO SSS career development advising and planning and financial knowledge, literacy, and monetary assistance. In addition, the advisor relaying continued reminders to the students shows the students are experiencing proximal environmental influences through consistent outreach and communication, which makes the students feel like they belong, which is another interconnected theme. The proximal environmental influences are a prime example of the learning experiences portion of the SCCT framework because Ethel thought that she was not good or smart enough to apply for the scholarship when, in all actuality, she was more than qualified. These interactions showed the students that one might need external motivation every so often, but it is about one’s self-efficacy, and the work one puts in to put them in the right situation to succeed.
Also, students spoke about the knowledge they gained from having guest speakers and financial literacy programming to explain why financial literacy is so critical and how to obtain that goal starting as a college student. More specifically, the financial literacy workshops assisted students with tips on saving money, the importance of scholarships in which no amount was too small, the importance of credit at an early age, applying for scholarships because there are scholarships out there that go unclaimed, study abroad scholarships to gain more exposure to the world. Ivy stated that TRIO SSS had speakers come in, and we would do different PowerPoints, different presentations, and I know they had one on like financial literacy. So even if they weren’t, you know, providing grants or anything, you were still able to come in and just learn about your financial options through TRIO SSS and just have someone to talk to about, like, financial literacy, how to budget, how to save, how to spin your money wisely and things like that.

For some, a scholarship may solely be considered financial assistance with tuition and fees; however, through my interviews, I quickly realized that the scholarships gave relief in many other fields. Michelle, a Social Work senior, talked about how the scholarship allowed her to take care of bills and pay for medication, which also allows the student not to work as many hours and frees up more room time to study for class or be present at an internship. Michelle said,

Umm, so I have been fortunate enough to be awarded the TRIO scholarship twice, so I got it once while you were there, and then I got it last year as well. This is great because I do not come from a family that can be financially supportive, so I have been on my own for a minute or so on that scholarship, in particular, when it hit the spring semester; that’s what happens. That’s how I get medicine. That’s how I get groceries at the start of, like, the semester. That’s how some of the rest of my bill gets paid sometimes, depending on what scholarships I can get and what scholarships I didn’t get. But yeah, TRIO has definitely come through at a very clutch time with that scholarship.

Michelle’s experience connected with the SCCT framework background environmental influences, which can be “conditions refer to the levels of support (e.g.,
family financial and emotional support), barriers (e.g., lack of finances, inadequate levels of education), and opportunities available to the individual” (Career Research, 2016, para. 12). Michelle’s experience aligned with the background environmental influences, because unfortunately, like many college students, she experienced the burdens and barriers of being a first-generation student, and not receiving financial assistance from a family which in turn made her adapt by working a job and applying for tuition assistance (grants, scholarships) just to be enrolled. Moreover, though it was difficult, I believe that having a positive environmental influence via TRIO and its staff assisted Michelle with getting financial relief, which led to more time spent on focusing on her schoolwork.

Although it is not a scholarship or a specific TRIO SSS resource, access to emergency funds during COVID-19 was vital, and at times, many students needed to learn that funds were available. Participants expressed that when many of them were trying to navigate COVID-19, the new uncomfortable norm, and financial hardship, TRIO SSS advisors informed the participants about the financial resources that assisted many students. Briana stated,

Like I said before prior, like they helped me find secure emergency funds like that I would never know that was accessible. But basically, I broke my laptop, and it was interfering with a lot of stuff . . . it was gonna be like 1,000 dollars to fix it, and then, like the idea of emergency funds came in from the school to help me . . . And then we got a new laptop.

Due to this wholistic strategy that not only assisted the TRIO SSS students academically, TRIO also helped during COVID-19 when a lot of students felt isolated not only from people but also the vital information that they needed to navigate the new norm of post-COVID-19. Fortunately, TRIO assisted their students by making the students feel like they belonged and were a priority both in and out of the classroom.
Sense of Belonging and Community

Another theme expressed was a sense of belonging, whether the participants felt that from the TRIO advisors and staff, their peers, or how the physical TRIO office made them feel when they attended. The interviews highlighted that the participants felt a sense of belonging by being around peers in similar situations (first-generation, low-income, or a student with a disability), being welcomed by their peers, having staff members who listened and genuinely cared for the participant, and having a diverse population of students from different cultures.

Whether it is classification, major, or being first-generation, low-income, or a student with a disability, the participants related to their peers on numerous levels. The research showed that adjustment to college was an area where the participants related to others; more specifically, FGCS learned study habits, shared class notes, and even learned how to communicate and build relationships with their professors. These struggles were also connected to the participant’s background environmental influences through SCCT. Conversely, participants also talked about experiencing a warm welcome from peers from diverse cultures that the participants had never met. Katherine stated,

I’ve met so many different people and that's the beauty of TRIO. Once again, you meet so many different people and like usually people from countries that you somewhat maybe have never heard of . . . I think I just became a lot more open-minded cause certain things you just can’t like to assume about other certain things you just can’t . . . And I think it's just with all the different peoples that I got to surround myself with all the different peoples that I had the chance to have a conversation with. I just became a lot more open minded and just a lot more. I don’t wanna say even kinder cause when you meet people who are extremely kind who just, you know, genuinely like, wish you the best. It’s just hard to not do the same.

