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FIRST IN MY FAMILY: OVERCOMING OBSTACLES AND UTILIZING RESOURCES TO
SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETE THE EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
Doctor of Education
in the National College of Education
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Abstract

First-generation college students encounter many hardships when trying to persist throughout their educational journey. They are expected to be successful in navigating their careers, family life, and school – all without anyone else’s experience to reference. When a student is the first in their family to go to college, they are expected to succeed with a lack of understanding the process. This qualitative study explores what assets first-generation students have and apply in their college experience that contribute to their persistence. This research is guided by Dr. Tara Yosso’s Cultural Wealth Model which examines many forms of cultural capital that students adapt from a standpoint. First-generation students must be looked at as holistic individuals. Data was collected through structured interviews with eleven participants in the upper Midwest in the United States. The interview protocol for this study focused on four topics: obstacles, assets, resources and being first-generation. Three themes emerged from these data: determination, support systems, and overcoming challenges. Within support systems, two subthemes emerged and those were college support and networks. Within the theme of overcoming challenges, the subtheme of access emerged. The major findings from this research study are: parents, limited college knowledge, faculty and staff, financial literacy, and difficulty accessing support networks and resources.

Acknowledgments

Since I was a little girl, I always told myself I would be a Doctor when I ‘grew up.’ In the last few years, I could not wait for that day to come. I dreamed of the moment I would be writing my acknowledgment; I knew I would get there – but I had no idea how many times I would want to give up. So many times I would walk away and say I was done, but then I had a little girl looking back at me, and my stomach would twist and turn, and I knew my reason why I had to keep going. So, let us start there...

To my beautiful, sweet, and intelligent daughter, Lea, I always felt like my calling in life was for two reasons. One, to become a Doctor and two to become a mom one day. Both were always a hope, a dream, a wish, but who knew, they would come at almost the same point in my life. At that moment, I felt so stuck. Just six months into this program, I found out the wonderful news that I would be becoming a mom that upcoming October, but how would I do both at the same time? How do I do this with a baby? How do I balance? So many thoughts – but those thoughts did not last long because I knew both were way too important to me. So many sleepless nights, writing and doing homework with you on my chest in the baby carrier, tears, exhaustion, and I am sorry for the moments I was not as present as I should have been, but this is for you. No mountain will ever be too high, and you can achieve what you put your mind on. I promised myself that I would sacrifice while you were little so I did not have you asking me when you grew up why we cannot go to the park, or why mama is not around or is stuck in the room writing and cannot play; you will not remember these moments of my absence. I will, but you will not. But again, this is for you. I could not fathom the thought of you hearing one day that your mom “started a doctorate program,” you had to hear that your mom “completed” a doctorate program, because you, too, will know that your dreams are not just dreams, they can

become reality when you work hard and chase them, and I will be right there in your corner through it all. Every step of the way. I was just thinking the other day about losing my identity of being a first-generation student. It is all I have been since kindergarten. One of my proudest identities for 24 years and it is hard to grasp that I will be losing that now, but Lea, I will proudly pass the baton to you now. I cannot wait to see you rule the world baby girl. You will do amazing things. I love you more than words can ever explain. Thank you for being my light, joy, savor, and all the above.

To my parents, thank you for instilling this drive in me. Probably more than I need – but I would not be where I need to be without it. Knowing you brought me to America with just one plastic bag of clothes and nothing else for a better life, there was nothing in the world that could stop me from chasing my dreams. I know I am hard-headed at times and every time you told me to just relax, it will get done, it gave me a bit more motivation because I knew you were actually praying for me and standing strong for me. When all I could say was, “I just do not know anymore,” you two stood strong, so I thank you. Despite all the setbacks with my health, we stood strong in front of each other, but I know we all feared behind closed doors – but look! Nothing could stop me. Thank you for all your selfless hours of checking in, taking care of Lea, devoting hours to playing with her, shopping with her, sleepovers with her, and pouring all of your full- and warm-hearted love into her. You two are what she needs, and I know she did not miss my absence for one second, and I am so lucky she is always in great hands. Thank you for picking up the pieces. To my brother, you are stronger than all your battles. Thank you for getting through all mine with me. Work hard and never give up. You got this.

To my husband, thank you for believing in me since day one. Eight years ago, when we met, I was in my bachelor’s program and told you about my detailed plans for my future,

highlighting all the way up until this point. I told you how determined I was and that no matter what is to happen, I do not plan to ever give up on my education. You stayed along my path the whole time. Thank you for talking this into existence and oftentimes calling me ‘future dr.’ and manifesting this moment for me, asking me many times when graduation is. Now we get to look forward to the next best graduation – Lea’s kindergarten graduation.

To the rest of my family, there are way too many of you, but you know exactly who you are. Thank you. For the countless laughs, when all I wanted to do was cry. When I was not fully present, because my dissertation was always in the back of my mind, and I could never really be clear-minded. I appreciate you all for also never missing a beat with Lea; her clothes and toys can be found at everyone’s house, extra support was never a burden for anyone even with their own kids, jobs, older age, responsibilities, and so much more. Everyone is willing to have her stay the night, pick her up, play with her, entertain her, fill in the gap, and it means the world. Even my lovely, sweet grandmas who at the ages of 84 and 77 are willing to stay with me during the week, help cook, play with Lea, have a set of eyes on her, help put her to sleep; the extra pair of arms and entertainment never go unnoticed – it will keep you young! Family coming from overseas to stay for months on end to help provide support. From the bottom of my heart, it means more to me than you all will ever know. Thank you.

To my chair, Dr. Jaclyn Rivard, I simply do not have enough right words for you. For whatever higher power we believe in, you are an angel sent from above. You always made yourself available, no matter the day or time, and nothing was ever too difficult. Your uplifting words still repeat in my mind, and always will. I most definitely would not be at this point without you. You have left such a mark and you have made this the most incredible journey.

Hands down this has been the hardest journey, but with your guidance, it has been an amazing learning journey. I am beyond thankful to have crossed paths and thank you for being you.

To my committee members, Dr. Brian Hamluk and Dr. Danielle Lemmerman, thank you for your guidance and support. I appreciate your expertise and feedback and being available at the needed times. This has been a journey for all, and all of your impacts will forever stick with me.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

First-generation students experience the same challenges as other students, but they face additional stressors such as “lack of academic preparation, absence of support from family and friends, and difficult cultural transitions” (House et al., 2020, p. 157). A combination of stressors can lead to mental health challenges, academic failure, and financial distress. Mentors, faculty members, and even the student themselves play a role in the development of policies and how to assist students when dealing with these challenges.

Engle and Tinto (2008) found that the 23% success rate of first-generation community college students was comparable to non-first-generation students in earning an associate degree or certificate within six years of graduating from high school. On the other hand, most first-generation students start at two-year institutions rather than four-year (Bui, 2002). There has been more research conducted on understanding success and failure of students, but continued research needs to be done on assisting first-generation students. Starting at a two-year institution allows students to save money and explore where they are headed. It gives them the option to take classes that will prepare them for a university, and they can utilize support resources to better prepare them for their institution (Bui, 2002).

First in family students have many strengths and have higher satisfaction in college compared to non-first-generation students (Evans et al., 2020, p. 1). The definition of first-generation students used in this paper is those that are students whose parent(s) did not complete a four-year college degree.

This qualitative study explored aspects of student’s persistence in higher education based on their assets and how those assets contributed to the students that persist. Research exists on first-generation students that are those who are the first-in-family with the goal of earning a

degree (Gofen, 2009; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). The role of parents is important and researched upon how their educational status impacts their first-generation child (Terenzini et al., 1996; Astin & Oseguera, 2005). Targeting finances is a challenge for first-generation students as it is correlated with parental education (Startz, 2022). Financial decisions have an impact on human flourishing (Geddes & Steen, 2016), and teaching financial literacy today is understood as taking responsibility for student's own financial well-being. Research around mental health is important as characteristics of a first-generation student usually serve as a disadvantage to pursuing their college education and they are more likely to be older, come from minority backgrounds, and have a disability (Bui, 2002; Hertel, 1992). However, unanswered questions remain around parental influence, finances, and other obstacles that are known to be challenges with which first-generation students struggle the most.

Problem Statement

Since 1995, first-generation students have comprised 36% of enrollments at community colleges nationwide (AACC, 2014; NCES, 2015). Although more first-generation students are gaining access to college, only 24% of the first-generation students entering college directly from high school will earn a baccalaureate degree within eight years (Choy, 2001). The opportunity, awareness, and achievement gap for first-generation students is reflected in differences in how individuals finance their education, peer support, and language barriers (Fry, 2021).

Understanding the experience of first-generation students is critical to ensuring that there is equity in education and that we have an in-depth understanding of how best to support this population of students. Understanding first-generation students can lead to a greater

understanding of factors that may foster their college success and how to increase college access to improve their retention and completion of higher education.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to describe the relationship between first-generation students and the assets and resources they have used to persist in their educational journey. This research explored college readiness and the application of assets to face challenges in the higher education journey. Capturing and understanding first-generation students' unique experiences may lead to strategies to better support their persistence. Administrators and staff can use these data to make decisions about resource allocation to support first-generation students in ways that target their specific needs. This study aimed to build understanding around first-generation students' higher education journeys as they navigate systems, encounter obstacles, and leverage their assets to persist to graduation.

Importance of Study

College students are navigating their education as well as their professional careers (Evans et al., 2020). Recognizing that first-generation students face obstacles to persistence allows educators to have discussions regarding opportunities to implement resources and support for enrollment and persistence. Higher education institutions will continue to struggle with recruiting students who are from minority populations due to the many struggles these students face. First-generation college students encounter many hardships and feel a lot of pressure from their families. Assets are important in a student's life to allow them to persist throughout their education. They are expected to be successful in navigating their professional careers while dealing with applications and student loans — all without anyone else's experience to reference. Nobody wants to let their family down, especially when their family is depending on

them to succeed. When a student is the first in their family to go to college and expected to succeed with a lack of understanding of college life, expectations, and resources, the future can be daunting (Fenjiro, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Yosso suggests that first-generation students must be looked at as whole individuals. Yosso's Cultural Wealth Model examined six forms of cultural capital that focus on and learn from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged (Yosso, 2005). Those forms of cultural capital are: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance (Yosso, 2005). The aspirational capital is the ability to maintain hope and dreams for their future in the face of real barriers. The linguistic capital is the ability for students to develop communication skills through various experiences; the familial capital refers to the social and personal human resources students have in their pre-college environment. The navigational capital refers to a student's skills and abilities to navigate social institutions. Finally, the resistance capital has its foundations in the experiences of communities of color in securing equal rights and collective freedom (Yosso, 2005).

For first-generation students, the aspiration of education is a space of financial mobility, as well as the cultural being based on storytelling that enhances students' ability to "memorization, attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, facial affect, vocal tone, volume, rhythm and rhyme" (Yosso, 2005, p. 75). Social capital is a form of capital that Yosso defines as students' "peers and other social contacts," and it emphasizes how students utilize these contacts to gain college access and navigate other social institutions (Yosso, 2005).

Yosso's work focuses on empowering students and resistance capital comes from parents, community members, and a historical legacy of engaging in social justice (Yosso, 2005).

Yosso's Cultural Wealth Model identifies and describes how the backgrounds of students from communities of color provide reservoirs of strength from which they can draw for the fulfillment of their academic aspirations. Yosso states that "it takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) parents neither value nor support their child's education" (p. 75). Instead, her framework offers affirming and celebration of strengths that are uniquely synonymous with students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This study was closely interpreted through related concepts of the Cultural Wealth Model as this concept seeks to affirm the cultural traditions and practices that diverse students bring to the college setting while also recognizing that these students need further tools and knowledge in order to navigate their educational journey. These forms of capital draw on the knowledge Students of Color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom (Yosso, 2005).

Research Question

This study addressed a gap in existing literature on first-generation students' approach to persistence in higher education, including their approach to facing challenges and leveraging resources and assets. Following the nature of general qualitative inquiry research, the central question of this study was open-ended and non-directional, taking an exploratory approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research question is: What assets do first-generation students have and apply in their college experience that contribute to their persistence? The interview protocol encouraged students to share their lived experiences leading them to share meaningful, personal

information about their college experience and how that experience shaped and informed their college journey. Participants' educational journeys did not begin when they enrolled into a community college but rather began with college preparation before enrollment and experiences of that were shared. This exploration of participants' preparation for college added depth to findings around their experience as a whole student.

Introduction to Research Design

A qualitative design was chosen due to its roots of holding a rich description, telling the story, and investigating of real-life experiences of each participant. This study heard from students firsthand about their experiences with diversity, cultural experiences, traditions, and struggles that assisted them with persisting through their education. The analysis moved forward with a simple qualitative inquiry and the approach was to learn firsthand from students themselves. The interviews were coded by categorizing qualitative data to identify themes and patterns. More information about the research design is below, with in-depth information in chapter three.

Participants

Individuals recruited for this study were ages 18 and older of any gender that currently attend Lucas Community College. The college's name used for this research is a pseudonym. The researcher kept the pool for participants very broad and did not put any limitations when choosing participants. Participants just had to be first-generation, meaning their parents did not complete a four-year college degree, otherwise gender, age, where they were in terms of their degree did not matter, nor did the program they chose, culture, race, etc., as the research did not go into those questions. The main criteria here was for all participants to be first-generation and participants were chosen solely on being first-generation, which are those whose parent(s) did

not complete a four-year college degree. Individuals recruited for this study were 18 and older years of age and a mix of genders. The researcher conducted eleven interviews to get an in-depth conversation with all participants by hearing their firsthand stories. The researcher planned for about two hours per participant and participants were recruited via email. This research collected data on the lived experiences of participants. The researcher worked directly with the Vice President of Planning, Institutional Effectiveness and Technology at Lucas Community College who then contacted students directly on the researcher's behalf with the invite email which instructed eligible and interested students to contact the researcher directly via email or phone if interested in participating. The researcher then recruited students on a first come first serve basis and scheduled interviews based on the student's availability. Data was gathered through interviews with first-generation students to gain an understanding of what their lived experience as a first-generation college student was like and how they persisted through their educational journey thus far.

Setting

This work was conducted at Lucas Community College in the upper Midwest. Lucas Community College was chosen due to their willingness to improve student's lives through learning. They enroll many first-generation students and also have a TRiO Student Support Services Program that encourages and assists traditionally and underrepresented students in preparation for the completion of a college education. This program supports eligible students whose second language is English and who are enrolled in mainstream college classes. They provide many services such as career exploration, tutorial support, financial literacy, various workshops, and many events that allow students to feel supported in many aspects.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The researcher conducted and recorded structured interviews via Zoom. Recordings were transcribed via Otter.AI and manually checked for accuracy. In qualitative research, data analysis systematically examines language, actions, and documents. Researchers use data analysis to recognize patterns, themes, and theories that describe and illuminate situations (Boudah, 2020, p. 111). The researcher looked at common themes and significant statements. Voice recording during interviews was used and later transcribed into text. Participants of this research all received a copy of their interview, and the researcher asked all participants to approve the transcript before proceeding with using any data. The analysis moved forward with a general qualitative framework and this approach was used to learn from the students themselves. The interviews were coded by systematically categorizing the qualitative data in order to find themes and patterns. All items including interviews, transcribing, etc. will be stored safely in a password-protected drive at home, and student names will be replaced with pseudonyms. The data will be destroyed after three years. The coding process went through two rounds, one of general coding and the second was an in-depth coding process to recognize themes and patterns that stood out for the findings.

