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The Activities, Roles, and Relationships of Successful First-Generation College Students

Cynthia Demetriou   Judith Meece   Deborah Eaker-Rich   Candice Powell

This qualitative study describes the experiences of 16 successful first-generation college students (FGCS) utilizing a theoretical lens, informed significantly by bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which guided our qualitative analyses of interview transcripts to examine the activities, roles, and relationships of these students as they approached the finish line of college graduation. We responded to an omission in the literature on FGCS experiences: although researchers have examined the struggles of first-generation and low-income students, few studies have focused on the experiences of successful students. We offer a developmental paradigm for appreciating undergraduate retention. Recommendations from this investigation support the development and implementation of proactive retention and degree-completion strategies from a strengths-based perspective.

Undergraduate retention and graduation are issues requiring critical attention from public universities across the nation (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). Degree attainment for first-generation college students (FGCS) in the United States is especially important to meeting future workforce demands, goals for national economic prosperity, and global competitiveness (Lopez, 2006; White House, 2009). The Higher Education Research Institute defines a FGCS as any student from a family in which both parents have no education beyond high school (Pryor et al., 2006). Nearly 90% of FGCS enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States fail to graduate within 6 years of enrollment (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). A recent study of FGCS enrolled in 4-year colleges and universities found that after 4 years, 75.3% of FGCS failed to earn a degree (DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011). As the numbers of FGCS attending colleges and universities in the United States increase, there is an urgent need for research on the retention of these students.

This study examines FGCS undergraduate retention using qualitative data collected through interviews with successful students from low-income families at a large, public research university in the southern United States. Guided by a developmental theoretical framework, this investigation describes the essence of interactions among individuals and their environment. Data collected through student reflections were explored to appreciate the experiences of successful FGCS on their paths to undergraduate degree completion. A theoretical lens, informed significantly by bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), was applied to the data. This study contributes to what is known about FGCS experiences. The study also responds to an omission in the literature on FGCS experiences. Although the literature has examined the struggles of first-generation and low-income students (Choy, 2001; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Saenz et al., 2007), few studies have examined the experiences of successful

students. To date, the majority of research on undergraduate retention and graduation has focused on failure (Schreiner, Hulme, Hetzel, & Lopez, 2009). Consequently, little is known about the experiences of successful students. Appreciating the experiences of FGCS who are retained and graduate from college enhances our ability to develop effective retention and degree-completion strategies.

For the purposes of this study, a *successful student* is a student who has been retained and is within one semester of 4-year undergraduate degree completion. This study describes the experiences of successful students using the voices of students themselves. It describes college success through the eyes of students from historically underresourced and under-performing groups. A rich and complex description of the activities, roles, and relationships of successful FGCS is shared.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This study is based on a synthesis of the psychological, sociological, and educational perspectives largely informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological systems theory. The theory contends that developmental changes occur across the life span through dynamic relations between the individual and the multiple ecological levels of his or her environment, including the family, peer groups, schools, community settings, and culture systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The theory is guided by two major developmental principles: (a) personal experiences cannot be disconnected from the settings in which they occur, and (b) individuals shape and are shaped by their social contexts. The theory includes five environmental systems that influence and are influenced by an individual: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The systems are conceptualized

as five nested circles with the individual in the center circle. Each system is both part of a larger system and contains smaller systems. Within the bioecological systems model, this study concentrates on the several microsystems of youth collegiate experiences. As described below, the study focuses on campus-related activities, roles, and relationships as proximal developmental processes for youth within collegiate settings.

ACTIVITIES, ROLES, AND RELATIONSHIPS

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the microsystem includes "activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (p. 22). Developing individuals engage in activities, take on cultural roles, and enter in to relationships with people, objects, and symbols in their immediate environment. How individuals perceive their experience of activities, roles, and relationships influences their development. To understand how an individual develops, it is necessary to understand the objectives properties of an environment as well as the ways in which the properties are perceived by the individual in the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). Personal characteristics influence individuals' experiences of activities, roles, and relationships. For example, attitudes and dispositions (e.g., interest, motivation), as well as gender and ethnicity, can influence how a student experiences the activity of going to class. It is important to note that activities, roles, and relationships cannot be isolated from one another; in the bioecological model, they overlap with and influence one another. In the microsystem, the individual forms social relationships such as the relationship between student and teacher. This relationship requires

participation in specific cultural roles. The individual must play the role of student and assume the expectations and responsibilities associated with this role. Together, the student and teacher will engage in activities associated with their role and relationship such as classroom learning and mentoring.

Developmental activities are constant behavioral processes involving a single action or a progression of steps (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Activities involve interactions with other individuals as well as interactions with objects and symbols (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 23). Individuals can perform activities with other individuals or autonomously. Perceptions of activities are important in shaping development. The way individuals perceive their engagement and their participation in activities influences how the activity drives development. Throughout college, students are likely to engage in a number of activities such as undergraduate research, study abroad, and participating in student organizations. Participating in activities that gradually increase in complexity over time can help college students advance toward positive college outcomes (Kuh, 2008; Light, 2001).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines *developmental roles* as sets of relations and activities expected of an individual in a culture (p. 25). Within a culture, there are distinct behavioral expectations and responsibilities associated with particular roles. Through roles, individuals explore their environment and learn about themselves. College students are likely to take on multiple roles in their immediate environment (Evans, Foreny, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Light, 2001). When students enter the college culture, they are likely to assume a variety of new roles and responsibilities specifically related to the college context. The role of undergraduate in and of itself is an important role new college students must take on. As an individual learns

to function in new roles, he or she is likely to develop a more complex identity as he or she grows to appreciate the expectations, behaviors, and tasks associated with each role.