For authentic relationships to manifest, students must interact with the staff and their peers in person in TRIO. The students need to feel that sense of belonging from
TRIO. Still, for that to be established, the TRIO office must first make itself appealing to its students by displaying a welcoming environment. Briana stated,

Like the area wasn’t updated, but it got updated, but I feel like it looks more like a community. We have a backspace, now we have more places to do things versus we have a little computer lab versus didn’t have that prior. So, I feel like that would be them investing in the building our area says, like our class. Our area made a big difference, like having a cardinal sign and just making it look more welcoming.

Last is the relationship between the advisor and the student which is connected to but distinctive from the previous theme of career development, advising, and planning. Sometimes, college can be isolating and make a student think that nobody cares and that they must navigate college alone. The participants stressed that at any given time, they would come in and speak with an advisor, whether it was an official advising session or just dropping in to decompress about life or school. Michelle stated,

I would just be on campus, and I didn’t feel like pulling out my laptop or at one point my laptop did break and would not charge anymore . . . and then literally just kind of chilling in the office in general having a TRIO office, especially where it’s located at on campus . . . And so just being able to go in there and chill and kind of decompress, talk to people who’s in there, color sometimes. Yes, like just personally you can get really lost freshman here like and so. I think when you were there . . . I’d walk into your office and be like, man, I’m just gonna sit here like I don’t got class until later like I’m just gonna sit here and chill, and that literally was like my getaway. Like I wasn’t just alone in my dorm. Left to race through my thoughts, but I mean I at least had somebody around.

Michelle’s statement further expressed the importance of the connections between the TRIO SSS students’ sense of belonging and the staff members’ availability to students to vent and let out frustrations and follow up with positive feedback and support. Through the lenses of SCCT, the proximal environmental influences connect with the sense of belonging and research question one, two, and three. Having the TRIO SSS office environment value and advocate for the students positively influences their
decisions. Furthermore, participants expressed their dislike for the increase of turnover for the staff members in TRIO, which in turn had the effects of a lack of relationship between staff and students, the need for time for genuine and organic relationships to grow, which takes time, and the incline of students physically being in the TRIO SSS office.

During the interview when the researcher asked Michelle the question “What learning experiences from TRIO SSS have impacted you academically?” Michelle answered differently than expected by shedding some more insight to her lack of sense of belonging. When speaking about going on educational trips with the TRIO SSS office Michelle stated,

I just didn’t go personally and that’s literally just because like again with so many people (advisors) rotating in and out, I don’t know nobody and you (Mr. McClendon) know me, I’m not about to if I don’t know you. I’m not just gonna sit around and chill with you. Like I got to at least feel comfortable, and like get to know you, and then I'll sit around and chill, but to go out of state; yeah, you’re tripping.

Due to the consistent turnover of TRIO SSS staff, Michelle felt like restarting the process of getting to know TRIO staff members was not worth it. During this time, Michelle experienced two director vacancies, two program coordinator vacancies, and two student support specialist vacancies. This further affected her attendance and participation due to the new TRIO employee that she would then have to get to know all over again, which, at the time, she was not invested in doing. Michelle’s statement expressed that she did not feel like she knew anyone on a personal level, and no one knew her in the space. Moreover, as time passed, the inconsistencies and a lack of a relationship with the TRIO staff led Michelle not to see the need to invest more time to possibly develop a relationship with a staff member, which unfortunately led to feeling a
lack of a sense of belonging. Ethel also spoke about the consistency of the TRIO SSS staff or lack thereof. More specifically, Ethel spoke about the deterioration of attendance and relationship with the TRIO staff due to the constant rotation of new staff members, which happened right before COVID-19, when two office staff members had left, during, and after COVID-19. However, those positions were filled shortly after. Ethel stated,

I know of at least two people in and out of office my last year there. So, my first two years was really good because the staff was consistent and it was the same staff members, and I was able to build really good relationships with each and every one of them that last year . . . and then there was two people in and out, and so no one lasted more than six months. Even then, that’s pushing it. So, I couldn't really build relationships with those individuals, so it kind of stopped once you know, the doors started to open and close. I came around less because of the turnover.

These experiences take away from students feeling a sense of belonging, because they did not feel like starting new relationships with the new TRIO SSS staff that took so long to build with the previous employees. Michelle and Ethel indicated that they did not feel a sense of belonging, which can be attributed to their status as two of the youngest and least experienced students among those interviewed. They indicated that they were under the guidance of TRIO SSS staff for most of their time in the program (two or more years) until some staff members left, which then left Michelle and Ethel feeling disconnected and lacking a sense of belonging, which answered Research Question 3.

**Consistent Outreach and Communication**

During the semester, it was customary for students to receive communication about resources through email, face-to-face, social media, and sometimes in hardcopy form for the students to take home. During the interviews, the students expressed that during COVID-19, which did not allow face-to-face contact in the TRIO office, based on the student’s perspective they felt the TRIO office did an excellent job of maintaining
contact and trying to normalize the use of virtual advising by disseminating resources or being there to talk to participants. Ethel stated,

During that time, I believe students were not allowed in the office. You know we needed clarification on what exactly COVID-19 was and how it could impact one’s health, but TRIO kept their phone lines open and their emails open. So, I was calling, probably weekly, to talk through things not only to help keep myself sane but to get help on online coursework because everything switched online, and I’ve never taken an online course before, so I needed more guidance.

