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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

FROM INVISIBILITY TO BELONGING: SUPPORTS AND CHALLENGES OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO IDENTIFY AS RACIAL OR ETHNIC MINORITIES

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Megan Nichols Martinez

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education

August 2020

This Dissertation by: Megan Nichols Martinez

Entitled: *From Invisibility to Belonging: Supports and Challenges of First-Generation College Students who Identify as Racial and Ethnic Minorities*

has been approved as meeting the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education.

Accepted by the Doctoral Committee

____
Basilia Softas-Nall, Ph.D., Research Advisor

____
Stephen Wright, Ph.D., Committee Member

____
Robyn S. Hess, Ph.D., Committee Member

____
Randy Larkins, Ph.D., Faculty Representative

Date of Dissertation Defense__________________________

Accepted by Graduate School

____
Cindy Wesley
Interim Associate Provost and Dean
The Graduate School and International Admissions

ABSTRACT

Martinez, Megan N. *From Invisibility to Belonging: Supports and Challenges of First-Generation College Students who Identify as Racial and Ethnic Minorities.* Published Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2020.

The experience of navigating through college is fraught with challenges, and within six years only 20 percent of first-generation college students graduate with their bachelor's degree (RTI International, 2019b). Additionally, these students experience notable academic difficulties during college when compared to peers, including lower GPA (Chen & Carroll, 2005; D'Amico & Dika, 2013; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005), decreased academic engagement (Soria & Stebleton, 2012b), and greater likelihood of withdrawing from or repeating coursework in college (Chen & Carroll, 2005). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to (a) understand how first-generation students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities experience support and challenges, and how they overcome challenges, as they navigate diverse social spheres and (b) to add to the body of knowledge about the relational experiences of first-generation students and how these relationships change during the duration of their undergraduate career. Narratives were gathered from 12 first-generation college students who identify as racial and ethnic minorities from a mid-sized institution in the Rocky Mountain region. From these narratives, 14 themes emerged including: Strengths, Isolation, Shared Identity, Cultural Values, Visibility, Awareness of Faculty's Willingness to Help, Mentorship, Connection with Peers, Knowing Where to Find Help, Understanding What it Takes to

Succeed, Honoring Hard Work and Sacrifice, Modeling, Success for Future Generations, Emotional Support and Encouragement, and Experiences with Counseling. Results guide implications for empowering first-generation college students who identify as racial and ethnic minorities for counseling psychologists and mental health professionals working in university counseling centers, faculty and mentors working with this population, and supportive family members.

Keywords: first-generation students, racial, ethnic, university, culture, support, challenges, qualitative study, strengths

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The importance of higher education is vast and difficult to measure; pursuing obtaining higher levels of education is associated with a number of factors, including better health and better vocational possibilities (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2014). Though there are many benefits to higher education that exceed beyond the financial benefits, as just described, salary and employment rates provide a clear, non-abstract measure of gain. In 2015, median annual earnings with a high school degree was $30,500 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). In contrast, median annual earnings with a bachelor's degree in 2015 was $53,000. Thus, there is a clear increase in salary associated with obtaining a bachelor's degree and greater educational attainment leads to greater income. People with a bachelor's degree are also more likely to be employed than people with a high school diploma, with an 88 percent and 69 percent rate, respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Collectively, research suggests that obtaining a bachelor's degree results in greater employment rates and greater annual salaries. While there are surely many benefits beyond employment gains, money makes a strong argument.

First-generation students enter the arena of higher education as the first members of their families to pursue a bachelor's degree, seeking the career and personal benefits associated with obtaining a degree. Given that they are the first in their families to

pursue this route, it is not surprising that they may face certain obstacles along their educational journey. They also face challenges related to other identities they may hold. First-generation students are more likely than their peers to identify within a racial or ethnic minority group (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; Soria & Stebleton, 2012b). Students who belong to racial and ethnic minority groups, in general, have a lower completion rate in college than Caucasian students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Counseling psychologists working in a university setting and other university personnel need to be knowledgeable about first-generation racial and ethnic minority students in order to support their academic and personal development. Therefore, this research is designed to gain insight on the experiences this population and where they encounter support and barriers both on-campus and within their families and communities of origin. How do first-generation students navigate their home communities and on-campus environments successfully?

Before further exploring the purpose of this qualitative study, it is important to overview key literature regarding how first-generation students function within the university setting and the impact of family and institutional support. This review provides a framework to understanding the importance of this type of research and how it can be applied toward ensuring the success of first-generation students who identify as a racial or ethnic minority.

Background and Context

Internationally, the number of college-educated adults continues to rise, reflecting a trend toward greater educational attainment (OECD, 2014). The United States mirrors this trend, as the number of non-college educated adults in the United States continues to

decline (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; OECD, 2014; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Total enrollment in the fall of 2015 was 17 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). While increases in overall educational attainment is encouraging, research indicates that greater access to higher education has not been increasing at the same rate for all; over a 30-year span, the rate of non-college educated White adults declined 40% while the percentage of Hispanic individuals in this category only declined 18% (Saenz et al., 2007). Thus, racial and ethnic minority students continue to have less opportunity to receive a college education than White students. Additionally, while the trend in the United States is toward greater access to higher education, it is unclear whether students, particularly students who are the first in their families to attend college, are receiving the support needed to succeed in college. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) argue that first-generation students are not provided with the support or academic preparation necessary to reach academic potential, stating "access without support is not opportunity" (p. 50).

There is ample evidence in favor of Engstrom and Tinto's (2008) claim in several notable dimensions. For example, examining the financial support first-generation students receive, evidence suggests that they do not receive enough aid. First-generation students receive less financial aid than they need to cover tuition and college-related expenses (Engle et al., 2006; Gonzalez, 2015) even though they are more likely to persist academically with more financial aid and grants (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). They struggle covering costs like books and transportation, which tend to be overlooked when calculating overall expenses because they are less central than paying for tuition, for example (Engle et al., 2006). Additionally, first-generation students are more likely to

come from working-class backgrounds (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016; Soria & Stebleton, 2012b) and low-income families (Engle et al., 2006) and thus are likely to have less financial support from their families of origin. There are an estimated 4.5 million low-income, first-generation students enrolled in universities, comprising a substantial population of students (approximately 24 percent; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Not surprisingly, being low-income, particularly without financial support, is a risk factor for educational attainment. Research indicates that students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to complete bachelor's degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

First-generation students also seem to be poorly supported and equipped academically as well. Retention and persistence seem to be major challenges for first generation students, as only 20 percent of first-generation college students receive their bachelor's degree in six years (RTI International, 2019b). In comparison, 49% of continuing-generation college students received their degree in this timeframe. Other researchers echo these statistics, finding that first-generation students are less likely than their peers to persist (D'Amico & Dika, 2013; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Soria & Stebleton, 2012b). Apart from retention issues, first-generation students have other notable academic difficulties in comparison to their peers once they enter college, including lower GPA (Chen & Carroll, 2005; D'Amico & Dika, 2013; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), decreased academic engagement (Soria & Stebleton, 2012b), and greater likelihood of withdrawing from or repeating coursework in college (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that first-generation students, while gaining access to higher education, are

not being provided the resources and support they need to be as successful as their continuing-generation peers.

Support seems to be integral to success for first-generation students. Institutional support, or support arising from the college or university staff, such as college preparation staff, is associated with decreased stress for first-generation students but not for continuing-generation students (Garriott & Nisle, 2017). Environmental support, or support from people in the immediate environment such as peers, predicts college self-efficacy, college outcome expectations, and academic satisfaction (Garriott, Hudyma, Keene, & Santiago, 2015). Thus, assistance from on-campus entities can impact first-generation student's academic self-efficacy and performance. Professors and other faculty can also be supportive parties for first-generation students and can play an important role as cultural agents, connecting students to campus resources and providing small and supportive learning environments (Schademan & Thompson, 2015). However, Schademan and Thompson (2015) describe how faculty often fail to provide these kinds of supports for first-generation students due to negative perceptions about the level of academic preparedness. Faculty and institutional support, then, may be helpful for ensuring first-generation student success, but there may be barriers to the consistent provisions of these resources. Faculty may inadvertently ascribe to negative stereotypes about first-generation students and their abilities, which, in-turn may impact the student's performance and self-perceptions.

While on-campus support and relationships with faculty are important, first-generation students may also receive support from their family of origin and their community of origin. The impact of family support yields conflicting findings in the

literature. Some authors, such as Garcia, Restubog, Bordia, Bordia, and Roxas (2015), found that contextual support, or support from family members and teachers, is related to greater career optimism for college students who are the first in their family to attend college. Similarly, Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, and Alpert (2011) find that parent emotional support is related to lower stress for first-generation students. Other research supports these findings and draws connections between family and peer group support and greater well-being as well as fewer psychological symptoms for first-generation students (Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008).

First-generation students tend to report less overall family support than continuing-generation students (Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Durón, 2013; Sy et al., 2011). Additionally, some first-generation students report feeling a loss of connection to home and family after beginning college (Lee & Kramer, 2013). Value placed on family interdependence seems to both produce greater academic motivation and internal conflict for racial and ethnic minority students in particular (Tseng, 2004). Other challenges first-generation students may face with regards to their family connections include feeling pulled between family obligations and school (Soria & Stebleton, 2012a; Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, & Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2014) and feeling guilt and depressive symptoms associated with leaving family and community members behind in order to pursue academic aspirations (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Tate, Williams III, & Harden, 2013). Thus, the current literature paints a complex picture regarding the benefits and difficulties associated with family support for first-generation students.

Rationale

From the research, it is clear that social support from family, peers, and faculty is integral to success in college for first-generations students (e.g., Garcia et al., 2015; Garriott & Nisle, 2017). While the interconnectedness of social support and academic success is evident, there are many nuances that are less well understood. In terms of faculty and environmental support, while research notes that this kind of support can decrease stress, increase college self-efficacy, and bolster academic satisfaction (Garriott et al., 2015; Garriott & Nisle, 2017) research also describes important barriers for first-generation consistently receiving this support (Schademan & Thompson, 2015). It is unclear, then, to what degree first-generation students who identify as a racial or ethnic minority truly feel supported by on college campuses and how they experience this support when they do receive it. Do first-generation students feel more or less supported by faculty and peers as they progress through their academic careers and how do they navigate challenges experienced in these relationships? Currently, there are no adequate answers to these questions.

Additionally, as described, the impact of family and community of origin support for first-generation students is nuanced and unclear. Some studies highlight the positive impacts of family support, such as decreased stress and greater psychological and overall well-being (Sy et al., 2011; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008) other studies highlight some of the challenges associated with family support. For instance, family support may cause internal conflict regarding obligations to family and obligations to academics (Soria & Stebleton, 2012a; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2014). It may also induce feelings of guilt and sadness, as first-generation college students often must leave behind their

family, at least temporarily, in order to pursue higher education and surpass the educational attainment of their family (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Tate et al., 2013).

First-generation students must navigate two different worlds when beginning college, as their communities of origin and college communities are often culturally distinct (Carter, 2003; Lee & Kramer, 2013). University settings tend to idealize individualization and promote an individualistic culture, while many first-generation students originate from more collectivistic cultural backgrounds (Fryberg, Covarrubias, & Burack, 2013; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Thus, first-generation students often must create hybridized identities, incorporating the old and the new. Current research fails to provide a complete picture of the nuanced impact of family support and how first-generation students experience this support. An in-depth perspective is needed, which qualitative research can address. As Lee and Kramer (2013) assert, study of first-generation students and other students from low-SES backgrounds, and their interactions with their families and communities of origin has been understudied.

The literature also fails to explore how family relationships and relationships with home change as first-generation students who identify as a racial or ethnic minority progress through their undergraduate degree and how they overcome challenges and navigate changing relationships. Understanding how first generation students overcome these challenges is an important gap in the literature, as counseling psychologists have a deep philosophical commitment to emphasize strengths and positive traits people possess, rather than only focusing on deficits (Gelso, Nutt Williams, & Fretz, 2014). Strengths are important to understanding a person holistically and are also important to assessment and

treatment, and thus should continue to be researched (Gelso et al., 2014). The current study, then, aims to address these gaps.

Intended Audience

The ethical codes for psychologists, and all mental health professionals, mandate the demonstration of competence when working with diverse populations. First-generation students often have many diversifying factors, as they are more likely than their peers to be from low-income backgrounds (Engle & Tinto, 2008) and are more likely to be racial or ethnic minorities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; Soria & Stebleton, 2012b). The results of this study have implications for counseling psychologists and mental health professionals working within a university or college setting, who are likely to encounter first-generation students. They must be equipped to work with these students and the unique challenges they face in the university setting. As Tate et al. (2013, p. 89) assert, “College counselors have an ethical obligation to be aware of and sensitive to the unique experience of first-generation college students.” Thus, the current research can serve to better inform mental health professionals and university faculty and staff, who regularly interact with first-generation students. The findings, then, can help to illustrate the needs of first-generation students and how on-campus and off-campus entities can be most effective in supporting them.

Additionally, this research has implications for counseling psychologists working in advocacy roles. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2017) ethical codes state that psychologists should not only be competent clinicians when working with diverse populations, but they should also be involved in advocacy roles. Within counseling psychology, a focus on social justice and diversity has become more prevalent

than ever before (Scheel, Stabb, Cohn, Duan, & Saur, 2018). Advocacy, then, is an important obligation of counseling psychologists. Institutional advocacy on university campus may be demonstrated in several important domains, including advocacy through campus-wide programs, research, and administrative advocacy (Tate et al., 2015). Also, given that first-generation students often hold underprivileged identities, counseling psychologists can play an integral role in advocating for equity for first-generation students who may experience discrimination and oppression.

Additionally, there may be systemic reasons behind why first-generation students are underrepresented in certain college degree programs, such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), thus suggesting that macro-level factors may present challenges for first-generation students (Allen, Muragishi, Smith, Thoman, & Brown, 2015). Thus, further research with a social justice emphasis may illuminate challenges in equity first-generation students experience and give rise to a better understanding of the advocacy roles counseling psychologists can assume to address these challenges. Advocacy requires being knowledgeable about the research regarding the experiences and challenges these students face, as well as their strengths and how they overcome barriers. Thus, the current research added to the existing literature and support advocacy endeavors.

Statement of Purpose

The current research emerged from gaps in the literature regarding the impact of family and on-campus support for first-generation students who identify as a racial or ethnic minority and how this support is experienced. First-generation students must navigate both their home communities while also “fitting in” to their university

community and find ways to navigate both social spheres successfully, which brings numerous challenges (Carter, 2003; Lee & Kramer, 2013). Additionally, the purpose of the current study was to better understand not only how students experience the challenges of navigating home communities and the university setting, but also the strengths and methods of perseverance they use to overcome these challenges. As described in this chapter, first-generation students encounter many challenges while pursuing their undergraduate degrees and are less likely to persist than their peers. Nevertheless, some first-generation students are able to persist despite these challenges and yet little research has been dedicated to exploring how these individuals are able persist when many of their peers do not. The strengths first-generation students demonstrate, in general, have been understudied (Tate et al., 2015). Understanding and emphasizing strengths of clients has been a central and enduring value of counseling psychology from its beginning (Gelso et al., 2014), and thus it is important to better understand the strengths of first-generation students who identify as a racial or ethnic minority.

Research on how first-generation students navigate their home communities and the new social spheres created when entering college has received little attention in the literature. Lee and Kramer (2013) note that little is known about students who enter elite institutions and their "nonelite home communities" has been lacking (p.19). While the current study did not focus on students from elite, ivy-league institutions, the importance of upward social mobility that may be obtained through pursuing college is a salient part of this research. Social mobility can be described as the process where individuals from socioeconomically disadvantaged families of origin surpass the educational and

occupational achievements of their families (Rondini, 2016). By surpassing the occupational achievements of their families, these individuals may have greater socioeconomic status than they experienced during their upbringing. How do newly socially mobile first-generation students, who may be from low-SES family backgrounds than their peers (Engle et al., 2006), maintain home relationships and receive support, despite the fact that their family members and community members may not share the same social mobility? As Rondini (2016, p. 114) aptly states, "The educational and occupational mobility of low-income first-generation college students who take on the role of their parents' aspirational proxies presents the possibility of healing some of the 'hidden injuries of class' incurred by the previous generation."

While Rondini (2016) suggests that first-generation students may, in some ways, provide healing for non-socially mobile families, Lee and Kramer (2013) describe some of the conflicts that may emerge when socially mobile first-generation students try to re-enter their home communities. For example, the participants describe having to hide their changing identities when they return home and feigning their old attitudes and habits. The current study aimed to further explore how first-generation students adapt their relationships with both families and communities of origin, while simultaneously forming new relationships and supports, and what barriers they encounter. Additionally, the current research aimed to better understand how these relationships shift over the duration of pursuing an undergraduate degree.

Overall, the purposes of the research were as follows:

1. To understand how first-generation students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities experience support and challenges, and how they overcome

challenges, as they navigate diverse social spheres. Greater understanding may enable counseling psychologist to be knowledgeable and competent therapists and advocates.

2. To add to the body of knowledge about the relational experiences of first-generation students and how these relationships change during the duration of their undergraduate career.

Research Questions

Q1 What are the relational experiences, both with their family and communities of origin and within on-campus relationships, of first-generation racial or ethnic minority college seniors at a four-year university?

Q1A How have these relational experiences changed over time?

Q2 How have these relationships provided support for first-generation students?

Q3 How have these relationships provided challenges/barriers for first-generation students and how were these challenges overcome?

Definition of Terms

Prior to presenting background literature, it is necessary to introduce key terminology that is used throughout. In order to better understand first-generation students as a population, the following terms provide important context and describe some prevailing ideas and theories about how first-generation students navigate university settings.

Academic preparedness. Academic preparedness is a measure used to describe readiness for college. It is generally measured by standardized test scores, which is a controversial measure of college readiness, as it does not assess skills such as time

management and knowledge of the college enrollment process (Barnes, Slate, & Rojas-LeBouef, 2010).

Barriers. Barriers impede academic and career goal pursuit (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). Notable barriers include: relational barriers, where key persons (e.g., family and friends) are unable to assist with the college process; individual barriers, which is primarily associated with academic readiness for college; and systemic barriers, or macrolevel barriers that emerge from governing systems (Gonzalez, 2015). First-generation college students may also face financial barriers to pursuing their degree (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). Challenges and barriers are used interchangeably in this dissertation because challenge is a more strength-based synonym.

Continuing-generation students. Individuals attending college whose parents have attended some college or completed an undergraduate degree (Sy et al., 2011).

Cultural mismatch. Given that American Universities promote independent, largely middle-class cultural norms and these norms are reflected in their educational approaches, students who are from cultural backgrounds that promote interdependence and have working-class values may experience difficulties acculturating (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012).

Ethnic minority. Ethnic group membership involves shared cultural and historical ties, including shared family structure, family roles, language, belief systems, etc. (Smith, 1991). Majority or minority status can be defined as one's relative power in society. The U.S. Census bureau includes only Hispanic or Latino as possible ethnic identities (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011).

Family achievement guilt. Guilt experienced related to surpassing the achievements of family members. This guilt may be particularly salient among individuals or groups where interdependence is strongly valued (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015).

First-generation students. Individuals attending college for whom neither parent has ever attended college (Sy et al., 2011).

Racial minority. According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau (Humes et al., 2011), there are a minimum of five racial categories including White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. For those who cannot identify within those categories there is often a category called "other race" that one can indicate for racial identity.

Resource deficiency. A hypothesis proposed to explain the lack of academic attainment of first-generation students is that they tend to lack the resources that are needed for them to succeed. They lack a variety of resources, including economic resources and academic preparedness (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012).

Social reproduction. Stemming from Bourdieu's theory of the transmission of capital, it is proposed that that various forms of capital (economic, social, and cultural) are often passed down generationally. Thus, social power and influence are also socially transmitted through generational lines (Bourdieu, 1983).

Supports. Supports are factors that facilitate a person's ability to develop and pursue his or her career goals (Lent et al., 2000). Support can be expressed in a variety of ways. Oftentimes, the most discussed types of parental support can be categorized as either emotional or informational support. Emotional support includes providing feelings

of love, trust, and understanding within an interpersonal relationship. Informational support can be defined as providing guidance, advice, or help (Sy et al., 2011). Support can also emerge from the college or university. Institutional support encompasses many organizational systems, including tutoring and writing services, institutional-need based scholarship programs, college preparation services, and counseling services, to name a few (Garriott & Nisle, 2017; Means & Pyne, 2017; Schademan & Thompson, 2015).

Limitations of the Study

The population selected for this study, first-generation students who identify as a racial or ethnic minority and a junior or senior in college, presents some limitations. First, because this is a very specific population, the extent to which my findings can be generalized is limited. Not all first-generation students are racial or ethnic minorities and, by sampling juniors and seniors, I am capturing the experiences of people who have been successful enough in school to make it through the first two years of college. Thus, the information gathered through my interviews may not be representative of first-generation students as a whole. However, the population selected allows for the exploration of strengths and methods of persevering barriers faced in college, which is consistent with my research focus. My hope is that counseling psychologists working with first-generation students can use parts of my research to inform their clinical work and advocacy roles with this population.

As described, the process of conducting qualitative research necessitates that the biases and values of the researcher cannot be fully eradicated. Thus, as a researcher, my worldviews, biases, and cultural background may permeate my research. It is possible that my perspective does not fully mirror the participants' or my readers' views. In order

to address this limitation, I describe my biases that may emerge through the process of designing the study, conducting interviews, and conducting data analysis. I also engaged in self-checks to minimize my interpretations and focus on the experiences of the participants. One way in which I self-checked is by engaging in bracketing, which involves describing one's own experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In the methodology, I describe my own experiences and biases surrounding the phenomenon in order to bracket my own experiences. In order to delve further into my subjective experiences, I engaged in researcher reflexivity by maintaining a self-reflective journal throughout the course of the research, as recommended by Morrow (2005). I also had others review my interview questions, emergent themes, and data analysis in order to further reduce bias. Engaging in participant checks further strengthened the trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005).

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the rationale for my research. The rationale centers around the importance of support for educational outcomes and overall well-being of first-generation students who identify as a racial or ethnic minority and highlights gaps in the literature surrounding how these students experience multiple sources of support (e.g., family support). There are also gaps in the literature regarding how these students may navigate new relationships formed on campus as well as relationships with family and community of origin. I also discussed the intended audience of my research, which is counseling psychologists and mental health professionals working within the university setting as both clinicians and advocates. Additionally, I overviewed the purpose of my research, which is to add to the body of knowledge about the relational challenges and

supports of first-generation students, how barriers are overcome, and how salient relationships change over time. Further, my purpose is to provide knowledge for those working within a university setting to promote greater competency when working with this population. Next, this chapter included the research questions and important definitions of terms used throughout this dissertation. Finally, I explored limitations of my research, including difficulties with generalizing findings and the potential for personal biases to affect my interpretation of participants' experiences.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Theoretical Orientation

Theory necessarily influences and guides all aspects of the research design and process (Crotty, 1998). The theories that have guided my understanding of the literature and my research design include Bourdieu's (1983) theory regarding the transmission of capital through various forms of capital and social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994).