Developmental relationships involve reciprocal interactions between two individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Reciprocal interaction means that there is an exchange between the individuals and both individuals are affected by the interaction (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 798). For positive outcomes to occur both individuals in the relationship must have mutually positive feelings, the connection between the individuals must endure over time, and both individuals must attend to each other's activities (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 816). In a developmental relationship, the balance of power slowly shifts toward the developing person with the developing person taking on enhanced responsibilities. Within the college context, developmental relationships include relationships between students and faculty members, peer relationships, and relationships between college personnel and students (Evans, 2010; Light, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Interpersonal relations of college students are critical to college student success. For example, supportive relationships with faculty, including individualized, one-on-one attention, have been related to enhanced learning in college (Kuh, 2008).

It is important to understand the activities, roles, and relationships of FGCS as these experiences shape the immediate environment of the developing student. Understanding these experiences can help us understand successful students. Describing the activities, roles, and relationships of successful students can present a picture of the ways in which successful students act on their environment and the environment acts upon them, guiding students toward positive college outcomes including successful transition, retention, and graduation.

The approach of this study differs from

prior research in several important ways. First, as stated, most studies of first-generation students focus on access, attrition, and failure. The current study focuses on successful FGCS at a 4-year institution. Second, the study departs from sociological models of college graduation (e.g., Bean, 1986; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1993) to consider college environments as a developmental context for youth making the transition from late adolescence to early adulthood. Another major departure is the use of qualitative methods to capture youths' perceptions of their college experiences and to give voice to successful first-generation college youth approaching college graduation during a time of national and state investments in higher education.

METHOD

Research on undergraduate retention has focused primarily on quantitatively measuring undergraduate retention and graduation rates among student populations. Researchers (i.e., Bowen et al., 2009) have predominantly utilized regression analysis to assess the influence of multiple factors on degree attainment. The base of research on retention could be enhanced through studies yielding qualitative insight into the lived experiences of students. Qualitative study provides the opportunity for researchers to explore individual experiences. The knowledge gained from this exploration can meaningfully contribute to our understanding of how students experience their undergraduate careers.

Data Sources

This project began with 100 student cases provided by the office of institutional research at a large, public Research 1 institution in the southeastern United States. Each student case included a deidentified interview transcript and corresponding categorical data. The interview transcripts explored curricular and cocurricular experiences of students on their paths to degree completion. The transcripts are from interviews that included 31 highly structured questions and lasted from 45 to 60 minutes each. The corresponding categorical data came from admissions applications, FAFSA applications, and university records. They described level of parental education, gender, ethnicity, age, home residence, academic achievement, area of study, and financial need.

The categorical data were used to purposively narrow down the 100 student cases to a study group of FGCS with common characteristics. Of the 100 student cases, 27 were FGCS. From the 27 cases, we constructed a final study group of 16 total cases (8 male and 8 female). All 16 cases were financially needy, came from a hometown within the state, were traditional-age college students (between 18 and 24), and were graduating on time (within 4.0 to 4.5 years of starting their baccalaureate degree). Half of the student group included students from historically underrepresented racial or ethnic groups, and the other half of the cases were White. In addition to using the categorical data to narrow down the study group, the categorical data were used as we read and analyzed the transcripts and considered the experiences of each student case. The categorical data served as a valuable resource to cross-reference items referred to in the interviews.

In qualitative research, to reach data saturation, the researcher continues to sample relevant cases until no new insights are emerging from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Guest and colleagues (2006) suggest that when interviews are highly structured and participants share common characteristics, saturation may be reached between 10 and 12 cases. We reached data saturation between 12 and 14 cases, but continued to analyzed all 16

cases to make the findings as rich as possible.

Strategies for Analysis

Strategies for analysis included interim analysis, memoing, coding and developing category systems, and creating matrices. The cyclical process of interim analysis was repeated multiple times over the course of this study (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Memoing was used to record emerging insights and thoughts on the data (Creswell, 2008). Coding and developing category systems was an essential part of the data analysis. During the coding process, we intentionally sorted the text into like segments and labeled the segments with codes. A master list of all codes was compiled, and the codes were continuously reviewed to avoid redundancies or overlaps (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Both inductive and a priori codes were utilized in the analysis. A priori codes for this analysis came from the literature on bioecological systems theory. In addition to the a priori codes, the data in this study were coded inductively. The codes were continuously refined and revised throughout the process of analysis. Creating hierarchical category systems with codes helped identify patterns and connections (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). In addition to hierarchical relationships, the segmented and coded data were also organized into matrices to allow relationships among categories to emerge (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Validating Findings

This study utilized specific strategies to validate findings including triangulation, negative case analysis, external audit, and member checking (Creswell, 2008). Through triangulation, evidence from multiple data sources, individuals, and types of data was corroborated. Negative case analysis was repeated throughout the research study. When negative cases were found, they were carefully examined to see if themes should be broadened or revised to accurately reflect the patterns emerging from the data. External audit was also conducted multiple times throughout this study. We worked with four different external auditors including a qualitative researcher, an educator who works closely with FGCS, and a graduate student who is a FGCS and mentors undergraduate FGCS. Auditors provided written feedback as well as participated in detailed conversations regarding the codes, the themes, the organization of data, the comparison of data, and the development of findings. Finally, member checking was used to validate findings. Because the original study participants were unidentifiable and inaccessible, a revised member check with current FGCS was conducted.