Even though two staff members left that Ethel had a strong relationship with, she still had another strong relationship with the remaining staff member, the director, and could call the office and converse with that person. More specifically regarding COVID-19, the participants spoke about the need for casual conversation for the students to have the opportunity to vent about the obstacles that COVID-19 had posed for the participants. Katherine stated,

So, during COVID-19, it was stressful. It was scary. No one really knew what was going on. Everyone thought that, you know, everybody was getting eliminated from left and right. So, it was it was very anxious times and TRIO . . . They were able to like send resources, send like all types of like help. Whether it’s financial, mental, like all types of resources are usually students might need in those times of hardships . . . So, I think TRIO did help immensely by just sending resources out to everyone. I think the dynamic change a little bit simply because you are not able to meet people in person or cry in front of like cry and somebody’s office when you need it . . . And it just the dynamic was different, but the resources stayed the same for like if you really needed someone to talk to.

In addition, the participants also stated that they utilized some of the virtual resources. However, overall, the participants expressed that receiving the resources and communication virtually was not the same as in-person because of the lack of physical or face-to-face interaction. Michelle stated,

TRIO was shut down, too, like the office wasn’t open. Yes, they have communication and email communications that go out about different things, but a lot of what TRIO did was in person in the office, creating that space. And once
that got taken away, it was like, ok, we can send you this email blast; you can contact me if you need me. But other than that, there wasn’t anything going on.

Although the students and TRIO staff were in different locations, they maintained a virtual relationship to help guide and assist the students during their low moments in COVID-19. Ethel stated,

I still felt my sense of community within TRIO during the pandemic. I was still able to reach each individual who worked in the office during business hours. I was able to reach them through email. I was able to interact with other TRIO members online, so I was still able to, you know, get that support that I desired through the phone and all my mechanisms. My experience was great.

These actions can be expressed through SCCT’s proximal environmental influences, which can moderate and directly affect the processes by which people make and implement career-relevant choices (Lent et al., 2000). Due to the physical presence of the TRIO staff in the TRIO SSS office pre-COVID-19, this made way for that trust and relationship to stay strong, and allowed for the student to continue to lean on its positive proximal environment that was a benefit before COVID-19 and continued to be a benefit for the student during the tumultuous times during and post-COVID-19.

Participants also spoke about the mental health resources they were given during COVID-19. Michelle stated that “TRIO didn’t assist with me coping with stress during COVID-19, but the TRIO office did change the way it supported its students during COVID-19.” Michelle added further,

Oh, of course it was more present when COVID-19 happened, but I do feel like that’s something that TRIO at least tries to do, like year round. Not necessarily. Like just when COVID-19 hit. But I do get emails, they do, do things like Wellness Wednesdays and like sometimes they have those . . . but other than that, like I think it was just they sent it out more frequently when covered happened because everybody was worried about everybody’s mental health. But I do feel like TRIO, no matter when, COVID-19, pre COVID-19, post COVID-19 has tried to like at least have, let you know that those resources are out there. Yeah, I think
everybody was trying to be a little bit more supportive when COVID-19 happened.”

However, there was an increase in virtual communication due to the pandemic. Participants also stated that the lack of in-person communication over time can wear on students due to the perceived isolation because the norm of face-to-face interaction was altered to only virtual communication. Ethel stated,

Yes, TRIO is really good at helping me identify feelings and providing safe spaces for me to feel those feelings. And then once I was ready to, you know, like talk about the feelings that I felt allowing me the space to talk about them . . . So, I wasn’t feeling so like isolated. I think with like COVID-19 pushing everything online, it wasn’t as, I feel like you can’t be as personal online. So, I kind of lost that like face to face when I was going through these feelings and moments, but they did a really good job at trying to mend that gap with the phone calls.

Although the transition to virtual learning and communication was difficult for all, the participants expressed gratitude for the TRIO office adjusting its support resources to meet the students where they were so that they could feel supported and guided by TRIO SSS staff.

**Resource Offerings**

Participants had no issue with expressing the influence that the TRIO resources had on them. Whether it was getting access to a class through priority registration, graduate school application assistance, goal setting involving having three main goals and then listing three strategies to obtain each goal, GPA calculator along with a discussion with an advisor, free printing, service trips, mock interviews, resume building, tutoring services, or guest speakers were practices from TRIO SSS that connected to the interest in the SCCT theoretical framework. Lucy, a health care, and leadership senior, stated,

I mean, I feel like TRIO has done a good job in presenting like good career development, like workshops where I feel like there have been several times where there have been opportunities where they’ll have workshops for resumes
and cover letters and stuff like that. And you can always ask people how does this look? Will you help me edit this, or do you think I should schedule to get this looked at? The career center there’s like a Career Center as well on campus, so I feel like they provided quite a few events for that. I definitely have been to one, uh, and now I write resumes for other people because I'm like, here you go.

Although resource offerings paint a broad swath of what is available to the TRIO students, Ivy made a specific connection between experiencing good career development which is the first themes and connecting it to TRIO’s resource offering theme.

Furthermore, Ivy also expressed that these resources provided more than just a worksheet or a guest speaker that delivered information in a bland seminar style. She spoke about the connection between her, the students and the resources that were given which made her feel holistically supported.

More specifically, the participants spoke about the amount of assistance they received by being connected to someone in their field of interest who could give them information about other general populations to which students may not yet be privy. Ivy stated, “Like as far as bringing in motivational speakers or bringing in people from like career wise and different careers and bringing them in and just having those conversations with different people.” This exposure also helped students figure out that the specific career path they thought they wanted to achieve may now change based on the new information they gained from guest speakers.