Bourdieu's theory provides a structure to better understand how first-generation students enter into academia and the obstacles they face. It is a theory that is used widely throughout the first-generation student literature to conceptualize the experiences and challenges faced by this population (e.g., Gaddis, 2013; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004). The theory describes various forms of capital, not exclusively relying on economic forms of capital that most readily come to mind, and how one's familial background predicts the collective capital that person possesses (Bourdieu, 1983). An aspect of his theory that has the most relevance for first-generations students is the concept of cultural capital, which Bourdieu describes as largely hereditary or fostered in the early years of a child's life. Bourdieu indicates cultural capital is largely responsible for the social reproduction of power in education systems. I chose this theory because it describes how cultural and social influences

influence the development of attitudes toward academia and proclivity toward success in educational settings.

The other theory I incorporated was social cognitive career theory (SCCT) is designed to conceptualize the development of academic aspirations and career-related goals as well as to better understand performance and persistence in these areas (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT has also frequently been used to conceptualize educational outcomes for first-generation students (e.g., Garriott et al., 2015; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, & Murdock, 2012). The theory conceptualizes how a variety of factors, such as self-efficacy and outcome expectations, shape the development of interests and performance. I chose this theory in particular because of its emphasis on contextual determinants and environmental affordances, which exert an influence on career development.

Essentially, both Bourdieu's theory and SCCT emphasize that every student does not necessarily begin on an even playing field and there are a variety of existing factors in the environment that influence academic aspirations and opportunities for attaining success. Both theories highlight the importance of relational factors in contributing to academic success and challenges in college. Though both SCCT and Bourdieu's theory have notable differences, they are compatible in their understanding of the importance of relationships to promoting academic success. A criticism of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is that Bourdieu's concepts are abstract and difficult to operationalize (McDonough, 1997; Sullivan, 2002). SCCT offers a clearer model of academic development and variables that are more readily operationalized.

Bourdieu's Cultural Capital

Bourdieu described what he called the "economic game" and hypothesized that there were different forces (sources of capital) that prevent this "game" from being a game based on chance alone (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 15). In this game, there are distinct winners and losers (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu, 1998). Sources of capital provide structure and meaning to the economic system. Bourdieu proposed three fundamental different forms of capital: economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983). While cultural and social capital are the primary focus of the current study, each form of capital are briefly described. An important criticism of Bourdieu's theory resides in the fact that some of his constructs are difficult to measure empirically because of their ambiguous nature (Sullivan, 2002).

The easiest to describe is economic capital. Bourdieu stated that economic capital is that which is "easily and directly convertible into money." (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 16). Thus, economic capital is material wealth or property wealth, perhaps the kinds of wealth that is most readily available in one's imagination when the word "asset" comes to mind. With regards to first generation students, research suggests that this population is typically from a lower socioeconomic status (SES) than continuing generation students and more likely to have to work in order to afford their college education (Saenz et al., 2007). Thus, first-generation students likely do not receive much economic capital from their families of origin, which could serve as a potential barrier for their education and aspirations.

Unlike economic wealth, social capital and cultural capital, though not readily transferred into dollar amounts, serve as important forms of human capital (Bourdieu,

1983). Bourdieu states this saliently by saying, "as everyone knows, priceless things have their price" and not all capital is strictly economic (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 16). Social capital, according to Bourdieu, is situated in networks and group membership. Social capital can be gauged by the size of the networks and also the amount of capital within these networks (economic or otherwise) (Bourdieu, 1983). Social capital, then, can be as simple as knowing the right person who has connections to jobs or other opportunities one might be interested in. One can infer that first-generation students, as the only members of their family to attend college, may lack in social networks that understand their experiences within the university setting. They may have to work more diligently than their peers to find connections and opportunities, such as internship programs or research teams. In other words, first-generation students may lack in social capital.

Cultural capital has a great deal of relevance for understanding the transmission of power, as Bourdieu states that capital and power are very similar (Bourdieu, 1983). Thorsby (1999) describes the value of culture in Bourdieu's system, stating it is an expression of group or collective parts of people's behavior, which is demonstrated through their activities and belief systems. Thus, cultural capital can be understood as a measure of one's socialization into dominant societal norms and can be gauged by one's preferences, attitudes, and behaviors and how well these align with dominant societal values (Carter, 2003). Sullivan (2002), though she is critical of the vagueness surrounding definitions of some of Bourdieu's constructs, states that cultural capital is the most fruitful and influential construct described by Bourdieu.

Bourdieu became interested in social and cultural capital while studying school systems and noting the unequal scholastic performance of children from lower SES

groups (Bourdieu, 1983). Bourdieu stated that he was able to divorce himself from typical views of these children as lacking natural aptitude in order to explore what factors were truly driving these disparities. Bourdieu argued that to take the perspective based on lack of aptitude is to ignore "the contribution which the educational system makes to the reproduction of the social structure by sanctioning the hereditary transmission of cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 17). Thus, Bourdieu suggests that the education system recapitulates values and norms, feasibly from wealthy or middle class structures, which are passed on from generation to generation (Bourdieu, 1998). Bourdieu termed this process 'social reproduction' (Bourdieu, 1998). Bourdieu, then, recognized the importance of cultural capital in creating opportunities, particularly in an academic setting and noted that cultural knowledge is often transmitted through familial lines.

All of Bourdieu's forms of capital, which describe the transmission of wealth, both material and non-material, are relevant to understanding the experiences of first-generation students, but social and cultural capital arguably offer the most explanatory power. First-generation students report receiving less instructional support, or guidance or help about how to navigate college, than continuing-generation students (Sy et al., 2011). First-generation students and continuing-generation students report similar frequency of talking to their parents about college as continuing-generation students, but the latter reported finding these conversations to be of higher quality and more helpful than their first-generation peers (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). While parents of first-generation students can provide emotional support for their children as they strive to attain a degree, they may not able to provide instructional support due to their lack of experience in this arena (Dennis, Phinney, & Chauteco, 2005; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017).

Research supports this hypothesis, finding that parents of first-generation Latina students have difficulty accessing information and resources to help their children apply to college (Chlup et al., 2018). Thus, first-generation students may not receive social capital from their parents or communities of origin, as these systems may not be rich in social capital that would be helpful in navigating college.

Cultural capital also seems to be relevant to the experiences of first-generation students. As proposed by Stephens, Fryberg, et al. (2012), cultural mismatches between universities and students who do not adhere to individualistic norms, seems to amount in these students having less cultural currency than other students. For example, first-generation students are less likely to adhere to individualistic norms, which are endorsed values in universities, contributing to decreased academic performance (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012) and greater cortisol production and negative emotions (Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). Thus, first-generation students do not seem to be socialized to possess some of the cultural values promoted by higher education, which seems to make succeeding in these institutions more challenging. Cultural capital and the skills necessary to succeed in college are not passed down from parents or siblings for first-generation students but rather must be earned through other methods. While not being born into privilege and cultural wealth does not mean that cultural assets cannot be acquired, first-generation students may have to work harder than continuing-generation students to earn cultural capital.

Though Bourdieu's writings may be somewhat dated and abstract, others have continued his work in applied and research contexts, such as McDonough (1997) who uses Bourdieu's framework to describe how students from high-status and low-status

backgrounds make different decisions around the quality of college selection, such as deciding how selective of an institution to attend. Attending selective colleges has important implications and is associated with higher future income, increased likelihood of pursuing graduate degrees, and greater civic engagement (Hearn & Rosinger, 2014). Research supports the notion of cultural capital as a vessel for transmitting access to power and educational opportunities (Gaddis, 2013; Huang & Liang, 2016; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Tramonte & Wilms, 2010). A study exploring international trends in math and science performance found that cultural capital does play an important role in predicting scores within both academic domains (Huang & Liang, 2016). Similarly, Lee and Bowen (2006) found that cultural capital and parental involvement have a relationship with positive academic performance in elementary school. These diverse lines of research indicate that cultural capital has important implications for academic achievement.

Research conducted by Gaddis (2013) provides further support for the notion that cultural capital impacts academic performance in college students as well. The researcher found that greater cultural capital predicts stronger GPAs. This effect is mediated by habitus, which is a concept Bourdieu used to describe the disposition one has toward education and learning. From this perspective, cultural capital may instill greater habitus, which in turn, predicts higher educational outcomes, such as GPA, for college students. Another important aspect of cultural capital is how cultural privilege is often held by the social elite. As Bourdieu (1983) described, the transmission of cultural capital can be passed along from generation to generation, perpetuating the privilege held in the educational system. Through their research, Hearn and Rosinger (2014)

demonstrate the trend described by Bourdieu, namely that the elite and rich tend to become wealthier over time. Higher income and greater social status is associated with entry into selective graduate school programs (Hearn & Rosinger, 2014), suggesting that privilege can increase one's odds of being admitted into selective colleges and benefitting from the associated privileges of these institutions.

Thus, one can see how Bourdieu's theories about types of capital, particularly social and cultural capital, have implications for students, such as first-generation students, who do not necessarily share the cultural norms or knowledge that other undergraduate students have. Though this knowledge can be gained, the theory of cultural capital helps to demonstrate that cultural capital can privilege some individuals, who are raised in environments with greater cultural capital. Differing degrees of cultural capital helps to explain some of the difficulties first-generation students face throughout their college careers, both academically and in the domains of physical and mental health.

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) is the other theory I used as a framework, as it is used to describe performance and persistence academically (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT is helpful for understanding the factors that contribute to academic performance and persistence for first-generation students. Better understanding the factors that contribute to academic success is important due to the academic challenges and low retention rates first-generation students face (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Ishitani, 2006; Soria & Stebleton, 2012a). SCCT is also a useful model for the current study because it conceptualizes how contextual affordances, such as family and peer support, can provide barriers and support to performance (Lent et al., 2000). Given the focus on relational

experiences of first-generation students, SCCT provides a helpful framework to understand how contextual factors impact first-generation college students who identify as a racial or ethnic minority.

First, it is important to note the theoretical roots from which SCCT was born. SCCT is heavily influenced by the foundational work of Albert Bandura and his social cognitive theory developed in 1986. Bandura's model stemmed in reaction to dominant behaviorism beliefs about the nature of learning. Bandura's social cognitive model was innovative due to the fact that it emphasized the role of cognition and cognitive processes, which were entirely dismissed in behavioristic explanations of behavior. Bandura's model has been widely used to describe behavior and learning, and, as Lent et al. (1994) emphasize, has important applications to the development of career and academic interests. Bandura's model featured the concept of triadic reciprocity, meaning that cognitive and affective states, environmental factors, and behavior all impact each other bidirectionally. Thus, Bandura's model emphasized that both internal states and external factors interact with one another affect one's behaviors. Bandura also emphasized the importance of social modeling and learning through observation of social models (Schunk, 2012). Social models provide sources of information for learners that extend beyond simple imitation and provide learners information about more nuanced aspects of a behavior, such as task strategies. Social learning may also be applicable to understanding how individuals acquire the skills and knowledge in order to successfully navigate college. For first-generation students, who are the first in their family to attend college, there may be a dearth of social learning about what behaviors might help them to succeed in college.

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT), developed by Lent et al. (1994) was designed to achieve three main goals: (a) describe how career-related interests are formed; (b) better understand academic and career choices, and (c) describe performance and persistence in these domains. SCCT "emphasizes the means by which individuals exercise personal agency in the career development process as well as extra-personal that enhance or constrain agency" (Lent et al., 1994, p. 79). Thus SCCT considers how a student's personal characteristics, such as their self-efficacy and career-related interests, are shaped by contextual factors or environmental factors. Given SCCT's usefulness in understanding academic and career development and performance, it seems to be apt to better understanding the supports and barriers first-generation students experience throughout their college career. Lent et al.'s model is depicted below in Figure 1 (personal communication to reproduce figure granted by author).

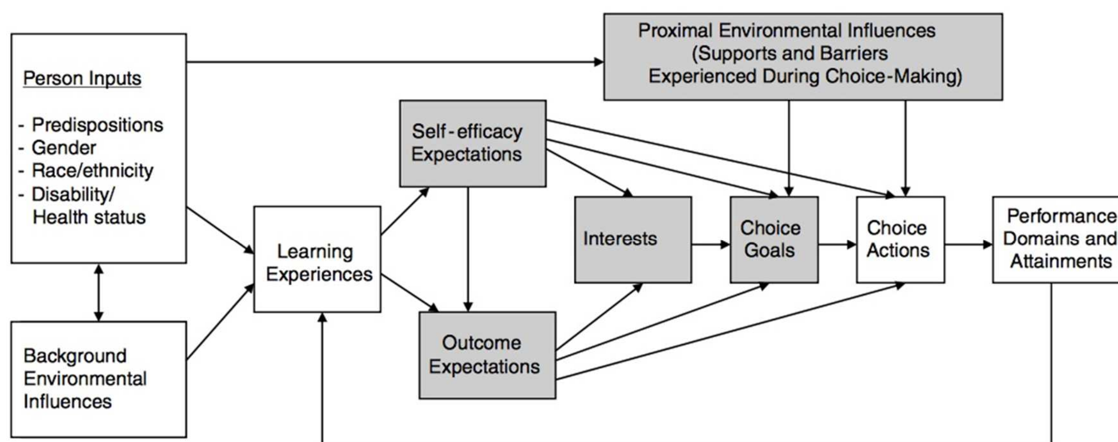

Figure 1. Model of SCCT by Lent et al., 1994.

SCCT can be described in two main parts (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT includes both a sociocognitive core as well as personal/contextual factors. Thus, there is an emphasis on the cognitive aspects of career development, where one exerts a degree of

agency and control, as cognitive processes can be malleable. Additionally, there is also a focus on the person factors and extra-personal factors, or external factors that a person may have limited control of, but are influential to career development (Lent et al., 1994). The sociocognitive core is described first then person inputs and contextual elements of the model are described.

Sociocognitive core. Self-efficacy and outcome expectations, which contribute to the formation of goals, are two of the variables in SCCT that account for the sociocognitive decision-making processes. Self-efficacy involves evaluating whether or not one feels equipped to achieve one's career-related interest or goal (Lent et al., 1994). It is important to note that self-efficacy is seen as dynamic, and thus able to fluctuate over time, and is domain specific, thus making it distinct from self-esteem (Lent & Brown, 2006). One may have low self-efficacy in one domain, such as math, while still possessing relatively high self-efficacy with regard to one's writing skills. While self-efficacy is concerned with questions about whether one can complete a goal, outcome expectations involve imagined consequences of pursuing a goal (Lent et al., 1994). Lent et al. (1994) stresses that outcome expectations also encompass personal values, in that the interest involves weighing possible outcomes and developing a valuing system to weigh the relative importance of these outcomes. Both self-efficacy and outcome expectations are strong predictors of first-generation student's career aspirations (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). Additionally, high self-efficacy is related to greater odds of success and persisting through the first year of college for first-generation students, even after controlling for GPA, ethnicity, and gender (Wright et al., 2012).

Goals are developed from the described cognitively-based evaluations: self-efficacy beliefs and evaluations of outcome expectations. Goals are essential for organizing and planning behaviors as well as self-regulating progress (Lent et al., 1994). Bandura (1986) posited that goals might be described as determination to engage in a particular activity or behavior or to pursue a future outcome. Lent et al. (1994) carefully delineate between various perceptions in goals; goals can be more ethereal and aspirational in nature or they can be planful and specific in nature, taking into account realities, such as job market considerations and availability of jobs in a particular field of interest. Lent and Brown (2006) note that choice-content goals, or goals related to the domain one hopes to pursue, and goals related to performance within that domain are the focus of SCCT.

Person inputs and contextual affordances. In addition to sociocognitive processes, SCCT includes relevant personal inputs, such as race/ethnicity, as well as contextual factors that shape career development. As Lent et al., (2000) describe, the sociocognitive processes allow the person to exert agency and control, while the environmental and contextual factors, to some extent, operate outside the individual's control. Person factors, such as cultural characteristics, race, and gender, may be one of the factors that individuals exert the least amount of control over. Lent et al. (1994) explain that while race and sex may seem to be merely biological attributes, they have psychological significance due to characteristic reactions from the social environment. Thus, personal inputs are salient because they are shaped by social systems, creating meaning behind what it means to be a man or a woman, for example, and there may be different affordances for people based on their privilege within the social system. Lent et

al. (1994) predict that personal inputs may impact career development at many junctures. For instance, cultural groups may emphasize different fields of study more than others, dictating interests and learning experiences. SCCT emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual and acknowledges how person factors contribute to one's career aspirations and development.

Lent et al. (1994) also describes how contextual affordances impact career development, conceptualizing how supports and barriers contribute to the development of career-related outcomes. Contextual affordances are most vital to the current study, as this aspect of SCCT addresses how family relationships and on-campus relationships may provide barriers and supports for first-generation students, impacting their success in college. Ideally, the best conditions for goal attainment in SCCT is high support and low barriers (Lent & Brown, 2006). Environmental influences impact people differently due to the fact that the impact is, in part, determined by how it is perceived (Lent et al., 2000). That is, subjectivity is crucial and people respond to their environments in unique ways. It is important to define barriers and supports from an SCCT standpoint. SCCT conceptualizes supports as factors that facilitate a person's ability to develop and pursue his or her career interests (Lent et al., 2000). Supports may be mentors, parents, faculty, friends, or even conditions within the environment that are facilitative. Barriers, such racism experienced in the university setting, can impede academic and career goal pursuit and have received somewhat more attention in the literature than support systems (Lent et al., 2000).

Lent et al. (2000) acknowledge that contextual factors, as a whole, and their effects within the model, have been under-researched. In particular, resources and support

within the environment have received little attention. In part, this lack of research may be due to a lack of domain-specific measures derived from the theory (Lent & Brown, 2006; Lent et al., 2000). For example, traditional indicators of social class, like parental income, do not incorporate other salient barriers and supports in the environment, such as access to quality education and good parenting skills (Lent & Brown, 2006). Though barriers have received slightly more attention in the literature, the impact of barriers and supports in the environment remains understudied (Fouad & Santana, 2017; Lent & Brown, 2006; Lent et al., 2000).

Applications. Recent research also highlights the need for SCCT to broaden conceptualizations of key variables in the model to address diverse populations (Sheu & Bordon, 2017). For example, cultural factors (e.g., individualistic cultural values versus collectivistic cultural values) can be incorporated into SCCT's understanding of person inputs and more distal contextual factors, such as opportunity structure in one's country, can improve the model's ability to be used with diverse individuals. Thus, as Brown and Lent (2017) emphasize, SCCT needs to continue to adapt to address the needs of diverse populations and further research should be conducted toward this aim.

Gibbons and Shoffner (2004) recommend the application of SCCT with first-generation students, in large part, because of the fact that SCCT emphasizes the role of person and contextual factors, which may be more salient for first-generation students, who often come from diverse backgrounds. For instance, research emphasizes that first-generation students are more likely to be ethnic minorities than continuing generation students (Engle et al., 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017) and are more likely to face economic barriers (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). In a systemic context,

the diversifying factors that first-generation students often present with may present different barriers and supports. Additionally, given that first-generation students are often diverse, it is important to have a model that addresses and incorporates these factors. SCCT has been used to better understand the formation and development of academic and career achievement with minority populations (e.g., Fouad & Santana, 2017; Gonzalez, 2015; Jackson, Mendelsohn Kacanski, Rust, & Beck, 2006; Lent et al., 2015; McWhirter, Torres, Salgado, & Valdez, 2007). Most significantly to the current study, SCCT also provides an avenue to better understand how contextual factors, such as family members and on-campus support systems, can provide both support and barriers for first-generation students as they pursue their undergraduate degree.

First-Generation Students in Context

Defining First-Generation Status

The definition of first-generation status varies and the lack of a consistent and widely used definition has hindered the process of better understanding this population due to the fact that researchers use the term first-generation differently (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). The distinction between being the first individual in one's family to graduate from college versus being the first individual to attend college is important. Some researchers define first-generation students by the former definition (e.g., Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliot, & Pierce, 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004), while many other researchers use the latter definition (e.g., Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2013; Sy et al., 2011). Though this may seem like a trivial difference, reflecting on Bourdieu's (1983) model, having a parent who has attended college, even if that parent did not complete his or her degree, imparts cultural capital. That cultural capital, then,

may then be passed along to one's children. Additionally, research suggests differences in performance and experiences in college exist for students whose parents have attended some college versus students whose parents have not attended college (Padgett et al., 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004). In summary, it seems that having a parent or parents with even a small amount of college experience can be impactful.

Demographics of First-Generation Students

First-generation students present with notable diversifying factors and, as SCCT explains, these person inputs impact the way in which these individuals formulate career goals and aspirations (Lent et al., 1994). It is important, then, to explore the demographic characteristics of first-generation students in relation to continuing-generation students. First-generation students are more likely to be ethnic or racial minorities, in comparison to continuing-generation students (Engle et al., 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; Soria & Stebleton, 2012b). In a national sample of undergraduates, 50.5% of first-generation college students were racial or ethnic minorities, compared to 34.9% of continuing-generation college students (RTI International, 2019a). Thus, first-generation students are more likely than their peers to hold historically marginalized racial identities.

Research suggests that racial characteristics, and other demographic variables, may affect retention rates (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Students who are Hispanic first-generation, low income first-generation, and female first-generation are less likely to persist from their first year to their second. While Latino college students surpass Caucasian students in enrollment rates, they lag behind Caucasians and other racial groups in completion rates (Pew Hispanic Center, 2013). Research indicates that

Hispanic students, as well as students from other minority groups, have high expectations for educational attainment and may be optimistic about completing college and advanced degrees (Mello, 2009) but may have difficulty completing these degrees. Completion rates among racial and ethnic minorities also tend to vary quite drastically for first-generation students. Asian/Pacific Islander students and Caucasian first-generation students have the highest completion rates at 69% and 62%, respectively, while Hispanic first-generation students have a 50% completion rate and Black and American Indian students have completion rates of 39% each (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). African American students also have the greatest decline in representation among first-generation students since 1975 (Saenz et al., 2007). Collectively, evidence indicates that first-generation students from racial and ethnic minority groups are less likely to complete their undergraduate degree, perhaps due to barriers related to their racial and ethnic identities.