Overview of Paper

Chapter one has introduced the topic of first-generation college students' approaches to persistence through the problem statement, study purpose and importance, the theoretical framework, and an overview of both the methods for this study and the paper as a whole. Chapter two provides a review of the literature, including an overview of the definitions, the role of parents, finances, mental health, social capital, peer mentoring, faculty and staff, and differing persistence, retention strategies for students and Yosso's Cultural Wealth Model theory. Chapter

three lays out the proposed methodology for the work including the research question, an overview of data collection and analysis, a discussion of methodological logistics and planning, and the researcher's positionality statement.

Chapter four reintroduces the reader to the purpose of the study and the research question. It continues to explain the qualitative method used for the study and it will refer to the coding and the three themes that emerged from the data analysis. Three themes emerged from these data: determination, support systems, and overcoming challenges. Within support systems, two subthemes of college support and networks emerged, and within overcoming challenges the subtheme of access emerged. Chapter five is the culmination of the dissertation and it contains the interpretation of the findings found in chapter four. This chapter focuses on the key points and what was learned during the interviewing experience. The discussion points to how the findings answer the research question and it discusses the significance of the study as well as the implications, recommendations for future study, and the dissertation conclusion.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

First-Generation Students

There has been an inflow of new college students in recent decades, the majority of whom are first-generation and first in their immediate family to attend college. Researchers are paying close attention to first-generation students to better understand their college decision-making and how to assist their overall success while earning their degrees. This is a group that has had the spotlight thrown on them several times by the educational system due to the erroneous idea that they lack academic preparation. Because of the common assumption from society that they have various types of support, motivations, or levels of parental participation, it is frequently considered that they face numerous challenges.

Defining First-Generation Students

First-generation students have been studied and defined through empirical research since the early 1980's and there are many variations in the definition of first-generation. One definition that is consistent is that first-generation students are those who are the first-in-family with the goal of earning a degree (Gofen, 2009; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996), which is the definition used throughout the paper.

Another definition of first-generation students is one whose parents started higher education but did not complete the degree (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). For the purpose of this research, a first-generation college student was defined as a student who is the first in their family to attend college and have a goal of completing their degree, and whose parent(s) did not complete a four-year college degree.

Role of Parents in First-Generation Student's Educational Decision Making

Parental education is usually a key predictive measure of degree completion for students of various socioeconomic backgrounds (Terenzini et al., 1996; Astin & Oseguera, 2005). Parents that have obtained some education, usually have greater access and knowledge of financial, social, and support resources. "Parents, families, and the communities in which students live are influential in shaping their views, expectations, and experiences about college. Empirical research from recent years demonstrates the influence of families in shaping students' attitudes about going to college" (p. 541). Insight into parents' views and interactions with college comes directly from communicating with their child to provide positive experiences in college for their child (Terenzini et al., 1996; Astin & Oseguera, 2005). On the other hand, parents who did not attend college can be less informed about the college process which can be daunting for their child (Terenzini et al., 1996; Astin & Oseguera, 2005).

First-generation prospective students face challenges such as information on how to choose a college; lack of knowledge over navigating financial aid; lack of family support; and lack of academic preparation (McDonough, 1997; Thayer, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2004). It was shown that even those that are prepared, are less likely to enroll in four-year institutions and are less likely to obtain an undergrad degree.

First-generation students confront disadvantages compared to peers whose parent(s) attended college (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003). They are less likely to attend college (Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006), with fewer than half (<50%) entering college the year after high school, compared to 85% of their continuing-generation peers (Engle et al., 2006). Some first-generation students who begin college have difficulty remaining enrolled and they are twice as likely as their peers to leave college without a degree (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003). Studies examining the

negative outcomes (i.e., dropping out) often fail to acknowledge that first-generation students often overcome significant odds to even start college (Becker et al., 2019). First-generation students have more dependents and lower incomes, and they are older and more likely to be married.

Finances

To target the financial challenges that low-income students and some first-generation college students face, former President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965. “First-generation students tend to come from lower-income families (average family income of \$58,000) than do non-first-generation students (average family income of \$120,000)” (Startz, 2022) are foreign-born, and come from households where English is not the primary language (Warburton et al., 2001). These students typically have lower overall SAT scores (Startz, 2022) and since the likelihood of attending college is correlated with parental education, first-generation students face more challenges than their peers when it comes to working through the higher education process.

Financial Aid

Financial aid is available to most students (Schelbe et al., 2019, p. 62), but some students may not understand the process or find it to be daunting (Schelbe et al., 2019, p. 62). Some may also not have the accurate documentation of citizenship, taxes, and financial documents that they are supposed to show and share. "One challenge is lack of financial resources, which sometimes contributes to students' need for employment while in school. The time commitment of employment can create challenges for first-generation students" (Schelbe et al., 2019, p. 62).

For low-income students, two of the biggest barriers to enroll in higher education are cost and lack of financing. The cost of education continues to inflate. According to the States News

Service the maximum Pell Grant covered only 36 percent of the price of attendance at a public four-year institution in 2004-05, down from 42 percent in 2001-02....And low-income, first-generation students receive only slightly more financial aid (26 versus just 7 percent) than their peers despite having greater financial need (Cook & King, 2007, p. 2).

Low-income first-generation students end up falling short for the required amount to pay for college, even when they get loans. Also due to insufficient academic preparation, low-income students struggle if they do not receive good grades or on placement tests, and do not realize the impact that this will have on their college journey (Cook & King, 2007, p. 1). The Pell Grant program plays a unique role in promoting economic and social mobility in the United States and it is the nation's largest single source of need-based grant assistance (Cook & King, 2007). The Pell Grant serves "more than 5 million students – one in every three undergraduates – annually" (Cook & King, 2007, p. 1). This is one of the most important federal programs as it creates opportunity for all students to benefit from higher education and recipients will be better prepared.

Teaching Financial Literacy

Financial decisions have a substantial impact on human flourishing (Geddes & Steen, 2016). The financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 exposed the lack of financial understanding and the financial decision-making of millions of Americans (Geddes & Steen, 2016). Today, Americans are expected to take responsibility for their own financial well-being in an environment that is complex with financial instruments. Academic literature often uses the terms financial literacy and financial education interchangeably (Geddes & Steen, 2016). Scholars are concerned about American's financial planning and education topics (Geddes & Steen, 2016).

There have been two primary reasons for increased demand for financial education (Geddes & Steen, 2016). First, it is the increase in the amount of American consumer debt. Since 1950, American household debt has been steadily rising (Geddes & Steen, 2016), while the total consumer debt peaked in 2008 at \$12.68 trillion (Geddes & Steen, 2016). Second, there have been reasons to increase the amount of financial literacy needed by ordinary Americans that is more expansive and it revolves around a recent situation, which is the growing number of choices in an array of finance-related areas and their related complexities (Geddes & Steen, 2016).

Mental Health

Characteristics of a first-generation student usually serves as a disadvantage to pursue their college education and they are more likely to be older, come from minority backgrounds, and have a disability (Bui, 2002; Hertel, 1992). First-generation students are usually born outside of the U.S. (Bui, 2002; Hertel, 1992) and are likely non-native English speakers (Bui, 2002; Hertel, 1992), as well as immigrants (Bui, 2002; Hertel, 1992), may come from single parents, and are financially independent of parents (Bui, 2002). Those that are dependent on their parents lack their own finances to support themselves through their education. According to Engle and Tinto, “research has shown that low-income and first-generation students are less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences that foster success in college, such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extracurricular activities, and using support services” (2006, p. 3).

Although institutions of higher education generally have done a better job of promoting college access to first-generation students, college success as measured by persistence and graduation rates (i.e., retention of first-generation students) continues to be a problem (Engle &

Tinto, 2008; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). These challenges can be exacerbated by enrolling at large research universities where classes tend to be larger and interactions with staff is infrequent (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics' Beginning Postsecondary Study describes the situation in terms of college success (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). It is shown that first-generation, low-income students were nearly four times more likely to leave higher education after the first year than non-first-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Alongside family duties and work demands, first-generation students tend to not be as academically engaged as their non-first-generation peers. Kuh discovered that first-generation and other historically underserved students tend not to participate in high-impact educational practices as frequently as traditional students despite evidence that they benefit from participation on par or even more so than their non-first-generation peers (2008). Kuh, 2008, conducted a study to examine the perceived academic obstacles of first-generation students. Using the Student Experience in the Research University completed by around 58,000 students from six research universities (Kuh, 2008). Researchers used nonparametric bootstrapping to analyze differences between first-generation and non-first-generation students' obstacles to academic success (Kuh, 2008). Results suggested that first-generation students more frequently encounter obstacles that compromise academic success, such as job responsibilities, family responsibilities, perceived weak English and math skills, inadequate study skills, and feelings of depression (Kuh, 2008).

It is noted that students' mental health is an ongoing concern and "...the prevalence and severity of mental health concerns is well documented" (Stebbleton et al., 2012, p. 17). Research

has shown that first-generation students whose family, such as siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and more, do not have the same access to higher education feel guilty about their educational achievements. High levels of guilt will impact first-generation college students' mental well-being significantly more than it will impact non-first-generation students (Markus et al. 2004). In the United States, a college education is associated with better outcomes for young adults (Markus et al. 2004).

Outcomes include better jobs, being able to venture out, not feeling stuck with what they are doing, and more success. However, graduation rates for first-generation students are significantly lower (Markus et al. 2004). Piorkowski (1983) used the term survivor guilt to describe the psychological experience of low-income, African American, first-generation college students who discussed feelings of guilt about academic achievement during counseling sessions. Piorkowski described the higher education experience of these students who felt like survivors because they "escaped" difficult home conditions that included alcoholism, severe marital conflict, and premature death of adult family members.

Some students have felt that in some way, they have abandoned their family because they chose to attend college (Piorkowski 1983; Weiss 1986, 1993). First-generation students then attempt to minimize their academic success around family members because of that guilt (Piorkowski 1983; Weiss 1986, 1993). As also documented in Piorkowski's clinical work, depression may be a possible consequence of survivor guilt. No work was found on how guilt may be associated with depressive symptoms among ethnic minority and first-generation college students, as it may be a barrier to retention and graduation.

Social Capital

Notably, urban students benefited from career exploration opportunities that are readily available in their cities and their high school (Sims & Ferrare, 2021, p. 1). As well as were preconditioned to see their home communicates as sources of social capital. Rural students relied heavily on fewer hometown mentors but also understood the urgency of forming new ties in college and ultimately bridged more successfully in the sphere (Sims & Ferrare, 2021, p. 1). Potential implications for student affairs professionals as well as faculty, seek to support and mentor first-generation college students, in which rural students in particular rejected mentoring and the first-generation college student label and wanted to associate more with their geographic background. Due to this, students from rural high schools create social capital through a different set of processes that can affect their transition to college (Sims & Ferrare, 2021, p. 1).

Yosso's (2005) framework of community cultural wealth explored how families who are not wealthy in a culture's dominant strand of capital can still have expert power. Yosso used critical race theory to argue that minoritized families should not be viewed as culturally powerless. Instead, they are uniquely powerful due to size-types of community-sourced wealth: "aspirational, linguistic, resistant, navigational, familial, and social capital" (Sims & Ferrare, 2021, p. 2). A foundation was laid for how non-dominant populations can recognize their capital. Yosso (2005) also noted that marginalized students who gain college access do so with a strong social support network, and these sources of support act as their form of social capital. Nelson (2016) noted ways in which rural students who may lack straightforward college-related social capital still benefit from other types of social capital (family-, community-, and school-based). These students are usually pursued by their school context to pursue post-secondary education and even their family was not focused on college.

In expectation to existing research, both rural and urban first-generation college students found other types of capital (e.g. resistant, familial) to help navigate the college transition. Rather than being students who lacked social capital, they were students who used aspirational, resistant, or familial capital, much as racially minoritized students have been found to do (O'Shea, 2016; Yosso, 2005). Students from both geographic groups rejected their association of the first-generation college student label and they did not view themselves as disadvantaged even when they were struggling academically. When it comes to building networks, it is seen that students from both rural and urban areas make a concerted effort to network to improve their social capital (Sims & Ferrare, 2021), and that impacts their academic decision-making (Sims & Ferrare, 2021). A student from a major city described how a large urban high school prepared her for networking:

“So high school did not really prepare me for college academically but socially it did. In high school, I went through a lot of friends, a lot of situations, so that now coming into college I know how to interact with people” (Sims & Ferrare, 2021, p. 15)

In contrast, this student expressed having limited perspectives of rural peers and suggested that universities consider requiring anti-discrimination courses due to problems being influenced.

First-generation college students lack the social capital that is necessary for them to succeed, persist, and flourish in college (Johnstonbaugh, 2018; Martin et al., 2020). The importance of having social capital for college success has led researchers like Schwartz et al. (2018) to evaluate interventions that aid in the building of social capital for first-generation college students. Schwartz et al. (2018) found that participation in the program assisted first-generation college students in forming more relationships with their instructors, more intentional

interactions and relationships with faculty and staff members, more belief in the importance of having support, and less avoidance in seeking help when needed.

Research has shown that an important factor in persistence is social capital, and this is especially true for first-generation college students (Schwartz et al. 2018). Social capital is passed from one person to the next and it is seen as an influential factor in students' transition to college (Schwartz et al. 2018). This has also played a role in academic and social integration within the college environment. A direct connection is shown from the importance of building and sustaining positive relationships because of social capital and the acquisition of knowledge through social contacts and its support (Schwartz et al. 2018).

Students Seeking out Mentorship

Mentorship should focus on a unique enduring bonded relationship that incorporates a wide range of roles, helping others to reach their fullest potential (W. B. Johnson, 2002; Stoddard, 2003). Mentorship can ultimately lead to a more resilient student, connecting them with the institution, which ultimately leads to a high degree of satisfaction with the institution, increased connectedness, the development of the whole person, and positive gains for the university's most valuable resources, its students (Hoffer, 2010). This dissertation will take an asset-based approach to first-generation students, involving mentorship and who were those who provided support and direction for first-generation students.

Over the past few decades, there has been an emergence of new perspectives on learning, and it is widely recognized that learning is a social process. A range of social practices through which students are supported to become successful learners include peer learning, active and problem-based learning, and student mentoring (Christie, 2014). Mentoring is one keyway to encourage student engagement and their participation. A 'Student Peer Mentoring' project was

created at a post-1992 university which is concerned with promoting student retention. Through this, new students and experienced peers are matched and there is a view to better support the mentees to successful conclusion of their degrees (Christie, 2014). The program was set up by a central university service to provide support for undergraduate students. Results showed other effects, including the extent of institutional control and the existence of power relations between participants (Christie, 2014).

