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I'm First: A Phenomenological Analysis of the University of North Carolina's "Carolina Firsts" Interviews

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"My story really starts with my dad ... He was originally born in Peru, he was an orphan, but it was always his desire to come to the United States and in 1960 he came by himself ... after the family was reunited I was born, the first American in my family ... once I got into college ... the distance was really short [but] the sort of cultural travel was really far" (Carolina, Cuadros). Nearly 20 percent of undergraduates enrolled at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill are first-generation students (Carolina, Undergraduate). As the nation's first public university, UNC has gained recognition as one of the best universities in the world. In March 2012, the University conducted interviews with first-generation students, staff, and faculty, which were intended to function as a recruitment tool for prospective students.

First-generation students face unique challenges during their transition from high school to college because they lack the personal history helpful in pursuing a college education due to limited educational opportunities experienced by family members. In other words, certain barriers influence the levels of preparation first-generation students receive for a smooth integration into a rigorous college environment. For example, language barriers, cultural differences, and socioeconomic factors operate as isolated variables or concurrently, which inform the first-generation student phenomenon. As such, these factors have serious implications for the transitional window of change experienced during the first semester of college and thereafter. Despite the numerous obstacles first-generation students must overcome they manage to become the first person in their family to attend college.

The experiences of first-generation students merit further analysis because their stories represent unique struggles with accessing, pursuing, and remaining in higher education from a disadvantaged standpoint. Often times, members of this subgroup feel as though they navigate their college experiences alone. The concept of loneliness is crucial to understanding the importance of studying first-generation college students. A college campus functions as a safe haven for a special sense of belonging and community. This study sheds light on the lived experiences of first-generation students and the common threads that unite them all. Why do first-generation students feel alone? Do college environments encourage first-generation students to find support among their peers with similar lived experiences?

Scholars and researchers have primarily investigated the experiences of first-generation students through phenomenological inquiry. Researchers have focused on minority students and their experiences at community colleges, the memorable messages received from on-campus mentors about college, the accessibility and successfulness of service learning courses, and also the co-cultural communication practices that students create between their lives at home and on campus. The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry is to examine the Carolina Firsts testimonials to determine if common experiences exist among the interviewees that will enable educators, students, and researchers to gain insights about the symbolic, cultural, and social meaning embedded in the interviewees' words and lived experiences. Based on the data analysis, the common experiences shared by the interviewees were meaningful. However, the similar experiences exist in tandem with personal experience. The findings are contradictory and provide a new lens with which to view the complex lived experiences of first-generation students.

Literature Review

Current research on first-generation students includes studies conducted at public universities and community colleges. These students are members of a subgroup within broader

college populations. Four themes emerge in the literature: (1) negotiating college life and home, (2) finding a personal identity, (3) the college transition, and (4) communication patterns.

Negotiating College Life and Home

According to Khanh Bui, first generation students are “more likely to be an ethnic minority, speak a language besides English at home, and come from a lower socioeconomic background than their continuing-generation” counterparts (3). For this reason, these students must negotiate between adjusting to college life and family responsibilities. First-generation students “face a constant struggle in balancing family obligations and college requirements, and as a result they face negative outcomes in college” (Sanchez 51). Often students find it difficult to balance residing in two distinct worlds.

Additionally, these students may feel guiltily “when [they] . . . feel hope in pursuing a higher education while they watch their families struggle to survive” (London qtd. in Hartig, 159). Therefore, students are caught in a double bind and must deal with the heavy burden of pursuing a college education and supporting their families. In terms of college life, Lowery-Hart explains that “first-generation college students enter academic settings with less knowledge about what to expect and are often at odds with familial expectations” (56). That is to say, these students undergo two phases of transition simultaneously because in the first phase they are expected to adjust to college life, and during the second phase family members expect students to prioritize life at home. Thus, students must transition back and forth between the home and college, which usually has negative impacts on their college experience—especially during the first year.

Finding a Personal Identity

As an emerging theme in the literature, first-generation students seem to engage in the process of identity negotiation. Mark Orbe uses the communication theory of identity as the theoretical foundation of his study. The findings warrant three conclusions: (1) the salience of FGC status in their daily interactions varies considerably among students; (2) FGC status appears to be more important for individuals who also identify as co-cultural group members; and (3) FGC students appear to lack any significant sense of communal identity (“Negotiating” 131).

Ronald Jackson argues that “as one moves back and forth among cultural identities or worldviews, adjusting values and behaviors . . . across space and time, the individual is the same as before, yet affected permanently by this process of cultural identity-alteration” (5). First-generation students must balance their identities in the home and as college students—maneuvering between two worlds. The process of cultural identity-alteration leaves first-generation students in limbo, which makes finding a personal identity difficult for them.