FINDINGS

The findings include identifications and rich descriptions of the activities, roles, and relationships in the microsystem. In particular, findings describe students actively engaging in coursework, participating in undergraduate research, traveling abroad, participating in student organizations, engaging in community service, and joining a small community. Students are also described as taking on multiple roles including that of undergraduate, researcher, and employee. Important relationships including academic, peer, and employment relationships are described. Finally, because developmental processes are influenced by personal dispositions and attitudes, findings also include attitudes and dispositions noted among participants.

Activities

Students described themselves as positively changing through activities with persons, objects, and symbols in their environment. Common activities students described included curricular activities, cocurricular activities, and employment activities. It is important to note

that these experiences are classified in this study as activities, but they span across roles and relationships. For example, employment is defined here as an activity; however, it overlaps with both relationships (the relationship between employee and supervisor) and roles (the role of being an employee). The curricular, cocurricular, and employment activities of the successful FGCS in the study are described in the following sections.

Curricular. The thematic analysis identified curricular activities as activities relating to credit-bearing, undergraduate courses or to the formal academic curriculum for undergraduates. Curricular activities included engaging in coursework, participating in faculty-mentored research, and studying or traveling abroad. Curricular activities involved academic credits counting toward degree completion.

Engaging in coursework. The first curricular activity described by study group participants was engaging in academic coursework. Participants engaged in coursework by participating in class, completing course assignments, working on group projects, completing research projects, communicating with peers, working with teaching assistants, and working with instructors. Successful students did not simply go to class and go home to do homework. They actively participated during course meeting times and invested several hours each week working on course content outside of the class meeting time. Overall, when students actively engaged in coursework, they were able to access further academic opportunities. For example, students described courses as gateways to academic areas with which they were previously unfamiliar. As a case in point, Sophie described taking her first linguistics course. Prior to college she had never heard of linguistics. She shared with an academic advisor that she really enjoyed French courses in high school. The academic advisor recommended that she

enroll in a linguistics course. The activity of taking this course, and fully engaging in it, led to what Sophie ultimately described as "the best part" of her academic experience:

> I think the best part is before I got here I didn't know what linguistics was and I'd always loved learning French and when I found out that I just thought it was really exciting, like this new thing to learn that I really loved. And I've just loved almost all my courses that I've taken in linguistics . . . coming in to college I had no idea what I would be majoring in. I had no idea.

By engaging in the linguistics course, Sophie found her major and developed an ardent interest in an academic area that was entirely new to her.

Gianna described a similar experience. Gianna never heard of sociology prior to college. Then she took one course with Dr. Karol from the Sociology Department. The activity of taking the course opened up to several more activities and opportunities. First, it led to academic advising from Dr. Karol. Academic advising resulted in Gianna's major selection and a research opportunity:

> I took Dr. Karol's "Sex and Gender in Society" class, and it kind of opened my eyes to a whole other aspect of things that I had no idea even existed, sex and gender inequalities and things like that. I was terribly interested by the course. . . . [Dr. Karol] helped me make my decision to major in sociology . . . and also choosing to write an honors thesis, those are probably two biggies that really shaped my academic career here.

The activity of engaging in the course led to the development of an important relationship with a faculty member. It also led to the decision to write a thesis. By fully engaging in the coursework, the single class opened up to multiple opportunities and academic pathways for the student.

Participating in faculty-mentored

research. Nearly all students, 15 out of 16, described participation in faculty-mentored research, including writing honors theses, completing capstone projects, participating in field and lab experiences, and doing research projects in credited courses. Most students described these experiences occurring after their first year in college. Students described faculty-mentored research that was a structured part of the curriculum of a course. As an example, Gianna shared,

> I'm in a class this semester where I'm actually doing a research project for sociology of Islam. We actually did a survey with the whole class, and we're using some of the survey data to generate our own results after we've done a lit review on the same topic. I'm actually writing it about the varying attitudes towards Islam by religious affiliation in the United States.

Students also described participating in faculty-mentored research through field placements. Alexandra participated in an internship abroad that included field research in South Africa:

> I [researched] the politics behind the AIDS crisis in South Africa. And I interviewed people and just worked on that. . . . [My faculty mentor is] an expert in Africa so that was really helpful. . . . I gained a better understanding into the connections between politics and health care.

Students indicated that participating in faculty-mentored research helped them to formulate original ideas as well as better understand and contribute to the academic enterprise.

Ethan described "having to come up with . . . a research topic, carry it out," and see it through to completion. Through this experience, Ethan realized that "every detail to that research project was important," and this realization helped him "understand the detail that goes into research, especially being at a research university." For students like Ethan, the growing appreciation of research and experience with research helped them understand the college environment better. Students described research as being highly valued in the university community. Understanding this value helped the students feel connected and accepted in the community.