Additionally, first-generation students are more likely to come from working-class backgrounds (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016; Soria & Stebleton, 2012b). They also tend to originate from low-income families and are more likely to be low-income than their peers (Engle et al., 2006). Median family income for first-generation college students is $41,000 compared to $90,000 for continuing-generation families (RTI International, 2019a). Income status is an important factor for first-generation students. First-generation students who receive grants and scholarships to attend college are more likely to persist than first-generation students who do not receive funding (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). For each $1,000 increase in grant aid, there is a 2.7% increase in the probability of persistence from first to second year for first-generation students.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is an important predictor amongst first-generation students of perceived barriers to academic persistence and attainment (Mello, 2009; Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). That is, high SES first-generation students perceive fewer barriers (e.g., financial barriers, insufficient student skills, or concerns about racial discrimination) to their success than lower SES first-generation students (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). These barriers seem to interfere with educational attainment, as research indicates that low-income students are less likely to enroll in college and complete a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Family income, or SES, is such an important indicator of college success for first-generation students that many studies control for its impact in order to explore how other, hypothesized variables contribute to academic success (e.g., Soria & Stebleton, 2012b). Overall, research posits that first-generation students originate from low-income, working-class backgrounds and these diversifying factors may cause them to be vulnerable to academic difficulties.

First-generation students are also unique due to the fact that many of them have parents who are immigrants and are non-native English speakers (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). As a result, English is likely not the primary language spoken at home for these students. Perhaps not surprisingly, first-generation students are also more likely than their peers to be non-native English speakers themselves, with 24% of first-generation students reporting being non-Native speakers versus 10% of continuing-generation college students (Engle et al., 2006). Language barriers may then prove to be a barrier to educational access for some first-generation students. Finally, first-generation students are more likely than their peers to be married and have children (35%

versus 22%) and thus have more responsibilities and competing demands (Engle et al., 2006).

In summary, first-generation students are more likely to hold minority identities (e.g. racial/ethnic identities, class/SES identities), sometimes in several domains, than continuing-generation students and these identities may cause them to be vulnerable to academic difficulties. These identities likely intersect to contextualize their experiences within the realm of higher education.

The following sections in the literature review explore some of the challenges first-generation students face in higher education, including in the domains of academia, finances, cultural adjustment, social relationships, and mental health. Though there are a vast number of avenues in the literature to explore to better understand the experiences of first-generation students in college, many of these avenues are beyond the scope of the current study. I selected the aforementioned literature topics to elaborate on because they capture some of the many challenges first-generation students may face in college and the social and cultural factors that contribute to these challenges. As my primary focus in on the relational and cultural strengths and challenges first-generation experience, the literature focuses a great deal on these aspects.

Academic Performance

The Impact of Greater Access to Education

Around the world, the number of college-educated adults continues to rise and the importance of higher education seems to be becoming an international trend (OECD, 2014). The United States is no exception; in the United States, the number of non-college educated individuals has declined greatly since the early 1970s, suggesting that,

overall, access to a college education has become more attainable (Saenz et al., 2007). From 2000-2016 total undergraduate enrollment in the United States increased 20 percent. By 2016, the rate of 25- to 29-year-olds enrolled in college had increased to 36 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Different racial groups have experienced greater opportunity for higher education more substantially than others have. Saenz et al. (2007) found that the number of non-college educated White citizens has declined by more than 40 percent while the number of non-college educated Hispanic individuals declined by only about 18 percent in that same time frame. There are also marked differences in educational attainment based on other factors, including SES and gender and research find that upward mobility (with regards percentage of students who are able to obtain higher levels of education than their parents) is less prevalent in the United States than in other countries across the world (OECD, 2014). Thus, historically privileged racial groups, such as Whites, have made more substantial gains in educational attainment than other, less privileged groups.

Regardless, as a general trend, the data indicates that the U.S. population is moving toward having better educated individuals. Though greater access is an encouraging trend, is access enough? Not according to Engstrom and Tinto (2008, p. 50), who state, “access without support is not opportunity.” The authors argue that low-income, first-generation students have been set up to struggle in college because they lack the academic preparation and lack a supportive environment once they enter college. First-generation students tend to enter college with lower standardized tests scores and they are more likely than their peers to have to take remedial coursework in college, indicating lower academic preparedness (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Simply providing the

opportunity to go to college does not ensure success of students, particularly first-generation students who may not have the cultural capital to navigate the college system. Accessing the academic achievement of first-generation students provides one avenue to explore how successful these students are in their pursuit of higher education.

Retention Rates and Grade Point Average

A national sample found that 24 percent of undergraduate students are first-generation (RTI International, 2019a). First-generation college students in this sample were less likely than their continuing-generation peers to graduate within six years with a bachelor's degree (RTI International, 2019b). Only 20% of first-generation college students received their degree in six years while 49 percent of continuing-generation students obtained their undergraduate degree. Findings from Ishitani (2006) note that first-generation students are 8.5 times more likely to leave college than continuing-generation counterparts. Not only, then, are first-generation students less likely to enter college than continuing-generation students, but they are also substantially less likely to complete their degrees within a four or even six-year period.

Other researchers echo the described results regarding retention, finding that first-generation students are less likely than their continuing-generation peers to persist (D'Amico & Dika, 2013; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Soria & Stebleton, 2012b). In particular, first to second year persistence and persistence between fall and spring semester of the first-year tend to be most problematic for first-year students, perhaps indicating difficulties with the college transition (Ishitani, 2006; Soria & Stebleton, 2012b; Wright et al., 2012). The odds ratio of someone with first-generation status, holding factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, GPA, and class constant, is associated with

a 45 percent decrease in the odds of returning for the second year of college (Soria & Stebleton, 2012b). Holding a minority racial/ethnic identity or having a low-income upbringing are further risk factors for dropping out (Ishitani, 2006).

Among first-generation students who do persist, there are notable concerns with their academic performance while in college. For example, first-generation students have persistently lower GPAs than their continuing-generation peers (Chen & Carroll, 2005; D'Amico & Dika, 2013; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004). Lower performance, measured by GPA, persists through the duration of college and is evident in a number of domains, including mathematics, science, and foreign language (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Trends demonstrate that while both continuing-generation and first-generation students' GPAs have improved since the 1970s, the gap between continuing-generation students, with higher GPAs, and first-generation GPAs has persisted and even widened (Saenz et al., 2007). Aspelmeier et al. (2012) argues that GPA differences between first-generation students and their peers is more moderate than depicted by previous research, and state that specific factors are linked with GPA performance. High self-esteem was found to be positively predictive of GPA while external locus of control, or attributing causal factors for an outcome to forces outside of oneself, was found to be negatively predictive of GPA. In other words, it may be important to consider individual factors when evaluating differences in GPA.

Other Academic Challenges

Apart from gaps in GPA performance, there are other notable academic concerns. First-generation students are more likely to withdraw from, or repeat, coursework as well, suggesting, perhaps, difficulties with college coursework or lower levels of academic

preparedness upon entering college (Chen & Carroll, 2005). The described academic challenges seem to impact their perceptions of their abilities, as first-generation college students report feeling underprepared in various subject areas and report deficient study skills (Soria & Stebleton, 2012a). First-generation students also take fewer credits per semester than their peers (Pascarella et al., 2004), which may contribute to Chen and Carroll's (2005) findings regarding their difficulty in completing their bachelor's degree in a timely manner. They are also more likely to demonstrate lower classroom engagement, as evidenced by fewer interactions with faculty and a dearth of contributions to class discussions (Soria & Stebleton, 2012b). In summary, the research on GPA and class performance, across many subject areas, demonstrates that first-generation students underperform compared to their peers.

Another important finding for first-generation students is that they tend to be less likely than their non first-generation peers to consider how their undergraduate degrees may contribute to success vocationally and are less likely to consider advanced degrees (Pascarella et al., 2004). This may be due to the fact that these students do not possess the cultural capital, given that their parent's did not pursue higher education, and do not fully grasp the importance of advanced degrees in particular vocational domains. The importance of pursuing advanced degrees is pronounced: obtaining higher levels of education is associated with a number of factors, including better health, higher employment opportunities, and better vocational possibilities (OECD, 2014). Lack of cultural capital may extend to selection of undergraduate institutions as well. First-generation students are more likely than their peers to attend less selective colleges and universities (Engle et al., 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004).

It may be that first-generation students are interested in selective universities, but the interest is not reciprocal; all selective institutions disproportionately select students from the middle and upper classes (Hearn & Rosinger, 2014). The fact that first-generation students are less likely to attend selective institutions has important implications, as Hearn and Rosinger (2014, p. 76) highlight, selective colleges tend to perpetuate a cycle where the "rich get richer." Attending a selective institution is associated with higher future income, increased likelihood of pursuing graduate degrees, and greater civic engagement (Hearn & Rosinger, 2014). There also seems to be a trend toward first-generation students pursuing degrees that may not lead to higher paying careers and jobs. First-generation students are more likely than their continuing-generation peers to major in vocational and technical fields and take fewer classes in mathematics, science, computer science, and social science (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Unfortunately, these fields may not help these students reach their aspirations; one of the most cited reasons first-generation students pursue higher education is to earn more money (Saenz et al., 2007).

Socioeconomic Status and Financial Needs

The cost of obtaining an undergraduate degree continues to rise in the United States. Since 1995, the cost of public university tuition has increased by 226%, even when accounting for inflation rates (Mitchell, 2015). In-state tuition at public national institutions has increased by 296% in the same time period. It is not surprising, then, that some students are forced to obtain employment while working toward their undergraduate degree, particularly students who come from low-income families. First-generation students are more likely to grow up in low-income families and thus may have

greater motivation to become employed during college (Engle et al., 2006; Saenz et al., 2007; Soria & Stebleton, 2012a). Before describing some of the challenges first-generation students face as a result of being from a working-class background, it is important to note strengths that have emerged from this identity. First-generation students identify having increased strength and independence as a result of their working-class backgrounds (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006).

There are some challenges associated with being from a low SES family and having to be employed in order to finance one's education. For example, research finds that students who are from low-income backgrounds are less likely to enroll full-time in undergraduate studies and they are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Income level also predicts academic expectations. Low-income students are less likely to expect to attain professional occupations than higher income students (Mello, 2009). While financial struggles are a commonality amongst many first-generation students, these problems can be especially pronounced for non-citizens due to lack of documentation and, as a result, difficulty finding work may be a theme within the family (O'Neal et al., 2016).

During high school, first-generation students are more likely than continuing-generation students to work twenty or more hours per week and 55 percent reportedly expect to get a job to pay for college expenses, a gap that has widened over time between their peers (Saenz et al., 2007). While employment may be necessary to manage expenses and ever-rising tuition, and may add to students' résumés in the form of work experience, it may come at a cost to student's academic development and achievement (Pascarella et al., 2004) and create competing interests (Soria & Stebleton, 2012a). First-

generation students report spending less time studying and doing homework than peers. They also are less engaged in extracurricular activities than their peers, perhaps in part due to increased demands on their time as well as financial limitations to participation (Pascarella et al., 2004). Research also suggests that first-generation students also perceive marginalization within departments based on their SES status (Longwell-Grice, Zervas Adsitt, Mullins, & Serrata, 2016). Thus, SES has important implications for first-generation student's experience in college.

Aside from employment, how do first-generation students typically find the financial resources to attend college? Like many students, financial aid, through grants and scholarships, are a potential avenue to gain funding. Students may also pursue student loans to supplement their financial resources. However, first-generation students report that the funding they receive is not adequate to cover the expenses they incur in college and that financial strains are a barrier to pursuing higher education (Engle et al., 2006; Gonzalez, 2015; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). In particular, students describe their difficulties funding "incidental" costs, such as textbooks and transportation (Engle et al., 2006). There are data to support the claim that first-generation students do not receive adequate financial aid; first-generation students typically fall about $1,000 short of the amount they need to pay for college, even after receiving loans, and for those students who do not receive loans, they fall about $4,000 short (Engle et al., 2006). Meanwhile, continuing-generation students typically receive about $2,000 more than they need for college expenses, even before receiving loans.

Despite, on average, having greater financial need than their peers, first-generation students tend to receive about the same amount of governmental financial aid

(Engle et al., 2006). These findings further support the assertion that first-generation students experience unmet financial needs. As might be expected, first-generation students are more likely to persist when provided with grants and scholarships (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Interestingly, receiving grants and scholarships is not a predictor of persistence for continuing-generation students, which perhaps highlights the salience of financial support for first-generation students and distinguishes how financial needs may impact first-generation students differently than continuing-generation students. When first-generation students are provided with adequate financial resources, they are more likely to succeed.

Cultural Mismatch and Sense of Belonging

Cultural Mismatch

The transition to college can be a difficult one even for the typical college student, having perhaps the first experience with living away from home. College students may have to learn to do laundry, cook, and make friends in a new environment, among other hurdles. For first-generation students, there are added challenges associated with adapting to college. Subtle cues in the environment provide input about whether there is congruence between one's own sense of self and values and predominant values in that environment (Fryberg et al., 2013). One receives messages about cultural representations of the self from the environment, which are messages about the "good and right way of being a person" (p. 440). Values around independent norms versus interdependent norms provide a good example of cultural congruence. The person and the environment may share the same values, and thus be congruent, or hold dissimilar values, creating a cultural mismatch. Cultural congruence between the student and the learning

environment is associated with better academic performance (Fryberg et al., 2013). Additionally, having self-relevant models within the school, or role models that share one's cultural or racial identity, increases minority students' sense of belonging. Cultural congruence, then, is associated with important benefits to the student.

While university settings may be culturally congruent for some students, it is clear that many students experience a cultural mismatch between their familial cultural norms and the university's. (Fryberg & Markus, 2007; Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012). This is particularly true in some degree programs, such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), where cultural perceptions of science are incongruent with the cultural values of many first-generation students (Allen et al., 2015). Research notes that minority students, particularly from American Indian and Asian American families, place more value on interdependence and the family than White students (Fryberg & Markus, 2007). The values held by minority students, then, clash with those of the university. As a result, these students report mixed feelings about participating in university and are less trusting of teachers. Given that minority students often experience cultural mismatch at university, how do the cultural norms of first-generation students' match or not match with those of the university? Research conducted by Stephens, Fryberg, et al. (2012) reveals that American universities primarily promote independent norms. In fact, 84% of universities sampled characterized their culture as primarily valuing independence, endorsing items such as valuing being a leader and learning to solve one's problems on one's own. In contrast, when examining first-generation students' motivations for attending university, first generation students demonstrate more interdependent values than continuing-generation students, endorsing motivations such as wanting to help one's

family after college. Findings of Stephens, Fryberg, et al. (2012) suggest that some first-generation students do experience cultural incongruence when entering universities, as university values reflect larger American cultural preferences toward individual achievement.

The consequences for first-generation students experiencing cultural mismatch at universities is notable. In an experimental design, Stephens, Fryberg, et al. (2012) manipulated the university orientation materials to either promote independent or interdependent values. Students read the university orientation materials and then completed a verbal academic task. When the university was framed as valuing independence, first-generation students performed worse than continuing-generation students did. Conversely, when interdependence was highlighted, first-generation students performed just as well as their counterparts. Thus, the findings imply that cultural mismatch can lead to impaired performance. Further, the consequences of cultural mismatch seem to have physiological implications. First-generation students, who perceive the university norms to value independence, rather than interdependence, demonstrate increases in cortisol and more negative emotions (Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012). These findings support the hypotheses of cultural mismatch theory, suggesting that when an individual is placed into an environment that has antithetical values and norms to those that the individual holds, the individual is likely to experience stress and underperform.

Sense of Belonging and Peer Support

Cultural mismatch theory highlights the implications of what happens when students' values do not align with the institutions'. It is easy to imagine that students

who find themselves in an environment where their beliefs are not held by the majority may feel a lack of belonging. In fact, first-generation students do report feeling disconnected and invisible on college campuses (Means & Pyne, 2017). Sense of belonging is an important indicator of persistence among first-year college students (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002). Additionally, sense of belonging is related to greater academic engagement (Soria & Stebleton, 2012a, b). In contrast, lower levels of belonging are related to decreased academic achievement, dropout, and decreased school involvement (Williams, Karahalios, & Ferrari, 2013). Sense of belonging may be defined as feeling personally involved in a system and feeling as if one is an integral part of that system (Hoffman et al., 2002). This definition lacks specificity in terms of what factors contribute to a feeling of 'personal involvement in a system.' The specific factors that appear to contribute to a sense of belonging are two-fold: forming functionally supportive peer relationships and holding a belief faculty are compassionate and the student is valued (Hoffman et al., 2002). Sense of belonging involves a sense of "mattering," to college friends and the college environment, that emphasizes the need to be fully a part of the university system, rather than holding a peripheral role (Dixon Rayle & Chung, 2007).

These factors highlight the importance of on-campus support, both with in terms of peer relationships and with regards to faculty-student relationships. Faculty relationships are explored more in-depth in the next section, but it is important to explore peer interactions and support for first-generation students. In terms of feeling a sense of belonging or mattering on campus, social support from college friends is the greatest predictor (Dixon Rayle & Chung, 2007). Peer support is related to greater academic and

social integration for first-generation students (Grant-Vallone, Reid, Umali, & Pohlert, 2003). There are many ways that students can develop social relationships among peers. Students may be connected to multicultural centers or social identity-based social groups, which can foster peer relationships and aid in personal development, such as better understanding one's own identity and helping students to become advocates (Means & Pyne, 2017). Another avenue of involvement lies in extracurricular activities such as clubs, sports, or other social groups. Research demonstrates that extracurricular participation is associated with positive impacts on critical thinking and other higher-level cognitive tasks for first-generation students (Pascarella et al., 2004) and environmental support, such as support from peers, is predictive of self-efficacy (Lent et al., 2015), college outcome expectations, and academic satisfaction (Garriott et al., 2015). Additionally, first-generation students who are satisfied with their social lives are 16.7 percent more likely to persist from first to second year (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Interestingly, first-generation students are less likely than continuing-generation students to engage in academic and social activities that foster success, such as engaging in extracurricular activities, studying with other students, or interacting with faculty and other students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kim & Sax, 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004). It is important to note that while some authors have found that first-generation students are less likely to participate in social groups such as university clubs (e.g., Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004), others (e.g., Munoz, Miller, & Poole, 2016) did not find evidence to suggest differences in involvement in student organizations among first- and continuing-generation students. The only difference found was that older students were less likely to participate. Further research is needed to better understand what types of

peer support programs first-generation students are more prone to attend, as Munoz et al. (2016) only explored participation in student organizations led by faculty advisors.

There may be many reasons why first-generation students do not tend to participate in social or academic groups, such as extracurricular activities, but Pascarella et al. (2004) describes how lack of financial aid or income may inhibit their ability to participate. Not only may students have to work, which reduces their available time, but also the cost of participating in certain clubs may be prohibitive. Research indicates that financial strain is a factor that predicts social and academic integration in college (Adams, Meyers, & Beidas, 2016). Another possible explanation for first-generation students' lack of overall engagement may be that they do not perceive their environment as open and welcome and feel they cannot establish strong social bonds. In fact, campus environment and expectations of being involved on campus are more predictive of first-generation student integration than standardized test scores (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Research indicates, too, that students of color may not perceive the campus climate as welcoming because they may be among a small group of people who share a similar racial or ethnic identity (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010). For example, if one is an African American student, he or she may be among the extreme minority on some college campuses. Thus, the campus environment may be an important indicator of whether first-generation students choose to engage with peers or join extracurriculars. Adams et al. (2016) highlight that there is limited research on what factors contribute to social and academic engagement, which remains an understudied area of literature.

Faculty and Institutional Support

Faculty and institutional support is an important area of research in the first-generation student literature. It is notable that both faculty support and institutional support are multifaceted and encompass a number of domains. For example, faculty interactions may be general, such as faculty interactions within class time or during office hours (e.g., Means & Pyne, 2017), or may be more specific, such as faculty-led research projects (e.g., Kim & Sax, 2009). Additionally, institutional support can encompass many organizational systems, including tutoring and writing services, institutional-need based scholarship programs, college preparation services, and counseling services, to name a few (Garriott & Nisle, 2017; Means & Pyne, 2017; Schademan & Thompson, 2015). Thus, the research findings on faculty and institutional support are somewhat mixed as these variables have been operationalized differently across articles.

Overall, research indicates that faculty interactions are important to student development and sense of belonging (Grant-Vallone et al., 2003; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Means & Pyne, 2017). For many students, quality interactions with faculty are an important indicator of effort toward academic endeavors and academic satisfaction (Kuh & Hu, 2001). Research suggests that for many students, faculty interaction is associated with higher GPA, degree aspiration, and critical thinking (Kim & Sax, 2009). It is important to note that the degree of faculty-student interaction is dynamic and increases over the students' four years, meaning that first-year students are least likely to benefit from the positive impacts of faculty-student interactions. Junior and senior students are the most likely to have quality interactions with faculty. This seems to be, in part, student driven; however, faculty make themselves more accessible to juniors and seniors

who are "intellectually mature" and faculty report finding their work with these students to be the most rewarding (Kuh & Hu, 2001, p. 326). The amount of faculty support and quality of support also seems to differ across university settings and smaller institutions are more likely to provide greater, more quality support (Kuh & Hu, 2001). Kim and Sax (2009) note much of the literature, including the findings of Kuh and Hu, tends to focus on the importance of student-faculty interactions broadly and fails to attend to conditional effects. For example, there is a notable dearth of research on the impact of student-faculty interactions for first-generation and other minority students.

The research that does exist in this domain tends to be somewhat mixed. While much of the literature acknowledges that first-generation students may not have as much access to institutional support and faculty support as other students (e.g., Kim & Sax, 2009; Means & Pyne, 2017; Schademan & Thompson, 2015) some authors, such as Kim and Sax, also found that first-generation students tend to derive less benefit and satisfaction from these interactions. Researchers found that first-generation and non-White students are less likely to be satisfied with faculty interactions than their White, continuing-generation counterparts. In contrast, many other researchers have found that faculty support is quite crucial for first-generation student success (e.g., Garriott & Nisle, 2017; Grant-Vallone et al., 2003; McKay & Estrella, 2008). In fact, participants in research conducted by Means and Pyne (2017, p. 917) indicated that "university faculty mentors were one of the most important variables for their belonging within the academic life of college." The specific benefits of faculty-student interactions include greater academic and social integration (McKay & Estrella, 2008; Means & Pyne, 2017), decreased stress (Garriott & Nisle, 2017), and greater rates of retention (Grant-Vallone et

al., 2003). Additionally, quality of faculty interactions is connected to positive beliefs about both short- and long-term goal completion (McKay & Estrella, 2008). Short-term goals may include completion of a class project while long-term goals may include achievements larger aspirations, such as completing one's degree.