The College Transition

According to Terenzini and his colleagues, compared to traditional college students (those with parents who received a college education), “the adaptation to college was far more difficult” for first-generation students (“Transition” 63). The findings report that “college-going was not part of their family’s tradition or expectations” (63). Thus, these students broke a family tradition. However, in being the first person to attend college in their immediate families this

"involved multiple transitions—academic, social, and cultural" (63). As Terenzini and his colleagues note, "studies consistently indicate that first-generation students are at greater risk with respect to both persistence and degree attainment than are their traditional peers largely because of lower levels of academic and social integration" ("First-Generation" 3).

However, other studies also indicate first-generation students benefit from becoming the first person in their family to attend college. In other words, "resilient families have been found to have clear-cut expectations of their children and share core values and routines" (Seccombe qtd. in Gofen 106). Families contribute to the perceptions first-generation students have about themselves as degree seeking individuals. For instance, participants in the study "constantly affirmed that what enabled them to break the intergenerational cycle and pave the way to social mobility lay in family day-to-day life during their upbringing" (109). Thus, first-generation students communicate two distinct experiences which may overlap: (1) the challenges of being the first person to attend college, and (2) the benefits of breaking a generational cycle.

Communication Patterns

According to scholar Tiffany Wang, first-generation college "students' voices revealed five college memorable messages themes including (a) pursuing academic success, (b) valuing school, (c) increasing future potential, (d) making decisions, and (e) support and encouragement" (335). Additionally, three family memorable message themes emerged, including (a) comparing and contrasting, (b) counting on family, and (c) recognizing the importance of family" (335). The study examined the memorable messages first-generation college students received from their on-campus mentors about college and family. The results of this study provide "a more detailed understanding of how mentors communicate memorable messages about college and family to FGC students from the FGC student's point of view" (352).

According to scholars Angela Putman and Stephen Thompson, "five themes were revealed as central to the experiences of the co-researchers while utilizing the phenomenological process" in a study of the experiences of Mexican-American FGC students (126). The reflective nature of the interviewing "process resulted in the emergence of five essential themes: making a "choice," paving the way, a cultural cycle, breaking the cycle, and communicating in multiple worlds" (127). The thematically based analytical approach used by scholars highlights the value of finding commonalities in lived experiences. The themes identified expose important similarities and differences among the groups being studied.

In a similar vein, this research identifies themes in "Carolina Firsts" testimonials and transcripts available online. The "Carolina Firsts" interviews serve as a powerful recruitment tool, however, the implications of the knowledge that can be extracted from the stories remains unexplored. For this reason, the following research questions are posed: (1) Do first-generation college students share common experiences? (2) Do public and private institutions of higher learning know enough about first-generation student experiences?

Methodology

Phenomenology serves as the methodological framework of this study. The origins of phenomenology are traced to twentieth century German scholars Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger. The philosophical underpinnings of the phenomenological method were developed further in France by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre. This method is

guided by a philosophy that values human communication as it describes the experience of an individual. As a theory, phenomenology “concerns itself with the nature and function of consciousness” (Lanigan 8). Phenomenology explores the consciousness of the individual.

The phenomenological method “was not founded: it grew. Its fountainhead was Edmund Husserl” (Spiegelberg 3). According to Husserl, phenomenology is “the general doctrine of essences, within which the science of essence of cognition finds its place” (1). In other words, Husserl refers to the human experience as an “essence of cognition,” which implies that individuals exist through the act of communicating their understanding of society and sharing the knowledge gained. Thus, personal experiences operate as meaningful sources of knowledge.

French scholar Merleau-Ponty further elaborates on the notion of essence by explaining that phenomenology “does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man [or woman] and the world from any starting point other than that of their ‘facticity’” (vii). That is to say, the essence of being is focused on the facts or “facticity” communicated based on individual perception. The idea of perception becomes important in deriving meaning of personal experience. Merleau-Ponty argues that “we are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world” (5). This consciousness of the world begins with a perception of the self. According to Sokolowski, the self represents an “agent of truth, the one responsible for judgments and verifications, the perceptual and cognitive ‘owner’ of the world” (112). Thus, meaning is extracted from perceptions of the self in an effort to identify a truth in lived-experiences. The work of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and others inform the contemporary approach to the method of phenomenology.

According to Jenny Nelson, phenomenology as a “research method requires researchers to acknowledge the ways in which they are positioned within the discourse that they are seeking to understand” (qtd. in Orbe, *Constructing* 36). In this sense, a researcher must acknowledge her or his self perception and worldview during the initial stages of conducting a phenomenological study. According to John Erni, it is important for “researchers to engage in a self-assessment where they can locate themselves as a person with a historical, social, and personal identity” (qtd. in Orbe, “African American”). According to Nelson, through this process, researchers engaging in phenomenological inquiry are “able [to] acknowledge, and consequently set aside, their conscious experience This is a key step in that it helps one . . . to stand back attitudinally and discover one’s own ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions about the phenomenon under investigation” (qtd. in Orbe, “African American”). The self-reflective process is not included in analysis of the study, but plays an important role in the framing of the study.