Summary

The collected data from all the participants' responses showed that the TRIO SSS office positively influenced its students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data also showed that TRIO SSS career development, advising, and planning, specifically advisors, played a substantial role in positively influencing students' self-efficacy through the
students’ academic preparedness and personal development. This data provided further
evidence to support Lent et al.'s (1994) framework of SCCT that focused on self-efficacy.
Without a good relationship with the advisor, the students would not even have taken
advantage of the resources provided by TRIO because the students would rarely, if ever,
come into the TRIO office due to the lack of feeling a sense of belonging. This was
expressed when students felt more overwhelmed during COVID-19; even though the
advisors stayed in contact virtually, the students still needed face-to-face positive
reinforcement, accountability, and simply a person to ask the students how they are doing
outside of the classroom and genuinely care about them as a person.

Financial burdens, specifically tuition, are familiar to a college student. However,
hearing about the additional factors that these first-generation college students deal with,
like receiving emergency funds to get a new laptop, paying for bills, medication, and
their apartment, is very disturbing and champions the need for the TRIO office and the
resources they have for its students while also having connections in other departments
that can assist students in getting additional financial resources from other places.

Last, the data showed that during COVID-19, based on the student's perspective,
they felt the TRIO SSS did an excellent job of continuing communication with its
students and did not let them feel like they were going through the pandemic alone.
However, the pandemic was so crippling that the continued communication involving
check-ins, advising meetings, and resources was still insufficient for students. Nothing
could have prepared TRIO or anyone else to deal with COVID-19 and how to properly
prepare TRIO students to return to the new norm of in-person instruction after being
virtually for almost two years. Chapter 5 contains a discussion of the results, recommended practices, and additional research.
IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

This study used a qualitative method to achieve a deeper look into how TRIO SSS influenced the student’s personal development and academic performance by allowing the students to expound upon their experiences. This study occurred at a large, Midwestern, four-year public institution. A total of 144 TRIO SSS students enrolled between the 2017–2020 school years, and six of these students participated in the student interviews or case study. The study was guided by three research questions, and qualitative data were collected. The qualitative research was conducted and was compiled into emergent themes: TRIO SSS career development, advising and planning, financial knowledge, literacy, monetary assistance, sense of belonging and community, consistent outreach and communication, and resource offerings. This chapter includes a discussion of the findings, conclusions related to the literature, implications for practice that could be used to enhance TRIO SSS programs, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This section addresses the research results as they relate to the study’s research question, which is reiterated and accompanied by the results from each focus group question as it related to how TRIO SSS influences program participants’ personal development, academic performance, and what role self-efficacy played in TRIO SSS students’ personal development and academic performance during the COVID-19
pandemic. In addition, this chapter provides a better understanding of what was learned during the interview process.

**Findings**

The first two qualitative research questions were developed to determine if TRIO SSS influenced its students’ personal development or academic performance during COVID-19. The third qualitative research question examined the role of self-efficacy in TRIO SSS students during the COVID-19 pandemic. To reiterate, this study examined the impact of the TRIO SSS program in increasing the academic preparedness, graduation rates, and personal development of first-generation college students. Specifically, the study examined how TRIO SSS affected students’ self-efficacy through academic performance and personal development during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings were consistent with literature reviewed and provided additional understanding of the experiences of first-generation and low-income students and the role of TRIO SSS in helping disadvantaged students reach their full potential (Coffman, 2011; Tinto, 2012).

**Research Question 1**

The first research question stated: How did the TRIO SSS influence program participants’ personal development during the COVID-19 pandemic? The primary influence on the participant’s personal growth was tied to their relationship with TRIO SSS staff members, specifically their advisors. The participants expressed that they felt they were receiving honesty, accountability, encouragement, and support during their interaction with their advisors, which led to a strong relationship. Participants also stated that the staff conversations were more than just surface-level concerns; they were on a
deeper level, like conversations involving relationship advice with a significant other or parent or their purpose in life.

Another variable that displayed TRIO’s positive influence on the participants’ personal development was the consistent exposure that the participants experienced. Participants expressed that whether their experience was a peer-to-peer social conversation or more academic, they felt that their personal development was added to by the exposure they received from their peers. More specifically, students talked about being in an office environment comprising many diverse populations and cultures where one would have to learn how to interact with someone else who has grown up in a completely different culture and social environment. Katherine stated,

I’ve met so many different people and that’s the beauty of TRIO. Once again, you meet so many different people and like usually people from countries that you somewhat maybe have never heard of. Because I remember Eritrea was just not a country that I was super, duper familiar with until I met a student from there. So it was just, it was personally, I think I just became a lot more open minded cause certain things you just can't like assume about other certain things you just can't, you know, say about others. And I think it's just with all the different peoples that I got to surround myself with all the different peoples that I had the chance to have a conversation with. I just became a lot more open minded and just a lot more. I don't wanna say even kinder cause when you meet people who are extremely kind who just, you know, genuinely like, wish you the best. It’s just hard to not do the same.

