# EXPLORING THE MOTIVATIONS & PERCEPTIONS OF FIRST-GENERATION DOCTORAL STUDENTS

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## FIRST-GENERATION DOCTORAL STUDENTS

Students who are the first in their immediate families to pursue doctoral degrees

## OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study is to explore the motivations and perceptions of first-gen doctoral students to examine the equitability of doctoral education from the student perspective.

### Research Questions

1. What are the trends in motivations, or reasons for pursuing and continuing doctoral education, of first-gen doctoral students?

2. What are the trends in perceptions, or psychological experiences in pursuing and continuing doctoral education, of first-gen doctoral students?

## INTRODUCTION

Disparities in education are among the most significant factors that impact long-term success. Beginning in primary school, children who are not afforded quality education are placed at a lifelong academic disadvantage; these students are less likely to pursue college education, and those that do are faced with obstacles that often plague first-generation (first-gen) students[1].

## OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
### Strome College of Business

## BACKGROUND

**Students who are the first in their families to attend college, or first-gen students, encounter many unique obstacles.** They are more likely to be minorities, come from low-income backgrounds, and have familial obligations[2]. A high proportion are also female, have disabilities, and are older[2]. First-gen students are less likely to pursue graduate degrees[2], thus potentially limiting advancement opportunities.

There is a lack of diversity in doctoral education[4]. Historically, doctoral students have been "white, affluent, protestant, and male"[5]. First-gen doctoral students are more likely to be female and from minority groups[1]. They are also less likely to have attended research universities and possess research experience[6]. In 2010, 32.1% of doctoral degree recipients were first-gen students[3].

Other obstacles such as facing discrimination, insufficient financial resources, and the lack of family support may also hinder potential doctoral students[1,2]. Considering this data and that first-gen students only make up approximately $1/3$ of doctoral degree recipients, more research is needed to explore these issues and increase equitability in doctoral education.

## METHODOLOGY

*Design Strategy* - A case study in the social constructivist paradigm was used for this study. This case study analyzed the experiences of students at a large research university in Hampton Roads.

*Participants* - Four first-gen doctoral students participated in the study. Participants were first-year students in a social science PhD program.

*Data Collection and Analysis* - A systematic literature review was used to analyze existing scholarship on first-gen doctoral students and disparities in academia. This is an emergent research area and limited literature was available. The primary field data collection strategy was a focus group. The focus group lasted approximately 75 minutes; the interview was semi-structured. Audio was recorded then transcribed and coded manually.

## CASE STUDY FINDINGS

Professional, familial, and personal motivations and competing self (internal) and social (external) perceptions were the most significant factors that affected participants' doctoral experiences. The diagram below represents the intersectionality of professional, familial, and personal motivations and how they affect and are affected by first-gen doctoral students' evolving self and social perceptions.
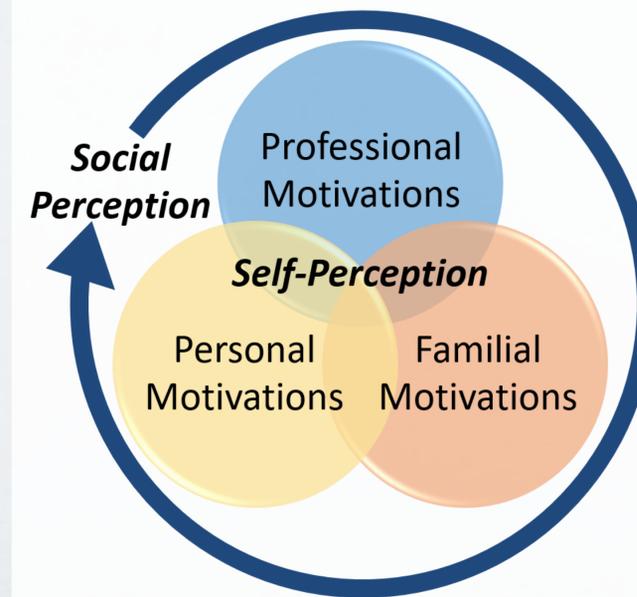


Selected responses show observed trends in data:

### Professional Motivations

*"If I go further in my education, then that would give me some form of legitimacy in the field. If you don't have a PhD it's like 'pshhhh, what are you doing?'"*

### Familial Motivations

*"I want my kids to have the things that my parents weren't able to give to me."*

*"I, myself, feel the weight of carrying my family. I've been caretaker of them for a long time, and the further ahead I get, the more they rely on me for support."*

### Personal Motivations

*"What motivates me is coming from far away to complete my PhD. It's not a time [to] quit or be weak...*

*[It's] the motivation for myself to [wake] up in the morning and [work] hard to achieve my goals.*

### Competing Perceptions

*"When you come from backgrounds of adversity and people are used to putting you in a specific box and limiting your potential, you definitely have to come out fighting... There's this sense of I have to show everybody that I'm worthy and that I'm capable."*

> "As first-gen doctoral students, it comes with its challenges. It's a testament that we are determined to achieve better despite our situations and the challenges we face."

## DISCUSSION

The focus group revealed that there are multiple, interconnected factors that influence the motivations and perceptions of first-gen doctoral students. As an emergent area, this study addresses a gap in academic research; with the goal of promoting more accessible graduate education, it considers the long-term implications of educational disparities and how affected students seek to overcome them.

### *Literature Review & Focus Group ➔ Surveys ➔ Equity Lens Tool*

This study presents preliminary research on the motivations and perceptions of first-gen doctoral students. The next step in this project will be to conduct a survey to collect responses from a larger sample, which will include students from other programs. The last step will be to develop an equity lens tool – an instrument to facilitate the implementation of equitable academic policies.

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