Moreover, for phenomenological studies, “in-depth interviews are a valuable tool for collecting descriptions of lived experiences of co-researchers [interviewees] because they allow them to tell their stories in their own words” (Orbe, *Constructing* 40). Scholar Mark Orbe describes the phenomenological study as a three-step process: first, phenomenological description—collecting descriptions of firsthand, lived experiences; second, phenomenological reduction involving themes and imaginative free variation or reviewing the descriptions in order to disclose essential themes (Orbe, “African American”); and third, phenomenological interpretation, that is, interpreting and analyzing the themes (Orbe, “African American”). This step-by-step process aims to reveal findings that capture the core of co-researchers’ experiences.

Communication scholars have utilized the phenomenological method to investigate human experiences with certain health disorders and education practices. For example, scholar Betty Yu conducted a study that investigated the “language practices of 10 bilingual, Chinese/English-speaking, immigrant mothers with their children with autism spectrum

disorders" (10). The purpose of the study was to "understand (a) the nature of the language practices, (b) their constraints, and (c) their impact" (10). The author employed in-depth phenomenological interviews with thematic and narrative analyses to reveal themes. The author appropriately and effectively used the phenomenological method.

In addition, James Magrini explored "how teacher/student alienation from the curriculum might be transcended through an understanding of authentic education, by means of recovering the forgotten ontological aspects of living and learning" (122). The author used a modified phenomenological method, an "existential-phenomenological" approach, in hopes that it "might lead in a positive direction to the reassessment of the standards, practices, and values of contemporary education" (122). Thus, the scholar argues that an "existential" form of "insight into the human and education holds the potential to enrich our current notions of teaching and learning" (122). In this case, a different phenomenological approach is used to investigate teaching education programs.

In his book, *Doing Phenomenology*, Herbert Spiegelberg provides a broad overview of the multiple and diverse styles of the phenomenological methodology. Spiegelberg aims to "supply the groundwork for an alternative to Husserl's phenomenological idealism by a phenomenology of our consciousness of reality without returning to a "native realism" or a critical realism in the traditional sense" (xv). For the purposes of communications research, the traditional phenomenological method is applied in the analysis.

Data Analysis

This phenomenological study investigates the lived experiences of Carolina Firsts interviewees. Orbe's three-step process is employed: first, the descriptions of firsthand lived experiences are collected from interview videos and transcripts produced by the University of North Carolina; second, the descriptions are reviewed in order to disclose essential themes; and third, the themes are interpreted and analyzed. The Carolina Firsts interviewees included: Kristen Barbour, Ron Bilbao, Paul Cuadros, Stacie Hewett, Sophia Nicholson, and Andre Wesson. The artifacts analyzed shed light on the commonalities of lived experiences. The analysis of the artifacts employs the second and third steps in the phenomenological approach.

After reviewing the interview videos and transcripts and employing the process of phenomenological reduction, eight essential themes were disclosed: (1) the dream comes true, (2) beating the odds, (3) facing the unknown, (4) a challenging first semester, (5) reaching for the degree, (6) it gets easier, (7) the issue of pride, and (8) Carolina keeps its promise. Therefore, the final step in this phenomenological study interprets and analyzes the identified themes.

The Dream Comes True

For many first-generation students, the idea of going to college begins as a dream. These students take certain actions to transform the "college dream" into a goal, and eventually the goal becomes reality. The parent(s) of first-generation students also partake in the college dream through their children. In other words, the college dream comes true for parents of first-generation students and the student. Sophia Nicholson, a current student at UNC describes the reaction of her family when she received her acceptance letter:

My families reaction when I got into Carolina was insane. They threw a huge party, they had it together in like two days. I hadn't even gone to college, hadn't

set foot in it, hadn't done the financial aid any of that, but I already felt like I had accomplished something. (6)

Nicholson describes the feeling of having "accomplished something" prior to starting classes and completing financial aid paperwork because the idea of being the first person in her family to attend college was a dream. When the dream came true for Nicholson and her family, the reality was met with a sense of surrealism and excitement. For Nicholson, the acceptance letter represents the actualization of the college dream.

Ron Bilbao, a senior at UNC explains that, "Carolina was still a little bit out of reach, but when that letter came in from the Carolina Covenant it just made everything pretty simple" (2). Bilbao refers to UNC as "a little bit out of reach" because the possibility of attending the university seemed implausible, but receiving his acceptance letter transformed the "a bit out of reach" (2) dream to one within the reach of reality. His dream was to attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Therefore, the letter and financial aid transformed Bilbao's dream into a reality.

