Oral Defense Announcement
University of Missouri – St. Louis Graduate School

An oral examination in defense of the dissertation for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy in Education with an emphasis Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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Understanding Non-Economic Persistence Barriers for Low-Income Students

Date: November 21, 2019
Time: 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.
Place: 110 Bayer Education Lab (TLC)

Abstract
The rising cost of higher education has created substantial college access and persistence barriers for low-income students. As a result, gaps in educational attainment between low-income students and their middle- and high-income peers have continued to widen over the last few decades. Several colleges and universities have taken notice of these growing disparities and responded by developing need-based financial aid programs to close unmet need gaps for Pell Grant recipients. These last-dollar financial aid programs have opened doors for more low-income students to attend selective institutions, but it is unclear how these programs will influence their persistence and degree attainment rates. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence the persistence of high-achieving, low-income students who receive full-ride scholarships that cover their full cost of attendance.

This qualitative study used a phenomenological research design to examine the lived experiences of 12 low-income students attending at a large, public research university in the Midwest on full-ride scholarships. Academic challenges, cultural incongruence, and family adversity emerged as major themes for persistence barriers in this study. However, the participants benefited from institutional support structures including academic support services, mentoring, residential hall programming, identity-based student organizations, and high-impact educational practices. The encouragement and validation they received from family, friends, and the campus community also emerged as critical resources to keep them motivated and focused on their goals while dealing with adversity both on and off campus. Implications of the findings are presented along with suggestions for future research on the persistence of low-income students.

Defense of Dissertation Committee
Patricia Boyer, Ph.D. (Chairperson)
Lisa Dorner, Ph.D.
Carl Hoagland, Ph.D.
Jerome Morris, Ph.D.