Studying or traveling abroad. Ten out of 15 participants worked, studied, or traveled abroad. All 10 of these students described their time abroad as a defining moment in their undergraduate career. Most students studied abroad between the end of their sophomore year and the first half of their senior year. Students recommended that all undergraduates should travel abroad during college. As a case in point, Orlando shared:

> I went to Ireland one summer and loved it. I'm actually going to Turkey and Cairo this summer after graduation. I think travel is crucial. . . . I think everyone in some way, some manner, while they're in their college career, should travel. . . . Get out there. Soak up everything you possibly can. And what better time in your life than to travel, to get out there?

Students described their experiences abroad as boosting their self-confidence and their belief that they can accomplish their goals. For example, Gianna described her study abroad experience as bringing her "out of her comfort zone" and "out of her shell." For Alexandra, an internship at a children's hospital in South Africa confirmed for her "that I really wanted to be a doctor." A third student, Brian, described his time abroad as confirming that he could accomplish his goal of becoming a working artist. He said that the experience established "that I can do that, that I can successfully put myself out there to be creative in the way that I want to be." Many students reflected that the confidence they developed

abroad continued to serve them once they returned to their home campus. Students described being more willing to develop relationships with people they did not know and to participate in new activities. As students discussed their experiences abroad, confidence and independence were continuous themes.

Cocurricular. For the purposes of analyses, we identified cocurricular activities as social and learning experiences that complement the formal undergraduate curriculum. Co-curricular activities include participating in student organizations, participating in community service, and joining a small community on campus.

Participating in student organizations. All participants (16 out of 16) participated in student organizations, with half of the participants engaging in organizations with a religious or an ethnic or cultural affiliation. Students described some organizations, especially ones with religious affiliations, as having a transformative influence on their lives. For example, Donovan described the significant role a Christian student organization and a Christian fraternity played in his development throughout college:

> It completely transformed my life and my college experience. . . . That organization was really instrumental in just my growth as a college student, and I've been involved with them since the end of my freshman year.

Another student, Mackenzie, described a religious organization as the thing "that most influenced" her time in college. Some students, such as Lauren, who participated in ethnic or cultural organizations described their experiences as "fun" and "time to relax." Others found that their experience with ethnic or cultural organizations challenged them to explore their cultural identities and their communities. For example, Faith said that her participation in the "Hispanic Student Association" challenged her to explore the "fine line between self-segregation and promoting your culture."

Overall, students portrayed their participation in student organizations as personally beneficial. Many students commented that participating in an organization made the large university community feel smaller. One student, Manny, described how he gained a great deal from student organizations, and while such gains may not be demonstrable on a resume, they were highly beneficial to his career prospects nonetheless:

> So I feel like I've grown personally through all these different extracurricular activities and it may not show maybe through a resume or through an application but that I will be well versed in cultural knowledge and social justice knowledge as I move forward in my career.

Students also described finding peer mentors through student organizations. These peer mentors helped guide students through the college experience. In addition to peer mentors, two students described valuable relationships they developed with professional staff who supervised student organizations.

Participating in community service. Nearly all students in the study group (15 out of 16) indicated that they participated in community service during their undergraduate experience. Students described participating in community service as early as the first week of school and all the way through to graduation. Some of these activities were connected to courses but occurred outside of the classroom, such as Faith's experience volunteering in an elementary school:

> I took an immigration geographies course and I volunteered at [an] elementary school with kindergarteners. It was great. I love it. . . . It's helped me educate myself about other cultures, not just Latin, or American culture, but Burmese. A lot of

the kids that I worked with were Burmese. And I'm so, yeah, just expanding my understanding of the world.

The student found that the volunteer service opportunity broadened her appreciation of cultures beyond her own culture. Another student, Makayla, described the way community service work influenced her major choice and career pursuits. She found that volunteering at the Family Violence Prevention Center gave her vital experience that helped her come to the conclusion that social work was the right field of study for her.

> So [volunteering], to me, was really meaningful, and it was really directed towards what I wanted to do, and that's why I picked social work. . . . Last summer I was there. . . . I was the only Spanish-speaking person they had during the summer.

The student also shared how meaningful it was to her that she could use her language to provide service to the community.

Several students indicated that community service provided them with stress relief, enjoyment, and an escape from the pressures of college. For example, Lauren described her service experience at a children's hospital:

> I like to help out, especially at the hospital with kids and stuff. They're really fun. I think it's like a reliever off from school. I just get my mind off it, and just hang out with the kids, and just play with them. So it was really fun. They're all interesting and have different personalities, so I think that's what I liked about meeting kids at the hospital too, and they make me appreciate my life, and just to see how strong they are.

Lauren described community service as a means to give back to her community and as a way to socialize and make friends. Service provided Lauren and others with the opportunity to build friendships with

peers who held common interests and valued volunteerism. Many students shared that they were very active in service during high school and continuing service during college was a helpful way to transition into the university environment.