Stacie Hewett, Associate Director in the Kenan-Flagler Business School and alumna, describes the process of selecting UNC:

Carolina was not the first choice, not because it wasn't the best choice it just wasn't something I had considered or had information about prior to choosing it . . . So when I got an opportunity to interview for a scholarship for UNC I started to do some research, and once I knew it was an option for me, it seemed like the only option for me. (5)

Hewett says, "once I knew it was an option for me, it seemed like the only option for me" (5). In the phrase "once I knew it was an option," Hewett communicates that attending UNC did not seem like a possibility for her. However, the college dream became real after she was selected for a scholarship interview. Prior to the interviewees' admission, the ability to attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel seemed surreal. Therefore, Nicholson, Bilbao, and Hewett communicate that UNC represented a dream that later became a reality for them.

Beating the Odds

Pursuing a college education presents numerous obstacles for first-generation students. The obstacles identified in the testimonial of Cuadros, Bilbao, and Wesson include cultural barriers, immigration, family history, and single parent households. These Carolina Firsts communicate how their familial struggles and personal efforts function to overcome obstacles.

Paul Cuadros, a faculty member shares his family's background as immigrants:

My story really starts with my dad, my father. He was originally born in Peru, he was an orphan, but it was always his desire to come to the United States and in 1960 . . . he saved up enough money to eventually bring my mother and my two brothers to Ann Arbor. I was born, the first American in my family to be born here in this country. (3)

He describes a common immigrant experience in the United States. In his family history, Cuadros refers to the personal and financial struggles his father had to overcome as an orphan and new immigrant. As the first person in his family born in the United States, he communicates the obstacles his family faced adjusting to their new life. For example, Cuadros says:

We had a language barrier we had to overcome and we had a cultural barrier that we had to sort of overcome . . . once I got into college . . . only about a mile and a

half away from my house. But even though the distance was really short the sort of cultural travel that I had to do to get to Michigan was really far. (4)

Therefore, he shares the details of his family's acclimation, which meant adopting a way of life different from Peru. In the phrase "the sort of cultural travel that I had to do to get to Michigan was really far" (4). Cuadros refers to his own experience with cultural acculturation. Despite the obstacles, such as family history, immigration, and cultural barriers, Cuadros managed to work around and through the difficulties. The odds were stacked against him, but he beat those odds.

Bilbao talks about a similar immigrant experience and shares his family history:

Coming here was a completely different experience, my parents don't speak any English, they were born and raised in Venezuela and Columbia. They wanted to go to college, my father actually had to drop out of college to go to work when he was younger. (2)

The Bilbao family's history meant he also had to overcome certain language and cultural barriers because his "parents don't speak any English" (2). Therefore, he experiences a certain degree of cultural acculturation as the son of Spanish-speaking immigrants. Bilbao overcomes the obstacles posed by virtue of his parents' background and beats the odds of being the first person in his family to attend college.

Andre Wesson, a staff member and alumnus talks about his personal history:

I hail from a single parent household and so my mother bar none was the most influential factor in me going on to college. A premium was put on education from a very early age, she did a lot to put me in a position to attend different camps when I was growing up, attend different leadership seminars during the summers. I was fortunate enough to attend the summer bridge program, which I think was absolutely critical. (7)

Wesson discusses growing up in a single parent household and his mother's involvement in providing meaningful learning opportunities throughout his childhood. In this sense, Wesson's mother was an influential figure in his decision to attend college. Despite growing up in a single parent household, he beat the statistical odds and attended college. The special opportunities afforded to Wesson enabled him to begin his first year at UNC. Cuadros, Bilbao, and Wesson communicate the unique experiences and obstacles they faced in their journey of getting into college, but the process of beating the odds unifies these three stories.

Facing the Unknown

A college campus is a mysterious place for any newcomer, but especially for first-generation students. These students did not grow up listening to stories of their parents' college years at the dinner table and lack the awareness of what college life entails. Regardless of the uncertainty, they decide to jump head first into the unknown. For first-generation students, the road to college is primarily an independent journey. The interviewees communicate feelings of excitement, fear, and nervousness.

Kristen Barbour, a current student talks about feelings of fear and anticipation:

I moved in a few days before everybody else because I was in the marching band and . . . I was scared to death because I was living in a room all by myself . . . It was nerve racking because you were the first one there and you were anticipating everyone getting there. What was going to happen, what was it going to be like was I going to like it, were we all going to get along, my room mates and I. (1)

In this excerpt, Barbour refers to the uncertainty she feels about moving on campus, starting classes, and living with roommates. She communicates feeling “scared to death” because of the mystery that surrounded her first days on campus and living alone. Barbour uses the phrase “nerve racking” (1) because beginning a new chapter in her life meant facing the unknown.