In addition, TRIO SSS taught the participants to be open-minded to not just different cultures but also to try new methods or hobbies to increase their personal development. Whether it was networking events, being more social and outgoing with campus events, student organization like a sorority, or going on the service trip with TRIO, these experiences made the students realize that there was so much opportunity outside of the TRIO SSS office and U of L campus for them to explore new things, sometimes for the first time.
The themes that assisted in answering the research question were TRIO SSS’s career development, advising, planning, and a sense of belonging and community. The data, in conjunction with both themes, displayed that the support students received during COVID-19 from TRIO SSS staff members positively influenced the students’ personal development during COVID-19, which was achieved through constant communication about available resources for students, a continued relationship with the office staff, and students feeling like they have a person(s) or place to reach out to gain assistance, whether that was a conversation about the obstacles that these students faced because of TRIO or a typical academic advising session that helped students navigate the virtual classroom.

Furthermore, the two themes, career development, advising, and planning, and a sense of belonging and community, correlate with SCCT’s Proximal Environmental Influences by the TRIO SSS office being a haven where students feel like they belong, can be open and honest, not just with staff but peers who can assist them. Having a positive Proximal Environmental Influence then leads to positive SCCT choice goals and choice actions found in the SCCT framework, which ultimately increases the indicator of a positive impact on career-related choices. Based on the research previously discussed, Background Environmental Influences and Proximal Environmental Influences from the SCCT framework connect to findings from Research Question 1. A significant focus in the research talked about the influence of first-generation student’s families, which affects the student’s decision-making ability and can lead to the students enduring familial pushback because they may overstep by inserting themselves in the decision-making process what the student does socially and academically, and financially assisting
the household while also taking care of their responsibilities. Familial conflict puts the students in an uncomfortable position because of the conflict between what the students want to do and the moral obligation the students have for their families. No matter how positively impactful the TRIO SSS office is to their students, the student’s family has a significant effect on the student’s decision. Although, at times, familial disagreements may be the unfortunate reality of some students, the research also highlighted the importance of positive proximal environmental influences that can assist first-generation college students in adapting to an environment that they are not as well versed in and, at times can lack assistance from their family.

Research Question 2

The second research question stated: How did the TRIO SSS influence program participants' academic performance during the COVID-19 pandemic? The results showed that the students did experience a positive influence on their academic performance due to the program's resource offerings, including guest speakers, tutoring services, and TRIO SSS Career Development, Advising, and Planning. The participants said that the topics of the guest speakers at the events were beneficial, specifically the College of Medicine speaker, who spoke to the students about the admissions process and methods to bolster an applicant's resume. Moreover, having knowledgeable, diverse speakers present at a TRIO SSS event showed the students that someone who looked like them and, at times, came from the same background had accomplished their goals and definition of success. The diverse representation allowed students to see themselves in the speaker, which increased their self-efficacy with career obtainment.
Participants also spoke about how the tutoring services in the interviews, although not to great lengths. The participants stated that the tutoring services were free, that they assisted with adjusting to college as a first-generation college student, and that they were helpful with understanding difficult classes, especially upper-level classes. In addition, the lack of in-depth feedback on the topic makes one believe that the students should have taken advantage of the resources regularly, which does not necessarily mean it was ineffective. This feedback also highlighted the parameters of tutoring in TRIO SSS, meaning, did TRIO SSS have enough student tutors, and if so, could those tutors tutor classes that the TRIO SSS students needed assistance with, or people who want to tutor, cannot, because they do not meet the requirements of having at least an A or B in the class they are trying to tutor. Also, TRIO students may be comfortable with their study habits, grow out of TRIO SSS resources, or go to other academic support centers on campus like the REACH office, which has more tutoring options for students to take advantage.

The TRIO SSS Career Development, Advising, and Planning data were confounding because data showed that TRIO SSS did not influence some participants' academic performance. However, the data also showed that based on the students' perspective, they felt the TRIO staff did an excellent job communicating with the students via phone, email, video calls, and Microsoft Teams and continued to send out resources to assist them with COVID-19. These COVID-19 resources included COVID-19 parameters of staying safe, remote events, emergency funds for financial hardship, mental health resources for those struggling to acclimate to COVID-19, and preparing oneself to go back to in-person classes on campus as a student. In addition, being unable
to go into the office in person was vital for the students who needed more interaction with TRIO. Some participants had a different experience because, during COVID-19, they were no longer on campus and were disconnected due to needing help visiting the office. Participants also stated they felt overwhelmed and that COVID-19 was difficult to maneuver with the new norm.

TRIO SSS themes that influenced the program participants' academic performance during the COVID-19 pandemic because of resource offerings include Career Development, Advising, and Planning, sense of belonging and community, and communication consistency. Although it may seem repetitive, the TRIO SSS Career Development, Advising, and Planning, or academic advisors, were at the core of the positive influence on the participant's academic performance during COVID-19. During this time, advisors consistently communicated by checking in on students and were accessible throughout COVID-19 if students needed immediate assistance. In addition, the advisors continued to send out resource offerings to students to ensure they were knowledgeable about campus safety updates, academic assistance like tutoring, or financial support that mainly looked like emergency funds or scholarships. Last, the sense of belonging and community was necessary because many participants talked about how difficult being in school during COVID-19 was due to the isolation and the unknown of what was next. However, the data showed that because the TRIO advisors consistently paid attention to not just the student during COVID-19 but also the person with mental health concerns, financial struggles, and fear of what was next, the students must abide by additional academic standards.
Research Question 3

The third research question stated: What role did self-efficacy play in TRIO SSS students' personal development and academic performance during the COVID-19 pandemic? The data showed that TRIO significantly impacted the students' personal development and academic performance during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the role of self-efficacy stemming from previous conversations that helped lay the foundation for them to navigate through this challenging period. The conversations with TRIO advising included having that relationship to talk to staff about their problems, which allowed students to feel comfortable reaching out during COVID-19 whenever they felt overwhelmed about life, wanted to relieve stress or get some advice. The data also showed that programming was still a part of what TRIO did during the pandemic and was helpful at times because TRIO gave resources on mental health. Last, participants stated that TRIO advisors had conversations with students on what returning to in-person class was going to look like, knowing the procedures, maneuvering in a new space of in-person learning post-COVID-19, and how to continue the communication with the professor and what the views on post-COVID-19 classes and classroom expectations were.