Leadership development has become an integral process of educational programming for students. Mentors can emerge from individuals in various roles such as staff, faculty, peers, student affairs, and more. Mentoring positively influences others in developing leadership skills and including the development of their socially responsible leadership Erickson (1997). One of the main differences observed between the peer mentor and the traditional mentor is they assume the mentoring role at different developmental stages of life. According to Erickson (1997), in the developmental stages of life, the adult must decide between being involved or stagnation. When the mentor chooses generatively (development of productivity and creativity), he or she wants to help and leave something behind that will impact society or the mentee.

Professional assistance refers to mentoring that supports novice teachers and students in the development of skills that are associated with career responsibility. Psychosocial assistance is designed to enhance novice teachers' and students sense of competence and effectiveness through encouraging interactions. Support for this type of framework is drawn from Kram's (1985) mentor role theory. This theoretical foundation was utilized to explain functions that mentors play in a dyad relationship. Kram concluded that mentoring is a type of development relationship in which mentors provide two types of functions: (a) career functions, which focus on skill development of the protégé; and (b) psychosocial functions, which are centered on

providing support and encouragement to the protégé. Career functions “are those aspects of a relationship that enhance learning the ropes and preparing for advancement in an organization” (Kram, p. 22). These functions increase the likelihood of the protégé becoming successful.

Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring has filled gaps in faculty mentoring by impacting commitment and collaboration and this mentoring typically consists of individuals who have experiences in specific areas of the mentorship that students may need (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Dugan & Komives, 2010). Peer mentors are there to lead and guide mentees and it allows for more advancement for students in personal growth through their development of leadership skills. Mentors can impact an individual’s leadership values of commitment and collaboration (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Dugan & Komives, 2010). This is one way of enriching campus leadership programs and developing processes for students to receive needed one-on-one attention in their college environment.

As it may be known, first-generation college students cannot rely on family to assist them through the knowledge of higher education and to guide them on the path to success. Most students have access to school counselors, mentors, and peers at their institution to assist them in finding their path to help map out their journey. Many first-generation students struggle to make a smooth transition to higher education (Plaskett et al., 2018) and that’s a major reason why only 50% of first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds earn a degree, compared to 64% of low-income students who are not first-generation (Plaskett et al., 2018). Those with novel experiences are complex and they learn by experience in novel situations that there is difficulty and a need for mentors. A much more effective strategy is to learn from competent,

relatable models, and people who can draw on their own experiences to help first-generation students build a sense of self-efficacy and achievement (Plaskett et al., 2018).

Martin and Trueax (1997) conducted a qualitative study of the perceptions of mentoring by early childhood teachers provides evidence for the concept of transformation for both mentor and protege in their personal and professional development. The concept of mentoring in early childhood education is presented as a viable strategy in the effort to professionalize early childhood staff (Martin and Trueax, 1997). The broad research question asked was: "What does a mentoring experience mean to a mentor and a protege?" (Martin and Trueax, 1997). An interview strategy was applied and questions were developed; coding of interviews is discussed (Martin and Trueax, 1997). A model of transformation through mentoring relations, derived from the research findings, is presented.

Mentoring is being used more frequently to recruit and maintain novice teachers, and at the same time, help senior teachers to be revitalized regarding their work. The Martin and Trueax (1997) study conveyed the importance of a mentoring relationship that not only benefitted both the mentor and the mentee through self-actualization but was used as a tool to help the mentee investigate and learn, while the senior mentors gained a new perspective on teaching.

Faculty and Staff

Students may be reluctant or not know how and when to ask for assistance (Barry, Hudley, Kelly & Cho, 2009). Faculty have indicated that these students might experience isolation in the classroom and fall prey to what is commonly called the 'imposter syndrome' the feeling that they do not actually belong in college (Barry, Hudley, Kelly & Cho, 2009). The student population can succeed academically with a few recommendations. The main one is creating a supportive learning environment. This is where students are identified and they

welcome students to notify staff of their status so that professors have a context for understanding learners. If professors were first-generation themselves, they indicate their status by verbally expressing that and this allows for them to serve as mentors and role models so that stigmatism is decreased.

It is important to be sensitive to student perspectives and conditions. Student affairs and higher education professionals should refrain from asking individuals to speak for whole groups so that we understand they are not all the same and how they each want to be included. When discussing disenfranchised groups, such as homeless individuals, this is a time to be aware of first-generation students in their classrooms and how they may be part of those groups. First-generation college students, a growing yet often invisible population, must overcome a myriad of obstacles as they pursue their diplomas. With increased awareness and guidance, faculty can increase the support they offer these learners. By doing so, they can elevate the possibility that first-generation students will complete college and consequently have greater opportunities for professional success.

Komaraju et al. (2010) wrote:

“Student-faculty interactions can be crucial in developing students’ academic self-concept and enhancing their motivation and achievement” (p. 332), which demonstrates the notion that interacting and connecting with faculty members play a positive role in a student’s college experience and success. When there is a connection between faculty and staff members, this is when new relationships are built, and they increase the flourishing in students. Findings indicated that first-generation college students tend to have challenges with interacting with their professors and were less likely to interact with

their professors as compared with their non-first-generation college peers (Kim & Sax, 2009).

First-generation students need to interact with professors so that they can increase their sense of belonging and increase college satisfaction (Komarraju et al., 2010). Students who had a positive relationship with their professors and found them to be approachable, respectful, and available increased their confidence in their academic prowess and their motivation (Komarraju et al., 2010). On the other hand, students who felt their professors were distant and made them feel as if they did not belong decreased their motivation and confidence in their academic abilities (Komarraju et al., 2010). These results show that the relationship students have with their faculty members is a factor in whether they have positive experiences, positive emotions, and persistence in college (Komarraju et al., 2010). Students build relationships and that increases their social capital as well as allows them to transition to college smoother and better.

Differing Persistence and Retention Strategies for Students

In higher education, we hear of two terms: persistence and retention. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, they define this as “retention as an institutional measure and persistence as a student measure” (Wyrick, 2015). If institutions are doing what they should, they will be retaining students, while students persist onto their next terms. These two terms can become more confusing if we are not looking at stop out students, graduated, drop-out, etc. Researchers suggest “starting with a commonly used definition of a graduate- a former student who has completed a prescribed course of study in a college or university, it is clear that all graduates have persisted. However, not all those that persist will graduate” (Wyrick, 2015).

The focus on student integration is important to consider the role that institutions are putting into play by programs and policies that is focusing on student's needs, finances, and cultural backgrounds. Due to culture, there are many reasons why students may or may not persist within higher education, or why they may have different plans. Eight themes should be considered when creating a retention model and those are: "intentions and attitudes, institutional fit and commitment, academics, social factors, bureaucratic factors, the external environment, the student's background, and money and finance" (Hossler, 2015, p. 352). There were times when students chose the most affordable institutions, but today, students are looking to see what institutions are providing for them if they spend money at their institutions.

Black, Indigenous, and people of color must overcome a broad array of factors that identify as predictors to retain and persist among this population. On the other hand, we also have "post-traditional" students who are students who enter college and may be adults, have kids, are married, working full-time, etc. First-generation students also require attention when fulfilling criteria to help institutions persist students and give them necessary resources to continue on. A "discussion of underrepresented students should be separated from a discussion of those students who are more than adequately represented on college campuses yet also being underserved" Hossler, 2015, p. 333). First-generation and non-first-generation students must be looked at differently as they need different types of resources to persist in their education.

The important aspect for non-traditional students and students of color is for institutions to allow them to relate to traditional students as much as possible by giving them necessary tools that they may need. Over the decades, "campus racial climate has taken

tremendous steps forward to help make students of color feel welcomed in their new environment” (McClain et al., 2017, p. 8). Campus racial climate is described as “the current beliefs, judgments, and outlooks within an academic society about race, ethnicity, and diversity” (McClain et al., 2017, p. 3). This affects college’s retention for all students of color and campus racial climate outlines five crucial components.

The components are “institutional historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion, compositional diversity, psychological climate, behavioral climate, and structural diversity” (McClain et al., 2017, p. 3). On October 1, 1962, James Meredith became the first African American to enroll at the University of Mississippi. According to the U.S. Marshals Service (McClain et al., 2017, p. 3) prior to his enrollment, Meredith was denied admission to the university several times due to what was deemed as administrative errors. With the assistance of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and President John F. Kennedy, he gained admission to the university (McClain et al., 2017, p. 3).

Upon arriving to school, Meredith was met with opposition from students, state troopers, and the Mississippi governor, Ross Barnett. A multitude of U.S. marshals, army troops, and national guard soldiers were sent to protect Meredith and uphold peace, but protests erupted, and 160 federal agents were injured, with twenty-eight of those injured due to gunfire (McClain et al., 2017, p. 3). For the next school year, Meredith was placed under twenty-four-hour protection by deputy marshals. Wherever Meredith went, deputy marshals followed and encountered the same harassments and assaults as Meredith (McClain et al., 2017, p. 3). With grit and determination, Meredith graduated with a degree in political science from the University of Mississippi. Each component analyzes campus racial climate in higher education and they play an intricate part in marginalizing students of color. Due to the mechanisms, initiatives were set,

such as intentional programming, to develop social clubs that helped create lifelong bonds as students navigate college (McClain et al., 2017, p. 8).

Adjusting to college life can be difficult already, often times it can feel like a career change to students as they are going from high school to college. Being a first-year student means entering an unknown atmosphere that feels overwhelming. A method was used to understand feelings of confusing by collecting data on personal relationships and how media influenced first-year students. Meyer et al., 2009, interviewed 52 college freshman at a small liberal arts university. Each student conducted and recorded two interviews with students then later transcribed the interviews. The reports and findings were defined clearly in this report, and they were easy to understand. The findings that were being critiqued in this report stated that demographics were all different such as “Caucasian (84.5%), although there were African-American (11.5%) and Hispanic (4%) respondents” (Meyer et al., 2009, p. 1070). Students answered questions about their parent’s college levels and if students were currently working as well.

This research discussed how there is a range of personal descriptions for first-year students. The authors listed out findings again and stated that “majority of the first-year students interviewed (60%) believed that college was less difficult than their initial perception, and only a small percent (17%) believed the academic rigor matched their initial perceptions” (Meyer et al., 2009, p. 1070).

Institutional Support

Community colleges enroll the largest number of first-generation college students compared to other institutions (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). First-generation students also possess limited knowledge pertaining to college and often are unaware of the guidance and

support that come from building relationships on campus (Garriott & Nisle, 2018; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Community colleges are putting programs in place, such as TRiO program, and policymakers are creating programs to ensure students are being successful. This section will look at institutional supports, steps students can take to become college-ready, and what it means to be a first-generation college student at a community college today.

TRiO Program

Title IV of the HEA targeted students considered first-generation and low-income by introducing low-income specific financial aid and TRiO Programs. “TRIO” is not an acronym. Rather, it refers to the three original programs that were funded under Title IV of the Higher Education Act, Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, and Special Services (later named Student Support Services). The TRiO programs are federally funded programs created to serve students *and* families who need assistance, specifically with enrolling in higher education (Higher Education Act of 1965; TG Research and Analytical Services, 2005). The TRiO consists of four programs: Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Services, and Educational Opportunity Center (U.S. Department of Education 4 [USDOE], 2011).

College Readiness

In the 21st century, students to be college and career ready is complex and it requires collaborative efforts among secondary schools, colleges and universities, policymakers and business and industry leaders (DiBenedetto & Myers, 2016). There have been contributing factors such as student’s development processes, motivation, interest, aspirations, support systems, and socioeconomic status (DiBenedetto & Myers, 2016). These factors give a direction of becoming college and career ready and ultimately to be successful in the world. The conceptual model established a framework to assist in understanding the complex process for

preparing students to be college ready (DiBenedetto & Myers, 2016). College and university teachers can organize preparation programs they can benefit from this work to incorporate skills and dispositions into the undergraduate curriculum.

Obtaining a college education is generally accepted as both a goal and a value among students today. Policy recommendations that can help schools facilitate effective early education and postsecondary planning have included:

1. College readiness should begin in the middle school.
2. Schools should explain to students and their parents the effects of taking a challenging curriculum on their future educational, career, and income options.
3. Schools should use multiple sources of information, including standardized assessments, to help inform students and their parents of the students' progress toward college readiness.
4. Schools should work with families to calculate college costs and develop a plan to meet these costs.

(Noeth & Wimberly, 2002).

By eighth grade, over 80% of students indicate that they will earn at least a college degree and nearly half also expect to earn a graduate or professional degree (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). These educational and career expectations are consistent across race, social class, gender, and student achievement level (Freeman, 1999; Kao & Tienda, 1998; MacLeod, 1995; Tracey & Robbins, 2004). Many factors contribute to the expectation to attend college. Over the last three decades, changes in education and social policy have expanded access to postsecondary education, causing enrollment changes and universities to increase (college

readiness beings in middle school). The earnings gap between college and high school graduates has changed in proportion to the labor and skill demands of the changing economy (college readiness beings in middle school).

There are multiple steps that students and their parents can take to successfully plan for postsecondary education and become college ready. These steps build upon one another to help students make the transition from secondary to postsecondary education and training (McDonough, 1997). The early stages of postsecondary planning can include, but are not limited to:

- Considering postsecondary education
- Deciding to attend college
- Selecting high school courses to prepare for postsecondary training
- Maintaining good grades
- Gathering information about the college admissions process (including college admissions tests)
- Discussing educational and career goals with counselors, teachers, and parents
- Obtaining information about colleges and academic programs
- Obtaining information about financial aid opportunities
- Exploring college major and career interests

(Noeth & Wimberly, 2002).

The noncognitive framework, shown in Figure 1, was created to bring differences between researchers from various disciplinary backgrounds together, combine the huge amount of research material on a variety of ideas, and clarify their meanings. The review identified five broad categories of noncognitive characteristics, each of which has been linked to academic

performance: academic mindsets, academic perseverance, social skills, learning techniques, and academic behaviors.

Academic behaviors are behaviors commonly associated with being “a good student” (Nagoka et al., 2013). These include, going to class regularly, engaged in schoolwork, studying and completing assignments. Academic behaviors such as completing class assignments and participating in classroom activities are how students develop and demonstrate their content knowledge and academic skills (Nagoka et al., 2013). Academic perseverance refers to a longstanding body of psychological concepts (Nagoka et al., 2013). This is the student’s ability to remain focused and engaged in work despite any obstacles or setbacks. Social skills include interpersonal qualities such as cooperation, assertion, responsibility, and empathy (Nagoka et al., 2013). These are acceptable behaviors that improve social interactions between peers or between students and their teachers.

Learning strategies is the process and tactic that is employed to aid the cognitive work of thinking, remembering, or learning (Nagoka et al., 2013). There is a strong link between using learning strategies and academic performance and effective learning strategies allows students to leverage their academic behavior to engage in learning. This is important to meet the demands of more individualized learning in the college experience. Academic mindsets are beliefs, attitudes or ways of perceiving oneself in relation to learning and intellectual work that promotes academic performance (Nagoka et al., 2013). The theory and empirical data on academic attitudes are based on a lengthy line of studies in psychology. Students that have positive academic attitudes are more persistent in their work and exhibit better academic behaviors, which enhances achievement.