Additionally, Nicholson describes feelings of excitement and nervousness:

The first day I was here . . . I was just so excited to be here and just to finally after all this build up put my money where my mouth was and start going to college. I was nervous but the excitement completely overruled that. I was ready to just get to know people, get to know my professor. There are things you just cannot know intuitively when coming to a college like Carolina. (6)

Nicholson feels excited to face the unknown, “I was nervous but the excitement completely overruled that. I was ready to just get to know people, get to know my professor” (6). In contrast to Barbour’s experience, Nicholson communicates an eagerness to face the mysteries of college. Both Barbour and Nicholson express facing the unknown with a sense of nervousness. However, Nicholson communicates feeling ready and eager to embark on her mysterious and new journey. On the other hand, Barbour talks about the fear and uncertainty she feels prior to beginning the first day of classes. In terms of facing the unknown, the different experiences that are communicated by the interviewees include fear, uncertainty, readiness, and excitement.

A Challenging First Semester

Carolina Firsts describe their first semester at the University of North Carolina as particularly challenging. Barbour, Hewett, Wesson, Bilbao, and Cuadros mention two challenges: first, adjusting to the academic workload and second, trying to meet higher expectations. Barbour, Hewett, and Wesson specifically discuss the academic challenges in their transitions from a high school setting into the rigorous university environment. Bilbao and Cuadros talk about meeting higher expectations at UNC.

Barbour describes her personal study habits prior to starting college:

The workload adjustment was probably one of the hardest adjustments there was. You have to put in a lot more time out of class, which was something I was not used to. I didn’t really have to study in high school, it wasn’t really a big deal. That was one of the biggest changes I had to make was learning study habits and learning what was efficient. (1)

As Barbour explains, the university coursework was the “hardest adjustment” (1) for her. Barbour describes the process of changing the old study habits she developed in high school. In this case, she performs well in high school without developing a studying ritual. However, early in her college career, Barbour acknowledges the limitations of her previous learning behaviors. Thus, she concludes that becoming an efficient learner requires altering the learning techniques developed in high school.

In a similar fashion, Hewett describes the challenge of changing study habits:

I had made straight A’s all through my childhood, graduated second in my class . . . I quickly figured out that I didn’t necessarily have the study habits I needed for a school like Carolina and needed to figure out how to make sure I was successful here. (5)

Hewett and Barbour communicate an analogous “need to change study habits” experience. They both identify a desire and necessity to develop the studious personality needed to succeed

academically. Finally, Wesson shares his personal experience with transitioning from high school to the University:

I still had to go through some of those first semester things of getting grades that I had never seen before, feeling like Carolina was too big of a place for me, feeling like it was too challenging, perhaps I made the wrong decision, I should have gone someplace closer to home. (7)

Wesson communicates the self-doubt he felt as a first-year student. He received grades he "had never seen before" (7), which made him doubt his decision of enrolling in college. Wesson wondered if he "should have gone someplace closer to home" (7) because he struggled to adjust to a completely new and challenging environment. Hewett and Barbour both describe a process of adapting to a rigorous academic community. Wesson, on the other hand, shared his personal experience with self-doubt and the academic challenges he faced in transitioning to college.

Moreover, Bilbao and Cuadros emphasize trying to meet higher expectations. Bilbao explains expecting more from himself as a new college student: "I myself felt a little overwhelmed the first semester you go into these classes they're a lot harder than when you were in high school . . . they expect a lot more from you and you expect a lot more from yourself to be honest" (3). Bilbao feels overwhelmed during his first semester—not only because college classes are more challenging—but also because he "expects a lot more" (3) from himself.

Additionally, Cuadros describes pushing himself to meet high expectations:

"Living away from home, even though it was a mile and a half away it was really as I said kind of far, managing your time, managing your classes and I was really ambitious my freshman year, which was probably a bit of a mistake. Probably a little bit too over confident and I should have probably taken it a little bit easier to acclimate myself to the university. (4)

In an effort to meet high expectations, Cuadros was "really ambitious" and "a little bit too over confident" (4) as a first-year student. He reflects about the actions he made as being "a bit of a mistake" (4) because he should have given himself more time to adapt to college life. Thus, both Bilbao and Cuadros communicate aspects of self-imposed pressure to do better in college. The first semester of college is challenging for Carolina Firsts because the academic workload requires change and adjustments, working through feelings of self-doubt, and pushing personal boundaries in order to meet self-imposed high expectations.

Reaching for the Degree

For some first-generation students, earning a college degree is similar to climbing up a mountain. The process of climbing that mountain is a risky, challenging, and worthwhile endeavor. However, these students embark on their journey without having the proper hiking boots and climbing gear that everyone else around them is wearing. Carolina Firsts climb that mountain because they are determined to make it to the top and earn their undergraduate degree.

In the following excerpt, Barbour shares her desire to become a nurse and reach her goal:

I can't do that without a college degree. There's always that goal that I've had of being the first person to finish college in my family. One day it'll all be worth it, it's trying and it's hard but there's a goal, and just trying to reach it. (2)

Many first-generation students have the goal of being the first person in their family to earn a college degree; that goal motivates them. Barbour's determination shines through when she says, "it's trying and it's hard but there's a goal, and just trying to reach it" (2). She illustrates a unique

and interesting metaphor—reaching for her goal is like stretching out her hand toward the sky and seeing it within her grasp.