The data showed that TRIO focused on self-efficacy in many ways, including peer-to-peer interaction, advising sessions, and becoming more active on campus. With personal development, the data showed that students felt the most support to obtaining self-efficacy through words of encouragement, being outgoing, advising sessions, and TRIO events. The participants spoke about feeling out of place by being in a new environment, whether when they first came to the college campus or in TRIO. The participants expressed that the advisors encouraged the students to go after their dreams,
even if it seemed unrealistic, which meant applying for scholarships they did not feel confident they would get. However, they told the students that no matter the outcome, the advisor would support the student afterward.

Participants also talked about how interacting with students from other cultures tested their self-efficacy, but ultimately, those experiences increased their self-efficacy. This stemmed from randomly sitting next to someone from a different culture and sparking a conversation. In addition, students living in houses with different cultural values talked about adjusting to gaining social skills in an environment where most students did not look like them or have the same cultural values. For example, Katherine spoke about the difficulties of trying to unlearn looking at someone in the eye when talking to them because, in her culture, looking someone in the eye in a conversation is deemed disrespectful. Katherine attributed her growth in face-to-face communication to her experience in the TRIO office. Furthermore, participants also spoke about TRIO staff encouraging the students to participate in the office programming, even if they did not sign up, or have the students ask questions in a large group setting to a speaker they had never met, which can be intimidating. This allowed the students to feel supported when they felt vulnerable when asking a question or participating when many people were present.

Last, participants spoke about their experience with their advisor during their academic session, which involved continued reassurance from the staff, assistance with joining a social club or organization, and mock interviews and class presentations. Interviews and presentations can be daunting; however, the TRIO office practiced with the students to ensure they executed to the best of their ability.
As for academic performance, the data showed that based on the student's perspective, they felt the TRIO office did an excellent job of staying in contact with the students virtually by sending out resources via email and continuing virtual advising sessions that helped uplift students during a time when students had never experienced virtual learning. Some had minimal experience with virtual learning prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially with the magnitude of a full course load. In addition, like personal development, the student's self-efficacy conversations with their advisors made them comfortable speaking with their professors to comprehend how a class would be run and how students could excel in the new virtual option and, later, the new post-COVID-19 way of learning.

The impact of academic performance was highlighted through the student's outgoing ability and the knowledge gained from advising. The participants spoke about the knowledge and confidence gained from the TRIO advisors on the importance of a relationship with the professor, which involved communication, the confidence to ask questions in class, and visiting professors during office hours. Last, the students spoke about the confidence they gained with test taking and class scheduling because, for some, they needed assistance in knowing their options on dropping a class and how to find a substitute class.

Research Question 3 was also challenging in getting a full view of what the students experienced because of the problematic nature of COVID-19, which made learning difficult. Many participants entered fewer details than the researcher would have liked. However, participants expressed that they either graduated, were already living off campus, or had already decreased the number of times they came into the office. The lack
of interaction and time-lapse ultimately impeded the participant's memory of what happened. However, the students also stated that they felt disconnected from TRIO; however, they did appreciate TRIO for continuing to email with encouraging words, resources, and reminders about advising.

**Insight on SCCT**

In this study, the theoretical framework was the SCCT, more specifically, SCCT’s (2016) performance model. SCCT focuses on the influences of ability, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and performance goals on success and persistence. SCCT’s performance model predicts and explains two primary aspects of performance: the level of success people attain in educational and occupational pursuits and the degree to which they persist in facing obstacles.

The SCCT framework highlights enrichment programs, like TRIO SSS, and the staff members’ interaction with the students. This study has shown how important it is for the TRIO staff to foster self-efficacy, enhance proximal environmental influences, and have obtainable expectations and goal setting. The participants continuously spoke about how meaningful the students’ relationships with their advisors were to their academic performance and personal development. During their conversations with staff, the participants spoke about a plethora of topics, and all stated that after having advising meetings or impromptu conversations with staff members, they felt seen, heard, and had an overall sense of belonging. In addition, the students spoke about accountability and expectations that the TRIO SSS staff members had for the students, which at times may have put the students in an uncomfortable position. However, the students said they needed those challenging conversations to excel.
This researcher was already in agreement with the SCCT viewpoint on self-efficacy because many TRIO SSS first-generation and low-income students may need more external assistance to achieve self-efficacy at times, which is where the advisors and TRIO SSS resources are helpful. College is difficult enough for students who come from a two-parent household and do not have to worry about possible financial woes. So, having individuals invest in students who need a little assistance, especially students who were not supposed to attend college, let alone graduate, is a phenomenal site to witness. SCCT emphasizes the motivational roles of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and performance goals. Specifically, SCCT suggests that self-efficacy and outcome expectations work in concert with ability, partly by influencing the types of performance goals people set for themselves (SCCT, 2016). Having an advisor who has a relationship with the students, continuously pushes, and has high and obtainable expectations assists that student in obtaining goals they never thought possible. Students and workers with higher self-efficacy and more positive outcome expectations will be more likely to establish higher performance goals for themselves (i.e., aim for more challenging attainments), organize their skills more effectively, and persist longer in the face of setbacks. As a result, they may achieve higher levels of success than those with lower self-efficacy and less positive outcome expectations. Thus, favorable self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals help people make the best possible use of their abilities (Career Research, 2016).