One common definition of college readiness is a set of abilities, behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge, both cognitive and noncognitive, that individual individuals possess and that affect their likelihood of completing a postsecondary education (Nagoka et al., 2013). Ultimately, the question is not just how to prepare students for college, but also how to create college contexts that better support a student's academic success. Thus, the responsibility for college readiness rests not just on students and their high schools developing cognitive skills and noncognitive factors, but also in post-secondary institutions being ready to support students in attaining a degree and high schools helping students make informed choices.

First-Generation Community College Students

Community colleges education many traditionally under-served students. This includes students of color, first-generation students, and low-income students (Green, 2006). In the twenty-first century, the processes by which students move from high school to college—including college choice, access, readiness, matriculation, and completion—are more important than ever before (Green, 2006). Students with diverse backgrounds must negotiate these processes if they wish to thrive in the educational system. However, not all students experience these processes in the same ways; for some students, the transition from high school to college can be extremely difficult (Green, 2006).

Historically, underserved students gain access and transitioning to college can be a great challenge. In recognition of these challenges, federal, state, and local governing bodies have instituted policies, practices, and programs to increase underserved populations' participation in higher education (Green, 2006). However, concepts mitigate the benefits of programs and policies for underserved students. Most underserved students attend community colleges, and these numbers are increasing as the nation experiences demographic shifts in the general

population that have produced a college-going population that is more racially and ethnically diverse than ever before (Laden, 2004). In spite of the increased numbers of underserved students attending community colleges, these students do not share the same level of success as their white and higher-income counterparts.

According to Adelman (1999), the strongest predictor of college matriculation and degree attainment is a rigorous high school curriculum. However, studies show that underserved students frequently do not complete a college preparatory curriculum and often take lower-level reading and math courses (Noeth and Wimberly, 2002; Twigg, 2005). Ultimately, to truly accommodate all students, community college educators need to ask questions that help develop and support policies and practices that provide multiple pathways for academic success.

Conclusion

First-generation students who are represented to be the first in their families to attend college means having the ability to adjust to very different social circles and many barriers that they must overcome. This population of students have always felt an uphill battle and these anxieties can mean having the encouragement to immerse themselves into simulated college experiences.

First-generation students strive for opportunities to connect with peers and faculty in relation to being more successful during their college journey. Outside the classroom, first-generation students ensure that they are socially integrated, and they seek opportunities for support services. They build authentic relationships and recognize diversity. In the classroom, students allow themselves to be as flexible as appropriate and seek resources such as coaching, support, mentors, etc. Universities must make time for students to not feel like an intrusion and to be patient and empathetic. Lastly, college students should implement patience with new higher

education processes and understand we are all in it together. The focus should be on adjusting, belonging, being productive, and maintaining good standing. First-generation students must remain confident in their journey and seek help when they feel lost or question their college existence.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Data, Methodology, and Methods

This chapter will present the methodology, including the purpose of this study, population demographics, and data collection and analysis. A qualitative design was chosen due to its roots of holding a rich description, telling the story, and investigation of real-life experiences of each participant.

Dr. Tara Yosso expresses that the student must be looked at as a whole in six aspects of their life: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance (2005). This framework allows for opportunities to connect with peers, faculty, and family to become successful in their educational journey. Building authentic relationships while recognizing diversity allows first-generation students to persevere through their assets and what is needed to complete their educational journey. Dr. Tara Yosso's framework guided this approach by looking at students as a whole and all of their lived experiences.

This research captured students' lives in an aspect of looking through all assets in their lives and what allowed them to persist thus far. Dr. Tara Yosso's Cultural Wealth Model examines many forms of cultural capital that students adapt from a standpoint. First-generation students must be looked at as holistic individuals. This approach may connect and encourage first-generation students to communicate their passions, motivations, and skills that oftentimes go overlooked and undervalued.

Research Question

This study addressed the gap of existing literature on first-generation students and their resources and what other resources could be put in place to assist students in succeeding in their educational journey. This study explored how first-generation students lean on assets. When a

student is first-generation in college and expected to succeed with a lack of understanding of college life, expectations, and resources, the future can be daunting. The hard work that first-generation students put into college is not as well studied; their application of assets is a critical question for those who want to support these students' success. The research question that guided this study is: What assets do first-generation students have and apply in their college experience that contribute to their persistence?

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, identifying patterns, themes, and theories describe and provides insight to the research. The interviews used for this research began by conducting the interview and then transcribing the audio recordings by using Otter.Ai. After the auto transcription was completed, the researcher checked the transcripts for accuracy and made changes as needed. The researcher then sent a copy of the transcription to each participant who was interviewed and asked for their approval before using it for any data. This member-checking process ensured that accurate data were collected and affirmed participants' choice to participate in the research. Trustworthiness was addressed through careful analysis of the precision, consistency, and accuracy through review of interview recordings by the participants. The researcher loaded the transcripts into the coding software ATLAS.ti. The coding software was used to identify topics and organize them into themes. Coding rounds took place and there were two rounds of coding. The researcher began the initial coding round and then conducted a second round to clean up the data and review the themes. The goal was to identify themes and classify data for meaning, and characterization, and explain the general qualitative inquiry to answer the primary research question (Ritchie et al., 2013). The next chapter will go into detail about the findings and common themes of this research study.

Participants

Individuals recruited for this study were 18 and older years of age and a mix of genders. All individuals were students who currently attend Lucas Community College. Students were at any point in their program and studying any subject and eleven interviews were conducted. The researcher kept the pool for participants very broad and did not put any limitations when choosing participants. Participants just had to be first-generation, meaning their parents did not complete a four-year college degree, otherwise gender, age, where they were in terms of their degree did not matter, nor did the program they chose, culture, race, etc., as the research did not go into those questions. The main criteria here was for all participants to be first-generation and participants were chosen solely on being first-generation, which are those whose parent(s) did not complete a four-year college degree.

The researcher worked directly with the Vice President of Planning, Institutional Effectiveness and Technology at Lucas Community College who then contacted students directly on the researcher's behalf with the invite email which instructed eligible and interested students to contact the researcher directly via email or phone if interested in participating and the interviews took place via Zoom. Two hours per participant was reserved and the study conducted a general qualitative methodology to describe the lived experiences of all participants. Interested students reached out to the researcher directly via email and phone and the researcher scheduled interviews on a first come first serve basis based on the student's availability. The recruitment email included an incentive for participation that indicated participants would receive a \$5 gift card after the interview.

All participants received an informed consent that was to be signed and returned back to the researcher before the scheduled interview. This informed consent covered the risks, benefits,

and information about data confidentiality. It was also clear that the participant could withdraw from the study at any time with no negative consequences. Contact information for the researcher and the institutional review board was provided and by signing the form they consented to being recorded on Zoom.

Confidentiality

There were no anticipated risks or benefits greater than those encountered in daily life. Further, the information gathered from this study could be useful in supporting the development of new programs that directly respond to this phenomenon. Confidentiality and anonymity were important in this study, and efforts were taken to control such factors. It is important to minimize harm to each human participant and the researcher did not and will not discuss the results of the interview with others. All notes, transcripts, and recordings were saved in a password-protected software hard drive and will not be open to others. Confidentiality and anonymity are also important as first-generation students already have a hard time talking about their lived experiences, so trust and rapport building is important at the participant's comfort level. This helped get rid of any undue stress to the participants.

Research Conducted at Lucas Community College

Lucas Community College is located in the upper Midwest. Lucas Community College is a public institution founded in the mid-twentieth century and is located in an urban area. As of 2021, 42% were Hispanic or Latino, 3,250 enrollments. Almost 41% of students were White, showing an enrollment of 3,171 students. 8% were Asian, with an enrollment of 593. 4% were two or more races, 327 enrollments, and 4% were African American, with 316 enrollments. When looking at enrollment status, 67% are enrolled as part-time and 33% are enrolled as full-time students. The total enrollment for both undergraduate and graduate students in 2021 was

8,050 students. Retention rate measures the number of first-time students who began their students the previous fall and returned to school the following fall. The retention rate for full-time undergraduates at Lucas Community College was 73%. Compared with full-time retention rate at similar Associates Colleges (60%), Lucas Community College had a retention rate higher than its peers. Lucas Community College has approximately 20 clubs and organizations that provide students opportunities to get involved and express themselves outside of the classroom. Lucas Community College is a diverse welcoming community where they welcome people from all backgrounds, gender identities, and beliefs and their mission statement is to improve people's lives through learning.

Limitations and Delimitations

One limitation of this study was that the experience of these students did not describe all of the students at the institution. Using interviews instead of direct observation relied on the student's memory recall and honesty. The researcher had to rely on students who volunteered to be interviewed. Such as students who had enough time, and are willing and okay to talk to strangers, and put themselves out there. Another limitation was that they are currently enrolled community college students. This eliminated all other college students. Another limitation was not being able to verify the results. In the interview questions, there was some guidance in the questions. This was a delimitation as it guided students into a response, but on the other hand, it helped students in some cases, as students may have needed guidance about what was meant by some questions. Guiding students into answers may result in responses that they did not mean but could have said due to being guided in a specific direction. Another delimitation was working with only one institution. Interviewing only first-generation students was an additional delimitation. This intentional action focused the work on this key demographic.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol for this study focused on four topics: obstacles, assets, resources and being first-generation. These foci were chosen in order to gain an understanding around challenges and resources encountered by participants in the study during their higher education experience with assets that allowed them to persist throughout their educational journey. This was a structured interview that used open-ended questions (Appendix A) and it was verbally administered.

Sharing challenges they encountered as first-generation, students built an understanding around how the participants overcame these challenges in order to persist through their educational journey thus far. Resources on campus have been put in place to support students, but whether those supports achieve their purpose depends on students' knowledge of and engagement with the resources. This work explored the potential impact of those supports on students' perseverance through the educational journey. Students' long- and short-term goals also impact their persistence in the educational space and it was discussed through the interviews.

Positionality as the Researcher

My positionality is important because it allowed me to reflect on my previous college experience and relate in a way that placed me in the shoes of many first-generation students. This narrative helped showcase my personal experiences which had biases that I had to set aside while conducting research.

As someone who was the first in my family to go to college, I remember researching colleges on my own and not having a clue of what I was doing or where I was going next. I started my educational journey by enrolling into a bachelor's program for Counseling thinking that was the only way that I could 'give back' to my community for being first-generation. I was

excited, yet so nervous knowing that I was about to go through this whole process completely alone. I had no other credentials to add to my experience, other than volunteering at my local church. Not only was I already a minority, who would possibly accept me into their program with a 2.5 grade point average? Thinking back to my grade school age, I was always enrolled into English Second Language (ESL) programs due to not knowing the English language as I was teaching myself by watching cartoons since no one in my family spoke English. Both of my parents only finished middle school and had no other educational experience. The knowledge of assisting me in any way was non-existent.

Now came the time to fund my education. In my culture, loans were a big ‘no’, and that frightened my parents that I was going to be using financial aid. Loans were looked down upon, but on the other hand, they knew that was the only way that I could pursue my dream of getting a degree. Going through the financial aid process alone was even scarier. It felt like I was signing my life away and had no idea what I was truly signing up for besides adding to debt later on.

Fast forward a few years, I found my true love for higher education. I knew that there were other students out there like me and I had to find a way to connect with them. In order to fulfill my dream of getting a degree in Higher Education, I had to rely on my own definition of purpose. I see now that this compelled me to condition my character with a strong sense of purpose and that was responsible for my personal evolution and motivation despite all the obstacles that I would have to overcome to get there.

This sense of purpose led me to study the role of first-generation students and what assets they have and how they apply that in their college experience that contributes to their persistence. My own personal experience allowed me to identify the strength that came from

purpose and how that outweighed any obstacle that first-generation students may have to overcome.

I had to seek help from advisors and counselors myself and to use resources at my institution to help me succeed each term. Mentorship is important in this research as it allows for students to connect to those that can help support them through their educational journey.

Although I may have been a first-generation student, I would not allow that label to get in the way of what I was meant to do.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what assets first-generation students have and how they apply in their college experience that contributes to their persistence. This chapter discussed the outline of the research process, the methods, the procedures, and the positionality statement. The chapter also included an overview of the problem, the qualitative design, the researcher's role, confidentiality and trustworthiness, the data collection process, and the participant selection process. The next chapter will reveal the results and analysis of the findings.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to give voice to first-generation students to identify what they have as assets that assist them in persisting through their educational journey. For many years, there has been conversation around first-generation students and the challenges and struggles they face. This study explored those questions as well as potential strategies for how to be more thoughtful about best connecting first-generation students to the necessary support and resources.

While it is true that first-generation students oftentimes do need some additional or different support than their peers whose parents have college degrees, first-generation students are an asset to any campus community (Carballo, 2020). By the time a first-generation student makes it to a college classroom, they have proven they can overcome obstacles. First-generation students prove they can overcome obstacles by working and supporting families, oftentimes taking care of parents and children, going through culture shock or having to have learn the English language as most times it is not their first spoken language. It is important to make resources known so that students may seek out necessary support. This study addressed the following research question: What assets do first-generation students have and apply in their college experience that contribute to their persistence?

To amplify diverse voices, eleven students were interviewed. These all very openly shared their experiences as first-generation college students. All participants were current students at Lucas Community College in the upper Midwest. They were all at various stages in their educational journey; some just starting, some close to graduating, etc. Each participant engaged in an individual, structured interview lasting approximately two hours, and then member checking was employed to affirm accuracy of transcripts. Each participant received a \$5 gift card

as a thank you for their time. Three themes emerged from these data: determination, support systems, and overcoming challenges. Within support systems, two subthemes emerged and those were college support and networks. Within the theme of overcoming challenges, the subtheme of access emerged.

Themes

Three themes were used to discuss the findings of this research. Determination in this research will be defined as a student reaching their own autonomy and forming their own motivated goals and regulating their own behaviors to meet these goals. A student's support system was the second theme, and this will be defined as any external person, outside of their campus, that offers the student the necessary support and guidance to achieve their educational dream. The final theme in this research was overcoming challenges and this will be described from a first-generation student perspective on ways they have successfully managed barriers and conquered difficult obstacles. Under the support system theme, two subthemes emerged and those were college support and networks. Although support systems were looked at as a whole, college support was looked at as a subtheme since it was brought up in many different forms and to keep external and campus resources apart, it was important to have college support as a subtheme so that first-generation students understand the programs and resources they have in place at their campus so they know to take advantage of those since they are available to them. The networks subtheme was also important since it was brought up in many different forms that it was important for first-generation students to network to build relationships for personal and professional purposes to become more successful students. Under the theme of overcoming challenges, a subtheme emerged and it was access. In some capacity, all interviewees mentioned

that it was important to them to have access to resources so they could take advantage of them so there are no missed opportunities.