Joining a small community. All participants described joining at least one small community on campus. In particular, students identified major departments, student organizations, work settings, campus recreation, and housing communities. For example, Makayla described the importance of her membership in a small housing community: "my suite, I loved the people in my suite, and I became really, really close to them, and they became some of my best friends." Another student, Ethan, described his small community as the "fitness community" based in the university's campus recreation center:

> I've been working in the Student Recreation Center. It's the primary fitness center on campus. . . . So through that and from working out there regularly for the past 4 years, I just met people as I worked out to where I maybe out somewhere on campus or even off campus and I see someone that I know through that there and also we're having conversation and everything, people that I would not know had I not worked there or worked out there. So you know, so it makes me feel more a part of the community. I can walk around and see people all the time saying hey to me that I know from there alone. So that's been very important. It made me feel a part of [the university].

For this student, being a member of the small fitness community helped the student connect to the university and feel like a part of the collegiate environment. Another student, Sophie, also described how joining a small community helped her feel like she was a part of the university. She described feeling lost for all of her first year of college. It was only in her

second year, when she became a member of a small community, a student organization with a religious affiliation, that she began to feel she belonged on campus: "Being a part of Campus Crossroads really made me feel like I had somewhere to go to and make the campus seem a little smaller." Other students echoed the importance of student organizations as small communities. Mackenzie shared that being

> involved in an organization enables you to be part of a smaller community, and then within those organizations even smaller communities. Probably the one thing that's influenced me most is my small group Bible study. And it's all 4 years the same girls, and just to see how we've grown and relied on each other and helped each other and encouraged each other, I can't imagine what my college career would've been without that group. And that's just 12 girls, so that's very small group.

Being a member of the small community of a student organization was significant enough to Mackenzie that she could not imagine what her college career would have been like if she were not involved in the community.

Employment. Employment activities involved working for pay at least part time. Eleven out of 16 students worked on or close to campus while enrolled in a full course schedule (12–18 credit hours). Only one student indicated that he worked more than part time. He worked between 20 and 35 hours per week, whereas all of the other students worked fewer than 20 hours per week.

Most students found the activity of employment as generally beneficial. Only one student indicated that working part-time detracted from her college experience. Makayla shared that "when you have to work, that also takes away from other extracurricular activities that you could be doing." Even though this student noted this limitation, at other points in the interview, she shared that she had

gained many favorable things from her work experience. Largely, students expressed great value gained from their part-time employment. For example, Gianna described her work-study position at the university hospital as "probably the most positive small environment" to which she had belonged on campus.

> I had some more support there. My boss is great. And that job really helped me grow, and it's definitely helped me in my job search thus far that I was a research assistant and I have all these responsibilities and things like that.

Another student, Tessa, described her work experience as a valuable opportunity to be "part of a team and work on team building skills." Manny described how working one summer "as a door-to-door solicitor" motivated him to become more engaged in college. Manny said he realized through his summer work experience what he did not want to be doing after college graduation, and he had to take more advantage of what the university offered. Manny's unsatisfactory work experience led to his decision to study abroad the following summer and seek out paid internship opportunities.

Roles

The roles participants most frequently discussed included being an undergraduate, a researcher, and an employee. Roles included distinct responsibilities and autonomous as well as social behaviors. Throughout the interviews, students discussed vital skills they had to develop to perform in their roles and meet expectations. As described in the next sections, the roles influenced identity development among the students.

Undergraduate. Study participants described their experiences as they took on the role of undergraduate in the college culture. To be successful, students had to learn how to play the role of college student. Several students

described initially feeling like an imposter in the role. Students expressed worry that the university made a mistake with their admission. For example, Orlando described his initial experience in his new role of college student:

> It is overwhelming . . . the first time you buy a textbook and you look at it, and you're like, "Why does the name match the person who's teaching this course?" You're looking at the, "Written by John Andrews," and you're looking at your course, it says "Teacher: John Andrews," and you're like, "Oh, no." You realize for the first time exactly what you've gotten yourself into, that you're like this isn't some dusty old guy out in the middle of nowhere writing this book. The guy that's teaching wrote this book. And it's overwhelming. You're thinking, "This person's going to see through everything. They're going to realize that somehow or another my high school messed up, and somehow or another the admission board messed up, and I'm here but I'm not qualified at all to be here," and you panic.

Orlando went on to explain that, through a relationship he had a with a faculty member, he began to genuinely feel like he belonged and like he could fully inhabit his role of undergraduate. By learning the student role, Orlando was able to live up to the expectations and responsibilities of being an undergraduate such as participating in study groups, visiting faculty during office hours, and meeting degree requirements.

Brian described serving in the role of undergraduate as learning that "you are not invincible." Brian described learning that he must put in time and effort to perform on the college level. Performing on the college level was different from high school, which required less time investment to succeed. This role change led Brian to reflect on his identity and his former sense of invincibility. Other students shared unique insights in to the role

of undergraduate. William described the role of undergraduate as someone who must take a broad array of courses. Gianna explained that being a FGCS undergraduate requires that you have faith in yourself and that you constantly remind yourself "you belong here and can do it." Orlando shared that being an undergraduate "is a pretty important part of my identity." Overall, students described being an undergraduate as a role that one does not automatically play without an investment of time and energy. Students had to actively think about their new role and how best to perform in this role.