Upon reviewing the data, SCCT’s proximal environmental influences, and aligning it with the SCCT framework, it became evident that maintaining an updated TRIO SSS space with an environment conducive to students feeling comfortable to
express themselves, seek support, study, or unwind, has a notable positive impact on the students. Last, SCCT reiterated that no matter how close students are to their advisors and how many resources are available to assist students, external variables like the COVID-19 pandemic or proximal environmental influences, as stated in the SCCT framework, can derail the success of a student.

**Study Takeaways on TRIO SSS Influence During COVID-19**

The experiences that the TRIO SSS students and staff members endured can be used as evidence of how to assist and advocate for students during another forthcoming global crisis affecting a college student’s expected life. To move the research further on factors that influence students, specifically TRIO SSS students, overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic or a crisis of the same magnitude, this study showed the importance of having a great staff that cares for its students and tries to build organic relationships with them, the importance of the TRIO SSS office community feel and culture, and resources accessibility, as well as constant communication with the students form the TRIO SSS office during the pandemic or a crisis.

During the study, participants consistently spoke about the importance of having a TRIO SSS advisor to talk to about academic issues, financial problems, or situations the students go through. More importantly, the participants spoke about the positive influence of having received encouragement, manageable goal setting, expectations, and accountability from the TRIO SSS staff members. Some students had never experienced this type of knowledgeable advising and care from another individual, even family members.
During COVID-19, students could receive assistance from staff during virtual advising. However, this communication had to be virtual, which was different for the participants and became detrimental during COVID-19 because they felt isolated without in-person interactions. Even though in-person communication suffered, the study showed that students were still utilizing the advising time to continue to receive assistance to help them during the pandemic. The advisors still helped the students find financial assistance (scholarships, emergency funds) that helped with books, rent, medication, and other incidentals. In addition, students also had to adapt to learning how to communicate with professors because, during COVID-19, students had to adapt to the new norm of communicating with professors more frequently.

With federal, state, and institutional mandates in place, COVID-19 did not allow in-person interaction at the U of L, and student morale was negatively influenced by isolation. The study showed that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the TRIO SSS office invited students to visit a great culture and environment and have advising meetings, decompress with peers and staff, or be themselves, and gave access to free printing among an excess of other valuable resources. However, most importantly, students could go to a place where they could be themselves and feel welcomed. The study showed that students’ feeling a sense of belonging and having a great relationship with the TRIO SSS staff were significant variables in students’ interaction. Therefore, during COVID-19, even though the students still had contact with the office, they still felt isolated because they did not receive that sense of belonging from TRIO SSS and justly from anywhere else because of the lockdown that came with COVID-19. Moreover, the lack of a sense of belonging because of the strict no-in-person interaction drastically affected the
students’ social interaction with TRIO SSS peers, on-campus friends, and student organizations.

Last, this study showed that even though in-person communication and contact were not allowed, the TRIO SSS office had to adapt to how it communicated with its students. TRIO tried different ways to ensure students were still engaged during COVID-19 by utilizing virtual options. This included consistent emails with financial resources and mental health resources, understanding how COVID-19 affected the student, how to prepare to come back to in-person instruction, and what the student needed to know about COVID-19 general updates. Going through the COVID-19 pandemic, concerning the TRIO SSS students, exposed what areas U of L needed to bolster to help in the future. During COVID-19, the TRIO SSS office increased mental health conversation and resources for external mental health services, in addition to online tools and resources with general information that is readily available if a crisis or pandemic of the magnitude of COVID-19 happens again.

**Recommendations for the TRIO SSS Future Research**

This study asked the participants about coping with stress, emotional support, and support during a crisis. Although these questions can lead down the path of counseling and mental health, that was not the focal point of the study. Future studies should examine how TRIO SSS students’ mental health is impacted. Higher education is no stranger to mental health conversation, but a focus should be put more on TRIO SSS students. In the study, the participants included only female students from TRIO SSS. However, the TRIO student population does include males. Future studies should see if there are discrepancies in participation from the male population in TRIO SSS. Possible
topics to focus on can be the relationship they have with TRIO SSS staff, a sense of belonging, whether the program is worth being involved in, whether the program is something other than what the male students thought when they signed up, and if they need more male staff member and guest speakers. Hence, they feel like they are speaking to someone that relates to them.

**Conclusion**

As mentioned earlier, the Kentucky CPE diversity plan focused on student body diversity mirrored the Commonwealth's diversity or the institution's service area, closing achievement gaps, workforce diversity, and campus climate (CPE, 2016). These actions posed great news to the higher education field, specifically those who interacted with diverse and marginalized student populations or employees who worked in this space. This study has shown that the U of L TRIO SSS office has contributed to CPE's diversity plan. More specifically, the TRIO student population is diverse, with students that are low income, FGCS, students with a disability, students of all genders and sexes on the spectrum, different religious affiliations, and students that come from all different cultures. During the fiscal year of Fall 2019, TRIO SSS served 144 students: 15% Asian, 34% Black or African American, 38% White, and 13% as two or more races. As stated earlier by Katherine, these students learn so much from each other because of their different backgrounds and how they learn how to navigate those situations.