Determination

A college degree is becoming increasingly necessary to succeed in today's economy. In fact, according to the Institute for Higher Education Policy, "70% of jobs in the next decade will require some form of postsecondary education and training" (Avila, 2023). College degrees offer graduates higher earning potential and better job opportunities. First-generation students are often faced with unique challenges and obstacles, but despite these challenges, they have the potential to change the trajectory of their lives, their families, and their communities. They often have a different perspective on higher education than their peers and are more likely to be motivated and determined to succeed in college. One student, 'J', reflected on his support through his educational journey to get him to where he is today and he stated:

...during the Covid outbreak. I was just like, severely extremely depressed and my family really helped me out because I would look at my transcripts and then I see it, like, two periods where I just had, like, GPAs of 0, and just like very low GPAs where I didn't want to do any work, and that had to do with mental health problems. But my family helped me out. I had to keep on going to work to figure it out, to keep on funding myself, to continue college, and I'll give up and I went out to seek out a counselor through my workplace benefits, and all that, and then, jumping back into 2021 with the determination in mind, I was determined to not let anything deter me off my path of completing my Associate's degree...the determination I was able to just power through and step by step, class by class, semester by semester, day by day, tackle on whatever came my way to finally complete my associates that I've been dragging on for quite a while.

‘J’ expressed having a lot on his plate, but always wanting to make the time for it all:

It's a, it's a full plate. I can't stress that enough like I was coming back from helping my mom going to the doctor, and then she's like, oh, I have this prescription at this place. Can we go get it? Like yeah, we can try to squeeze that in, I know that's a commitment that I made. There's family responsibilities of like being a good son, a good worker, a good student, a good reliable worker, but I want to have a good reputation and be presentable. I want to be a good son. I want to be a good worker, I want to be a good student. I dedicate so much time to school, but I also dedicate time to taking care of myself. It's this drive I have. I want to do good things and I want to do the next thing. I am determined to do it all.

‘J’ did also talk about his failures and that it wasn’t always easy, but he knows why he did it:

I've failed. I didn't always know what I was doing and I took it very personally. But I celebrate the wins, too. Like when my GPA went from a 1.9 to a 2.7, that was significant. I'm at a better mental state on how to handle college stuff. I'm actually looking forward to continuing my education for bachelors and masters, and that's an energy I cannot say I have had all throughout my academic career because there have been many points earlier in my career I just wanted to give up, drop out and just focus on work, help out my family and do that instead of just hiding behind books and whatnot but now that I'm excited to pursue more knowledge and gain more knowledge, to give back to my community and have a clear path of where I want to go, I'm very excited to see where my future leads me.

When the determination and motivation kicks in, first-generation students begin seeing results and those continue to drive them to the next big thing and help them continue making plans for

their future. Many participants in this study continued talking about continuing their education past what they are currently doing and that will be discussed further in this findings section.

Samantha expressed a lot of gratitude for her parents. She also stated that she saw the hard work that her cousin was doing, but after seeing how hard and all the effort her parents had to put in for her and her siblings to have what they had, she wanted to set up a better life for her future kids by putting in the hard work that she can now:

My parents too, like basically my parents work hard, especially my dad. I love my dad so much he literally tries to get me not to worry about anything. I guess for me, it's just kind of like, you know what, like, just keep going. You will fail. Get back up. I don't know, I look at my parents and I'm like you guys came with nothing, had \$0 in your pocket. Just because I fail something, I can get back from it, there's so many ways to make up for things, and I feel like that's where my determination comes in, and that's a lesson I learned very early on; so, get just get up. I realized that I built discipline and that discipline just reflected everywhere else in every other area in my life.

Samantha expressed some short- and long-term goals for herself and stated:

For short-term, obviously, I want to finish my associates in a year. I will be the first in my family and that is a big deal. I am taking law classes and hoping to take some business to combine the two. For long-term, I don't know, this might be dreaming too big, but I hope to have my own law firm one day. Again, my long-term goal is to make my parent's proud and I know they want to go back to Mexico, if I have my own law firm, I could help them live comfortably. It's like, I would have my dream job, and they would be living their dream, too, but again, for first-generation, it's so hard to see that far out, but I am determined to chase my dreams.

For a first-generation student, it can be hard at times to see the ‘big picture’ or to think too far ahead because of fear of failure. Many times, we go back to the idea of making family and parents proud and wanting to give back in that sense. Samantha feels that she would be happiest if she could do both at the same time, but fears that her dreams are too big. Later in the interview, she teared up and said, “*I just really hope my parents can be happy.*”

Another student, Scout, is determined to continue his education beyond his Associate’s and is proud to say he’s a first-generation college student:

It's given me hope and confidence to believe I can study anything. I mean, I'm considering an Associate's next and after that, maybe a bachelor's...it makes me feel very accomplished, just attending college, being able to say 'I'm a college student', I open my wallet sometimes to just look at my ID, and, see, to a lot of people it's like not a big deal, it's a little piece of plastic with your picture, but for me, like, I get a little choked up, you know, like, I'm 41 years old, I'm very proud of myself that I'm living a dream that I've always really wanted. I believed that I wasn't college material. Being a first-generation student, obviously, my family is very proud of me, and that's a huge deal, too.

Scout also opened up about mental health struggles he’s had about how he was determined to figure out a good balance in his life:

I'm also a recovering addict. So I go to 12-step meetings throughout the week for my own personal recovery and that has definitely taken a little bit of a back seat to the school and work but I make up for it on the weekends when I'm not working or in school. So I guess how I prioritize is to keep all the things that are important at a balance. I know I have to keep going with school and keeping my mental health stable, but I am determined to prioritize and keep things figured out best that I can.

College classes at times are known to be financially daunting for students, but for students like James who are determined to live up to their dreams, even when they are not approved for financial aid, they will do what they can to take classes, even if that means paying for classes on their own, so they can achieve their educational goals: *“Like I even paid for some classes on my own. I decided, you know, I didn’t have the financial aid, so I’m like you know what, okay, I’ll just pay for this and figure out how to do it all on my own, so okay, perfect.”* This shows true dedication and determination when a student has their mindset set strong on goals and is willing to achieve their dreams. James also shared that he is very proud to be first-generation because *“it’s shown me that I have more drive than I thought I did.”*

Another student, Erica, stated how it can be hard to not have guidance from someone directing you where to go next and pointing you in the right direction:

So when there isn't someone telling you this is what you're gonna do next, it's so easy to just be like, I don't know, I'm not gonna go to school, but I've definitely appreciated the hard work that I've put in more because of being a first-generation student.

Erica also stated that:

I feel this determination has made me appreciate a lot more, and I've appreciated the successes a lot more as well because I've had to work so hard for them, and sometimes I feel like I don't give myself enough credit for like having been able to get this this point in my life almost all by myself.

Mike feels that his determination stems from sacrificing so much in the last few years to get his school done. Luckily, he feels that he’s been supported from his wife and kids and that things are finally falling into place:

I sacrificed a lot over the years for me to do this (school) and a lot of other things to get done. I was always supported by my wife and kids and it seems like it's all starting to fall into place. So it's just, you know, trying to keep up and make sure those things happen because not only do I deserve it, my family deserves it. We've all made vision boards and we've all helped each other keep up with the vision boards, so I just want to be able to take care of my family and that keeps me going.

When Maria was asked to reflect on her being a first-generation student and what she was most proud of and how she was determined, she said:

The beginning is always gonna be the most important to me. Just getting started was huge to me. My GED graduation meant everything for me. Instantly when I walked through there, it instantly boosted my confidence, my self-esteem, and everything and I said okay, I did this, and now I know that I'm gonna be capable of doing whatever I want. I said I'm going to pave the road for my kids and lead the path to education for them. I have three kids. The youngest is in kindergarten. He sometimes goes to class with me, but I know I need to get this done.

Maria has heard people say to hear that it will take her years to complete this and she has been doubted many times, but she keeps telling herself, “*if you really want this in your life, you’re gonna go for it no matter what, until you finish it.*”

For Mary, being first-generation is pretty much a big motivation for her, she states:

I guess being first-generation is like my motivator, because it's always like, in the back of my head. I'm like, okay, my parents didn't like come all this way for me to like, fail. You know, they came here to like, to give me more opportunities, and if I don't take advantage of them, then it's like, a waste in a way. Also, you know, speaking two languages, and

stuff like that, like definitely motivational and wanting to pass that along. So that's definitely nice and that in itself feels successful to me.

The journey to college is certainly not the same for all first-generation students. Students from different cultural backgrounds and minority backgrounds often face difficult challenges in trying to obtain a college education. It seems as if many participants are motivated to become their best selves through education and their inner drive is pushing them to attend college to achieve a better life for themselves, leading them to be the first in their families to attend college and complete their degree.

Support Systems

Student's support system was the second theme, and this will be looked at as any resources provided to students to enhance their learning experience and overall well-being. These support systems can include components on campus, such as counseling services, financial services, academic advising, and more. These support systems can also include external people outside of the college that are their support system that offer necessary guidance to achieve their educational dream. With that, under this theme, two subthemes emerged, and they were college support and networks. It was important to keep college support and external people separate so that we could get the bigger picture of all the diverse types of support a first-generation student can have. Not all support is within the college, and not all are within their family, friend group, peer group, etc. either.

It's important to keep them separate along with the networks subtheme since networking was also brought up in many different forms of building relationships for personal and professional purposes for a student to become more successful. First-generation students must weld together two separate worlds: home life and academic life. These students enter new

situations with limited knowledge of the jargon and come from a variety of different backgrounds, it is likely to begin their careers at different points in their lives and it's important to keep the two separate when looking at the support systems so that the student can understand all the different forms of support they can have.

'J' focused heavily on relationships and how those helped him get to where he is today aside from the programs available on campus:

*My family helped me out. I had to keep on going to work to figure it out, to keep on funding myself, to continue college, and I'll give up and on that and then with that mental health struggle, I went out to seek out a counselor through my workplace benefits, and all that. My mom and dad are great support. My dad working and making sure that he can provide for the family and then there's my mother in the spiritual sense...my friend xxxx. He's a student at UIC, and he'll be finishing up his Bachelor's, and he's been giving me the insight. He's even offered me tours at UIC...then there's this one online friend in Texas. They're not in college or university at the moment, nor are they employed, but they're always interested to hear what I say, what I have plan. Always having that extra pair of ears to just listen and help you digest information is very helpful. I like to say my counselor although I haven't made a meeting with them in almost 6 months. They were a grand help in digesting a lot of the *** that has happened throughout the years.*

Scout's biggest support system that he expressed is: "having my friend who's involved. My partner is a big, big part of my life. She supports me in so many ways." Mary uses her parents support as a push to keep motivating herself to keep pushing forward with all of her educational goals:

That's really my parents, you know, they like immigrated here, and built a life off of nothing. So, it's definitely like inspirational to like, have them as an example like, okay, if they could come here and make a life out of, you know, having pretty much nothing, then like, I have no excuse.

James also says his biggest support is his partner:

My partner XXX is my biggest support. We've been together 38 years this year. It's so important to have someone by your side that just, gets you.

Support for first-generation students provides many practical benefits such as supportive relationships, and having people who can provide information, advice, guidance, and assistance in times of uncertainty. Social support can be comforting and it can enhance student's feelings of security.

College Support

Support systems play a crucial role in assisting first-generation college students through their educational journey. By creating a network of support, colleges are ensuring that first-generation students have access to resources that can help them overcome challenges and foster a more inclusive and supportive environment (Medicat, 2023). Despite the progress, there are still many difficulties for first-generation college students after they complete their college applications and are admitted to an institution. Many colleges already have resources available for first-generation and low-income students, but not all students are aware they exist. Thus, schools should make a greater effort to ensure students know where to find help if they need it. When 'J' was asked why he chose to attend Lucas Community College, he said:

...because it was very affordable compared to any other university or college around my area and then early on in high school, I got introduced to a program called TRiO

Upward Bound and they had a sign up for it, and I saw it as an opportunity to jump ahead and get some credits for my future. It didn't go so well because of personal issues and COVID but I am finishing up my Associates this semester.

For Scout, it was important to not have a financial burden when completing his degree. When asked why he chose Lucas Community College, he expressed:

I have a friend who recently attended and is working partly in the RSS program, but after explaining it and describing it to me a bit, I realized it was something that sounded really interesting to me and something I could benefit from and I really like to do. It's actually a state-funded program. So it's no cost to me to attend. That was definitely part of the decision that helped me decide to go to school.

Like mentioned earlier, support systems even include faculty and staff. Samantha highlighted her professors and stated that:

I would say the professors have been very understanding. I guess I got lucky with the professors I got because I know for my law class, I don't know if I should say what kind of the name of the class but he specifically explains everything so well. And he's always there to help. He responds quickly and he's very understanding about certain situations. Another professor, something else happened in her class, and I was like wow, that's actually really nice of her. You can reach out to them, and the other two classes I'm taking they've always made it clear like you know, you need help, just reach out. That's no problem. And I feel like my other school, it wasn't like that, like a lot of the professors were just kind of like, this is online work. You know, you could figure it out yourself.

Maria also mentioned more staff on campus by stating:

Um, I believe there was always the conversation with the instructors. They are a big support there. They're always willing to help you out with any question. I feel like every time that I stopped to talk with one of them, I would learn something new every time. But also the advisor, my advisor, she was she's been always there to answer my questions and my concerns regarding my education or any support I needed.

Institutions can introduce all campus resources during orientation, provide a list of resources in buildings and around classrooms, and list resources on school websites, and on the learning sites. Many resources include centers like the career center, alumni center, financial aid, organization centers for first-generation students and low-income students, and so many more. Institutions should also not assume that first-generation students will receive guidance on essential career development skills, and resources such as how to write a resume, cover letter, presentation preparation, can go a long way in helping students.

Networks

Through guidance, mentors can provide a healthy balance of support and challenge by transferring responsibility to students for their own learning (Dalton & Crosby, 2013). In addition to providing support to first-generation students by listening and responding to their needs, mentors must also hold their mentees accountable to working towards their goals. Mentors can refer students to resources and help manage their workload to offer support get connected to resources students might not have known were available.

Erica feels supported by her parents and mentions support by her professors as well:

I look up to my parents because of how hardworking they have been throughout their whole lives. I admire that they've been able to accomplish so much and in terms of other people, I feel like there's been teachers who I've looked up to and aspired to be because

of the way that they're able to connect with the students and the way that they're able to inspire.

For 'J,' when asked what he was most proud of as a first-generation college student, he talked a lot about his community:

So being a Hispanic guy going into like a mental health type of field or like social work type of field is something I'm very proud of, because not many people in my community tend to go into that type of field and be, like, as successful or prominent in that field I would like, I would say, I am proud to represent my community in this way.

He later went on to say that "it's kind of like being a role model for someone later on." Although he does say that:

I just wanted to give up, drop out and just focus on work, help out my family and do that instead of just hiding behind books and whatnot but now that I'm excited to pursue more knowledge and gain more knowledge, to give back to my community and have a clear path of where I want to go, I'm very excited to see where my future leads me.

For first-generation students, it seems as if a lot of the self-determination spoke about earlier comes from within oneself, pushing oneself to keep going for more. Many of my participants wanted to give up numerous times, but then they remember that they are representing their overall community and giving back is so important to them, and gaining that knowledge is what is helping them strive for more.