Cuadros discusses a perspective that reflects his own experience:

Anyone who decides to go on to higher education has already made a commitment to do it and I would encourage anyone who has decided on something to fulfill it. So if you've decided to come to school and seek higher education then you owe it to yourself to fulfill that and to complete it no matter what it takes. (4)

He says students owe it themselves to complete their education “no matter what it takes” (4). Cuadros communicates the idea that challenges can indeed be overcome. In other words, first-generation students can stare at the mountain before their eyes and decide to climb it, go around it, or break through it, but “no matter what it takes” (4) they must keep their eyes focused on the summit of that mountain—the degree.

Finally, Nicholson introduces a different element to the theme of reaching for the degree:

So first generation students are kind of at a disadvantage because they don't have that background they don't have those people at home saying this is what we went through so you can apply it. You have to be more self-motivated to be a first generation college student I think. (6)

Nicholson mentions that first-generation students “don't have that [family] background” (6) for guidance or support. For this reason, being a first-generation student is “kind of . . . a disadvantage” (6), which requires more self-motivation in comparison to other students.

Barbour, Cuadros, and Nicholson communicate the similar lived experience of reaching for their undergraduate degrees. However, some distinctions emerge in the experiences shared such as doing it “no matter what it takes” and being “more self-motivated” to pursue higher education.

It Gets Easier

The third theme of this analysis discusses “facing the unknown,” and the theme “it gets easier” brings concepts in the third theme full circle. That is to say, the unknown becomes familiar and it gets easier to tackle the challenges first-generation students face. Barbour and Bilbao reference two elements in this theme: (1) a degree makes it easier to get a job and (2) time makes difficulties easier to handle. Thus, climbing the mountain—even without the hiking gear—does get a bit easier.

Barbour talks about how a college education is helpful later in life:

Having a college education will make it a lot easier to get a job. I found that out a lot this summer, just trying to find a job for the summer . . . It really helps to have the experience and a degree. It'll . . . really helpful later down the line. (2)

In this sense, the degree represents a personal investment. Therefore, finding a job or starting a career becomes one of the many important returns on the investment of achieving an education at the University of North Carolina.

Bilbao explains that finding a personalized college “groove” takes time:

Never give up, even in the darkest times, even when it's finals even when it's three in the morning and you still haven't started studying for your second test the next day. Just keep going because it really does get a little bit easier as you go through.

It's just like any new thing that you start, it may seem overwhelming at first but you've just got to find that groove. (3)

He suggests that it is important to "just keep going because it really does get a little bit easier," and "never give up" (3). Bilbao offers a perspective that emphasizes being patient about adjusting to the learning curve that starting the first year of college presents for first-generation students. Barbour and Bilbao share a unifying idea, "it gets easier," but their experiences are different and they communicate unique outlooks about a similar concept.

The Issue of Pride

The idea of pride can have positive and negative connotations for first-generation students. Three Carolina Firsts—Cuadros, Hewett, and Wesson, all of whom are staff members or professors, sketch out characteristics that become problematic with having a sense of pride. For instances, students may exhibit the following traits: (1) highly self-motivated, (2) overly independent, and (3) inability to ask for help.

Cuadros describes the mindset that first-generation students may develop:

You almost develop this feeling that I don't need anybody's help, I can handle it myself. Sometimes that's an issue of pride and I think a lot of students have this sense of pride, especially those that put themselves into college on their own. (4)

Students may feel like they "don't need anybody's help" (4) because they are highly self-motivated. That is, some students make it to college on their own and believe that they can "handle it" (transitioning into college) on their own, without needing anyone else to help them along the way.

Hewett highlights the core issue with this sense of pride students may feel: "Often times students will come and not do as well as they would like or expect to but their pride keeps them from getting assistance with that" (5). In other words, first-generation students may feel less inclined to ask for help because their sense of pride and independence clouds their judgment. As a result, students may find themselves struggling immensely from the very beginning of their college experience, and pride prevents them from seeking assistance.

Finally, Wesson refers to a stigma that is associated with being a first-generation student, which helps identify the source of this sense of pride:

And I think for so many incoming first year students, particularly first generation college students, there is a stigma of being ashamed a little bit of asking for help. Or feeling that if we ask for help it means we are somehow inferior to other students. (8)

Thus, first-generation students feel "somehow inferior to other students" (8) if they ask for help. Wesson identifies the source of this pride, which is difficult to conclude without his insight because it seems counterintuitive to the other thematic elements of this analysis. Understanding the potential consequences of the sense of pride first-generation students may feel is important for retention purposes. Cuadros, Hewett, and Wesson share points of view, informed by their own experiences and observations, which discloses the concept of pride as potentially impeding first-generation student success.