Researcher. Researcher was an important role that overlaps with the activity of research and the relationship of academic mentor and mentee. Fifteen of the study participants reported participating in faculty-mentored research and described the importance of their role as a researcher in their overall undergraduate experience. Makayla described that in the role of researcher, "you definitely see it all come together," including the ability to ask academic questions, write, and draw conclusions. Brian described that as his role of researcher increased in complexity over time, he became more confident. He described feeling honored that eventually, after several years as a researcher, his faculty mentors let him become a principal investigator for a study.

Ethan articulated the importance of being a researcher to connect with faculty. He described a particular faculty as being unapproachable in class: "during a lecture, like he never seemed like personable at all." When the student became a researcher for the faculty member, "when we needed help, when I went to his office and everything, he was very helpful." Through the researcher role, the student was able to make a connection and develop a relationship with the faculty member even when he could not do this through the lecture class. Brian, like several other students, indicated that overall being a

researcher helped him identify his academic interests and prioritize his goals. From his research experience, Brian also learned "my first priority is getting into grad school, and continuing my research in social psychology because that's what really interests me."

Employee. The role of employee overlaps with the activity of employment. Through the role of employee students developed in multiple ways. Ten of the 16 students worked part-time while enrolled in full-time course work. These students described their role of employee as largely beneficial. For example, Mackenzie found that through her role as a babysitter, she became a part of a family away from home and that she felt cared for and needed in this role:

> I just fell in love with the family, they were great and the kids were great and I just ended up keeping them up until last year when they went to school. So it was two days a week and it went from me going to their house and sitting with them to picking them up from their little preschool and taking them home and just playing and cooking them lunch and just kind of become part of the family.

Mackenzie described the responsibility and accountability expected of her in this role. Ethan commented that through his role of employee, he learned responsibility, accountability, and how to communicate and interact with other people. In particular, Ethan commented that his job taught him "a lot about how to deal with other people . . . like knowing how to work with others is very critical, working with co-workers and everything." Ethan went on to explain that his role of employee taught him how to "be real diligent about work" and "serious on the job," which will aid him in his future vocational aspirations beyond college.

Relationships

All participants described at least one beneficial, developmental relationship with a more experienced peer, faculty member, or adult. Many students described multiple relationships that positively influenced their college experience. The most common relationships they described included academic mentor, student mentor, and employment mentor. All students described having at least one of these relationships, and some reported relationships in all three of these categories.

Academic Mentor. Relationships with academic mentors included relationships students developed with faculty members or graduate students, including teaching assistants and research assistants. Students shared that relationships with academic mentors helped them make important academic choices and decisions including which major to declare and whether or not to pursue graduate school. The relationship of academic mentor overlaps with the activity of research. Students shared that they met their academic mentors through a course or research project but their relationship ultimately extended well beyond the occasion for their initial interaction. Manny's description of how he met his academic mentor is demonstrative of this occurrence:

> As a sophomore . . . I took [my mentor's] class. . . . I really, really enjoyed it and pretty much aced his class. So, he asked me to help him with [research]. . . . He provided me a really good recommendation for graduate school. . . . I'm still in contact with him from time to time so he was a really good mentor and provided me a lot of good feedback and it was a really good experience with him.

Bronfenbrenner described relationships as bidirectional in nature (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Manny's experience is a good example

as the relationship positively influenced the development of Manny, the student, and it positively influenced the development of the mentor. Manny's relationship with his mentor grew out of the activity of research and, over time, it took on significance beyond the research activity. Another student, Gianna, described a similar situation. Whereas she initially connected with her academic mentor for a research project, she ultimately found that while she was "a great advisor to my thesis," she was also "a great mentor" overall and someone to whom she could turn "just with anything."

Student Mentor. Students described having a peer mentor through a student organization. These mentors were not part of assigned mentoring programs but stemmed from two peers being in the same organization. In most cases, the mentors were more experienced with college but not necessarily older. Orlando shared that he valued "having a role model your age" and indicated "it's very satisfying to see someone your age doing well who you respect, actually respect, respect as much as you would any professor or an adult." Orlando went on to say that having a peer mentor helped him feel valued and more confident about his own goals:

> You hold them [peer mentor] in high regard, and you're convinced . . . "Well, gosh, I hold this person in such high regards and we seem to have similar goals, so I must be doing something right."

Tessa commented that the best thing about having peer mentors from student organizations was that "we were all looking out for each other." Donovan explained that his peer mentor interactions helped him feel valued and seen. Donovan's peer mentor was from a student organization with a religious affiliation:

> He's been there since my freshman year, and I met him the first night that I went

to the meeting, the first meeting ever that I went to my freshman year, and he was the first person that really reached out to me during my college experience. His first question to me was . . . what is my story? And then I talked to him for an hour after that and just kind of told him about me. And that was the first time that anybody took a genuine interest, and was sincere, and then he followed up, and called me the next week, and called me, and prayed for me, and asked me to get dinner, and all these things, and so he then pretty much began to mentor me and kind of teach me different things about my Faith, and so I went freshman year, sophomore year, meeting up with him every week.

William also reported that a peer mentor from a student organization "challenged me" and "made me think of things in a different way." He shared that he was inspired by the fact that his peer mentors "all want to do things with their life and do very important things."