Scout uses his networking to achieve these goals in hopes to find a better paying job and to break stigma:

I'm Mexican American, you know, so I feel like I'm advancing my people as much as my own life. Anything I do, from here on out, you know, I wonder if I could be the first

Mexican American to do this or to achieve these goals or, or another one just to stand in, in the gap for a culture of people that is sometimes overlooked or are viewed as only a labor force and not always expected to achieve a higher education and better paying jobs. So I see myself as an example, you know?

Samantha talked about the importance of building connections on campus with staff members who play an important role in your education:

I've taken advantage of my advisor. I always email her or like talk to her. Even therapy. Like if you need therapy, you could go to this building, and it's free. It's access to college students, and you know therapy is so expensive and to have that like easily accessible in your community college, I feel like that's such a nice part. I know my advisor tries to be free whenever she can, you know, and like, everywhere I see that. Having these networks builds a community for me where I feel safe and heard.

Samantha also had to network with people at work to learn how to communicate professionally as her parents couldn't even teach her the proper English language:

I feel like I had to learn how to communicate through people at work. I couldn't learn it from them (parents) because obviously, they just know how to talk casually, like I'm not trying to be offensive but that's just how my parents are. They didn't even go to high school, they don't know English. I was so scared at first because I had to learn how to have good customer service, I learned how to talk to people outside of like, just my friends, my family. And yeah, I basically learned everything from work. So I think that really does affect my interactions. I had to take this with me into college because I had no idea who to turn to as I was seeking out guidance from mentors and such.

Mike is a basketball coach and spends a lot of time coaching his son's team and networking with spots and other activities in his community. He feels that building connections in the community will lead to jobs and 'building your brand' to something bigger in the community around you. His biggest network is his large family. He is an adopted child and feels that it's important for him to break the barriers of his biological family of drugs and college dropouts and feels that prompting college to his family is showing his true role model skills:

I have in my life are my wife and kids and basketball practice. So you know I'm always busy and running there's never there's never time. My wife and her sister and her kids. I have five other brothers and sisters. I have many nieces and nephews. So it's a busy day around here. It's important to learn to understand the family, being able to be around people, interact with people, different types of races, different types of cultures, learning what they love and also going back and forth. I think the biggest thing for me was being able to connect with people....The thing is I was adopted as a kid. Me and my brothers and sisters. We were adopted. My mother, our mother was heavy on drugs and I never really knew my dad. So when I was growing up, I started to learn my family history and come to find that this is how I figured out I was the first person to go to college. And then all the kids in the family see what I'm doing (with school) and want to do what uncle Mike is doing, or my kids themselves want it. It's so important to promote each other and encourage each other to stick to what we needed to do. So I just want to be able to take care of my family and a sense of what I felt like they should they deserve. Network with the community, with the family, put your name out there, it will get you far.

For Maria, she believes starting with taking care of yourself can help and that can lead into meeting and networking in other types of environments as well:

I've used the fitness center, sounds silly because sometimes for kids like I'm a mother and I tried to study while my children were at school and sometimes it's very challenging to go to gym to take care of myself. So sometimes I will use their fitness center as well. But I've met so many connections there on campus and it's motivated me to return.

Earlier in the study, Maria raved about her professors and how she stops to talk to them and learns from them. She also went on to talk about her children and wanting to “*show them the path towards education and the importance of it.*” She hopes by building connections on campus she is going to start by giving up some of her time to begin volunteering and giving back to the community. For her, giving back to the community is a big deal and gives her a sense of belonging.

At times, networks do not always have to be physically close to us. Liliana has a role model, her best friend, who she looks up to and relies on:

So right now I rely a lot on a best friend of mine. She was going here to Lucas Community College but because she ended up with cancer, she had to move out to Tennessee, but she keeps me going a lot. I mean just even seeing what everything she's gone through, it's like sometimes I feel like giving up and you know, she already reminds me like if I can do things like she's gone to school and stuff as well, then I can do it, too, you know.

It was no surprise that support systems were of much value to them and made such an impact on them. Those close to us who provide us with that support, especially during these life-changing moments such as earning a college degree, can also impact our determination as mentioned in the previous section.

Overcoming Challenges

Factors that have helped first-generation college students include school integration, government assistance programs, and a population shift that has increased minority presence in schools (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). During their time in college, however, first-generation college students confront distinctive challenges, including a lack of college readiness, financial stability, familial support, and self-esteem. Despite these barriers, first-generation college students can succeed in college (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Próspero, Russell, & Vohra-Gupta, 2012). The common denominators of success include participation in high school and college preparation programs, college assimilation, familial support, and positive personal characteristics (Hudley et al., 2009; Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013; Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014; Wilkins, 2014).

Being unfamiliar with the expectations of the college curriculum, parents may be unable to help their child prepare for college. First-generation college students rely on support in other ways, but they overcome challenges by seeking guidance and information from staff and resources available to them and oftentimes rely on themselves for academic success. In this study, one recurring topic was financial challenges. ‘J’ expressed how the FAFSA application was daunting and he’s just to “*assume to know to fill this application out every year.*” ‘J’ also expressed:

So you're able to qualify for scholarships or avoid loans and to fill that out with Hispanic parents can be troublesome because they don't know what is going on in the college atmosphere, and then for me, being a first-timer, I know even less. So we're just kind of like figuring it out altogether. FAFSA was always a headache and me having gotten my CNA certificate out of high school, I was able to work full-time to provide for the classes

that I could afford at Lucas Community College since we did not qualify for FAFSA, so money is probably one of the biggest issues and for me, personally, it would cause me mental health problems.

As mentioned earlier in this study, first-generation students are very determined and throughout this study, participants shared how they pushed themselves through challenges. As finances are still at the forefront, Samantha shared a lot about her personal experience with financial struggles and overcoming those obstacles:

I guess the money part was a challenge because everything I have had to pay out of pocket. Fortunately, I now have a job at a place where they do also college tuition reimbursement but it is like still a struggle because I have to pay it first, then show I passed my classes and then I get it (the reimbursement).

Cycles of unemployment that lead to a lack of financial stability can lead to an inability to cover the costs of education and this can be a challenging cycle to break. James was faced with this cycle, and on top of that, he feels that another challenge of his was being a student who was a little older than his peers:

Finances is probably the first one, which I'm sure everybody has issues with. Challenges being 59 and going back to school, I was 58 last year. So I was nervous about that. I mean, I had a high school education. I did a couple like college classes like two or three but life situation happen and that just didn't work out at the time. I was so much older than my peers. So the finances, being an older student. At the time when I started going (to school), I was actually unemployed. But you know, I got into the program and really loved it. It just changed my life. I found a job, figured out my finances...It was, it was a huge blessing. A huge blessing.

Erica expressed at times not feeling validated or understood:

And my parents, too, they've supported the best way that they can. They've always pushed for like a higher education, but I feel like they don't really know everything that takes to like do that. So even though they're they've been supportive, sometimes it gets lost in translation because their struggles are very different than my own. It's different challenges that I'm facing at my age that they're not able to validate.

Liliana expressed how her parents at times might not even understand what studying for a test might truly mean to her:

It's so challenging when they (parents) don't even understand what a test means at times. It's just like, oh, it's just like a regular school test. Like that's kind of what she (mom) thinks like it's just like a school test or you know, when so many hours I'm studying, you know, I'm doing it so many hours. Like she thinks I'm over-exaggerating, and I think I would like to have more support in that way as well.

Access

In some capacity, all participants mentioned the importance of building networks, having a community, being heard, and having access to resources so they can take advantage of them, or having more knowledge around resources so they could have possibly taken more advantage of them while they were available to them so there was no chance for a missed opportunity.

Informal mentors can be just as important as those mentors, networks, and resources that are physically put in place for first-generation students to seek assistance from. Anything that assists a first-generation student in getting the support that they need, is an important asset to highlight. In theory, it is very important to highlight all the important aspects of what is important to a first-generation college student. With that, this subtheme also focuses a lot on

access and all of the participants talked a lot about access to resources and what they wished they had used more of, had more resources available to them, and what they might not have even known was available to them. It's important to highlight this as well to help future first-generation students understand some drawbacks on gaining access to resources.

'J' mentioned that he *"has no missed opportunities, but I do want to highlight the importance of the TRiO Program and really make it known to all incoming freshmen. It is such a good program to know about."* TRiO Support Services is put in place to encourage and assist traditionally underrepresented students in preparation for the completion of a college education. This program also supports eligible students whose second language is English and students are enrolled in mainstream college classes. TRiO provides many services such as career exploration, assessment, tutorial support, services, financial literacy, and much more.

'J' also was aware of many resources on campus and stated:

Since I started early on when I was in high school, TRiO Upward Bound has been a very great resource, and the COVID outbreak was rampant and those were the years I was dealing with a loss of a best friend, and I ended up going to the Wellness Center to talk with professionals about what I was going through even though it was something that was outside of the campus, it clearly affected how I was gonna tackle my academic career. Financial aid office for many reasons already stated, and the writing place has been a wonderful place to proofread my papers and make sure that I'm staying on topic and answering the prompts that I need to follow. I used the writing place significantly. So just to like recap, it's TRiO, Wellness Center, Financial Aid, and the Writing Center. Those are the 4 resources that were readily available for me on campus that I have used significantly.

Scout feels that his biggest missed opportunity was seeking out help and feeling defeated by not trying resources:

I think I would have taken more of a chance to try some of those resources, like just meeting with a guidance counselor or someone to help me with the process. You know, getting prepared or even explaining to me how to do the orientation video, which was like, an hour-long or something like that, but I had received an email and then I lost it. So I wasn't even able to register and these are simple things, but they were real barriers for me. A lot of times when I faced them, I just felt defeated. And they were practical roadblocks. I guess I would have asked sooner had I known you know, I could just talk to someone and say, 'Hey, I really want to go to school' but I don't know even where to start.

Scout also feels that by working 40-hour weeks, it's hard for him to do practical things like eat, shower, drive, which makes less time to access resources that might be useful for him and *"I am trying to prioritize by keeping all the things that are important at a balance best I can."*

Samantha felt shy to ask the financial aid department for assistance although she knows they could be of big help:

I wish I went into the financial department and see what kind of financial aid they have but I've kind of been shy to like even go there or even email but who knows, maybe I can get a scholarship through the financial aid department, but really I haven't taken advantage and I feel like I should.

Financial aid seemed to be a pattern for most participants here as James, too, went into talking about how:

I wasn't really impressed with financial aid because I went to talk to somebody and they were looking at the previous year, or maybe even the one before that, where I was making more money, and then I had this period where I was unemployed, so I kind of had to advocate for myself with financial aid, and I got help, and it was already hard enough to ask for help, so, yeah.

On the other hand, he was so aware of the Career Development Center and networked with them so much that:

They did such an amazing job on my resume and I have a good background and some good jobs that I went to apply for an internship there, they're like, can we just hire you? So that career development as an older student, to be able to have an amazing resume, that was a huge asset.

For Mike, he felt that he didn't have the resources available to even know how to start college in the first place. He stated, *"the only thing that I've probably would have done differently is probably started school a lot earlier in life."* It can be a daunting journey to begin if you have no one that can guide you through the process and it can take years before you even take the first step to get started on your educational journey.

For Liliana, there were a couple of services she wished she used and wished were better:

Um, the one thing I didn't use, um, career services. I wish I would have used it when I needed it. I kind of just never got around to it. And then as far as services that I wish they had, I wish they had like they do have the Wellness Center. I did try it but I really didn't like it. So I wish that was a little bit better.

For any services available, it would be important to gather any necessary student feedback to continue improving the services available to always try and provide the best services possible.

Most first-generation college students have a hard time seeking out help in the first place. They either instill that they should figure it out on their own, or something pushes them back to not seek out help and Erica spoke on that:

I could see all of the resources that was available. I feel like I was always just focused on academia like, go to school, take your classes, go home. So I didn't really open myself up to those opportunities or those resources. and asking for help with people. I think in my family would have been good, too. Not necessarily my parents, because I know that they don't know much about what is available, but other family members, I know that were like educated or college educated. I didn't feel comfortable enough to ask them for help or for guidance, and I feel like if I would have, then maybe I wouldn't have felt as lost.

Erica did mention that “*thankfully the teachers were really supportive and very encouraging, and that helped to keep pushing me forward.*”

Lis went above and beyond thinking about resources for first-generation college students:

Maybe transportation. Like for example, majority of people has a car but sometimes some Venezuelan people that don't have a car and is very far and maybe the transportation is hard. I have a car and for me is very good, and I need to drive an hour and a half but I am very happy because I enjoy my classes and I enjoy this college.

Another resource, the food pantry. This would be helpful.

Mary went back to talking about the counselors and advising:

I didn't have the best time with the counselors there. I felt like they were very like generic. And like, just very basic, like answers like I felt like they weren't very specific when it came to like your specific path and stuff like that. Um, I think that was my biggest issue,

because then after that, I kind of just like gave up going to them and like did my own research.

It's important to invest time into each first-generation student as they will all come with their own personal journeys and we help get them on their own correct path so they feel supported on the correct route. First-generation students overcome many barriers in the process of applying and being accepted into colleges, but their struggles do not stop there. More can be done to ensure that these students succeed throughout college and obtain their degrees, opening the door to more opportunities and reaching their long-term goals, no matter how big.

Conclusion

Chapter four discussed the study's themes and subthemes with codes that evolved into categories. Three themes emerged from these data: determination, support systems, and overcoming challenges. Within support systems, two subthemes emerged and those were college support and networks. Within the theme of overcoming challenges, the subtheme of access emerged. These themes and subthemes were used to discuss the findings that helped to answer this study's research question on assets that first-generation students have and apply in their college experience that contribute to their persistence. In each section, the student's firsthand experiences, feelings, emotions, thoughts, and feelings were shared, as well as their lived perspectives and experiences. Self-determination occurs when a student reaches their own autonomy and begins forming motivated goals and regulating their own behaviors to meet these goals. A student's support system was looked at as any external person, outside of their campus, that offers the student the necessary support and reinforcement.

In the subtheme of college support, resources and programs were looked at as what was already provided on campus for students that they can take advantage of and what is already

readily available to them so there are no missed opportunities. The networks subtheme highlighted networking to build strong relationships for personal and professional reasons to become successful students in all aspects of their lives. It also talked about students getting involved in their community, college, etc. and allowing themselves to put themselves out there. Under the theme of overcoming challenges, it was looked at from a first-generation perspective on ways they successfully managed barriers and conquered difficult obstacles rather than avoiding or giving up. In the access subtheme, it was mentioned how students voiced that it was important to have access to these resources readily available to them so that future students know what is available and where they can go to these resources and know that it is important to them to have them at their fingertips.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to describe the relationship between first-generation students and the assets and resources they have used to persist in their educational journey. This research explored college readiness and the application of assets to face challenges. Yosso's work focuses on empowering students and resistance capital comes from parents, community members, and a historical legacy of engaging in social justice (Yosso, 2005). These frameworks guided this study, which looked at students as a whole and examined their lived experiences.