Carolina Keeps its Promise

Carolina Firsts discuss finding a second home and building community within a network of individuals who support and guide them through their college experiences. Bilbao and Nicholson share their insights about UNC's atmosphere. However, Hewett and Wesson communicate their experiences from a staff member's perspective, while simultaneously using subtle recruitment tactics. These four Carolina Firsts discuss the concept that Carolina makes a special promise and fulfills that promise.

Bilbao describes the University's promise to first-generation students:

The Carolina Covenant is a promise. It's the university telling you that you that you have an opportunity to go to college to get an education just like everyone else. These kind of walls of rich people going to school with poor people not going to school, they're kind of broken down at this university and we were the first ones to do that (2).

He identifies the "promise" as an equal "opportunity to go to college to get an education just like everyone else" (2). The idea of starting college may seem out of reach for many first-generation students. Bilbao explains that UNC promises an equal opportunity to high quality education because the "walls of rich people going to school with poor people not going to school, they're kind of broken down" (2). In these phrases, he illuminates a special characteristic about Carolina Firsts, "we were the first ones to do that" (2). They were the first ones to move beyond language, cultural, or financial barriers and work through the obstacles posed by inequality and disadvantage. Bilbao continues to explain: "So it's promising you that in four years you'll graduate with an incredible degree and it will be completely one hundred percent debt free. The decision really comes down to . . . what you want to do with your life" (2). Thus, the University promises equal opportunity, a high quality education, and a sense of community and support for prospective first-generation students.

Moreover, Nicholson and Wesson both share their insights about UNC's supportive community: "There's always this sense of you know you can talk to anybody and they're going to be very receptive. There's more of a sense of community here at Carolina" (Nicholson 7). Nicholson's description of the university's atmosphere reinforces the idea that current and prospective first-generation students can build a "sense of community," can feel a sense of belonging in the college environment, and can succeed at Carolina.

Wesson says that "what Carolina does is provide a wonderful support system of resources across the board, whether it's learning disabilities resources, the writing center, the learning center, the math help center" (8). In other words, prospective first-generation students will be able to find and seek out the resources necessary to succeed at the University. Nicholson and Wesson seem to imply that UNC also promises first-generation student success. Thus, first-generation students will have access to numerous resources, which help guarantee success.

Finally, Hewett shares her personal career trajectory at the University:

I chose to stay at Carolina for the last 20 years because I had an immediate sense of family and connection and home when I came here as a student. . . . Often times when I interview students and ask them why they chose Carolina if they had other options and the majority of them will tell me that once they came to visit they immediately knew this was the place for them and I felt that same way. (6)

Hewett describes having "an immediate sense of family and connection" (6). Thus, she refers to the strong sense of community at UNC. Additionally, hints of recruitment efforts are evident in

the testimony, "when I interview students and ask them why they chose Carolina . . . the majority of them will tell me that once they came to visit they immediately knew this was the place for them" (6). In these phrases, Hewett describes recruitment strategies directed toward prospective first-generation students. These four stories are united by similarly lived experiences—with specific points of distinction—with the Carolina promise.

Conclusion

The analysis using the phenomenological method, which emphasizes understanding the lived experiences of present and former first-generation undergraduates, led to the discovery of eight themes evident in the six Carolina Firsts interviews: (1) the dream comes true, (2) beating the odds, (3) facing the unknown, (4) a challenging first semester, (5) reaching for the degree, (6) it gets easier, (7) the issue of pride and (8) Carolina keeps its promise. The thematic elements in this study suggested new findings about the undergraduate experiences of first-generation students, staff members, and faculty at the University of North Carolina.

In the data analysis section the themes cluster common experiences, but some of the themes acknowledged the differences within similar stories. The shared experiences among Carolina Firsts, however, demonstrated a potential for juxtaposed emotions, attitudes, and perspectives within a common theme. Therefore, the findings suggest that first-generation students communicated similar experiences, but an individual's personal experience may differ from the shared experience.

While the themes identified in this analysis are similar to previous studies, four themes offer new insights about the differences within these shared experiences. In the existing literature, variations of themes such as, "the dream comes true," "beating the odds," "reaching for the degree" and "a challenging first semester" have been identified. However, studies focusing on themes like "the issue of pride," "facing the unknown," "Carolina keeps its promise" or "it gets easier" remain largely unexplored.

For instance, the "issue of pride" theme found that the interviewees described the different ways in which pride can manifest itself. The consequences might be similar—i.e. falling behind or low performance—but first-generation students can express pride differently. Therefore, understanding the different factors which may influence first-generation student personal experience is crucial to providing the support, encouragement, and counseling necessary for first-generation students.