While there is ample research emphasizing that faculty-student interactions and institutional support may offer tremendous benefits for first-generation students, there is also evidence that first-generation students may not consistently receive this support (Kim & Sax, 2009; Means & Pyne, 2017; Schademan & Thompson, 2015). Some barriers may come from student. For example, to varying degrees, some first-generation students have voiced fears about approaching faculty, which may have prevented them from making contact (Means & Pyne, 2017). Other barriers may exist within the system or with faculty themselves. Research conducted by Schademan and Thompson (2015) suggests that faculty may be particularly beneficial in supporting low-income, first-generation students by connecting students to university resources, serving as cultural agents and validating diverse identities, and providing small learning communities. However, Schademan and Thompson (2015) express concern about the consistency with which faculty actually achieve these goals. Faculty voiced having concerns that low-income, first-generation students are unlikely persist and feeling challenged to provide support for these students when they feel that they are not academically equipped to manage college. Kim and Sax (2009), too, note that there are differences between first-generation students, particularly non-White and lower class first-generation students, and their counterparts in the degree to which they engage in faculty interaction both within and outside of the classroom, stating that these students are often excluded from research-

based and course-related faculty interactions. Researchers indicate that these findings warrant further research into why first-generation students may be excluded. Overall, the findings demonstrate that first-generation students benefit from receiving faculty and institutional support, though the research is unclear to what degree they receive this support and what barriers might prevent this support from being endowed.

Integrating Old and New Identities

As cultural mismatch theory describes, college systems generally have different values and cultural customs than first-generation students are accustomed to (Fryberg et al., 2013). Though much of the literature in cultural mismatch theory focuses on differences in valuing systems around independent and interdependent norms (e.g., Fryberg et al., 2013; Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012), there are other areas of the literature that address other cultural differences first-generation students face when leaving their home communities for college (Carter, 2003; Lee & Kramer, 2013; Owens et al., 2010). The focus of the research conducted by Carter (2003) and Owens et al. (2010) is how first-generation students navigate a new social sphere, one with different cultural norms, and, additionally, how they return to their families and communities of origin and interact afterward. It is notable that research of this type has only focused only on African American first-generation students and non-first-generation, low-SES students.

Cultural congruence is important to establishing authenticity in a particular social group or system. The process of establishing authenticity within a given social system requires that the individual espouses authenticity, which is quite complicated, but can be established, in part, by displaying certain cultural markers that are indicative of group membership (Carter, 2003). Carter (2003) describes how racial and ethnic groups set up

internal, cultural boundaries in order to determine who truly belongs within the group, thus establishing authenticity. For example, Carter describes how group membership within Black communities often requires that a person display certain speech patterns, such as using certain slang phrases. Carter describes how these cultural markers serve as a form of cultural capital within the Black communities. This type of capital is not useful within the dominant culture and is then referred to as non-dominant cultural capital, which is described as tastes and preferences (such as musical, linguistic, interaction styles) that are specific to a lower status group (Carter, 2003). It is important to note that "cultural capital provides the means to 'walk the walk' and 'talk the talk' of the cultural power brokers of society" (p. 138) while non-dominant cultural capital helps to establish authenticity in communities of origin and establishes a sense of self and group belonging (Carter, 2003). While non-dominant cultural capital plays an essential role in establishing bonds within home communities, Black first-generation students describe experiencing difficulties fluctuating between establishing non-dominant cultural capital in one environment but having to adopt dominant cultural capital when interacting in other environments, such as universities (Carter, 2003; Owens et al., 2010).

Essentially, individuals who must occupy two culturally different spaces must develop hybridized identities to be successful in both environments (Lee & Kramer, 2013). It is important to consider what the cost might be to these individuals. Research suggests that low-SES students and first-generation students report a loss of connection to home (Lee & Kramer, 2013). The cultural capital that they acquire within the dominant culture does not transfer to their home communities and may even alienate them from these communities. Low-SES students describe feeling that their families and people

within their community of origin see them as a snob or stuck-up when they return home from college (Lee & Kramer, 2013). They discuss using a number of different strategies that they use to try to regain non-dominant cultural capital and pretend that they are unchanged by college, such as being mindful of not using overly sophisticated words around their families. Thus, the current literature supports the claim that first-generation students and other students who do not ascribe to the dominant cultural norms may be forced to adopt a hybridized identity, which may cause difficulty when they re-enter their communities of origin. Further research should focus on first-generation populations who are from other racial backgrounds (Carter, 2003; Owens et al., 2010).

Family and Community of Origin Support

Introduction to Current Family and Community Support Literature

Research on how first-generation students navigate relationships within their home communities after beginning college and building new relationships has received little attention in the literature. There is a need to elucidate how first-generation students receive and perceive support from their families and communities of origin and what challenges may exist within these bonds. Lee and Kramer (2013) support this claim, noting that study of students who enter elite institutions and their “nonelite home communities” has been understudied (p.19). While Lee and Kramer’s research focused on first-generation students entering elite colleges and universities, and thus a niche group of first-generation students, the importance of upward social mobility that may be obtained through pursuing college is a salient part of the experience of attending college for first-generation students. In fact, first-generation students are motivated to attend college primarily to make more money and prepare for graduate school (Saenz et al.,

2007). First-generation students are more concerned about financial security, in general, than continuing-generation students. Thus, first-generation students who attend university place themselves in a position to achieve upward mobility and seem to want to depart from their former class and social systems in order to gain more financial security.

Parents of first-generation students acknowledge their inability to obtain social mobility, socially, occupationally, and economically, and see the opportunity for their first-generation children to attain the mobility they were unable to achieve (Rondini, 2016). Rondini describes how parents of first-generation students, who believe that hard work leads to advancement (i.e., the American dream), are able to reconcile their own perceived failures to gain social advancement, despite their own hard work, with their children's' achievements. Rather than blame inequality in the social system, parents of first-generation students may internalize the blame and desire to see their children succeed in the wake of their own failure. Parents are able to, then, heal the "hidden injuries of class" they obtained through their perceived failures to become upwardly mobile by creating narratives of redemption, guided by their children's successes, and viewing their children as "aspirational proxies" (Rondini, 2016, p. 96). The parents then can experience their own sense of success through their children's accomplishments. Thus, social mobility, which Bourdieu (1983) would describe as cultural capital, is very much a part of the narrative of first-generation students and their families. However, as Lee and Kramer (2013) identify, there may be changes in the fabric of the relationships for first-generation students and their "nonelite" families and communities of origin due to the fact that first-generation students are on the path toward upward mobility.

Benefits of Family Support

While the benefits of peer support for first-generation students tends to be clear, the literature regarding the benefits of family support is a little more nuanced. There have been mixed findings, with some researchers finding clear benefits (e.g., Garcia, et al., 2015; Wang & Castañeda-Sound., 2008) and other researchers finding no significant benefits (e.g., Purswell, Yazedijan, & Toews, 2008). Still other research has indicated somewhat mixed results, finding that parental support has important benefits for first-generation students and also presents relevant challenges (e.g., McWhirter et al., 2007; Rondini, 2016; Tseng, 2004). Parental support, then, may not clearly be delineated as a positive predictor of academic success nor a negative indicator. Literature describing how parental support is a strength for first-generation students is first presented and then some of the limitations or challenges of family support are visited in the following section.

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) provides a framework to understand how contextual support, which consists of support systems that include family and community of origin support, contributes to the development of a student's career and educational goals. Consistent with the literature of SCCT, there has been research that supports that contextual support is important to the development of career and education goals and outcomes (Garriott & Nisle, 2017; Garriott, Raque-Bogdan, Yalago, Ziemer, & Utley, 2017; Lent et al., 2015). In fact, research about contextual resources has been quite popular in the SCCT literature and there has even been a scale developed to measure these resources (Lent et al., 2015). Lent et al. acknowledge that there have been comparatively fewer studies produced exploring contextual barriers and no scale has yet

been developed. Research using the SCCT framework has also yielded important information regarding how contextual support may be multilayered and complex. For example, recent findings provide evidence for parental support being comprised of several different types of support (Garriott & Nisle, 2017; Garriott, Raque-Bogdan, et al., 2017). Parental support may be more emotionally driven or instructional and these types of support may be demonstrated differently, such as through parental involvement or setting parental expectations and relaying to one's child that educational success is related to career success. These types of support may differentially affect development of career and educational goals. Thus, SCCT research has provided some valuable evidence to better understand the construct of parental support.

The two areas currently researched where parental support seems to be an important strength for the overall well-being of first-generation students: mental health and stress management and encouragement and motivation. Though there is very limited research in this domain, there is some evidence for the importance of parental support in promoting positive mental health for first-generation students (Sy et al., 2011; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). First-generation students who report greater emotional support from parents also report having less stress (Dixon Rayle & Chung, 2007; Sy et al., 2011; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). It is important to note, however, that first-generation students report receiving less informational and emotional support than continuing-generation students (Sy et al., 2011). Family and peer support are also related to decreased psychological symptoms and greater well-being. Thus, though limited, evidence indicates that having support and encouragement from parents can bolster

mental health. The lack of research into the effects of parental support on first-generation student mental health presents the opportunity for further research in this domain.

The second area where parental support seems to be particularly important for first-generation students is in the realm of encouragement and motivation. Parental and contextual support is also related to greater career optimism for first-generation students, suggesting that parents made provide the framework and encouragement for first-generation students to begin developing their career-related goals (Garcia et al., 2015). Other research supports this, as first-generation students report parental encouragement as increasingly an important factor in their decisions to consider pursuing a college education (Saenz et al., 2007). Parents and families may also provide motivation for first-generation students to pursue their degree, due to the love and respect first-generation students feel toward their families. Among racial and ethnic minority students this seems to be especially true, as research finds that attitudes about achieving academically for the sake of the family are more prevalent for these students than for White students (Tseng, 2004). Among Asian and Latin American students, students express a greater desire to support their family and respect their wishes than European American students (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999). Additionally, children from immigrant families are more likely than children whose parents were born in the U.S. to feel they need to repay their parents and to place a higher emphasis on interdependence (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Tseng, 2004). Thus, families of origin may provide first-generation students with a meaningful reason to pursue higher education.

Challenges of Family Support

While commitment to family and desire to fulfill family expectations can be a huge strength for first-generation students, motivating them to achieve academically, these same values can also create competing obligations between school and family (McWhirter et al., 2007; Soria & Stebleton, 2012a; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Tseng, 2004; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2014). The impact of the family is clear from the outset, as first-generation students are more likely than continuing-generation students to attend community college or a university near home and live at home (Saenz et al., 2007). Gaining family approval to attend a university or college can be paramount, as choosing an institution against the desires of the family can lead to alienation (Tseng, 2004), which would likely be deeply impactful. Separation from family, either geographically or emotionally, by moving away to college is of great concern to Mexican-American students, and one of the reported barriers for entering post-secondary education (McWhirter et al., 2007).

Additionally, obligation to family seems to have implications for academic achievement. Tseng (2004) presents a salient point stating that their findings note that family interdependence both helps with and impedes academic adjustment. Strong connection to family creates greater motivation for academic achievement while at the same time it leads to behavioral demands, such as helping with household chores, caretaking, and assisting with finances, that may impede academic performance (Tseng, 2004; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2014). First-generation students report more pressure to come home for family events, such as holidays and birthdays, and greater pressure to live at home (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2014). Further, they report that these obligations

sometimes create barriers for completing academic assignments, studying, and other academic necessities. First-generation students' GPAs tend to suffer as a result of competing demands (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2014). Notably, less parental education is associated greater expectation to come home, suggesting that parents, perhaps not understanding the demands of college due to never attending, may place restricting demands on their children to return home regularly.

As mentioned previously, findings indicate that overall, first-generation students report experiencing less support than their continuing-generation peers (Jenkins et al., 2013; Sy et al., 2011). The question that remains is whether first-generation students actually receive less social support than their peers, or whether they do receive support from their families, but the support is limited in its usefulness due to the fact that their families of origin do not have the cultural capital to provide insight into the dynamics of academia. There is some evidence for the latter claim (Dennis et al., 2005; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). First-generation students and continuing-generation report similar frequency of talking to their parents as continuing-generation students but non-first-generation students found these conversations to be of higher quality and more helpful than their first-generation peers (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). While parents of first-generation students can provide emotional support for their children as they strive to attain a degree, they may not able to provide instructional support due to their inexperience in this arena (Dennis et al., 2005; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). This explanation may provide insight into why peer support, rather than family support, is found to be overall more positively impactful for first-generation students (Dennis et al., 2005; Purswell et al., 2008; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). This, Bourdieu might

argue, is why universities promote social reproduction, as parents of first-generation students are unable to gift them the social and cultural capital necessary to achieve in college. Further research is needed to explore how the parents of first-generation students can provide support to their children, from the child's perspective, despite the parent's lack of experience in higher education (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017).

Finally, another way in which family connection and support may create barriers for first-generation students and their academic trajectories has been described in the literature as survivor's guilt or family achievement guilt (e.g., Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Piorkowski, 1983; Tate et al., 2013). Piorkowski first applied the concept of survivor's guilt to first-generation college students in 1983. Piorkowski argued that although first-generation students may not have experienced a situation where they survived death and another did not, as the definition of survivor guilt indicates, they face similar psychological dilemmas. That is, "the question, 'Why should I survive when they died?' can be translated into, 'Why should I succeed when they failed?'" (Piorkowski, 1983, p. 620). Thus, Piorkowski argues that first-generation students, having watched their family members and, sometimes, community members fail to climb the social ladder, experience a deep sense of guilt for their academic successes. Tate et al. (2013) provides more recent evidence for the presence of survivor's guilt amongst first-generation students. Thus, the authors argue that it is imperative that college counselors are aware of the guilt first-generation students might be experiencing and note that survivor's guilt may impede academic performance for these students.

Covarrubias and Fryberg (2015) note that, to date, there has been no empirical evidence of survivor's guilt among first-generation students. Rather, Covarrubias and

Fryberg reframe what Piorkowski (1983) originally termed as survivor's guilt to be more aptly described as family achievement guilt, or experiencing guilt related to surpassing the achievements of family members. In evidence for this theory, Covarrubias and Fryberg (2015) used a scale that measures guilt related to surpassing family achievements and found that first-generation students report greater family achievement guilt than continuing-generation students. Perceptions of family struggle mediated the relationship between college status and guilt, suggesting that the guilt is rooted in feeling as if one is leaving one's struggling family behind. Experiencing family achievement guilt has important implications for mental health. Research finds that family achievement guilt is associated with greater depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem (Covarrubias, Romero, & Trivelli, 2015). Perhaps not surprisingly, first-generation students experienced more depressive symptoms and greater family achievement guilt in this same study. Thus, family context is important to the overall adjustment of first-generation students.

Mental Health and Use of Counseling Services

Mental health is an important predictor of academic performance, persistence, and graduation rates for college students, as many students who leave college without a degree are struggling with mental health concerns (Kitzrow, 2009). Recently, college counseling centers are being utilized more frequently and are encountering students with more severe psychopathology (Kitzrow, 2009). The majority of college students report at least one incidence of abuse as a child (Miller-Graff, Howell, Martinez-Torteya, & Hunter, 2015). Thus, the use of counseling services, and the need of these services, appears to be on the rise.

First-generation students tend to have significant need for counseling services and other services that promote mental wellness. First-generation students report lower levels of belonging than continuing-generation students (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman Jr., 2014). They also report more depressive symptoms (Covarrubias et al., 2015; Jenkins et al., 2013; Stebleton et al., 2014), even meeting clinical cutoffs of depression more often than continuing-generation students (Miller-Graff et al., 2015). First-generation students also report lower life satisfaction (Jenkins et al., 2013) and greater rates of clinical-level anxiety (Miller-Graff et al., 2015) than continuing-generation peers. Thus, first-generation students may struggle with more mental health concerns than their peers and may need greater levels of support.

There are many factors that play into mental wellness for first-generation students. Parental support is related to less stress for first-generation students (Dixon Rayle & Chung, 2007; Sy et al., 2011; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008) and thus students who perceive greater support may have lower incidence of mental health concerns. Conversely, experiencing family achievement guilt, or guilt related to succeeding beyond the level of family members, is related to greater depressive symptoms (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). First-generation students also experience greater incidence of trauma (Jenkins et al., 2013; Miller-Graff et al., 2015). They are more likely than continuing-generation students to be victims of multiple instances of interpersonal trauma, often called polyvictimization (Miller-Graff et al., 2015).

Despite having greater need for mental health services, first-generation students are less likely than their peers to utilize college counseling services (Stebleton et al., 2014). Interestingly, there has been a lack of research on why first-generation students

tend not use counseling services at the same rate as continuing-generation students (Garriott, Raque-Bogdan, et al., 2017). Garriott, Raque-Bogdan, et al. (2017) found that, for first-generation students, self-stigma was most related to negative attitudes about help-seeking behavior. Authors suggest that first-generation students may be more likely to turn inward, relying on their own attitudes about help seeking, when evaluating whether or not to seek counseling. In contrast, continuing-generation students seemed to rely more on how they believe others would perceive their help-seeking behavior when forming attitudes about pursuing counseling. Thus, research indicates that early assessment of mental health needs (Miller-Graff et al., 2015), greater outreach (Kitzrow, 2009), and tailored approaches to addressing stigma (Garriott, Raque-Bogdan, et al., 2017) may be helpful approaches to promoting help-seeking behaviors for first-generation students.

Strengths and Methods of Persevering

Interestingly, while there has been a great body of research dedicated to exploring the academic, financial, and psychological challenges first-generation students face when entering universities and college, which has been described in previous sections, there have been very few studies that explore strengths first-generation students possess (Tate et al., 2015). That is, relatively little research has been devoted to how first-generation students overcome the numerous challenges that they may be faced with. This is particularly interesting given that there have been studies (e.g., Purswell et al., 2008) and even a metanalysis (Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012), exploring the strengths of college students and strategies used to succeed in during their undergraduate degree. This is a critical gap in the literature, as strengths-based research, assessment, and

treatment has been a fundamental value of counseling psychology as a field since its conception (Gelso et al., 2014). Counseling psychology, in general, has added a great deal of research into the literature about individual qualities or traits that are generally positive (Gelso et al., 2014). Strangely, within the context of first-generation students, research about these positive individual qualities or traits has been lacking.

The very limited research that exists suggests that first-generation students do possess a number of notable strengths and resiliency factors. First-generation students tend to possess a strong internal drive and work ethic (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). First-generation students from working-class backgrounds describe how their SES has made them stronger and more independent, as aspects of this identity, such as having both parents work full-time, helped to foster the development of these traits (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). Thus, first-generation students seem to make meaning of their identities and find strength in these identities. Quantitative research has also demonstrated that first-generation students may demonstrate high levels of grit, which is related to lower levels of depression in most populations (O'Neal et al., 2016). Additionally, first-generation students describe having the ability to contain negative emotions, without letting them overflow, until they are able to discuss their emotions with someone they trust (O'Neal et al., 2016). Thus, they demonstrate the ability to emotionally regulate even during distressing times. First-generation students who are able to maintain high self-esteem demonstrate high levels of psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). First-generation students also self-describe a number of other strengths, including a love for learning, an interest in upward mobility, and career-minded practicality (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016).

While the literature is limited, there is evidence that first-generation students have strengths and resiliency factors that may be overshadowed by the predominant literature that focuses only on their limitations and challenges. While first-generation students do face notable challenges, the majority of first-generation students do persist and graduate with an undergraduate degree (Stuber, 2011). More research is needed to better understand the strengths first-generation students possess, from their perspective, and how they utilize these strengths to overcome barriers.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the literature regarding the experiences of first-generation college students in the higher education system. First, I explained my theoretical conceptualization of first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities within the frameworks of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and SCCT. Then, I specified a formal definition for first-generation status and explored some of the demographic characteristics of this population. I also discussed academic challenges first-generation college students often face and how these challenges impact their GPAs and persistence rates. I explored financial struggles many first-generation college students face when coming to college due to commonly being from lower SES backgrounds. I described cultural mismatch theory as it pertains to first-generation college students and the norms within higher education and also how inhabiting different social spheres (e.g., navigating communities of origin and community established at college) often necessitates integration of multiple identities. This chapter also details current literature, and gaps in this literature, about support systems of first-generation college students and how these systems contribute to a sense of belonging. Additionally,

the chapter explores mental health concerns commonly experienced by first-generation students and their use of mental health services while in college. I then transition to gaps in the literature regarding strengths and methods of persevering demonstrated by first-generation populations.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Research in the field of psychology has historically been dominated by quantitative methodologies, providing an incomplete lens from which to view human behavior (Ponterotto, 2005). Ponterotto notes that it is important to include qualitative methodologies in order to advance psychology as a scientific field, broadening professional knowledge and societal impact. The inclusion of qualitative methods as "on equal footing" to quantitative methods was a major breakthrough in the field of counseling psychology (Suzuki, O'Shaughnessy, Roysircar, Ponterotto, & Carter, 2019, p. 833). Qualitative research emerged in reaction to growing dissatisfaction with some of the limitations of positivism (Ponterotto, 2005). For example, it has been argued that positivism produces research with human participants that ignores their humanness, as positivist research relies heavily on etic research (or research with an objective focus) and excludes emic research (research with a subjective focus) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research is designed to provide an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon from the person or persons who are experiencing it (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research aims to produce a holistic account, identifying the multiple factors at play and the emergent, larger picture (Creswell, 2013).

Qualitative research is defined as a set of approaches that analyze the data in the form of natural language (i.e., words) and expressions of experiences (e.g., social

interactions or art) (Levitt et al., 2018). Qualitative research centers on exploring the meaning participants ascribe to their experiences and acknowledges that there are multiple, equally valid truths (Moustakas, 1994). In some qualitative research, the researcher and participants are seen as equivalent co-investigators, empowering researcher and equalizing the power hierarchy that can be present in quantitative research (Ponterotto, 2010). Qualitative research does not necessarily aim to generalize to populations as a whole. Rather, the goal of qualitative research is best conceptualized as aiming to "understand the particular in depth, rather than finding out what is generally true of many" (Merriam, 1995, p. 57). I chose to use a qualitative approach to research in order to better understand the lived experiences of the participants, seeking to better understand how they experience support and challenges from on- and off-campus relationships.

In this chapter, I begin by describing the theoretical framework I use to guide the methodology of the current research and outline my researcher's stance. Research methodology is then presented, describing the phenomenological design employed and the purpose of the design. The research design is more fully explored, including procedures for data collection, characteristics of participants and exclusion criteria, research procedures, and data analysis. Finally, I describe ethical issues that can emerge in qualitative research as well as methods employed to provide trustworthiness.

Theoretical Framework

Research paradigms are basic belief systems or worldviews that create context and provide philosophical assumptions about reality and the research that influence the selection of methods of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Effective research must be

rooted in certain beliefs about knowledge, or how one makes sense of the world, which is termed epistemology (Crotty, 1998). It encompasses the relationship between the knower and what can be known, specifically the question of what reality or truth is, and how truth can or cannot be known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Epistemology serves as the root of research, guiding the theoretical approach a researcher selects, which, in turn, influences the methodology and research design (Crotty, 1998). Methodological choices, then, are highly dependent on whether the choice is consistent with one's paradigmatic framework (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). There are three major epistemologies, or theories of knowledge, that are identified in research including: objectivism, subjectivism, and constructivism (Crotty, 1998). Objectivism asserts that an objective truth exists outside of the individual's experience, subjectivism posits that there is no single reality outside of the reality the participants ascribe to it, and constructivism is a belief that people construct meaning based on their experiences.