Employment Mentor. The relationship of employment mentor overlaps with the activity of employment. Several students described their employee supervisor as an important mentor during their college experience. Of interest, these students described work supervisors who were college graduates and could relate to their college experience. Two female students described babysitting jobs they worked throughout college for families with professional parents who graduated from college. The young women described developing caring and supportive relationships with their supervisors who could relate to their college experience. Ethan described working on campus for a recent college graduate ("my boss at the rec center. He's definitely become a mentor in my life") who could relate to his struggles in college and discuss plans for life after college. Manny also described working with the housing department on campus and having several recent college graduates as his

supervisors: "They've been through school and they see all of the things that are going on and they're very understanding." Manny and his supervisors shared mutual feelings of positive regard and were able to connect around the shared experience of college including its challenges and opportunities.

Proximal Processes

Within and across activities, roles, and relationships, developmental processes called *proximal processes* influence individual growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). We identified seven proximal processes for successful FGCS. These processes are embedded in social context and time with the processes becoming progressively more complex over time. These processes include (a) forming attachments to people and places, (b) developing academic skills, (c) setting goals, (d) coping with change and challenges, (e) finding purpose and meaning in learning, (f) developing autonomy, and (g) forming and solidifying social and occupational identities. Through these developmental processes, students expanded their understanding of the collegiate environment and formulated ideas about their place within this environment.

Attitudes and Dispositions

Personal characteristics influence proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The attitudes and dispositions of an individual can invite or discourage reactions from the social environment. Attitudes and disposition may foster proximal processes or disrupt the operation of proximal processes. In this study, there were several attitudes and dispositions we identified that appeared to foster the operation of proximal processes. These included (a) being flexible and willing to change, (b) feeling independent, (c) perceiving challenges as opportunities for growth, and (d) risk taking. These personal characteristics

were evident across the majority of cases. Some students may have developed these characteristics during college, while it is likely that other students came to college with these characteristics.

DISCUSSION

To understand how an individual develops, it is necessary to understand the objective properties of an environment as well as the ways in which the properties are perceived by the individuals in the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This study has examined the lived experience of students to explore how developmental situations in college are experienced by the people who participate in them. The findings of this study illustrate several tenets of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological systems theory. For development to occur, an individual must be an active agent in his or her environment. The participants in this study were active agents as they repeatedly sought out activities, learning experiences, relationships, and opportunities for participation in the college community. Furthermore, for development to occur, an individual must interact with the environment in a progressively complex manner as the individual becomes more competent. This was demonstrable repeatedly throughout the study. For example, Manny described the progressively complex manner in which he participated in faculty-mentored research. Initially, he served as a research assistant completing simplistic organizational tasks. Over time, Manny's relationship with a graduate student led to him becoming intricately involved with analyses and then eventually suggesting future projects and developing research questions. As Manny's competence as a researcher increased, his research tasks and responsibilities increased in complexity. The growth Manny experienced was a result of reciprocal interactions occurring on a regular basis over the course of time. These

interactions included the activity of the research project, the relationship with the graduate student, and the increased responsibility he took on in his role of researcher. Proximal processes are reciprocal in nature; all parties involved in the interaction are influenced by the interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Manny's case showed this, as the graduate student was also influenced by the interaction with the undergraduate. The graduate student was aided by the undergraduate and went on to complete his research and accept a faculty position at another university. The graduate student and Manny continued to work together and support one another even after one of the parties left the immediate college environment. Overall, the activities, roles, and relationships promoted learning, growth, and development. By engaging in activities, roles, and relationships, study participants enhanced their understanding of their environment and how to act on the environment in a beneficial manner.

In this study, we utilize a developmental paradigm to appreciate positive college outcomes. This paradigm diverges from the theoretical tradition in the study of undergraduate retention. Traditionally, retention researchers have not focused on student success; rather, they have focused on attrition. Theorists (Bean, 1986; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1993) have attempted to explain the negative outcomes of dropout or attrition. There is limited empirical support for these attrition models (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000), indicating that the potential of these models to guide research on undergraduate retention is limited. Researchers have proposed that these models are fundamentally flawed (Brunsden, Davies, Shevlin, & Bracken, 2000) and culturally insensitive (Guiffrida, 2006; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). The models fail to take account of the changing nature of the student and the environment over the course of the student's interaction with the institution (Guiffrida, 2006). In this study, we have demonstrated that the attrition paradigm can be replaced with a perspective that takes into account the adaptive development of successful students.

The new paradigm has yielded a study with useful findings. The findings take account of the activities, roles, and relationships of successful students and provide insight into how students can meet their potential in the college environment. The study findings provide an array of challenging activities and supportive relationships that can be nurtured in the college environment toward advancing positive college outcomes. Researchers have argued for a paradigm shift away from the pathological study of college learning and persistence (Walker, Gleaves, & Grey, 2006). In this study, we have responded to this argument. We describe positive experiences and outcomes. Our exploration of optimal academic functioning has provided a snapshot of flourishing students who are fulfilled, accomplished, and learning. Describing optimal functioning is important because students will not flourish if we simply cure pathology and eliminate behavioral and emotional problems; rather, flourishing requires building and capitalizing on human strengths and capacities (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Research on the experiences, strengths, and capacities of successful students is necessary. The following section includes recommendations that can take the findings of optimal student experiences and bring them into practice for all students.