Additionally, the theme identified as "facing the unknown" acknowledges the different emotions expressed by the interviewees, which ranged from excitement to fear. While the interviewees were forced to face the unknown during their transition to college, they experienced a similar situation with distinct emotional responses. The "it gets easier" theme unites two perspectives described by the interviewees. One perspective focused on the benefits of a college degree later in life and the ease of finding employment opportunities, while the other perspective illustrated the ease of transitioning into the college life. One interviewee explains that first-generation students eventually find a "groove" and adapt to the new environment.

The last theme "Carolina keeps its promise" focuses on Carolina Firsts describing what the Carolina promise meant to them. On the one hand, an interviewee expressed that the Carolina promise represents getting an incredible degree and graduating from the University completely debt-free. On the other hand, some interviewees described the Carolina promise as finding a supportive community that provides resources which help guarantee success, as well as a sense

of family and connection. The Carolina promise represents a common lived experience among the interviewees, and yet the promise can represent multiple or different meanings.

This study extracted knowledge from the testimony of Carolina Firsts in order to better understand their college experiences. The worldviews of these six Carolina Firsts informed the significance of this study. In order to understand the communicative experiences of first-generation undergraduates, researchers must allow co-researchers to share their personal knowledge in their own words. Improving the experiences of first-generation undergraduate students resides in listening to their personal stories—only then can their needs be identified, assessed, and understood. Undergraduate institutions have the ability to formally or informally research the personal experiences of first-generation students, faculty, and staff and gain new knowledge through those stories. Communication scholars in particular need to continue exploring the lived experiences of first-generation students to establish a more robust body of firsthand knowledge about the experiences of first-generation students, staff, and faculty in order to provide better support, resources, and assistance.

Conclusions and Implications

These findings are bound to the context of this study. The tradition of phenomenology recognizes that the eight themes revealed in the data analysis are limited by the experiences communicated by the six co-researchers, as well as, the individual who interpreted the videos and transcripts. Despite these limitations, the research presented in this study offers a valuable point of exploration in terms of communication experiences among current and former first-generation undergraduates at the University of North Carolina and provides another point of entry for further research.

This study contributes to the on-going investigation of first-generation students and their experiences while enrolled in higher education institutions. Current research on first-generation students includes studies conducted at public universities and community colleges. Fewer studies have been undertaken at private liberal arts institutions. Therefore, private institutions can benefit from the data collected and utilize the research findings to improve the experiences of first-generation students.

Do first-generation students have the appropriate support systems and resources necessary to complete their undergraduate studies? The Pell Institute investigated the experiences of 135 first-generation students enrolled in pre-college programs in Texas—using an informal focus group method (Engle 11). The focus groups “addressed several key areas including aspirations and encouragement to go to college; academic preparation for college; “college knowledge” about how to apply to and pay for college; and academic, social, and cultural transitions to college” (11). Many of the students who participated in the focus groups “had no or low aspirations for going to college prior to receiving pre-college services” (39). The findings indicate that the plausibility of student success improves with pre-college services. According to the students interviewed, “the earlier the outreach, the more effective it was” (39). The institutional resources available to first-generation students vary widely state by state. Hopefully, this study prompts others universities and colleges to identify their own resources, evaluate the effectiveness of those resources, and implement new programs catered to first-generation students. First-generation students need more assistance in developing a meaningful and valuable connection with the university or college community and themselves.

In addition, Central Michigan University scholars Folger, Carter, and Chase conducted a study assessing the effectiveness of the Freshman Empowerment Program, which was designed to support first-generation students during their first year. Their results suggest that "GPA was significantly higher for those students involved in the program compared to similar students who chose not to be involved" (472). Recently enrolled "students who are from low-income families and/or who are first-generation college attendees are often at-risk in the university setting. They have transitional needs not generally met by traditional support services and often find themselves in academic limbo" (472). How are students assisted through this academic limbo?

What is more, Upcraft and Gardner found "that many students who do not succeed at the university level are either reluctant students and/or passive students" (qtd. in Folger 472). However, the following question should be posed about these findings: why are students "reluctant" or "passive" in a university setting? Do the terms "reluctant" and "passive" properly reflect the experiences or personal states of first-generation students? Could the seventh theme identified in this study—the issue of pride—help introduce a new perspective to the "reluctant" and "passive" first-generation student phenomenon? Future research is needed to reevaluate existing assumptions about first-generation students' common experiences.

This study identifies valuable themes and areas of consideration for further exploration. In terms of implications for future research, communication scholars should explore the differences or commonalities among the communicative experiences among former first-generation staff and faculty juxtaposed with current first-generation students. While this study analyzes the lived experiences of first-generation faculty, staff, and student at the University of North Carolina, the analysis presented focuses primarily on common thematic elements and less on the juxtaposition of the student, faculty, and staff communicative experiences. When we hear someone say, "I'm the first person to finish college in my family," hopefully we will listen and ask, what does that mean to you? How would you describe your undergraduate experience?

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