Regarding achievement gaps, TRIO serves individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who may be persistent, stay enrolled, or graduate if given specific resources that TRIO offers. To reiterate, in 2019, the data shows, according to Goldstein et al. (2020) from U of L's Office of Institutional Research and Planning, low-income TRIO
students have a 66.16% persistence rate, and first-generation students, 65.43% of TRIO students, were persistent. Lastly, TRIO SSS students (86%) were in good academic standing, with the overall combined Fall 2019 semester grade point average (GPA) for TRIO students was 2.946, and the overall combined GPA for TRIO students' complete enrollment was 3.103. These reiterated statistics clearly show that TRIO students are closing the achievement gap for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds and having these same academically successful diverse students enter the workforce.

Regarding the campus climate, this measurement may take more work to identify. However, the TRIO students were engaged on-campus through the TRIO SSS office and other student organizations that would do campus programming, events, and community service. In this study, the TRIO SSS students and the office have displayed their contribution to the CPE diversity plan even through COVID-19 on the U of L campus. Unfortunately, due to recent events, these achievements may not be as impactful in the future due to unwarranted safeguards by stakeholders.

Recently, a Republican-backed measure to limit diversity, equity, and inclusion practices at the state level won approval by Senate vote (Senate Bill 6) (Schreiner, 2024). However, weeks later, a turn of events took place, and lawmakers ran out of time to decide to pass the GOP legislation, which was a surprise. Though the bill was not passed, the lawmakers’ actions have displayed the severity of the fact that DEI programs and services are constantly being threatened and are at risk of being defunded, which could impact programs like TRIO SSS across the nation.

However, DEI is used to educate by learning what happened in the past; accountability, how oneself (Black or White) is accountable for their current actions and
take their added knowledge to make a better culture for all moving forward; and last, continue to incorporate this viewpoint in all facets of higher education so that everyone has the same opportunities no matter their sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or race. Luckily, the bill did not pass because the CPE diversity plan may be significantly affected, which could have led to TRIO SSS programs falling victim to the reorganization of the new higher education landscape because the TRIO program focuses on individuals from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, the students who thought about giving up on school but were given the proper resources and care from staff members and then went on to graduate and succeed, who will do that for the next generation? What is going to happen to this student demographic? Anti-DEI legislation exists, but this study provides impetus for more research on the effects of COVID on a student's personal development and academic performance and why TRIO SSS is essential for student success.

Unfortunately, the anti-DEI legislations may undo all of the great work that the TRIO SSS office has done for its students through the themes found in this study by decreasing resource offerings due to lack of general U of L scholarship and funding for the TRIO SSS student population, decreasing career development and advising services by the students not having a more one-on-one advising experience that they thrive in, a decrease in financial knowledge and monetary assistance that TRIO specifically helped its students with guest speakers and specific TRIO SSS scholarship’s, a lack of consistent outreach from an advisor with a caseload of three times more than a TRIO advisor, and last, a significant decrease in the sense of belonging, because where will students go to be around other students that may not look like them but are in the same situation in which
they are not as knowledgeable about college and how to navigate, and need an advisor that knows them by name and will advocate from them. These are just a few examples of what TRIO SSS does for its students, but unfortunately, it may be derailed by uninformed legislation.
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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Primary Interview Questions

- Why did you join TRIO?
- To what extent (if at all) has TRIO helped you academically?
- How has TRIO helped your personal development?
- What have you learned in life skills from TRIO?
- If given the opportunity, why would you join TRIO again?
- If given the opportunity, why would you not join TRIO again?

Sub Questions

- Was TRIO SSS Academic Advising different from other advising experiences? If so, how?
- Do you feel TRIO SSS has provided Emotional Support?
- What resources did TRIO provide that assisted you with financial support?
- Has TRIO SSS provided support during an unexpected event or crisis?
- How has TRIO SSS assisted with your career development?
- How has TRIO SSS assisted with your academic adjustment to college?
- Did TRIO SSS promote self-efficacy? If so, how?
- How did the COVID-19 affect you as a student? (Academic, social, personal development)
- Add a question about navigating family dynamics as a first-generation college student?

*Define “self-efficacy” for the students being interviewed.
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2024 Indiana Association of School Business Officials Inc. (IASBO)

PUBLICATIONS

2018 Contribution of Student Affairs Preparation Programs to Undergraduate Student Success: Influences of Mentoring on Campus Racial Climate and Sense of Belonging

INVITED PRESENTATIONS

2020 American College Personnel Association (ACPA)
Topic: Contribution of Student Affairs Preparation Programs to Undergraduate Student Success. Abstract: Researchers found near-peer mentoring between student affairs graduate students and undergraduates creates a beneficial ripple effect on overall undergraduate sense of belonging and racial climate.
2018 Dialogue on Diversity, Conference Presenter
Topic: College experience for Black students: Myths vs. Reality. Abstract: We seek to rely on theory and surveys to understand why Black students choose to attend college based on the dramatic and unstable highs and lows for Black high school graduates enrolling in college.

2015–2016 Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (YRRP) Conference
Topic: Assisting Army Reserve (AR) families with the deployment cycle. Promoted the well-being of National Guard and Reserve members, their families, and communities, by connecting them with resources throughout the deployment cycle.