This chapter provides a discussion of the findings presented in chapter four. It will also apply the theoretical framework to interpret what assets first-generation students apply in their college experience that have contributed to their persistence. In addition, this chapter will also discuss the interpretations of the findings, the significance of the study, implications for practice, and offer recommendations for future research.

Summary of Research

More than half (about 56%) of students in the United States are first-generation college students, or students whose parents did not attend college (RTI International 2018). First-generation students have lower rates of college readiness, earn lower GPAs, and are less likely to complete their college degree in 6 years (Martinez et al., 2009). The home environment may not be as conducive to first-generation students' academic productivity potentially due to the families' lack of knowledge about college expectations (Watts et al., 2023). Currently, there is a lack of research on the assets that first-generation students have and how they apply them to their college experience. This study aims to fill the gap by focusing on the student's determination,

support systems, and overcoming challenges, and how these experiences have impacted the student's overall persistence in their educational journey thus far.

This research is guided by Yosso's Cultural Wealth Model and it pulls from the six forms of cultural capital which are: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance (Yosso, 2005). Aspirational capital is the ability to maintain hope and dreams for their future in the face of real barriers. Linguistic capital is the ability of students to develop communication skills through various experiences. Familial capital refers to the social and personal human resources students have in their pre-college environment. Social capital refers to peers and other social contacts. Navigational capital refers to a student's skills and abilities to navigate social institutions. Finally, resistance capital has its foundations in the experiences of communities of color in securing equal rights and collective freedom (Yosso, 2005).

The research methodology is qualitative, and it centers around students' firsthand reports of lived experiences. Structured interviews were held with eleven participants who all currently attend Lucas Community College and are aged 18 and older. There were 13 questions and one sub-question that focused on topics such as obstacles, assets, resources, and being first-generation. Students were all at various stages in their educational journey. Each participant engaged in an individual, structured interview lasting approximately two hours, and then member checking was employed to affirm accuracy of transcripts.

During data analysis, the coding process went through two rounds, one of general coding and a second, an in-depth coding process to recognize themes and patterns that stood out for the findings. The researcher loaded the transcripts into the coding software ATLAS.ti. The coding software was used to identify topics and organize them into themes. The researcher began the initial coding round and then conducted a second round to clean up the data and

review the themes. Three themes emerged from these data: determination, support systems, and overcoming challenges. Within support systems, two subthemes emerged and those were college support and networks. Within the theme of overcoming challenges, the subtheme of access emerged. A discussion of these findings will appear in the next sections.

Interpretation of Findings

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the lived experiences of first-generation students and the assets and resources they have used to persist in their educational journey. This study aimed to answer the following research question: What assets do first-generation students have and apply in their college experience that contribute to their persistence?

The next sections will discuss the findings under these main themes: parents, limited college knowledge, faculty and staff, financial literacy, and difficulty accessing support networks and resources. All of the sections will address the research question and discuss the personal experiences that participants had due to being first-generation college students. These findings include how students' persistence was impacted due to the assets they had available to them and how some experiences were affected due to not having enough support, access to resources, or networks in place.

Parents

The role of parents is important and research has described how their educational status impacts their first-generation child (Terenzini et al., 1996; Astin & Oseguera, 2005). Parents that have obtained some education, usually have greater access and knowledge of financial, social, and support resources. "Parents, families, and the communities in which students live are influential in shaping their views, expectations, and experiences about college. Empirical research from recent years demonstrates the influence of families in shaping students' attitudes

about going to college" (p. 541). Engaging parents early in the process and providing families with information builds on the funds of knowledge that parents can possess and provide their child with extra support and guidance.

Participant interviews revealed a lot about the parent's role in their academic career and how this can influence their educational experience. Key areas of focus emerged through conversations with participants and upon reflection throughout the data analysis process. It is clear that all participants felt it was very important to have parental support and that it was important to them to make their parents proud. Families have an impact on how a student values their education and parental involvement is a significant factor in a student's educational success and persistence. However, the level of involvement of the parents of the participants did not seem to matter as much. Many participants mentioned that their parents were doing the best they could, did not visit campus with them, had no idea how to do any of the application process with them, etc., but to them, it was important that they were making them proud and they know their parent would want them to get a college degree. Many participants mentioned that their parents migrated to America for a better life and they felt that if they were not taking advantage of completing their education here, they were wasting their time and resources and if their parents could come here with nothing to make a better life, they should most definitely take advantage of bettering their life with a degree.

In the interview protocol, the ninth question was "who are the people in your life that you look up to?" All the participants mentioned parents in some capacity and how they want to make them proud, be like them, give back, or are taking care of them to this day by translating for them, taking care of needs for the family, and making sure their parents have what they need. 'J' said his parents are a huge support and his dad is always working and his mother is spiritual,

although he does not always agree with that, he knows they have both been there when things got rough with his GPA and he was unsure of how he would get out of that rut. Scout talked about both of his parents dropping out to raise his sister and seeing that it made him believe he was not college material. Although his parents never got a college education, he said they both supported him in praising him and motivating him to go even if they did not understand the process of how to help him get there, they were always behind him to keep him motivated and give him that extra push.

Samantha mentioned her parents not speaking English to this day, but still being very hard workers. This has given her the drive and determination that if you want something, you will work hard for it. She sees them trying to provide for her and her siblings and it is making her want to try even harder. She knows they are there to assist with any problem, but they do not see the bigger picture since they do not understand the educational system here. She is even looking at the bigger picture of hoping to help her parents retire and live comfortably in Mexico since it is their dream to live back home one day. She said she does a lot of this for them and to make them proud, but she knows getting a degree will also help her in the long run, too. Liliana talked about her mom not really understanding how exams work. She did appreciate her support, but she also hoped for a little more enthusiasm when she felt she needed a little more encouragement. On the other hand, she said part of her doing her degree now is because she has kids at home and wants to be a role model for them. She wants to break the cycle and show them that you can achieve what you set your mind on.

Erica mentioned her parents always pushing for higher education. She said at times it may get lost in transition, but she knows they mean well since they never got that opportunity themselves. She understands that they might not understand it all, but she does appreciate them

listening to her and allowing her to chase her dreams. Oftentimes she's heard of parents influencing their child's career and major due to the parent already being in that career field, but she is happy that her parents allowed her to choose what makes her happy and are supportive of it. Lis did not talk about her parents directly, but she did bring up a great point about how her daughter's high school is inviting parents to come in so their child can begin career exploring and she thought this was great for early intervention and access to higher education and career setting and she was happy to be supporting her daughter in ways her parents missed out with her.

Claudia had very strong feelings about her parents migrating to America with nothing in their lives to give her more opportunities. She said if she did not take advantage of these opportunities, it would be a waste. She felt very strong to be proud to speak two languages and it was a motivation to her to be able to pass that down one day. She felt successful being able to do that and she knows getting a degree will just add to her list of being more successful.

Yosso (2005) discusses familial capital and explains that this component is one way in which families convey their values and shape their children's goals for pursuing an education. Familial capital, which refers to "social and personal human resources students have in their precollege environment, drawn from their extended familial and community networks" (p. 2). This is an experience within a communal environment that comes with the knowledge that campuses can help students leverage into positive experiences in college. Some things to consider are how to help students draw on values, and stories, how to create environments that honor, and how to get families to participate.

Limited College Knowledge

Participants all mentioned having some limited college knowledge that impacted their experience in some or all fields such as: career counseling, financial aid, accessing resources,

networks, etc. This section will go into detail on the impacts and issues a student may run into when they have limited college knowledge.

Faculty and Staff

In this research, some participants reported that they spent less time than they should have meeting with their college counselor. They also stated that they would have benefited from meeting with them, but they either did not, were frustrated, or did not ask the right questions or seek out help at the right time. Participants that did not seek out help felt they could have benefited from more guidance if they did seek out the assistance. Students may be reluctant or not know how and when to ask for assistance (Barry, Hudley, Kelly & Cho, 2009). First-generation students need to interact with professors so that they can increase their sense of belonging and increase college satisfaction (Komarraju et al., 2010). Students who had a positive relationship with their professors and found them to be approachable, respectful, and available increased their confidence in their academic prowess and their motivation (Komarraju et al., 2010).

When asking about someone on campus that a student seeks advice from, 'J' said that he did use his counselor once, and they were helpful, but he did say that he has not made an appointment in almost six months. He went on to talk about how this counselor was there to help him digest somethings that have went on in his personal life, but he did not talk to this counselor at all about his academics. It is good to have this extra support, but it also does seem like 'J' is not using this counselor to the full extent that he could be. These counselors are also there to help guide you, tell you what classes to take, how many credits, etc. Not having the full knowledge of how they are there to support, might be difficult if you later feel alone or like you have no one to guide you again in your academic career. 'J' was also asked about communicating with

professors via Zoom and office hours, and this question was not answered. For deeper questions or future implications, there should be a deeper dive into the support provided on campus and how exactly students are taking advantage of them.

Scout also says he regrets not taking the chance to talk to a guidance counselor. He had a friend who attended the school and he took her guidance, but he does see how he could have been a big help if he listened to a professional that works on campus. Scout says that he feels these guidance counselors are helpful with items such as orientation videos, accessing classrooms, helping set up student emails, and even items that seem small like that, were huge roadblocks for him, and having a helping hand and someone who is willing to sit down and guide you is a huge asset.

Claudia stated that she gave the guidance counselors a try but she did not have the best experience. She felt they were very generic and very basic and not specific and she gave up going to them. This is a resource that Claudia may not return to again, but she may begin to feel alone. She did not mention any support from professors, meeting with them, or how she communicates with them. Not having involvement or interaction on campus can make it feel like you are on the outside, when in reality, many first-generation students many need more time, support, and extra guidance to make the best decisions for themselves with their guidance counselor than non-first-generation students.

Galina (2016) states, “first-generation students must learn not only the content of their classes but the social rules and roles of academia. Even the vocabulary of college—words like ‘registrar,’ ‘bursar,’ and ‘GPA’—may be completely unfamiliar to these students” (p. 4). There is an assumption that everyone knows college terminology and understands its culture, but that is the perspective of non-first-generation individuals looking at it through their lens. First-

generation students can feel isolated on campus due to the expectation of having to adapt and understand many things on their own. Spending time visiting institutions, having support on campus and off campus, and developing relationships will ease many fears and much of the unknown.

Mentorship can ultimately lead to a more resilient student, connecting them with the institution, which ultimately leads to a high degree of satisfaction with the institution, increased connectedness, the development of the whole person, and positive gains for the university's most valuable resources, its students (Hoffer, 2010). Peer mentoring has filled gaps in faculty mentoring by impacting commitment and collaboration and this mentoring typically consists of individuals that have experiences in specific areas of the mentorship that students may need (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Dugan & Komives, 2010).

Financial Literacy

The participants in this study all discussed concerns about financing college. They all struggled with completing the FAFSA and understanding the application, or some had to work hard to pay for school out of pocket in order to make their dreams come true. Participants did not understand the financial impact of student loans, interest, and future debt. Many participants expressed frustration over communications with the financial aid office and counselors and not being able to get direct assistance. All participants also stated that ultimately, community college was the best decision for them financially due to it being drastically cheaper than a university.

Financial issues are many times a huge barrier to successful completion of college and for all participants it was a factor in starting college and being able to stay until completion, but unsure how to get more in-depth financial information during the process which would benefit each participant drastically. Financial aid is available to most students (Schelbe et al., 2019, p.

62), but some students may not understand the process or find it to be daunting (Schelbe et al., 2019, p. 62). "One challenge is lack of financial resources, which sometimes contributes to students' need for employment while in school. The time commitment of employment can create challenges for first-generation students" (Schelbe et al., 2019, p. 62). For low-income students, two of the biggest barriers to enrolling in higher education are cost and lack of financing.

'J' stated that he had visited the office a few times but had no luck. He said that he understood it is an available resource and it should be taken advantage of because the paperwork needs to be filled out, but he had no idea how to even go about it. Having immigrant parents, it made it even more difficult for him since they had no understanding of the application or process to help guide him through it. For Scout, he appreciated getting travel funds through his program at school and a laptop he could use, aside from that, internally he said he was not successful in understanding the financial resources available to him.

Samantha stated feeling shy about asking for help when it came to finances. She felt ashamed that her situation put her in the low-income bracket and she felt that she stood out from other students. She feels she should have done more to apply for scholarships but she did not take advantage of these resources as she did not understand the process of how scholarships worked and she put up walls when it came to asking for help. First-generation students already feel an overwhelming amount of pressure to succeed, there comes a sense of guilt in asking for help. They feel they do not share the full truth as it causes stigma and sheds the wrong light being put on their population.

James had a very difficult time in getting through to financial aid. He paid for many classes on his own out of pocket and felt a burden in having to work longer hours to make ends meet. This causes a cycle that never ends as it can cause burnout by trying to balance and juggle

many stressful situations by working long hours, attending school, doing assignments, paying for expensive classes, and more. James feels lucky that later he was able to run substance abuse groups to help fund his program, but he feels he had no resources to help him understand his finances during that difficult time.

Erica was in a similar situation as James having to work a full-time job and pay for classes on her own. She was able to step down to a part-time job and apply for financial aid and she is thankful for the help financial aid has provided, but she is worried about the burden this will bring her down the road with debt and not understanding the bills that will come later from this. She feels uneducated about the difficult decision of taking out loans, but she said she realized she was more stressed at work than attending school and she hopes by getting a degree she can find a more stable job in a field she actually enjoys working in with the hopes of becoming financially stable to be able to cover the bills that come later. She is unaware of what path was right or wrong to take, but she is currently hoping that she is doing the right thing in focusing on her education.

Mike on the other hand is very involved in the college. He says he is very aware of what is going on because he knows a lot of people and feels that it is important to get involved in your college and get in tune and involved anywhere you can. It is important to take advantage of all resources you can. He has taken advantage of other resources such as the food pantry and he feels he needs to be a voice for other students that are unaware of things that are there for their support. Maria also has used scholarships for materials, books, and computers. She feels that she is lucky to be a recipient of a scholarship and hopes for all students to understand finances.

Financial decisions have a substantial impact on human flourishing (Gramatki, 2017). In order to perform well in a finance-heavy society, good knowledge of basic financial issues is

crucial (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014). Such knowledge, which includes handling money and transactions, managing finances, identifying financial information, and analyzing risk and return, is known under the umbrella term financial literacy (OECD, 2013). Improving financial literacy is key for ensuring financial stability and a more developed, well-functioning society.

Difficulty Accessing Support Networks and Resources

Social capital is a form of capital that Yosso defines as students' "peers and other social contacts," and it emphasizes how students utilize these contacts to gain college access and navigate other social institutions (Yosso, 2005). Yosso's work focuses on empowering students and resistance capital comes from parents, community members, and a historical legacy of engaging in social justice (Yosso, 2005). When it comes to building networks, it is seen that students from both rural and urban areas make a concerted effort to network to improve their social capital (Sims & Ferrare, 2021), and that impacts their academic decision-making (Sims & Ferrare, 2021). First-generation college students lack the social capital that is necessary for them to succeed, persist, and flourish in college (Johnstonbaugh, 2018; Martin et al., 2020).