Recommendations

The study findings highlight mentoring as an important part of the student experience, and it is thus recommended that colleges and universities encourage mentoring relationships for FGCS. However, participants of this study described mentoring as relationships

that developed from joint participation in an activity such as research or employment. This is different from the ways that many mentoring programs work on college campuses. Often administrators assign mentors to mentees based on a common interest or background characteristic. We recommend here that administrators of mentoring programs focus more on creating activities through which mentoring relationships can develop rather than assigning mentoring dyads.

It is also recommended that all FGCS have access to high-impact practices (HIP). HIP are widely tested evidence-based teaching and learning practices that are beneficial for college students from many backgrounds (Kuh, 2008). Undergraduates who engage in HIP are retained and graduate at higher levels than those who do not (Kuh, 2008). HIP include living-learning communities, faculty-mentored research, and study abroad. FGCS are more likely than non-FGCS to be unfamiliar with HIP or enrichment opportunities within the college environment (Hurtado, 2007). We recommend marketing HIP directly to FGCS and providing supports to help FGCS become familiar with these programs. The steps for participating in HIP should be explicit. Providing peer guides who previously participated in these experiences could be especially helpful. How engagement in these activities can be beneficial to the overall experience of FGCS as well as to vocational paths and graduate school opportunities should be clear. Participation in student organizations and service opportunities is also important. There should be multiple opportunities for new FGCS to become familiar with and join a student organization. In particular, campus communities may want to make sure their FGCS are aware of student organizations with cultural, ethnic, and religious affiliations.

FGCS should be challenged and universities should offer supportive relationships to help them negotiate challenge. During orientation and admissions events, university professionals should help FGCS develop the expectation that college will be challenging and that challenge is a part of learning. Activities should provide FGCS with the opportunity to set short- and long-term goals and consider potential obstacles they may encounter as they move toward their goals. Students should work on developing their goals in collaboration with academic mentors and more experienced peers.

Finally, we recommend that policies affecting first-generation and low-income students, such as America's College Promise (White House, 2015), include not just financial support to attend college, but also evidence-based programs that encourage degree completion such as living-learning communities, academic mentoring, and cocurricular activities,

Suggestions for Further Research

The results of the study imply several areas that would be useful for future research. First, studying successful students proved to be a useful endeavor. We suggest that more studies of the experiences of successful students be conducted. The literature on education and development should include investigations of thriving and success in learning activities. We also suggest research into the benefits of FGCS working part-time while enrolled in a full-time course load. Whereas employment during college can be detrimental to some, for many others, it may offer highly beneficial opportunities, including exploration of vocational paths and mentoring.

More research should also explore ways in which mentoring relationships develop. As noted several times throughout this article, the important mentoring relationships students described developed through joint partici-pation in an activity. Understanding how mentoring relationships develop could inform

practice and offer the best support possible to mentors and mentees. Studying this process is especially critical given how important supportive relationships are to helping FGCS respond to and navigate challenges in their environment. All of the study participants reported involvement in a student organization. Half of the students described participation in organizations with cultural, ethnic, or religious affiliations. We suggest that further research be conducted into the role of these organizations in the FGCS experience. Several of the students who discussed their participation in cultural, ethnic, or religious organizations described their involvement as life changing. It would be beneficial to understand this phenomenon more deeply. Do most students have this experience, or is this unique to FGCS? What does participating in cultural, ethnic, or religious organizations offer that participating in other student organizations does not? Answers to these questions could help institutions offer refined cocurricular activities and opportunities.

Last, in this study, while all participants were identified as financially needy, we do not know if students took on debt to fund their education. The nation is currently engaged in critical dialogue about student indebtedness. Further research should examine how much debt successful FGCS assume by the time they graduate.

Limitations of the Study

Qualitative research findings are context and case specific (Patton, 2002). Although the findings of this study contribute to knowledge of the FGCS experience, they are not generalizable to all FGCS. One of the primary challenges of qualitative research is that it is inherently "rife with ambiguities" (Patton, 2002, p. 242). It is important to note that qualitative researchers apply "purposeful strategies instead of methodological rules"

(Patton, 2002, p. 242). There is no one absolutely right or wrong way to conduct a qualitative investigation. The intrinsically ambiguous nature of such an investigation can be difficult for consumers of research who are not comfortable with uncertainty. Although this study made best efforts and employed all possible resources to make purposeful and informed methodological decisions, the nature of the chosen research method inevitably results in the presence of some methodological ambiguity. Furthermore, this study relied on interview data. Data collected through interviews are subject to recall error (Patton, 2002). Interviewees may not correctly recall an event or activity or may exaggerate or diminish the importance of an event. This study also utilized categorical data from institutional records. Such records may be incomplete or vary in quality and completeness (Patton, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Empirical investigation into the lived experiences of FGCS enhances our appreciation of undergraduate student retention. This study contributes to what is known about FGCS experiences. This contribution is important for the development of programs and supports to encourage 4-year degree attainment for FGCS. The study also responds to an omission in the literature on FGCS experiences. Although the literature has examined the struggles of first-generation and low-income students, studies have not examined the experiences of successful students. This study describes the experiences of successful students utilizing the voices of students themselves. Finally, this study offers a developmental paradigm for appreciating undergraduate retention. Recommendations from this investigation support the development and implementation of proactive retention and degree-completion strategies from a strengths-based perspective.

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