Researchers must have a well-developed understanding of the philosophical assumptions that underlie a theory they have selected to conceptualize their research, as these assumptions have an impact on all aspects of the research design (Creswell, 2013). My theoretical approach to the current research is constructivist; social constructivism views meaning as being both subjective and co-constructed (Creswell, 2013). These philosophical assumptions match the purpose of my study, which is to understand the relational experiences of first-generation students, including: how these relationships provide both support and barriers and how these relationships change over the course of their undergraduate career. Thus, my research aims to further understand co-constructed meanings first-generation students ascribe to their relationships and how they change.

Social constructivism involves an ontological approach, embracing multiple, equally valid realities (Creswell, 2013). This approach suggests that there is no objective truth to be discovered (Crotty, 1998). Truth, then, does not exist outside of the individual and one person's 'truth' is not held by others. Rather, meaning is constructed through interactions with one's environment (Crotty, 1998). The environment is a multi-faceted concept, and includes many individuals, including the researcher (Ponterotto, 2005). The researcher is both an active agent in co-constructing and an interpreter, rather than a reporter, of experience (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). Thus, the researcher impacts the formation of meaning for participants. The researcher, then, must "position themselves" in the research and recognize how the researcher's own background influences interpretation of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013). As a researcher, I must be aware of how my own background, experiences, and biases impact my interpretation of participants' narratives and be able to "bracket" my values, while recognizing that it is impossible to entirely eliminate them (Ponterotto, 2005).

Importantly, it is not just discrete individuals, such as the researcher, that influence the meaning-making process, but also historical and cultural norms that operate within the environment (Creswell, 2013). Thus, the researcher must also be aware of the context of participants, including these historical and cultural norms, in order to fully understand the participant's experiences. This may involve using multiple sources of data. For example, I use the self-report of the participants (via interviews), my own analysis, and another researcher examining the data. The hope is to provide a richer understanding of the participants' context and how this has shaped their experiences.

Methodology

As described earlier in the chapter, epistemology serves as the root of research, guiding the theoretical approach a researcher selects, which, in turn, influences the methodology and research design (Crotty, 1998). Thus, the methodological choices must be consistent with the social constructivist epistemology selected for the current research. Crotty (1998) compares research methodology to a strategy or plan of action, which dictates the methods one implements in the research design. The methodology must also align with the research paradigms selected, as discussed in the above section, in order to conduct meaningful research. Thus, it is important to choose a methodology that both aligns with one's research paradigm and allows for the type of methods one wishes to employ. Phenomenology is a methodology best suited for studies where the aim is to gain a deep understanding of a phenomenon experienced by multiple people, and focuses on commonalities in experience (Creswell, 2013). I selected phenomenology for the current study, as it captures the lived experiences of first-generation students, highlighting their voices and first-person perspectives. This aligns with my goal of understanding, from their perspective, first-generation students' relational experiences, specifically the supports and barriers experienced. Additionally, my purpose was to understand how barriers are overcome and how these relationships change over the duration of their undergraduate careers.

This study explored what it means to be a first-generation college student and a racial or ethnic minority at a mid-size public institution. It explored commonalities and unique lived experiences between individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of being first-generation college students, creating what is called the essence of experience

(Merriam, 2009). Phenomenology seeks to transform individual experiences of a phenomenon to a description of a universal essence (Creswell, 2013), emphasizing the commonalities that are assumed to exist within experience. The shared essence of experience must encapsulate both the "what" and "how" of the shared experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Questions such as, "what is the nature of the phenomenon" and "what are its qualities" are relevant to better understanding what is being experienced (Moustakas, 1994, p. 78). The feelings, perceptions, and thoughts contextually surrounding the phenomenon are necessary to understanding the "how" aspect of the phenomenon. Thus, the present study aimed to address both what it means to be a first-generation student navigating on- (i.e., students and faculty) and off-campus (i.e., family and community of origin) relationships, and how first-generation students experience this phenomenon, including their perceptions, feelings, and thoughts.

It is important to further explore the philosophical assumptions embedded in phenomenology. Phenomenology returns to the traditional, Greek focus of philosophy, which is a search for wisdom, rather than empirical conceptions of philosophy (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, phenomenology is described as a "philosophy without presuppositions." (Creswell, 2013, p. 77). Husserl described this freedom from suppositions Epoche, which translates from Greek to mean stay away from or abstain (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche, or bracketing, is the process of putting aside prejudgments, biases, and preconceptions. Moustakas (1994) delivers an important warning about the process of bracketing, suggesting that bracketing is rarely perfectly achieved and some life experiences are so ingrained that they may not be bracketable. In most instances, bracketing, though imperfect, can reduce the impact of biases and prejudgments

emerging from the researcher. Self-reflexivity is not a process to be solely undertaken at the outset of research, and should continue throughout the duration of the research process (Creswell, 2013).

Moustakas (1994) describes the process of being able to see beyond one's worldview as a researcher and individual and being able to openly and naively interact with the phenomenon itself. He calls this transcendental phenomenology. This is again where bracketing, or epoché, becomes an essential part of the research process, allowing the researcher to place his or her biases aside in order to perceive the phenomenon as naively as possible. Again, it is important to note that the process of bracketing is rarely fully accomplished, as some experiences are too intense or engrained to be fully bracketed (Moustakas, 1994). The focus of the results, then, should be less on the researcher's interpretations, though these interpretations are a necessary part of the process, and more on the participants lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). The focus of the current study was to deeply understand the meaning-making processes and lived experiences of first generation students who identify as a racial or ethnic minority, as they navigate the challenges and sense of support derived from interpersonal relationships, and thus transcendental phenomenology is an ideal approach.

Finally, phenomenology is a holistic methodology, striving to view an individual and his or her experiences as a whole, rather than reducing to parts (Moustakas, 1994). This involves capturing both the "what" and "how" of experience, fully understanding the textural and structural accounts of participant's experiences in order to combine both elements to form a composite. The phenomenological interview is an important part of

this process, allowing the researcher to directly interact with the participant, who has first-hand experience with the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009).

Thus, phenomenology aims to explore in-depth the lived experiences of individuals who have each experienced a particular phenomenon, exploring the meaning ascribed. In the current study, I used phenomenology to explore the lived, relational experiences of first-generation students navigating barriers and supports, and how barriers are overcome. Additionally, my purpose was to explore how these relationships change over time. Before venturing further, it is important to explore my own perspectives and biases that I bring as a researcher, as qualitative research values transparency in order to avoid one's assumptions or worldviews from hindering the research process (Levitt et al., 2018).

Researcher Stance

My interest in first-generation students stems, in part, from my personal experiences and family history. My parents had very different experiences growing up, and as a result, disparate views of education. Their differences were fueled in large part by racial and class differences. My mother's family identifies as white and for several generations they have enjoyed the privilege of being middle and upper middle class. She and her siblings, like generations before them, all received at least a bachelor's degree and many people within that family have achieved advanced degrees as well. Education was a value that was strongly emphasized in my generation as well and my siblings, cousins, and I are all well educated.

Within my father's family, there are notable differences. My grandfather's family of origin lived much of their lives in Mexico as farmers, passing down strong values

around work ethic but not necessarily around education. They occupied the working class and did not have the resources to fund my grandfather's education. Thus, my grandfather did not, at first, attend college and worked a number of different jobs, including driving school buses. My grandmother encouraged my grandfather to go to college. When my father enrolled in college, my grandfather must have found the impetus to go to college himself, as they both graduated with their bachelor's degree the same year from the same institution. While my father and my grandparents wanted me to pursue higher education, they saw education as a chance for financial and social mobility, rather than an opportunity to pursue my vocational dreams. Thus, my father's family and my mother's family had very different perceptions about the importance and role of education while raising my three siblings and me.

Thus, though I am not a first-generation college student, I have had family and life experiences that highlight the fact that higher education is tied to privilege, and that not everybody is allowed the same kind of educational access. I have been extraordinarily lucky to be afforded the privilege of family resources to attend a private college for my undergraduate degree and now the support to pursue my PhD, though I realize that this privilege is not universal. My pride in my grandfather for obtaining his bachelor's degree, despite his lack of access, is part of the undercurrent driving this dissertation. I want to support first-generation students, who, like my grandfather and his family, may not have all the resources and opportunities continuing-generation students enjoy. Supporting these students through my research endeavors and through my recent work within the university counseling center setting is very important to me.

Additionally, my interest in this population stems from some of the personal identities I hold. I identify as multi-racial, though I present to others as white and have thus experienced white privilege throughout my life. I see my racial identity as somewhat of a hidden identity, one that people often only discover when I tell them or when they realize my last name is Martinez. Recently, a friend of my partner only realized I identified as multi-racial after he made a derogatory joke about Mexicans, which prompted me to share my identity. First-generation students, too, have an aspect of their identity that may go unrecognized by others. Their first-generation status is not necessarily outwardly visible and first-generation students may or may not choose to share this identity with their peers, friends, and faculty while on-campus. Nevertheless, I suspect that this may be an important aspect of some first-generation students' identities, one that impacts their daily experiences.

I know that my hidden identity, while unseen by many, has impacted my experiences and worldview. My undergraduate career at a liberal institution helped me to connect with my multi-faceted identities, realizing the impact of my privileged identities and my underprivileged identities. I discovered feminism and social justice for the first time. Since, I have become further immersed in social justice, helping to facilitate social justice workshops for diverse undergraduate women during my first year in my doctoral program. I now consider my role as a social advocate a vital part of personal and professional identities. Being a proponent of social justice and the pursuit of equity has certainly influenced my choice to conduct my research with first-generation students. Thus, collectively, my family experiences, personal identities, and my values around social justice have contributed to my desire to pursue this topic of research.

Research Methods

Institutional Review Board Approval

Upon approval of my dissertation proposal, I submitted an institutional review board application and the application was approved, approval number 1239341-1 (See Appendix A). I completed an application for an exempt research project, as first-generation students are not considered a vulnerable population and there is no apparent risk associated with the methods of research I have selected. See Appendix B for the Consent Form for Human Participants in Research.

Participants

Sampling method and recruitment. The current study utilized purposeful criterion sampling, where a set of criteria developed by the researcher distinguishes which participants are able to participate (Merriam, 2009). In phenomenological research, it is important that the participant has experienced the phenomenon first-hand (Creswell, 2013), and thus first-hand experience of the phenomenon is one necessary criteria for participant selection.

Participants were recruited from a mid-size public university within the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. See Appendix C for the recruitment letter. Approximately 40 percent of first-generation college students graduated in six years from the public university selected for this study, which is higher than the national average of 20 percent (RTI International, 2019b). Participants were all between the ages of 20 and 25 and identified as first-generation college students. An equal distribution of male- and female-identifying participants were represented in this study. Three participants identified as African American, six students identified as Hispanic, one participant

identified as Asian, and two participants identified as multiracial. See Appendix D for more in-depth participant demographics.

Participants were recruited from organizations within the universities providing services and resources for first-generation students and cultural centers across campus. These organizations were contacted via email to see if they would agree to provide information about the current study to their first-generation students. One participant heard about the study through a cultural center and contacted me to participate. Participants were also contacted through the researcher's professional connections, such as instructors, and through email listservs that reach undergraduate students. Nine of the twelve participants were recruited in this manner. When participants agreed to be a part of the study, they were contacted via email and asked to complete the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix E) to ensure that they met inclusion criteria. Purposeful sampling was used first, which involves the selection of information-rich cases for in-depth study (Merriam, 2009). Snowball sampling, where participants are asked to refer other potential participants, was also utilized (Merriam, 2009). Snowball sampling is arguably one of the most commonly used sampling tactics in qualitative research and typically provides new avenues for gaining knowledge and transferring power into the participants' hands by relying on natural social networks for recruitment (Noy, 2008). In the current study, two participants were recruited via snowball sampling.

When considering sampling procedures, Gutterman (2015) states that the size of the sample and the appropriateness of the sample (e.g., the relevance of the participants) are two major domains the researcher should consider. The researcher should select a sampling strategy, devise a plan to determine how many participants are necessary, and

document rationale (Gutterman, 2015). The number of participants in qualitative research is typically determined by the study's purpose and the course of the study (Merriam, 2009). Reviewing qualitative research from 2008-2012, Gutterman (2015) found evidence that recent qualitative publications have large sample sizes and may be oversampling, which may make the data repetitive and decrease depth. Thus, oversampling should be avoided while still recruiting an adequate number of participants. Frequently, researchers continue recruiting participants until saturation is met (Creswell, 2013). The method of reaching saturation, or redundancy, occurs when additional participants do not yield new findings (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). In the current study, saturation was reached after the 11th participant. One more participant was recruited to ensure that no new information would be yielded from continuing to recruit. No new themes emerged after the 11th participant and thus twelve participants total were included in the current study.

Inclusion criteria. Participants needed to meet four criteria for inclusion. The criteria were described in the recruitment letter (see Appendix C) sent to potential participants and participants were further screened from the information they provided on the demographic questionnaire. Nine total interested participants were not included in the study because they did not fully meet participant inclusion criteria. Participants needed to qualify as a first-generation undergraduate college student and also be between the ages of 20-25. While there are varying definitions of first-generation status, I used the definition of first-generation that many use in the literature (e.g., Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2013; Sy et al., 2011). This definition of first-generation status consisted of students whose parents have never attended college, university, or

community college. Three potential participants who expressed interest in the study provided information in their demographic questionnaires that indicated they were not first-generation and thus were not included.

Student athletes were not included, as they may receive more funding and different experiences through the university due to being a part of an athletic team. One potential participant was excluded due to not meeting this criterion. Thirdly, participants needed to be either junior or senior status in college. No interested participants were excluded based on this criterion as all potential participants were either juniors or seniors. As part of the research focuses on how relationships have changed over time, it is necessary that participants have been attending college for a sufficient amount of time to reflect on these changes. Additionally, because the research also focuses on resiliency factors and how first-generation students have overcome relational challenges, having junior and senior students may allow them to best reflect on this process. Both college junior and senior first-generation students have been selected in previous research to explore how they achieved success in college (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). Participants also could not be transfer students, as they have different experiences coming into four-year colleges and adjusting to a different level of rigor and they may not be exposed to first year experience programs, such as freshman orientation (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011). Three potential participants were not included because they disclosed they were transfer students.

The last required criterion was that the student identified as a racial or ethnic minority. According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau (Humes et al., 2011), there are a minimum of five racial categories including White, Black or African American,

American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. For those who cannot identify within those categories there is often a category called "other race" that one can indicate for racial identity. Ethnic group membership involves shared cultural and historical ties, including shared family structure, family roles, language, belief systems, etc. (Smith, 1991). Ethnicity involves a subjective sense of ethnic group membership (Phinney, 1996). The U.S. Census bureau currently identifies being Hispanic or Latino/a as ethnic identities and includes only these two ethnic identities when collecting census data (Humes et al., 2011). Majority or minority status can be defined as one's relative power in society (Smith, 1991). The experiences associated with holding a minority identity can be characterized by powerlessness, discrimination, and prejudice (Phinney, 1996). The current study focused on people who identify as racial or ethnic minorities, which means that they are individuals whose identities have been historically disempowered. Thus, all racial categories, except White, and all ethnic identities were included in the current study. Two interested participants were not included in the study because they identified as White and thus did not meet this criterion.

First-generation students are more likely to hold racial or ethnic minority identities than continuing-generation students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), suggesting that first-generation students tend to be a diverse group. I decided to focus on racial or ethnic minority students because research indicates that first-generation students who hold these identities have lower rates of retention and completion (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pew Hispanic Center, 2013), indicating that these students may face additional challenges in college. Due to these potentially enhanced challenges, exploring

how first-generation students who hold minority racial or ethnic identities overcome these challenges will hopefully offer insight into the unique strengths these individuals hold.

Data Collection

Informed consent was provided before any data were collected (see appendix B). The informed consent overviewed the participants' rights to choose not to participate in the study at any time and the purpose of the research. The informed consent also described confidentiality and the researcher verbally described confidentiality in research, to ensure understanding of this important concept.

The data collection included demographic questionnaire responses (see Appendix E) and one-on-one, in-person interviews. The demographic questionnaire was administered first, via email, when individuals expressed interest in participating. Participants were asked to provide basic demographic information, including race, gender, years attending college, and several other questions. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at a quiet location, such as a coffee shop or public library, ensuring comfort and confidentiality. Interviews began on October 12, 2018 and concluded on April 3, 2019. Before interviews began, participants were given the opportunity to select pseudonyms of their choice.

Interviews were digitally recorded and saved on the researcher's computer, then fully transcribed and de-identified. The researcher's computer is password protected and interviews were saved with pseudonym names, rather than the participant's actual name. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes (Merriam, 1995). Consistent with this style of interview, the semi-structured interview was guided by the

phenomenon being explored: the relational experiences of being a first-generation student (Merriam, 1995). The interview questions were also guided by the theoretical lenses selected, namely Bourdieu's (1983) theory of the transmission of capital and SCCT (Lent et al., 1994). See Appendix F for the interview guide. Follow-up questions were asked, depending on participants' responses, to gain greater depth. All questions in the interview were open-ended. Examples of questions include: (a) In what ways have your relationships with your family members and friends from the community you grew up in have changed since you began college? (b) How have your relationships with your family and community of origin provided support with regards to helping you succeed during your undergraduate career? How did you overcome any barriers?

In order to triangulate and gather multiple forms of data (Creswell, 2013), participant observations, such as observation of participants' non-verbals, were recorded as field notes as soon as interviews concluded. These included observations like voice intonations, facial expressions, or other non-verbal data that the researcher observed throughout the interviews. Additionally, the researcher maintained a digital journal throughout the research in order to engage in research reflexivity and researcher reactions and emerging themes were recorded (Creswell, 2013).

Role of Researcher

The researcher is necessarily embedded in the research process, serving as both a participant and observer (Creswell, 2013). Though the researcher aims to fully explore the participants' lived experience naively and freshly through bracketing, the researcher cannot be fully removed or objective (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, as the researcher, I needed to be aware of my role as a participant in the research process, and understand

how my identities and presentation may affect participants. I hold identities, such as being a white presenting individual, that were different than my participants. I aimed to approach the research openly and warmly, and address any misunderstandings that may result from differences in identity and experience.

Additionally, consistent self-reflexivity was important throughout the research process (Creswell, 2013), as self-awareness of one's own worldviews, biases, and perceptions is important to the bracketing process (Moustakas, 1994). It is important to let participants describe their experiences in their own words, and thus direct quotations are used when describing the themes that emerge. In summary, while I, as the researcher, am inseparable from the research, I aimed to capture the participants' experiences in as undiluted fashion as possible.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research is unique from more traditional quantitative approaches in many ways, but data analysis within quantitative research is particularly unique. The research design in qualitative research is often emergent, meaning that aspects of the study design are not necessarily fixed and may be revised as data is analyzed (Merriam, 2009). Data are analyzed concurrently with data collection, revealing emerging themes (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). Without data analysis occurring concurrently, researchers would be unable to determine next steps, such as whether they should interview more participants or whether saturation had been reached (Merriam, 2009).

The first step in the process of data analysis is transcribing participant interviews. I transcribed participant interviews, using the selected pseudonyms instead of the participant's name and de-identified participant information that may be identifiable to

their person. It was important to read and reread transcripts, making notes in the margins and gaining greater familiarity (Merriam, 2009). From the interviews, I collected a number of significant statements, which are statements or other data derived from the participant describing his or her experience with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). These significant statements were then listed, each considered equally valid to other statements, creating a non-repetitive list of statements (Moustakas, 1994). This process is known as horizontalization, and is important for isolating the essence of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009).

The next step in the process of analyzing data was to group these significant statements into larger themes (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, in the current study, meaningful statements about how first-generation students experience their on- and off-campus relationships, and how these relationships shift over time, were compiled and grouped into larger themes. Providing thick descriptions is also an important aspect of disseminating qualitative research (Morrow, 2005). Thick descriptions provide both a description of the participant's experience with the phenomenon and contextual information and can be achieved through providing rich descriptions of both the "what" and "how" of experience. Thick descriptions help to provide both the structural and textual elements of the data. Textural descriptions describe what participant's experience with regards to the phenomenon, sometimes using direct examples from participants' lived experiences, whereas structural descriptions capture the context of how the phenomenon is experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Contextualization of the data, or describing the context in which the phenomenon occurs, is a fundamental piece of qualitative research (Levitt, 2015; Levitt et al., 2018). Finally, the textural and structural

descriptions were combined, revealing the shared essence of experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Ethical Considerations

The researcher in the context of qualitative research is inextricably tied to the research (Creswell, 2013) and he or she makes decisions throughout the research process that may influence the participants. Thus, the trustworthiness of the researcher depends on the methods selected by the researcher and the ethical decisions he or she employs (Merriam, 2009). Thus, I explore ethical dilemmas that tend to impact qualitative research designs like the current study and discuss how I addressed these dilemmas.

One important ethical consideration in the current study is demonstrating multicultural competence, as the first-generation students who I have selected as participants held at least one, and sometimes several, underprivileged identities. Counseling psychology values diversity and social justice as part of the field’s identity (Scheel et al., 2018). Within APA’s code of ethics and ethical guidelines, there is a recognition of the need for greater research with diverse individuals, as the focus of research has long been centered on the experiences of White, middle-class individuals (American Psychological Association (APA), 2003). Thus, psychologists are beginning to “investigate the differential impact of historical, economic, and sociopolitical forces on individuals’ behavior and perceptions” and need to develop multicultural competency in order to successfully navigate this role (APA, 2003, p. 64). In order to contribute to this ethical mandate to focus research on populations that have previously been marginalized in research, I needed to channel my knowledge and competency in this domain. I have developed and grown in multicultural competency through my coursework, clinical work,

and through trainings and extracurricular opportunities, such as my previous involvement in implementing a social justice program for minority undergraduate women. I used the multicultural tools and knowledge gleaned from these experiences to conduct research in a multicultural sensitive manner.

Given that many of the participants were from diverse backgrounds, it was also essential to acknowledge my own privilege and how that may affect how participants view me and how likely they are to share their experiences. I am white-appearing, middle-class, able-bodied, and am pursuing my doctoral degree. Thus, I hold privileges in many of my intersecting identities. I used the reflexive journal as a means to explore the impact my identities have on my worldview and attempted to bracket my identity-driven biases in order to prevent them from negatively impacting the data.