Entering the college atmosphere is a challenging time for first-generation students as they lack college knowledge and feel a disconnect. Although support is important, knowing about campus resources and accessing those are essential competitions to successful college completion. Participants in this research expressed being reluctant to reach out to school personnel and instead relying on family or friends and outside connections. 'J' stated that he has a friend who currently attends UIC and although it's not the same campus he attends, he provides him with information and accompanies him with forefront information he should know. He has given him information on what colleges offer and what questions he should be asking. He also has a friend who lives in Texas but is not enrolled in college at the moment. He said he enjoys

having him around since he listens to what he has to say, but he hasn't taken initiative to schedule any appointments with anyone at his current campus at Lucas Community College.

For Scout, he states that he takes night classes currently because it works better with his work schedule. His partner is a great asset since she helps with keeping his schedule straight and on track for him but does not provide any school information for him. Taking night classes, he feels he misses out on resources since many of the offices are closed during those hours. He also states that he looks up to his brother who attended college in the past and provides with a lot of great advice and does help out, but he feels that they look for different resources and different types of people to look up to.

Samantha feels that her cousin sets a good example by finishing her bachelor's degree, going to the gym, taking care of herself, working a good job, but like stated earlier, Samantha still feels shy to reach out to resources that are available. She feels guarded in having to figure out some of the logistics out on her own but she feels that she is not a bitter person and does not want to hold anything against anyone. She feels she knows what resources are in place and although she has kept a good relationship with her guidance counselor, the resources have stopped there for her.

For James, the most important was being able to financially fund the program. He feels that if he did not have a grant available, he would not be able to get back into school. Being able to have a grant was the only thing that got him enrolled back into school. Having more resources around grants and financial literacy available would provide more opportunities for other first-generation students to not have to worry about the financial burden that attending college can bring.

As mentioned earlier, Mike is very involved in the college, but he still has trouble accessing resources due to his busy schedule. He feels that his troubles come around trying to juggle everything – being a husband, father, work, going to school, sports, etc. Keeping the pace with keeping on top of assignments, and assisting your children with their homework, while driving them around to band and sports, does not allow for much time on your plate to access resources that would allow first-generation students to be even more successful. Some of these resources being incorporated into courses, orientation, or new student welcome webinars and calls would allow for easier access to resources rather than having to go on campus. If some of these resources became easier to access online or virtually as we see the world going more down that road, it may be easier for students who are more on the go to be able to attend to more.

Maria also feels that time is not on her side due to being a full-time working mom that also at times takes care of her nieces and nephews. She also struggled a lot with mental health when she felt a huge burden on her back for not having a high school degree. Finding a job was not easy when she would get turned down and looked down upon for not completing her education. She said reaching out for help and resources was something she never wanted to do as it put this fear in her that she would always get looked at as never good enough. She apologized to her inner child for taking so long to get to where she needs to be and now says that she is taking more initiative to be that role model for her kids and would like to have more access to resources so that she can continue being successful in her educational journey.

Erica's current struggle is graduating and transferring out to a university but not knowing the process. She is worried she does not have many resources to assist her with transfer credits, applying to universities, and getting started on her bachelor's degree, and she is worried about how this might push her back. Early exposure to these resources should start as early as middle

school or early high school years to get first-generation students comfortable with the process and understanding of applications, credit transfers, and providing any assistance with next steps.

Having resources available to first-generation students is important but it does not stop there. Active outreach, exposure, and promotion of these resources early on embody students to understand how they can access these resources to help lead them to persistence in their educational journey. Students have many reasons on why they may have difficulty accessing resources, in today's world, many things are becoming virtual, students now more than before are becoming online and remote, it is important to not have students feel left behind or in the dark. Resources need to become available online and not just physically on campus. When a student opens their student profile page on their school site, it should list all available resources, how to schedule appointments, video tutorials on how to access them, and more, so students feel comfortable navigating. Having mentors can allow students to feel cared for on a one-to-one basis and know they are not just a number. Student voices need to be heard and allowed to shine. This population of students are not as vulnerable as they may have seemed in the past with all the stigma, we may just need to allow them to express their needs more and to fully hear them out.

Significance of Study

The significance of this study is that it fills this gap in the research and acts as a starting point to understand how first-generation students use assets and resources to persist in their educational journey. This study demonstrates how certain factors, such as determination, support systems, resources, networks, and access to resources affect the relationship between student experiences and their continuance in their educational journey. This study also contributes to existing research that relates to the role of parents, mentorship, and limited college knowledge.

Under that, this research relates to faculty and staff, financial literacy, and the difficulty in accessing support networks and resources.

There has become an increasingly larger number of students enrolling at community colleges due to the different goals of these colleges. Community colleges also help to develop relationships with their advisors and select majors (Garriott & Nisle, 2018; Glaessgen et al., 2018; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). These differences may lead first-generation students to place more importance on college-related goals while they face more college- and other life challenges. Due to this, community colleges should not have a mere “one-size-fits-all” approach to assisting first-generation students in terms of a single program or support group. Community colleges should instead offer a variety of unique, evidence-based programming for first-generation students that is explicitly designed to give students at various life stages the tools and resources they need to succeed in their pursuit for higher education. Similar findings are found in existing research and add to arguments that suggest policymakers consider investing more in adding to resources that first-generation students need the most.

This study also contributes to the scarcity of research that demonstrates the need for first-generation students to get their voices out and heard. Many times their stories are looked at as a vulnerable population and a population we should be cautious about. In reality, they are tough, determined, and motivated, they just need to be heard. All participants had very positive responses regarding questions on their experiences and misconceptions about being someone that can easily be broken were made to be false. They want to shine the light on their population, they might just need a little extra push, or might just need to be shown where the resources are and be made more readily available to them. It’s important to not shut down their stories or voices and

to continue allowing them to provide the necessary feedback for programs and resources so that we can continue investing on future programs for all upcoming first-generation students.

Implications for Practice

This research study has shown that support systems externally and within the institution are important, but they are not enough to gain all the access and networks first-generation students may need. First-generation students many times have been looked at as vulnerable, but in reality are determined and want to get their voice out, just might not have had the right opportunity to do so. This study has demonstrated that it is important to continue providing resources and support to our first-generation students and implications for practice include engagement with first-generation students, support advisors, and exposure to workshops.

Engagement with First-Generation Students

As findings in this study have shown, first-generation students want to feel seen, validated and heard. They want to have a feeling of involvement and belonging at their campus and they want to have a sense of feeling supported. This means that regular action must be taken with frequent engagement and ongoing communication with first-generation students about their needs, wants, and experiences during the college experience. First-generation college students have a profound impact both inside and outside the classroom on the strategic goals of universities (Graham et al., 2021, p. 44). This will allow for feedback to improve resources, while in return gaining perspective on how the student is doing while genuinely checking in on their well-being.

In order to hear the voices of first-generation students, it is recommended to provide various different opportunities for their stories to shine. It can be difficult for first-generation students to share and open up, but that could also be because they simply have not been given the

chance and opportunity to be heard. They often times feel that they are not worthy enough or have enough to say, so they pull away. During the interviews, they truly appreciated that time was genuinely set aside for them to be heard and that light was being shined on their population. It is important for institutions to “1) recognize student strengths, 2) give space to capture intersectional first-generation student identities, and 3) involve students in institutional restructuring, thereby including students as part of a larger “engaged community” on campus” (Graham et al., 2021, p. 45). Many participants stated that they are not vulnerable, they are strong and determined, they just need the opportunity to speak up.

It may take time for first-generation students to open up, but it should start with first asking what their needs are so that we can provide what they are looking for. Action should be taken as if there is no follow through, it may cause them to not speak up again in the future. If first-generation students provide feedback, this will also result in more resources being created solely based on the needs of students because they are being heard and actions are being taken. Institutions should be welcoming students to open houses, mentorship programs, student organizations, open forums, to take surveys, and to participate in focus groups, all of which will be safe and give the opportunity to share honest experiences.

Support Advisors

This research has highlighted numerous times the importance of support systems. The institution now will be responsible for ensuring that first-generation students are supported on a one-to-one basis by a Student Support Advisor from the time of admittance all the way through graduation. When a student expresses interest in the institution, the institution will pair them up with a staff member that will be their advisor until they graduate. This advisor will be their main point of contact throughout the entire program to ensure successful completion and to be there

for any issues that may arise. This advisor will conduct a welcome call to the student to introduce themselves and will walk the student through important information (program information, website log in, how to register, assist with finding books, logging into student email, etc.). They will assist with course concerns and any questions the student may have.

Once the student begins a course, the advisor will be there to remind them of all important milestones happening via email, phone, and text message engagement. These milestones will be reminders such as, first day of class, you are nearing the mid-way point of your course, end of session, registration is opening up, etc. This will ensure that students are successfully attending all classes, registering for upcoming terms, and not missing out on any important deadlines. The advisor will also work on a metrics-based outreach strategy which will ensure that they reach out to students every month and a half so they check in with their students to ensure they are doing well and to check if they have any questions. The student is more than welcome to reach out if they have any pending questions or issues. This will ensure proactive outreach is being done and the student does not have to be the one to attempt the outreach first all the time. This will give the students a cared-for feeling and not make them feel like they are left out in the dark alone.

This advisor will also serve as an additional resource by monitoring the student's progress and participation to catch any potential at-risk students who are on the cusp of not passing courses. Advisors should build relationships with professors as well to keep an open relationship going if a student is not doing well so that a proactive plan is worked out to support the student on how to catch up, do better, and boost their overall grade. Without this mentorship process, students are likely to struggle in academia (Seymour, 2006, p. 460). Mentorship has

many positive benefits, and having an advisor can be an added support to first-generation student's support system.

Exposure to Workshops

Institutions do a good job of posting workshops around the campus, but we should continue exposing them virtually to students as well. For first-generation students, we should send flyers directly to homes, as well as send text messages about upcoming workshops. In a busy, virtual world where everyone has quick access to their phones, it is easy to see these notifications pop up. Email notifications are good as well, but student advisors should continue checking in with students to make sure they understand the importance of checking student emails and frequently accessing that email account.

Workshops should be very geared toward first-generation interest and surveys can be held throughout the year to get a feel for interest. This also relates back to gathering feedback, but feedback can be gathered so interest can be captured for what workshops should be held more or less of. For instance, around the time of year when it is time to do a new FAFSA, there should be workshops for the next steps on financial aid, scholarship search workshops, financial aid documents, etc. Students might be job searching and job fairs can be held. The career development offices can hold workshops such as how to write resumes and cover letters. These are many important items that classes do not teach, but they are very important to students.

Student advisors can also get together at the beginning of the school year to host live webinars for tips on how to be a successful college student. These can result in networking opportunities for students to meet one another, as well as an opportunity to learn how to be successful and persist through their academic year. Many of these workshops can be held by

advisors as long as the institution is willing to hire advisors knowledgeable in these fields that have experience working with these topics as well as with first-generation students.

It is also important to have new student orientation programs that are for all new students. All institutions have a different way of incorporating these orientations, but this orientation can provide the first insight into their program information, navigate the site basics, how to find important website information, and much more.

Recommendations for Research

This qualitative research study uncovered areas for continued research in the first-generation student population. Future research could focus on programs that offer mentorship to show the affects this will have on persistence. This research study relied heavily on relationships, support, networking, and striving off of close relationships with others and how that is an important part of the student experience, thus, future research should dig deeper into the influence that mentorship can have on GPA, academics, further involvement within the college, and more. Future research can include the different ways that mentorship programs can work (e.g. assigning mentors to mentees based on common interests, background characteristic, through relationship building, etc.). Mentors can be alumni, faculty, staff, older students, etc. Getting connected with a mentor will help ease the transition to college for first-generation students and help them navigate the college landscape. This mentor will help the student with campus resources and help connect them to available organizations, answer questions, and connect them with any social groups students are interested in becoming a part of building a sense of community and belonging. Second, further research can also include more research around meaningful student feedback and being heard. Allowing students to provide their

feedback in courses, surveys, and within programs allows for programs to continue improving and evolving and to continue developing to continue being at their best for all students.

Further research should also involve early exposure to the college process and financial literacy. Participants discussed having limited conversations with college counselors and although their parents wanted to be supportive, they weren't as involved in conversations or they might not have known the best ways to support. Participants also discussed challenges with completing the FAFSA process not knowing how to go about the application and oftentimes wondering if they were doing it correctly. College campus visits were limited and they were not even aware this was something they should be doing. It is recommended that this process starts early, perhaps in middle school, or early high school years, and include parents in the process to help develop college knowledge for both the student and parent. There should also be more assistance for in-depth financial aid information about completing the FAFSA, applying for scholarships, taking out loans and what debt means, and other important financial information to assist in determining the affordability of college.

Conclusion

First-generation college students have expressed much interest in making their families proud, being very determined students, and wanting to be heard, but do not always know the ways to get their voices out there. They understand the importance of accessing resources, and may have even tried to take advantage of a few, but they feel as if they still face barriers. These participants have shown that they carry a heavy burden – they just felt they were not college material. This study has shown that it is important for first-generation students to take advantage of the resources available and that institutions provide more geared resources and more ways to

let their voices be heard, as well as providing space for first-generation students to provide feedback.

On the other side, many participants share positive stories of connection with faculty members and positive relationships within the institution. They felt that the resources they used were positive and the support was appreciated. More times familial support was highlighted, but it is important that institutional support is essential as well and there needs to be a focus on institutions providing that. Working closely with support advisors will enhance academic success and attending workshops will allow for networking opportunities, a lot of which participants expressed wanting. External supports can offer motivation in the best ways they can, not understanding the educational system, but we see the most determination come from the students themselves. My goal with this research was to highlight the drive that first-generation students have, and to focus on the importance of allowing their voices to be heard to assist future first-generation students in seeking out all possible resources so there are no missed opportunities and gaps.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. Why did you choose to attend Lucas Community College and how long have you been a student there?
2. What challenges have you faced as a first-generation college student?
3. While a student at Lucas, what resources and supports have you taken advantage of?
These might include the financial aid office, student support services such as writing support or the career center, advising, or other supports and resources.
4. Continuing to think about supports that may have helped you face challenges or be successful in college, are there any existing supports you wish you had used, or any supports not available that you wish *were* available?
5. What resources were in place that helped you persist through your educational journey?
6. What are your short- and long- term goals for yourself as a first-generation student and more broadly in life?
7. While enrolled at Lucas Community College have you also held a job now or at any time? How did or has that impacted your work as a first-generation student?
8. What other responsibilities do you have in your life, and how do you prioritize and balance school, work, and those responsibilities?
9. Who are the people in your life you look up to, seek advice from, or who inspire how you live your life?
10. First-generation students are students whose parent(s) did not complete a four-year college degree. How does being a first-generation college student impact your

educational journey, including your approach to learning, interactions on campus, and your educational goals?

- a. If you were not a first-generation college student, how might your educational journey and goals have been different?

11. When you think about your identity as a first-generation college student, what part of your journey are you most proud of? This might be a way you work, an accomplishment, a thing you learned, a connection you made, or anything that brings you pride.
12. How has being a first-generation student played a part in your successes and failures as a student?
13. What haven't I asked that you think I should know about your life?