Another ethical dilemma could have emerged in the current research evolves from the cultural differences that arise when first-generation students, who often identify with more interdependent norms, and the university system, which tends to promote middle-class, independent norms (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012). Stephens, Fryberg, et al. (2012) describes this as cultural mismatch theory. As a researcher who is currently in a doctoral program, I have adapted to the cultural norms of the university system and likely consciously or unconsciously identify with some of these norms. For example, I strongly value education and have seen in my personal experiences, and experiences of other students, the potential it can have for career advancement and pursuing one’s passions and interests. Not everyone may place the same value on education, and it was important that I bracket my values around education during the research process to more fully engage with the participants’ experiences and values.

Additionally, pursuing education often involves tradeoffs and sacrifices. First-generation students are more likely to have competing family demands and may come home for family events more often or live at home (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2014). Family, then, is often very important to first-generation students and pursuing higher education certainly has systemic implications. It is important not to let values around the positive aspects of higher education cloud the understanding that pursuing higher education can disrupt the family culture for first-generation students (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007). Thus, it was important to be aware of biases I may hold about higher education and it was important that I was sensitive to the systemic impact pursuing college can have on first-generation students and their families.

Finally, another ethical dilemma had the potential to emerge was holding the delicate line between researcher and therapist, which is a line that other social scientists may not face unless they have a clinical role (Knox & Burkhard, 2009). As a researcher who also has provided counseling in a university counseling center, it was, at times, difficult to separate these roles. It was important then, to be aware of times that it may be tempting to fall into my role as a therapist, such as when sensitive or emotionally-laden topics were introduced in the interview (Knox & Burkhard, 2009). For example, some participants spoke about trauma they had experienced or struggles with mental health, which made me want to spend more times on these topics and process them. I avoided doing that, knowing my role was not clinical. While I used relevant counseling skills, such as reflection and probing, during qualitative interviews I was careful to maintain the boundaries of these roles. I also limited my interviews to one interview per participant, as

having multiple interviews may further blur the lines between therapist and researcher (Knox & Burkhard, 2009).

Rigor in Qualitative Research

Establishing rigor in qualitative research has typically been addressed by exploring the trustworthiness of the research (Levitt et al., 2018). Trustworthiness is the terminology used in qualitative research to describe rigor and it is comprised of four parts: dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability (Merriam, 2009). These criteria are sometimes called parallel criteria, loosely fitting the same purposes as quantitative standards of validity and reliability (Morrow, 2005). Dependability is similar to the quantitative construct of reliability, credibility corresponds with internal validity, confirmability is similar to objectivity, and transferability is consistent with external validity. It is important to note that trustworthiness can rely on the judgments of its readers, thus including judgments that are irrelevant to the research process (e.g., the degree to which findings adhere to the reader's own beliefs about the phenomenon), and thus some researchers are choosing to use the term 'methodological integrity' instead of trustworthiness (Levitt et al., 2018). Thus, it is important to focus on the methodological components that create trustworthiness such as focusing on methods of participant selection, data analysis, and procedures designed to check research findings (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017). Each of the four components of trustworthiness are explored in the context of the current research and the methodological choices made to establish greater trustworthiness.

Dependability

As described, dependability shares some characteristics with reliability, the criterion used in quantitative research (Morrow, 2005). Reliability refers to the extent to which the findings can be replicated. In qualitative research, replication of findings is not necessarily the goal of the research, given that human behavior is varied and unique, and thus dependability serves to fulfill a different goal: to measure whether the results are consistent with the data collected and whether the method of collecting data was adapted to provide a strong description of the phenomenon (Levitt, 2015; Merriam, 2009).

There are several different strategies that can be used to enhance dependability. Peer checks, researcher reflexivity, and triangulation are some methods that researchers typically use. Peer checks, which I employed, involve having a peer or colleague provide an external check of one's results, similar to developing interrater reliability (Creswell, 2013). I enlisted a counseling psychology doctoral peer trained in quantitative methods to review the transcripts and engage in peer checking through providing her interpretation of the themes and comparing them to my own emerging themes. The role of the peer check has been described as the "devil's advocate" asking difficult questions about the researcher's process and interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is important to determine whether the researcher and peer aim to have equivalent themes or codes or if both themes and codes should be equivalent before enlisting a peer check (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, & Marteau, 1997). Researcher reflexivity, another way to establish dependability, is an ongoing process where the researcher reflects on his or her experiences and worldviews and how they influence the research process (Morrow, 2005). Self-reflective journaling is one avenue for achieving this aim.

Finally, triangulation can enhance dependability by using multiple types of data to converge on accurate results (Merriam, 2009). For example, interviews, focus groups, and artifacts can yield rich, unique types of data and using more than one of these methods can help to develop a more complete representation of the participants' experiences.

The most common method of establishing dependability is creating an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail should describe both the end product and the process of the research, including a detailed chronology of research steps, emerging themes, and codes (Morrow, 2005). Lincoln and Guba (1985) compare the audit trail with a fiscal audit, and the audit trail should be created so that an external source could read the audit trail and understand the research process completely. The researcher journal, detailing reflections and decision-making processes, is a vital part of creating an audit trail (Merriam, 2009). I created an audit trail in order to detail the decision-making processes throughout the research process and explore potential codes and emerging themes.

Credibility

Credibility describes the extent to which the results are based in reality and representative of the participants' experiences (Merriam, 2009), which draws comparisons to the function of internal validity in quantitative research where the primary question is whether one effectively studying what he or she intended to study. Credibility can be achieved through several different methods, including researcher reflexivity, participant checks, triangulation, and providing thick description (Morrow, 2005). Additionally, negative case analysis can be utilized (Morrow, 2005). Negative case

analysis involves rethinking working hypothesis as data emerges that may disconfirm these hypotheses (Creswell, 2013; Wertz et al., 2011). Providing thick description, another mentioned method to enhance credibility, involves providing rich descriptions of both how the phenomenon is experienced by a participant and also the context of the experience, including cultural context (Morrow, 2005).

In order to establish credibility in my own research, I utilized multiple methods. I engaged in triangulation, using interviews to collect participants' described experiences with the phenomenon and also collecting behavioral data during interviews. I also engaged in participant checks, eliciting participant feedback via email. I provided participants with a brief summary of the overall themes and asked them to reply with any feedback they might have about the themes within a month. One person responded and stated she felt the themes were representative of her experience and added that cultural centers are an additional supportive system for many first-generation students. Additionally, I used thick description in order to provide a richer understanding of participants' experience of the phenomenon and the circumstances and contextual information surrounding these experiences.

Confirmability

Confirmability can be compared to objectivity (Morrow, 2005). However, objectivity in qualitative research is impossible and the researcher and research are inextricably tied. Thus, confirmability involves accurately reporting results, conveying the participants' experiences, despite ever-present subjectivity. Confirmability measures the extent to which the results are consistent with the raw data (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). To establish confirmability, the researcher needs to manage researcher bias and can

employ other methods such as an audit trail, triangulation, and peer checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). As described, I used an audit trail, triangulation, managing researcher bias, and peer checks in order to develop stronger confirmability.

Transferability

Transferability addresses how well the findings can generalize beyond the small sample of participants described (Morrow, 2005). While the goal of qualitative research is not necessarily to generalize, but to understand the particular in-depth, the reader may gauge to what extent the results of a qualitative study are generalizable to their own experiences (Merriam, 1995). In order to ascertain whether the findings are transferable, there must be thick description about the researcher (as he or she is the instrument), research processes, participants, and research-participant relationships (Morrow, 2007). Thus, in qualitative research, the reader, rather than the researcher, is able to determine the applicability of findings in their own context and situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Merriam (2009) also recommends having maximum variation in the sample, thus collecting data from a heterogeneous group.

In the researcher stance section, I provided thick description of myself, as the researcher, and my own experiences in order to enhance transferability. I also have described my research processes and aimed to capture the participants' experiences through thick description as well.

Summary

The outset of this chapter described the theoretical framework underlying the study, which is a constructivist framework. A couple essential elements of constructivism are that reality is posited to be subjective and co-constructed. Next, the

methodology used, phenomenology, was described and important features of phenomenology, such as describing the shared essence of experience, were explored. I described my own worldviews and biases with regards to the phenomenon of being a first-generation student in order to prevent my biases from interfering with the data collection and analysis. Then, I described how participants were recruited and selected, including inclusion criteria (such as being a first-generation college student, identifying as a racial or ethnic minority, etc). I described the concept of saturation and how saturation was achieved in the current study after twelve participants. The consent form provided to participants (see Appendix A), recruitment letter (see Appendix B), the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix C), and interview questions (see Appendix D) were referenced as well. Ethical considerations were examined in the context of the current research and the process of establishing rigor and trustworthiness was explored. I described each of the relevant constructs of rigor in qualitative research, including dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability, and noted methods I employed to increase rigor in the current study. For example, I described how I engaged in peer checks and participant checks, engaged in research reflexivity, created an audit trail, and provided thick description.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

In this chapter, participants' experiences of being first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities are described, illustrating the phenomenon of being first-generation and identifying as a racial or ethnic minority in American colleges or universities.

The following research questions are addressed and answered in the following paragraphs:

Q1 What are the relational experiences, both with their family and communities of origin and within on-campus relationships, of first-generation racial or ethnic minority college seniors at a four-year university?

Q1A How have these relational experiences changed over time?

Q2 How have these relationships provided support for first-generation students?

Q3 How have these relationships provided challenges/barriers for first-generation students and how were these challenges overcome?

Participant Descriptions

Twelve individuals participated in this study. All participants were from a mid-size public university within the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. Demographic information is provided in Table 1 and in-depth descriptions of participants follows after.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Characteristics

	Age	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Year in College	Major	GPA	Marital Status	Living Situation	Parent Occupation
Chloe	21	Female	African American	Senior	Sociology	3.0	Single	Living Off-Campus	No occupations listed
Jasmine	23	Female	Hispanic	Fifth Year Senior	Psychology	Not Provided	Single	Living with Family	Both parents: owners of trucking company
Jordan	21	Male	African American	Senior	Vocal Jazz Performance	3.9	Single	Living Off-Campus	Mother: Records office at hospital, Father: Bus operator
Jude	20	Male	Hispanic	Junior	Theatre Education	3.5	Single	Living Off-Campus	Mother: Fast Food Manager Father: Construction Worker
Julio	22	Male	Hispanic	Senior	Software Engineering	3.9	Single	Living Off-Campus	Mother: Check Maker Father: Unemployed
Jacob	20	Male	Native American, Caucasian, Asian	Junior	Music Performance	2.93	Other	Living Off-Campus	Mother: Housemaid Father: Semi-truck driver

Table 1 continued

	Age	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Year in College	Major	GPA	Marital Status	Living Situation	Parent Occupation
Kiersten	20	Female	Asian	Junior	Did not specify	3.6	Single	Living On-Campus	No occupations listed
Martin	20	Male	Hispanic	Junior	English, Secondary Education	3.5	Single	Living Off-Campus	Mother: Cleaning Father: Construction
Nora	22	Female	Hispanic	Senior	Anthropology and Criminal Justice	3.3	Single	Living with Family	Mother: Health Clerk Father: Drywaller
Tony	25	Male	African American	Senior	Sociology	3.0	Single	Living Off-Campus	Mother: Rental Agent Father: IT
Tara	21	Female	Latina, Native American, White	Senior	Psychology	3.2	Single	Living Off-Campus	Mother is deceased Father: unknown
Vivie	21	Female	Hispanic	Junior	Elementary Education	3.7	Single	Living with Family	Parents own restaurant

Chloe

The interview with Chloe took place during an afternoon at a public library, tucked away from the busy traffic of people walking back and forth. The researcher was sitting at a table waiting for Chloe when Chloe confidently walked up to introduce herself and ask if the researcher was there for the interview. It was quiet due to being toward the end of a day on a Friday but Chloe spoke loudly and had a lot to say.

Chloe identifies as African American or “chocolate” and she is studying sociology. She grew up in Alaska and received scholarships to come to college. She described how her mom got a job at 17 and married at age 18, forfeiting her opportunity to go to college. Chloe’s mom moved with her new husband from Texas to Alaska to start a new life and raise a family. Chloe talked about how, from her perspective, it can be taboo to pursue higher education in the African American community because it demonstrates privilege. In Chloe’s family, the majority of her siblings have gotten a degree in higher education or are pursuing a degree, though Chloe is the first of her siblings to pursue a degree in social science and described how her siblings initially questioned her degree choice and its usefulness. Chloe described how her oldest sister became pregnant in her last year of college and still finished her degree. Which, from Chloe’s perspective, set the standard that all the siblings were expected to finish college no matter what hardships they encountered.

Chloe participates in several cultural centers or centers designed to serve first-generation students on-campus and regularly meets with mentors and other individuals from those places. Chloe is a senior and described hoping to pursue a graduate program after she finishes her bachelor’s degree.

Jasmine

The interview with Jasmine took place in the middle of the day while Jasmine was in between classes. The researcher and Jasmine met at a public library near the café area. Jasmine seemed somewhat shy and gave short answers, especially at first. Jasmine's parents moved from Mexico to the United States before Jasmine was born. They decided to settle in the town where the university is located and so Jasmine lives at home with her family while she is finishing her bachelor's degree. She lived off-campus her second year to be more connected to other students and have more freedom, but ended up moving back home. In Jasmine's family, her parents emphasized that they came to the United States to have better opportunities for the family and thus higher education was all but expected. She is the first of her family, including her cousins, to go to college.

Jasmine encountered academic challenges early on her academic career during college when she was studying pre-nursing and was placed on academic probation. She described wishing she had pursued community college before coming to a four-year institution because it would have helped her feel more academically prepared and choose a major that fit better. She described feeling like she hit "rock bottom" when she was on academic probation and realized how quickly the opportunity to be in college can be taken away. Now, as a fifth year senior, Jasmine is studying psychology. She is performing better academically and feels more connected to her major. Jasmine seemed a little unsure about what she would be doing after college but was excited to graduate.

Jordan

Jordan's interview took place in a coffee shop near campus during spring break. Jordan had been somewhat difficult to schedule with because he has a busy schedule and

had just returned from Southeast Asia, where he had been performing with a musical group. Jordan was 15 minutes late to the interview and was apologetic. During the interview, Jordan spoke eloquently and with confidence.

Jordan is studying music as a vocalist and is in his senior year of college. He mentioned that he has recently finished working on an album, which is now for sale. Jordan identified strongly with being a musician and considered this identity more significant than many of his other identities, such as his racial identity. Jordan accrues side jobs where he performs at different venues for pay, such as churches, on a weekly basis and has been working throughout college.

Jordan grew up in a major city in Colorado and his family still lives in the area. He expressed some disappointment that his family does not often come to concerts or recitals, even though they live less than two hours from campus, but Jordan admitted he does not go home often either and is very busy. Jordan most identifies with his family's values around having a "go until you die work ethic" and believes that mentality has strongly influenced his approach to college and the success he has experienced. Going to college, from Jordan's perspective, was a natural progression for him because he did not have children, immediately have another job, and was succeeding in high school. Jordan's goal after finishing college is to be a professional musician.

Jude

The interview with Jude took place in the evening at a public library. He appeared nervous or shy at the beginning of the interview but seemed to settle into the interview quickly. He seemed to respond very openly and earnestly to all of the researcher's questions.

Jude is a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) student and was born in Mexico. He came to the United States when he was only a year old and thus he does not remember Mexico. Being a DACA student has affected Jude in a lot of ways, but one concrete problem he has often faced is dealing with problems completing FAFSA. Jude is involved in an on-campus group for DACA students and finds support in that community. He also is involved with the LGBTQ community on-campus and identifies as gay. He said that coming out to his family created tension given that the family is Roman Catholic and they are active in their religious community. However, he feels their relationship has since mended.

Jude's family lives in a major city in Colorado and he describes his family as very close, which he attributes, at least in part, to them being Hispanic and placing a high value on family. His family lives less than two hours away so he goes home to visit frequently and spends time with his parents and siblings. Jude is currently in his junior year of college and says that it has been the hardest year yet and is affecting his mental health. Jude says that despite this year's difficulties, he still would like to continue on to graduate school after finishing his bachelor's degree.

Julio

Julio and the researcher met at a coffee shop nearby campus for their interview. Julio spoke with a strong accent and was very friendly and jovial. He wanted to talk about research projects he has worked on and had an air of confidence when he spoke. Julio and his family immigrated to the United States from Mexico when he was approximately 16 because his family did not feel there were a lot of professional opportunities for him and his sister and there was a lot of violence where he lived.

Initially his family moved to a rural town in Eastern Colorado and lived in a small mobile home without a kitchen. Julio said that he did not know English at that time and it was very difficult to learn the language and adjust to his new surroundings. Julio's family eventually moved to a large city in Colorado and they currently live there. Julio goes home often to see his family and he expressed that one reason he ended up attending this university was that it was close to home. His sister also attends the same university.

Julio expressed gratitude for being able to attend college and stressed that college is an opportunity. He received scholarships to attend his university. When he began at the university, he knew that he wanted to be a part of some community and so he joined a couple of programs designed for first-generation college students. There, he found others who were Spanish speakers like him and even found others with the same dialect. Julio explained that he always has been passionate about working with computers and will be graduating in the spring with a degree in software engineering. He will be studying software engineering in a graduate program next year.

Jacob

The interview with Jacob took place in a coffee shop near campus around lunchtime. Jacob was friendly and talkative almost right away with the researcher. Jacob grew up in a rural town in Illinois and decided to move to Colorado for college because he was tired of the "drama" that came with living in his small town. His parents eventually moved from his hometown to southern Colorado. Jacob described how his parent's challenges led him to want to attend to college. His father lost his job due to an illness and then has been on disability since. His mom was fired from jobs for seemingly small offenses, such as taking a roll of toilet paper home with her to treat her running

nose when she was sick. Jacob felt that his parent's lack of education made them vulnerable to being fired, which then led to financial struggles. Therefore, he was resolved to go to college and obtain a degree. Jacob has been successful in college but has faced some challenges related to his reading abilities, which affects his performance in some of his classes that are heavily focused on reading assignments.

Jacob also identifies as gay and described some of the challenges he has experienced in the city where he is going to college related to his sexual orientation. While working in retail in this community, he described experiencing prejudice and open hostility. However, he feels that he has been relatively accepted at the university he attends. Jacob does go home to visit his family, but sometimes spends less time with them because his partner lives in the same city. He also disclosed that his parents recently divorced and that has been difficult for him. Jacob is currently in his junior year and is studying music. He originally wanted to be a music educator, but has since decided that he would like to be a performer instead. He hopes to pursue a master's degree and then potentially a doctorate in music.

Kiersten

Kiersten and the researcher met in a quiet, private section of a coffee shop near campus for their interview. Kiersten was early for the interview and seemed somewhat anxious at the beginning. She spoke softly. Kiersten felt that college was not necessarily a choice for her but a mandate, as her parents expressed wanting her to get a good job so she could care for them as they aged. Kiersten expressed feeling proud that she was doing something for her family by getting a degree but also felt some pressure because she believed she was living out her mother's dream.

Kiersten's parents grew up in Vietnam and immigrated after the Vietnam War to the United States, where Kiersten was born. Kiersten has often served as a translator for her mom growing up when her mom went to various appointments, such as doctor's appointments. While she feels competent holding basic conversations in Vietnamese, Kiersten expressed frustration because she feels there is a language barrier with her mom because her mom speaks very little English and Kiersten's fluency in Vietnamese is imperfect. Kiersten recognizes that there are other cultural differences between her and her parent's due to differences in their upbringing, such as differences around emotional expression.

Kiersten expressed finding it difficult once she began college to know what she wanted to study or ultimately what she wanted to pursue for her career. She thinks that there was too much emphasis placed on her to get strong grades, rather than to engage in self-exploration. She felt that college has been helpful for that process. Kiersten is currently in her junior year and did not seem to know what she wanted to pursue post college.

Martin

Martin and the researcher met at a coffee shop near campus. Martin arrived early for the interview and politely greeted the researcher. He spoke slowly and thoughtfully throughout the interview and thanked the researcher for being interested in studying students like him. Martin grew up in a large metro area of Colorado, less than two hours from his university, and his parents still live there. He and his family grew up speaking to one another in Spanish and Martin expressed that while he has been at college he does not use Spanish as often. As a result, he feels that he is still a very fluent speaker, but

sometimes mixes up words from Spanish and English more than he used to. Martin described that although his family spoke Spanish at home, culturally they were more similar to other white American families. They celebrated American holidays and never any Mexican holidays, for example. Thus, coming to college he realized that although he sees himself as "American," others see him as Mexican or Hispanic.

Martin described being surprised by the lack of racial or ethnic diversity at his university, which was especially shocking because he came from a diverse high school. He said he finds it difficult to connect to some of his peers, especially white men. Another challenge Martin experienced early on his college career was feeling intimidated to ask for help or speak up in class because he saw professors as authority figures. Martin receives scholarships for being a first-generation college student, which helps to ease the financial burden of college for him and his family. He expresses that college is an opportunity but also a responsibility. It is his responsibility to be a good role model for his sisters, as the oldest child, and a responsibility because he wants to be an effective teacher when he graduates. Martin is currently a junior and is studying English and secondary education.

Nora

Nora and the researcher chose to meet at a public library, near the café. Nora was polite and spoke very eloquently and formally. She was not very emotive but came across as serious and thoughtful. Nora grew up in the city where her university is located and thus has lived at home throughout her educational career. She described how she went to college to "make [her] parents' struggles fruitful" and thus saw college as very much like a business, in which she is investing time, money, and effort. She described

feeling proud to be the first individual in her family, including her cousins, to attend college but also feeling pressure in that role.

Nora came from an IB high school program, which helped her to prepare for college courses, though she dropped the program her senior year because she felt her high school over-privileged IB students. She described how she did not think it was fair that class times in non-IB classes were changed to accommodate IB students, for example. Nora received scholarships related to her ethnic identity and her status as first-generation that helped her afford to attend college. She said that at first she felt like she did not belong at her university, as she had come from a diverse high school where there were many other students who looked like her and did not find the university population to be diverse. Because her family lives in the town where the university is located, Nora lived at home throughout the duration of her degree. She described certain gender and culture roles that needed to shift in her family for her to be successful at school. For example, Nora mentioned that because she is a woman from a Hispanic family, she was initially expected to clean more than she was able to with her school schedule. Nora has two majors (anthropology and criminal justice) and two minors (biology and psychology). She is currently in her final year of college and would like to be an anthropologist working with human remains.

Tony

Tony and the researcher conducted their interview at a public library. Tony was very friendly and came across as mature and wise, which may have been due to his age. He is 25 years old. Tony seemed very connected on campus and several students waved hello to him during the interview.

Tony identified as African American and described being from a lower SES background. Tony was one of the few students interviewed who expressed that college was not initially a route he considered. His parents never finished high school, so initially he hoped to just finish high school and find a job. He was encouraged to pursue college after watching his cousin pursue her bachelor's degree and then her master's. He was inspired by her because she came from a similar class background as he did and he thought that if she could finish college, he could too. Tony grew up in the metro area of a large city in Colorado. Early on in his college career, Tony was attending a movie and there was a shooting that occurred at the theater. Tony described experiencing symptoms of PTSD and failing college courses for his first two years of college. He described how he was homeless for a period of time after the shooting and was sleeping on people's couches. Thus, undergraduate has been a longer road for Tony than many other students.

Tony identifies as African American and described how he "wouldn't be here really if not for white women." He had a white female teacher in high school, for example, who convinced him to take Advanced Placement (AP) English because she noticed his talent even though he did not feel he was smart enough or that Black kids took AP English. Tony's family has not uniformly been supportive, but Tony's father has been an important support system. Tony is a senior majoring in sociology and will be pursuing a doctoral program in sociology after he graduates.

Tara

Tara met the researcher at a public library for their interview. Tara came across as a very warm individual and asked the researcher questions about her degree program.

Tara spoke thoughtfully throughout the interview and seemed open to discuss even some difficult personal struggles she has faced.

Tara's grandmother raised her since she was 18 months old because her mother passed away and she does not know her father. Though she lives off-campus with her partner, Tara goes home often to see her grandmother because she has health concerns and needs support from Tara. Tara also helps to pay her grandmother's rent sometimes and has two jobs as a result. Tara grew up in a city in southern Colorado and began thinking about college when she was in a college preparation program for first-generation students in high school. Tara identifies as Latina and is a multiracial individual and described feeling apart from other students who are racial or ethnic minorities because she is white presenting. She also feels she does not quite fit in with white students.

Tara is diagnosed with bipolar disorder and described struggling with the disorder a lot during her first couple of years of college. She shared having to walk herself to a crisis center in town in the middle of the night during her first semester because she was so distressed. Her bipolar is now better managed with medication and counseling. Tara was placed on academic probation during the first semester of her sophomore year and described getting support to get off academic probation, but having trouble navigating getting into certain courses after academic probation, even though she got straight A's after her probation period. Tara is currently a senior and hopes to pursue a graduate degree in psychology.

Vivie

Vivie and the researcher met at a public library nearby a café area. Vivie spoke quickly and quietly and appeared younger than her age. She used the word "like" frequently when speaking.

Vive grew up in the city where the university is located and was given scholarships to attend the university because of the district her high school was located within. Vivie also selected the university because they have a strong teaching program, and Vivie knew since she was a child that she wanted to be a teacher. She used to play teacher for her younger cousins. Vivie has lived at home during her college career and described initially feeling resentful toward her parents and embarrassed to tell her peers about her living arrangements. Vivie's parents told her that they could not afford to pay for her to live off-campus and that culturally it was viewed as inappropriate in her family to move out before she was married. Her family is originally from Mexico and Vivie spoke only Spanish in her home growing up.

In addition to school, Vivie works in the late afternoons, which keeps her busy. She used to go to one of the cultural centers on-campus, in order to be a part of that community, but finds herself doing that less frequently because of her work schedule. Vivie is currently a junior and would like to be an ESL teacher when she finishes school so she can help students who are learning English as a second language, which is an experience that she had growing up in the public school system.

Emerging Themes

In the next section, themes that emerged across participants in this study are presented. Direct quotes and examples given by participants are included with each

theme in order to describe the phenomenon of being a first-generation college student who identifies as a racial or ethnic minority. Table 2, below, provides a summary of the themes and subthemes that emerged.

Table 2

Emerging Themes and Subthemes

Themes and Subthemes
1. Strengths
2. Isolation
3. Shared Identities *a) Salience of Race/Ethnicity* *b) Intersectionality*
4. Cultural Values
5. Visibility
6. Awareness of Faculty's Willingness to Help
7. Mentorship
8. Connection with Peers *a) From Isolation to Connection* *b) Finding the 'Right' People*
9. Knowing Where to Find Help *a) Finding Resources* *b) Families are Unable to Provide Academic Support*
10. Understanding What it Takes to Succeed
11. Honoring Hard Work and Sacrifice *a) Pressure* *b) Motivation to Succeed*
12. Modeling Success for Future Generations
13. Emotional Support and Encouragement
14. Experiences with Counseling *a) Cultural Awareness*

Strengths

In terms of strengths, participants identified a number of personal strengths that were unique to them as individuals. Some participants identified with being "independent" or "kind." However, there was a notable overlap in a couple of domains. Nine of the twelve participants identified with being hard working and connected that trait to their educational successes. Jordan strongly identified with this theme, describing how he had developed his work ethic from his family. He said that although no family members had gone to college, all of them had worked hard all their lives and set the stage for him to continue this legacy of hard work. He described this trait as "go until you die work ethic." For Chloe, too, her work ethic was central to her perseverance in college. She described wanting to give up and drop out on several occasions. She said, "What do you tell yourself to keep moving? And what I've noticed is that I just tell myself that I gotta keep making it." She described how a deeply rooted work ethic drove her to continue to push forward. Thus, participants were able to recognize that their work ethic was a notable strength.

Another strength some participants mentioned was adaptability or resiliency in the face of change. Participants expressed coming to some difficult junctures, such as being on academic probation, and having to make choices to adapt or drop out of college. Tony experienced a major trauma, discussed more in the next theme, which caused him a lot of emotional distress and eventually led to him being temporarily homeless. He described listening to successful people's interviews and seeking out support to help him get through the difficult emotional hurdles he was dealing with. Participants were able to adapt to these difficult circumstances and, as Jasmine put it, demonstrate great

"perseverance." Finally, a few participants described their bilingual or multilingual abilities as major strengths. Nora describes this very eloquently saying:

> I am bilingual, so because I have another language under my belt, which some people would see it as that as, um, as a distinguishing factor of your race or ethnicity to being marginalized. I believe it's also a tool. So because of this tool, I have gained access to other opportunities such as being able to transcribe and translate and interpret both in English and in Spanish.

So, rather than seeing Spanish as evidence of marginalization, Nora saw it as a strength, a tool that allowed access to greater opportunity. Vivie, too, identified her Spanish speaking abilities as a strength for her future career as an ESL teacher. She stated:

> I think because like I had to learn English and I kind of like know a little bit about like how difficult the process can be. So then like now that I'm a teach- or now that I'm going to be a teacher, um, I'll know how to help those students too.

Isolation

The majority, nine out of twelve participants, described experiencing some degree of loneliness or isolation when first beginning college. When asked about what his experiences have been as a first-generation college student who identifies as a racial or ethnic minority, Julio said simply, "First, it's a lonely road being first-generation." Jacob described how he felt overwhelmed when he came to college realizing that he did not know how to make new friends, as he had come from a small town where there was an established sense of community. Nora stated, "When I first got here, I don't think I had relationships or ties with any of my peers or with faculty. I've always been more of a shy student. So like kind of breaking those barriers has always been a problem." She described feeling as though she did not belong, at first. Tara too blamed her shyness for her inability to establish relationships early on in college, though she also acknowledged that her sense of isolation was also a product of feeling excluded from Latinx and White

communities as a multiracial individual. Tony described how the trauma he experienced because of the shooting he witnessed affected his sense of belongingness at school. Tony noted that he almost never left his room because he was experiencing symptoms of PTSD. However, remaining in his room had its costs. Tony said, “I didn't have a roommate and I was by myself all the time. It felt like solitary confinement.” For some students, the loneliness almost led them to reconsider whether they should remain at the university. Jude in particular described how the sense of isolation he experienced almost led him to consider transferring.

While there were many factors that participants identified as contributing to their isolation early in their college careers, some of them unique, like Tony’s experience with trauma, a common thread emerged in terms of race and ethnicity. Some participants had come from more diverse public high schools and thus it came as a shock to them to suddenly be on a college campus with so many white students. Martin said, “I mean I went to a school that was pretty diverse. And everything just seemed like, ‘oh this is what life is like.’ Then I got here and was like, nobody looks like me.” He described finding it hard to connect with “upper-class white people” and feeling out of place. Nora had a very similar reaction to Martin after coming from a diverse high school. She described feeling “like I don't belong here. It didn't feel like home.” The disconnect of being a minority on a largely white campus was obvious to Nora and Martin early on and further isolated them from their peers. Tony, too, noted feeling isolated and rejected as one of the only black students in his classes said, “I just know like me being in classes that was like predominantly white, I always felt, I always felt isolated. So, and I always sat in the back, I felt like people never wanted to be my partner.”

Shared Identities

Race and ethnicity were threads that all participants talked about to some extent. It was clear that each participant had different experiences with regard to their racial and ethnic identities. It is notable that two participants, Jacob and Jordan, both did not feel that their racial identities were particularly salient compared to their other identities. For example, Jordan described how his identity as a musician was most salient to him and helped him to find community on-campus. He described going to a cultural center for Black students early on in his college career and realizing that many of the people there could not connect with the struggles he faced as a musician and how there was a disconnect as a result. Jordan asserted, "The closest person that could be there for you is that other musician who's doing the same thing on the other side of the hallway regardless of what color they are." Thus for Jordan, his chosen community, a community of musicians, was connected to the identity he felt was most salient for himself- being a musician. The theme of shared identities was an important broader theme for participants, which was divided into two subthemes: salience of race/ethnicity and intersectionality.

Salience of race/ethnicity. For all of the other participants interviewed, race and ethnicity were very salient aspects of their identities. Nora said, "I think that identifying as a minority in a college setting, I think it's about representation of your minority." Thus, on a predominately white campus Nora felt that she had to represent her ethnic group as a whole, which was a source of pride for her. Because race and ethnicity were so salient for many participants, they described yearning to find others on-campus who shared these identities. Julio connected with a center on-campus for first-generation

college students and noted, with obvious delight, that he discovered that there were other students who spoke Spanish as fluently as he did and even spoke in the same dialect. Tony describes the importance of shared identity eloquently, saying:

> If you don't know what success looks like and sounds like it's really difficult to be there. So like for me it was, it was very beneficial to find like black professors. To find black professors who look like me, but not even in a sense of like you're just black. Because then it got to a point of like, well, I like dressing this type of way. Are there any professors who dress this way? So there's professors who wear like Timberlands and hoodies. I'm like, that's what I want to wear when I'm a professor. I just want to be like, be able to be myself.

Tony's quote illustrates the importance of finding mentors who look like you and can demonstrate what "success looks like and sounds like," especially for first-generation college students who many not have had individuals who could role model this in their immediate environment growing up. Jude also described the importance of finding people who look like you on-campus. He said:

> Especially at [University], it's hard to find people who look like you. And so I think that's where it gets hard is finding people that you can relate to, people that you can talk to about, one for me at least, being a DACA student. Two, of being Hispanic heritage. And then also that first-generation aspect.

Thus, for Jude, finding people that looked like him and shared aspects of his identity helped him feel that he could be understood and relate.

Intersectionality. Jude also brings up the issue of intersectional identities and how these identities are interdependent. Many participants held more than one historically marginalized identity. Several participants described how having intersecting marginalized identities shaped their experiences and further made these experiences unique. For Jude, an individual with several minority identities, there was not space where he could interact with people who were DACA, Hispanic, first-generation students, and who identified as gay. In order to have different aspects of his identity

recognized, he connected with different groups on-campus, such as a group for DACA students and the gender and sexuality resource center. Further illustrating the importance of intersectionality, Chloe described her experience with counseling on-campus. She said:

> When you bring in that identity piece of being a person of color, there are some certain things that I don't think you can understand, you know? Because that's something that really heavily influences everything and informs everything in my life, even when I feel like it doesn't, it's the most salient thing. And you know, being a person of color and then being a woman. And you put those things together and then I'm faced with a whole other set of challenges that influences the other challenges on this other side. And so when I felt like because I couldn't find anyone who identified as a woman of color that was hard. Because the majority of the struggles I struggle with is like in some way some how connected back to me being a person of color and being a woman of color. And that was something that I couldn't find that at the counseling services. To talk to a professional counselor at the counseling services and have these conversations that felt like the advice was shallow.

Chloe felt that her experience as a woman of color influenced all aspects of her experience. As a result, she felt that White counselors could only shallowly connect with her, causing her to discontinue counseling and seek support from mentors who shared in these identities. Class and SES were also mentioned, and participants described these factors in conjunction with other salient aspects of their identities. Jordan spoke about the salience of his class background and compared his experiences growing up as an African American in a lower class family to his cousins' experiences as African Americans in a wealthy family.

Cultural Values

In addition to noticing how they physically stand apart from white students on campus, participants also described becoming aware of how cultural values uniquely shaped each of their experiences in college. Seven of the twelve participants were

bilingual and some, such as Julio, had strong and identifiable accents. Their bilingualism likely caused them to stand apart from many college students. Chloe describes how her early views of education were shaped from culturally informed values about education. She said, "Education is, it's changing now, but education is not even something that's even accessible for black people in the context of the U.S." She goes on to describe how, because education has not been accessible, it has historically been undervalued in her community. Tony echoed this sentiment, explaining how coming from lower class African American family also shaped his own educational expectations. He described how he never thought of attending college until his cousin, who also came from a lower class background, graduated from college. Up until that point, the messages he received from his family and community of origin devalued higher education. His cousin provided him with an example of how someone who had a similar cultural context could succeed in higher education.

For other participants, college highlighted their cultural differences and made them more aware of their uniqueness in relation to students who more strongly identified with the dominant culture. Kiersten described realizing how her values about emotional expression had been shaped by her family system. Kiersten's parents grew up in Vietnam and immigrated to the U.S. before Kiersten was born. She described how open emotional expression is discouraged in her family. Until Kiersten began studying psychology in college, she did not question this cultural value. However, immersion in psychology caused Kiersten to realize that emotional expression may not always be taboo and caused her to reflect on her own comfort talking about emotions. Julio described cultural conflicts that occurred when he was choosing colleges, saying, "Latino families

tend to be really close to each other. We stay together. I just wanted to get a better education. If it meant moving to a different state, I would do it. But my mom didn't want that." Ultimately, Julio chose to live away from home, but close enough where he could visit.

For other participants, like Vivie, who continued to live at home during college, the contrast between the cultural values of the university and her family became evident. Vivie described how she initially felt angry with her parents and she felt too embarrassed to tell her peers that she lived at home, for fear of how they would perceive her. However, over time, Vivie began to understand her parents' reasoning and see the underlying cultural values. She said:

> It's really different culturally. Like over [in Mexico] my parents, like you don't leave until like you get married. So like, the idea of like an 18 year old like going out and like living by themselves is like crazy and just like totally unfathomable to them.

Nora also lived at home with her family while in college and similarly began to become more aware of her family's cultural worldview and how these values impacted her role as a student. Nora noted that her family ascribes to traditional perspectives on a woman's role in the home. As Nora became busier with school, she was not always able to complete the tasks expected of her as a woman. Nora said:

> Sometimes, when your culture or society expects that role to always be fulfilled and you're not able to, sometimes that can crumble. So when I was not able to come home and clean or when I was not able to come home and provide, um, and feed this cultural norm, it provided tension.

Thus, for some participants, cultural worldviews they had perhaps never questioned were brought to light as they navigated the university system, as this system had its own cultural values.

Visibility

Several participants described the importance of feeling acknowledged by their professors and feeling as though they mattered. For Tony in particular, feeling acknowledged, and no longer invisible, was a key part of his success, even before college. Tony described an encounter with a white English teacher in high school who was trying to convince him to take AP English. He said that his first thought was that AP English was for "smart kids. That's for kids who know all the big words and stuff like that… I said, this is for the white kids. Like the black kids not gonna. Like he's not going stay in here and be in this." Tony described how this was the first instance where he felt like he "mattered." The experience of mattering or being visible showed up later in college for Tony as well. He described an incident in a class where he brought racial issues into a class discussion and he observed many of his peers looking away from him. He said that the teacher reiterated what he said and observed aloud that the students were avoiding eye contact. Tony said, "I felt visible, like someone's seeing me, like somebody can actually see me and they like, they, it wasn't about agreeing with what I said, like they heard what I said. This was a white woman." Feeling acknowledged and no longer invisible, particularly by an individual who held privilege in her racial identity, seemed meaningful to Tony.

Martin also talked about how a professor's acknowledgement shifted his perspective on his own significance in the classroom. Martin described how he was approached by a professor after class one day during his sophomore year. The professor told him to come to his office and explained that he wanted Martin to talk more often in class. Martin said, "I went and then I became a lot more comfortable. I was like,

[professors] are also people." His insight ran contrary to what he had previously believed about professors, thinking they did not care about students. Martin described feeling as if someone had noticed him and had cared to make sure that his voice was heard. Another participant, Kiersten, echoed a similar sentiment of feeling acknowledged by a mentor, who was a former professor. She began meeting to have coffee with this mentor. Kiersten said, "She just kept telling me, she was like, you know, you remind me of myself when I was younger. Or, um, you have, like you have a different light in you that shines differently." For Chloe, it was somewhat different in that acknowledgement needed to come in the form of someone being concerned about her and seeing through her pretending everything was okay. Chloe described going in to see a mentor about a personal statement she was writing and having the mentor notice that she seemed overwhelmed. She said that the mentor asked if she was struggling with depression, which was meaningful to Chloe because somebody noticed how she was doing emotionally and cared.

Awareness of Faculty's Willingness to Help

The majority of participants described having difficulty initially realizing that college professors are meant to provide support for students, which posed as a challenge for them getting the help they needed. For many participants, such as Jacob, Kiersten, Martin, Tara, and Vivie, the biggest barrier to asking for help early on in their college careers was perceptions that they had about professors. For example, Kiersten described initially believing that professors are "intimidating." Similarly, Martin said, "I dunno I guess the way I was raised it was like you see these people in a position of authority and you have to be very formal with them and stuff." Thus, due to his upbringing and cultural

background, Martin had perceptions about professors that led him to believe that they were not approachable for help and “hindered” his relationships with them. For others, there were different reasons why they believed professors may not be able to help them. Tony stated that for him, not seeking help from his professors was tied to beliefs he held about himself. He said, “It was just like, I never felt good enough and so it was a lot of me just questioning myself. I felt like my teachers didn't want to help me.” For Nora, she initially did not know how professors could help her and so she did not seek them as a resource. She did not realize that connections with professors could help her to find internships and potentially jobs in the future.

Many participants expressed that they began seeking help from professors more often as their perspectives about professors began to shift. Jacob described it saying, “I gradually learned, you know, they're there to help us. They’re humans too and they're there to talk.” Tara, too, learned to see the ‘humanness’ of professors and faculty after initially seeing them as “uptight.” She described how getting to know faculty, and in some cases finding out their hobbies, helped Tara to see beneath the intimidating layer of authority that these individuals possessed. Jasmine noted that, as her perspectives about professors started to shift and she realized they were open to helping students, she did not necessarily seek help often but felt that knowing that professors were there as a resource was meaningful. Kiersten sums up the experience that many participants had once they realized that many faculty members were invested in student success. She said, “College professors, they actually care about you, they want like better for you. And so that really like changed my mind about how college was.”

Mentorship

Seven of the twelve participants talked about the importance of finding mentors and how that contributed to their emotional well-being and academic success. Describing how he attained success in college, Tony said, "I think I just surrounded myself with a ton of mentors who I always go to for help, guidance. I can just, you know, just talk to them about anything at all." For some, just small gestures stood out in participants' minds about their mentors. For example, Jacob described how a professor made a point to reach out to Jacob. Jacob said, "He always was like, my office is always open. I have biscotti and tea and I have a couch." Jacob became closer to this professor over time and would frequent his office for biscotti, tea, and guidance. Jude explained how his mentor drew him in because he felt that he could be "100 percent authentic with her about everything." Jude felt understood by his mentor and he described feeling as though he could be transparent about his intersecting identities (e.g., being a DACA student, Hispanic, and gay), which was a challenge for him in other spaces where he felt he had to shift in and out of identities depending on his context. Tara echoed this sentiment by explaining how her mentors helped to create a sense of belonging for her on-campus. She said, "I think just having almost that sense of community within my mentors, um, and feeling like, since I don't feel like I belong within like the Latinx or the white community, almost feeling more of a sense of belongingness through those mentorships."

In some instances, participants described how their mentors helped them through challenges with their mental health. Chloe described having a mentor ask her about whether she was experiencing depression and she said, "It turned into those deeper, self-care, self-evaluation kind of conversations. … To know that you can support me beyond

just academics, that has helped me a lot." Chloe went to counseling after realizing that she was feeling depressed and needed support. Through Tara's challenges with bipolar disorder, she described feeling supported by a professor who became her mentor. She describes her mentor almost a lifeline, saying, "I am sitting in this abnormal psychology class talking about mood disorders and I just started talking with her more and more and just kind of going to her like I feel so alone and I feel like I'm not, like I'm drowning in all this. She was just always there to hear me out and support me. And so when I didn't have a friend and when I didn't have a partner, it was like, that was almost my main connection."

Connection with Peers

As described in a previous theme, many participants initially felt very isolated on-campus, for various reasons. Previous themes have explored how mentorship and meaningful relationships with faculty members eased students' sense of loneliness and isolation. Peer support was also an important aspect of participants feeling more connected on-campus. Two subthemes emerged. The first theme describes the process of becoming more connected to peers and the second subtheme details how participants chose supportive friends and friend groups.

From isolation to connection. A trend toward initial difficulty connecting with peers and gradually building more connections was observed with nine of the twelve total participants. Tony describes this trend well. When he first began college, Tony said, "The only friends I met was playing basketball. So that's kind of where I stayed at because that's like where it was people of color, people of color there. So I felt connected, I felt a part of something." He described feeling overall very isolated and apart from

others. Tony said that his social experience is drastically different at this point, approaching graduation. Tony stated, “I literally know everyone” and feels that he has cultivated connections on-campus. Some of the students who lived in the community before coming to college, such as Vivie, Nora, Kiersten, and Jasmine, initial disconnect from peers on-campus seemed to occur because they clung to relationships they had before college. Kiersten said, “Coming up here, I went with, I came up here with my closest friends from high school. And like, it was great in the moment, but looking back at it now, I wish I hadn't because I had a group with me and I was like really anchored to them. So I didn't really get out much.” It was difficult for these participants to get out of their comfort zone and meet new friends. Jasmine described moving into the dormitories her second year to begin to feel more integrated with her peers and the campus. Kiersten began taking jobs on-campus, such as being an RA, where she was forced to overcome her social anxieties and interact with others, which gave her confidence to make new friends on-campus. Kiersten said, “If like you were to compare me then to now it's just completely new person just because I can talk to people now.”

For other students, who did not live within the community previous to coming the university, they did not have the same safety net. Some participants described how meeting just one person on campus helped to give them the confidence to pursue other friendships. Jacob noted that after he met his best friend, a fellow music major, he began to make other connections with people in the music department and even ventured outside that circle. Tara described a similar situation, saying, “As I met, as I met my best friend and my partner and I started to become more social, I felt more confident in doing new things. And so I applied to new campus jobs. I was a new student orientation leader

for a handful of months." Thus, for some, even just one connection blossomed into greater confidence socially.

Finding the 'right' people. There were not many commonalities with regard to how peer relationships provided support for students, but one notable theme was that finding the "right people" was important. Julio described this well, saying, "Surrounding myself with people that are trying to achieve the same things as me, especially when I work in group projects and stuff like that. Yeah it's just knowing how to pick the right people." For Julio, then, the 'right people' were people who had high aspirations of success like he did. For Jacob, the 'right people' were people in his major who were working toward similar career goals. He said, "We kind of almost push each other and we just feel like when there's nowhere else to go, we kind of motivate each other." Kiersten has a somewhat different take on what the 'right people' were for her. Kiersten describes how before college, many of her friendships were developmentally immature and shallow because people did not know what they wanted out of life. As Kiersten matured, her friendships did as well. She said, "Now that we're kind of getting a grip on like who we are and what we want out of life, we're finding the right people to, you know, be there with us and enjoy the ride." Jordan felt most supported by his peers when he was able to connect with peers who inspired him musically. He described how when he would attend a performance where one of his peers put on a great show he felt he could "catch a little glimpse of how high up in abilities you can get" and feel comfort in the fact that he and his peers were "on the same path." Therefore, while finding the 'right people' meant different things for each participant, there was a strong sense of support derived from these relationships, helping participants to succeed.

Knowing Where to Find Help

A broader theme emerged for participants about challenges and barriers to receiving the help they needed during college. Seven of the twelve participants expressly named barriers they had encountered in this process. Within this broader theme, two subthemes emerged: challenges with finding resources and families being unable to provide academic support.

Finding resources. As first-generation college students, it was perhaps not surprising that many participants expressed feeling like they did not know how to navigate college initially. Martin captured this well, saying, “Challenges [in college] have definitely been just sort of knowing what to do. It always seems like people around you kind of know what to do and know what’s going on.” Many participants brought up difficulties with FAFSA. For example, Martin described how he sought help with FAFSA because he did not understand how to complete it. He said, “There was an administrator at my high school and he didn’t really do a good job and so like it got rejected. And so like my whole first semester I didn’t have financial aid or anything.” Martin described having to work many hours to pay for college that semester. FAFSA was even more challenging for two participants, whose parents were undocumented, as their parents did not have social security numbers. It was also challenging for participants whose parents did not read English fluently. Participants described having other challenges, such as choosing a major and several participants were on academic probation at some point during their college career. A couple of participants expressed wishing that they had gone to community college first so that they could gain more academic preparation in a less costly institution and find an appropriate major. As a

whole, many participants expressed feeling underprepared for some of the challenges they would face in college.

To make things more challenging, many participants described being unsure what resources were available to them and not knowing how or when to ask for help. Jude described experiencing symptoms of depression when President Trump was elected into office. He kept thinking about what impact the president's policies might have on his life, especially as a DACA student and felt the campus climate changed substantially when President Trump was elected. He said:

> I didn't leave my room for a good amount of the time. Like I was just always kind of in my room. And it got really hard just because like I didn't know how to navigate a lot of things and like how to reach out and ask for support as a first-generation student or anything like that. And part of it was me not knowing of the resources I had on-campus.

Martin had a similar perspective about finding resources on-campus. He said, "I'm someone who has never really been good at asking for help. So I had to kind of learn how to do that. Like I had to learn how to use the resources around me, especially freshman year."

As first-generation college students, then, participants understandably did not know what resources were available to them on-campus, but also some had difficulty knowing how and when to ask for help, putting them in a double bind. Several participants recommended that colleges could help first-generation students be more successful by better advertising or exposing first-year students to the on-campus resources available to them. It is important to note that some participants were connected to programs designated for first-generation students from the beginning, which helped them to connect to resources. One such participant was Chloe. She described how the

program helped her to navigate on-campus services. Describing some of the problems she faced, she said:

> When I come in to talk to advisors and professors, do I really need to utilize their office hours? Do I need to, how do I get connected to um to resources on the campus that will help me as a student and thrive in, you know? How do I know if I have a learning disability? Where do I go to talk to individuals to get support? That's something that I can't talk to my family about so if there aren't places like [name center for first-generation students] or places like McNair for first-generation students. Or Stryker. Then um then I'd be stuck.

Families are unable to provide academic support. Chloe's quote also captures an experience that most participants mentioned in their interviews, which was not being able to seek academic support from their families. Nine of the twelve participants described experiencing this issue. Perhaps it is not surprising that parents had difficulty providing support, given that they had never gone to college and may not have even completed high school. Tara's family exemplifies this experience well. She said:

> No one in my family had really ever talked about [college]. Education wasn't really valued in my family as much. Most people, like half of my family probably they barely made it through high school. My mom didn't graduate from high school.

Thus, families of first-generation college students often did not have the experience or knowledge to help guide their first-generation college students. Kiersten felt that her parents just expected her to know "right off the bat" how to be a successful student when she began college, which made her feel worried and like she lacked support. Jordan said, "Your family's around to help but they're not" and elaborated on this statement saying, "What that meant is, if I have any questions about college, I can't ask my family."

Many participants described feeling like when they spoke about their academic struggles with their families, it was almost like they were speaking a different language. They would have to "dissect" and described each component of the problem before their

parents could even understand what help they needed. Jasmine brought this issue up when explaining why she did not tell her parents she was on academic probation, as she felt she would have to explain every aspect of what academic probation meant and felt that would be "exhausting." For Kiersten, an actual language barrier developed over time with her family and she felt she was less able to communicate with her mom in the level of Vietnamese required to discuss things like academics and would turn to relatives that spoke more English for support. Julio was another individual who felt like he could not turn to his family for help, saying, "They didn't know anything. So I had to figure out everything. That was a stressful time." So, given that parents were unable to provide support, much of the responsibility was shifted onto the shoulders of the first-generation student. And, as Julio noted, that created a significant amount of stress for participants, who felt that they were navigating unchartered waters. Julio said, "There was a lot of confusion. I made a lot of mistakes."

Understanding What it Takes to Succeed

Identifying trends in changes within family relationships was more complicated, with a less clearly linear trend than relationships with peers, for example. Some family relationships grew stronger, while others waned. Some participants described eventually making choices about which family relationships they wanted to maintain, forgoing some of those relationships. Tony said, "There's a difference between family and relatives. Relatives have the same blood, right? They have the same blood, but family's who you get to pick." A couple of thematic elements stood out in participant interviews that help to shed light on how family relationships evolved over time.

Many participants described how understanding and adaptability within their family system made them feel supported and sustained close family bonds throughout college, while the opposite damaged those relationships over time. Some participants described family relationships where their family never fully understood their experience as a college student. Tony described how some family members have distanced themselves from him because they perceive that he thinks he is too good for them now that he wants to attend graduate school after his bachelor's degree. Another commonly noted challenge that many participants discussed was feeling that their family had a difficult time understanding the time and effort that was required to be a successful student in college. Jordan, Julio, Nora, Kiersten, Tara, and Martin all directly address this issue in their interviews. Tara provides a striking example of how strain can occur when the family system is unable to adapt to their role as a busy student. Tara was raised by her grandmother, as her mom died when she was very young. Tara described how she often feels obligated to drive a couple hours to provide support for her grandmother, who has health issues and is not financially stable. Tara said:

> It's always kind of that, that key piece of that real strain. It's like I am stressed out. I've got jobs and I've got school, I've got my own life and then you know to have to drive two hours down there and sometimes it's longer because of traffic and take care of her and then have to drive all the way back and then have work or something the next day. It really has been a real strain on the relationship.

Tara's quote exemplifies the challenges many other participants experienced in terms of time demands from their families. She described how her grandmother has not been able to understand and accommodate to her lifestyle as a student, creating strain in their relationship.

Nora also provided several examples in her interview of how her family initially had some challenges understanding what being a student meant for her lifestyle. For example, Nora described having extended family visit while she was swamped with schoolwork. She said,

> In my culture and in my personal family values, the guest is always priority… However, the older I've gotten and the more involved I've gotten in school, I don't have time to stop doing what I'm doing, to interact with family sometimes, and according to their values and what they expect when they visit. Um, I am not meeting that.

In this situation, Nora felt misunderstood by her family and felt pulled between academic obligations and family approval. However, over time, Nora felt that many, though not all, members of her family began to understand and accept the sacrifices that needed to be made for her education. She said that family members began to realize that “if success is going to be gained, I need to put a little bit more time into some of these other areas, which means that my role as a daughter and as a sister is going to change.” Nora describes how her family made changes to accommodate her needs as a student, which aligns with the experiences of other participants. Family relationships that were characterized by understanding and adaptability, even if there were challenges initially, were more perceived as more supportive.

Honoring Hard Work and Sacrifice

While there were several participants who expressed being unsure whether they would go to college initially, the majority of participants admitted that college had been almost an expectation from their families and that they had known they would be going to college from a young age. Chloe describes her experience with these expectations:

> Really it was more of an external motivation. More of an obligation. I’m the youngest of five siblings and so my mom, my pops, my mom they didn’t go to

> school. So I'm a first-generation student. And my siblings- my oldest sibling, she went off to school and she got pregnant in the middle of her last year. For her to get pregnant and have her child and still finish school that was motivation for, yeah I better go to school. That was her setting the precedence for the rest of us. And so it was almost like this responsibility that you have to fulfill.

Chloe felt that her desire to go to college was more externally driven and an expectation in her family, which was a common theme that emerged. For many participants, familial expectations and honoring the sacrifices families had made was both a source of support and challenge. The two subthemes that emerged address the challenges and pressure participants felt from family expectation as well as the motivation family expectations provided.

Pressure. A major challenge that participants faced as a result of being expected to attend college is a fear of failing and managing the pressure that comes along with being the first individual in one's family to attend college. Kiersten describes feeling as though she is "living out [her] mom's dream" through attending college and experiencing pressure as a result. She described feeling, at times, like she was going to college for her mom and being unsure if she was meeting her family's expectations. Nora, too, describes her complicated experience with being a first-generation student and managing the pressure associated with that role. She said, "When I was younger, I think it was very prideful. It was like, yes, I'm the first. But as I've gotten older, there's also that fear factor of well, what if something happens and I actually don't reach it?" The fear of failing Nora describes is something that other participants echoed in their interviews. Jasmine also experienced a similar pressure to succeed. She said:

> I feel like everyone, might sound cocky, but like looks up to me and so I feel a lot of like pressure even though I'm like, it's like, yeah, kind of a lot of pressure. 'Cause like I'm like the first of my cousins, like first of like every one. So it's just kind of like a lot to take in sometimes. And I feel like everyone thinks it's like

> been easy or something, but they don't know, like, you know, like the bad sides of it or how hard it is.

Jasmine further describes how she did not tell her family about many of her struggles, such as being on academic probation, because she did not want her cousins and others who might be considering college to be “scared off” by the adversity she faced. Thus, being first-generation for some participants meant bearing the pressure of their families' expectations and shielding them from how difficult the process really is.

Motivation to succeed. On the other hand, honoring family expectations and the sacrifices families have made was also a huge source of motivation for participants. Eleven of the twelve participants noted that family sacrifices encouraged them to pursue college and influenced their desire to succeed. When asked about what influenced her decision to pursue college, Nora said, “I think that it wasn't, um, I want to go to college. I think that to make my parents' struggles fruitful, it was almost like I need to go to college. I need to make their struggle worthwhile.” Jordan describes a physical embodiment of family sacrifice and work ethic, which was a ring that his grandfather gave him, who he describes as a “man who did everything.” Jordan remembers the sacrifices his grandfather and others in his family made when he looks at the ring. He described his family legacy of hard work saying:

> So I think by them just having lived the lives that they did, it makes it easier for me to, it makes it easier for me to have a daily understanding of that work ethic and just apply it to my own. Or I don't even have to apply it. It's just my life now. If there's one part of me that's fully manifested into that family spirit or energy, I would say it's that.

Additionally, five participants had parents who had immigrated to the United States from another country, which altered their perspectives on the importance of a college education and the sacrifices their parents had made to give them the opportunity

to pursue higher education. Julio and his family emigrated from Mexico when he was a teenager so that he and his sister could have better opportunities and to escape the violence of the place they were living. He said of the immigration process:

> It was tough, a lot of chaos. We initially moved to a mobile home. You know one of the small ones. We didn't have a kitchen. I didn't have a room. There was a lot of work we put into that thing. I didn't know English either so it was a lot of hard work. And sometimes you work as hard as you can and there are no changes. So we just kept working, kept working, and kept working and we just took one day at a time.

Julio witnessed firsthand the sacrifices he and his family had to make for him to be college educated and thus described feeling grateful for the opportunity and passionate about education. Kiersten's family, who emigrated from Vietnam, were very open about the sacrifices they had made for Kiersten. The messages Kiersten received from them about college was:

> You have to go to college, get a good job and then come after that, you have to take care of us. Okay. Just cause like we came over here, we came over to America, we've worked so hard to get you where you are. The least you could do is to go to college and take care of us later.

Whether they had been part of the immigration process or not, participants with family who had immigrated to the United States had a unique understanding of what the opportunity to go to college meant. Some had parents who simply did not have access to education in their home countries and spent their adult lives trying to attain financial security to help their children go to college.

Modeling Success for Future Generations

While participants emphasized that role models were important to their success as first-generation college students who identified as racial or ethnic minorities, it also became clear that many of them were also beginning to recognize that they were role

models themselves, especially for siblings and younger family members. Seven of the twelve participants spoke of modeling success for siblings or future generations of their family. Martin described how he has recently begun to understand how his sisters see him, saying:

> I have three little sisters and in some ways I've come to realize that they look up to me and stuff, especially when I went to college. One of them is about to be that age, so. It's nice to be able to come home and be that person that I didn't have I guess.

For Martin, his sisters viewing him as a role model encourages him to "elevate [himself] to a higher standard" even though there have been times where he has felt that he might not make it through college or may need to take a semester off. He said that the fact that his sisters are watching him causes him to continue to push toward graduation. Jude expressed a very similar sentiment in his role as the oldest sibling. He said, "I have two younger siblings ... So I think with that, there's my brothers viewing me as a role model and also knowing that I am their brother and they can confide and trust in me."

For other participants, they were role models for individuals beyond their immediate family. Both Jasmine and Nora described being first-generation amongst cousins as well, and noted that they served as role models for success in that way. They described having cousins ask them for advice about college. Others, like Tara, described how she saw herself as setting the precedent for future generations, and how that was a source of pride. Tony described being a role model in higher education for his young cousin. In a very poignant quote, he said:

> I told her, I was like, look, you're going to go to Harvard, you're going to do all these great things. She doesn't know what Harvard is; she doesn't know like being a STEM major. Like, none of this stuff. I'm telling her, like, we need more women in all these positions. You're going to do this. And so like this year, this year she calls me saying, hey cousin [Tony], I'm gonna go to Harvard.

Tony, and other participants, wanted to help other family members or future generations feel that they too could be successful in higher education. They wanted to set a precedent and be an example of success. Tony sums up the phenomenon of being a role model as a first-generation college student well, saying, “I try to be mindful of like, no matter what you do, somebody's always looking at you.”

Emotional Support and Encouragement

When asked about the support that their families provided during their undergraduate career, the most common answer from participants was that their families supplied emotional support and encouragement. Tony provides a good example of this when he described his relationship with his father. He said, “My father more so he empowered me of like, you can do whatever you want. I'm proud of you no matter what.” Tony described how, despite his father not knowing what challenges he was facing as a student, his father was always encouraging and supportive. Tony stated, “My dad is my biggest cheerleader. He don't know what the hell I'm doing. He don't know what a McNair is. He don't know anything.” For Martin, he described how his family provided “encouragement and positivity” and he described that, as he progressed through college, he and his family became more emotionally open and close. He said that growing up, his family wasn’t very “expressive.” Noticing the further disconnect that happened when he left for college, Martin decided to be more open with his parents about his life “so they can still be a part of [his] life without being there.” For Martin, moving away for college made him want to be able to turn to his family for emotional support and so he worked to foster a more emotionally close relationship with them.

In Vivie's case, her family provided her with an important asset. She described how her family instilled in her the "mindset that you are capable," which helped her to feel that she had the tools to succeed in college. Vivie also described how her parents would motivate her to remain in college by reminding her that she could always come work for the family restaurant if she were to drop out of college, which reminded Vivie that college was her way out of that avenue of work. Nora, too, felt the positive impact of family support on her educational pursuits saying, "In terms of my family, that support has always been there. Always. And that has never faltered." Finally, families expressing their pride in their first-generation students helped first-generation students feel motivated and supported. Several participants expressed that their family's pride in them was important, but Kiersten describes it well. She said she feels pride in being first-generation and knowing that she in "not traditional." She said, "I'm really proud of that just because like I'm doing something for my family." Thus, participants seemed to garner a sense of support from the encouragement and emotional support their families provided.

Experiences with Counseling

Half of participants mentioned that they had been to counseling while on-campus. Several of them noted having a good experience with counseling services while others had unfavorable experiences. For example, one participant mentioned that he had been asked not to return to the counseling center on-campus and, from his perspective, it was due to the fact that he believed his counselor did not understand culturally embedded aspects of his identity. Regardless of whether they had counseling experience, all had ideas about what would improve counseling services on-campus for first-generation

college students who identify as racial and ethnic minorities. In line with a previous theme about knowing where to find help, counseling was another resource that some participants had trouble navigating. Chloe aptly describes this experiencing noting, "I just felt like when I navigated those services, they weren't- I couldn't find anything for me. Fitting for me. So I kind of strayed away from those things. But I wish I had more support in navigating them." Martin, Jude, and Tony felt that counseling services could do a better job being more visible for first-generation students and potentially doing outreach in order to offer support outside of the counseling center. Tony proposed:

> It's just like everybody being accessible in both parties, so it's not like-its not like we're placing blame on like university programs and things like that for not coming to the students. And we're not saying we're not placing blame on the students for not coming. It's that we need to meet each other in the middle because like that's how we succeed is like working with each other.

Thus, participants felt that they did not always have knowledge of counseling resources or ready access to them. A consistent recommendation from participants, described in the subtheme below, was that counselors need to have cultural awareness when working with other students who are first-generation and identify as racial or ethnic minorities.

Cultural awareness. Participants also expressed that it is important for counseling professionals to be aware of how culture influences values around emotional expression and willingness to seek help from mental health professionals. Tony also noted that it was important to be aware of what kinds of challenges people from different racial and ethnic groups may be facing. He described the importance of "being empathetic with folks about what they go through as an ethnic group." Culturally, several of the participants who identified as Hispanic mentioned that counseling is not always viewed favorably. Jude discussed his fears around telling his parents he was

going to counseling saying cultural values within his Catholic, Hispanic family caused him to think they would not be supportive. Jasmine said about mental health "It's just kind of like don't like see, don't talk about it kind of thing. You know, like something you kind of deal with yourself." Kiersten brought up cultural differences in emotional expression within her family, as her family brought many Vietnamese cultural values when they immigrated, and said:

> The biggest cultural difference that I can think of is talking about your emotions. My family, I don't know if it's like my culture or just like my family, but we don't like talking about our feelings. We like really push that off. We don't like talking about ourselves or issues because we're just, we had just, we were taught to just suck it up.

Values around counseling and ideas central to most counseling, such as emotion, are thus very much culturally dependent. Thus, cultural competence is key for mental health professionals and psychologists working with this population. Vivie summed this up nicely noting the importance of "knowing a little bit about like their culture, just like some of the values and some of the ideas that they have." It is important to note that while cultural competence is key, both Chloe and Vivie cautioned against overgeneralizing and emphasized that it is also important to recognize individuality. Chloe advised, "Don't generalize. Every person, every individual is just that, an individual. So their circumstances, their upcoming, their upbringing is very different even though you may see similarities."

Summary

Twelve individuals participated in the current study. All were first-generation college students who identified as racial or ethnic minorities and all were juniors or seniors. Each participant was individually interviewed, for 60-90 minutes, in order to

gain a better understanding of their relationships both on and off campus and how these relationships have changed over time. Many participants expressed feeling isolated when they began college and described lacking faculty support and peer support. There were a variety of barriers to this on-campus support, such as feeling a disconnect given the mostly white demographics on-campus, cultural values that do not align with value systems common to universities, and participants perceiving faculty as unapproachable or intimidating. Participants expressed difficulty knowing where to find help and felt that they could not turn to their parents with many of their problems. Most participants, however, expressed feeling more connected on-campus with peers and faculty over time. This progression seemed to be related to several factors. Some factors discussed by participants included finding the "right" peers to connect with, finding mentors and professors who held similar racial/ethnic identities, and feeling visible to professors. In terms of family connection over time, participants noted that some family relationships dwindled while others flourished. Some key factors that were connected with strong family relationships included families understanding the time and resources necessary for success and providing emotional support and motivation. Participants overall felt motivated by their families, trying to honor the sacrifices those before them had made and trying to pave the way for future generations. Finally, participants also had recommendations based on their experiences with counseling and identified some of their strengths.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Overview of Study

First-generation college students face unique challenges compared to their continuing-generation peers and these challenges prove to be insurmountable for some, as evidenced by the fact that first-generation students have lower retention rates than their peers (Chen & Carroll, 2005; D'Amico & Dika, 2013; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; RTI International, 2019b; Soria & Stebleton, 2012b). Demographically, first-generation college students are more likely to identify as racial or ethnic minorities than continuing-generation peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017) and are more likely to originate from lower income families (Engle et al., 2006). Approximately 24 percent of students within universities are low-income first-generation college students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Thus, first-generation college students enter college with different experiences and backgrounds than their continuing-generation peers.

It is important, then, given their unique experiences, to consider what kind of institutional and off-campus support first-generation students may need in pursuit of their degrees. This study emerged from gaps in the literature regarding the impact of family and on-campus support for first-generation students who identify as a racial or ethnic minority. The current research aimed to explore how first-generation college students find support both on and off campus and what barriers may exist in them accessing and experiencing this support. Additionally, the current study aimed to understand not

only how students experience the challenges of navigating home communities and the university setting, but also the strengths and methods of perseverance they use to overcome these challenges, as the strengths first-generation college students exhibit have been under-researched (Tate et al., 2015).

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

In order to gain insight into the experiences of first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities and address these noted gaps in the literature, the following research questions were developed:

Q1 What are the relational experiences, both with their family and communities of origin and within on-campus relationships, of first-generation racial or ethnic minority college seniors at a four-year university?

Q1A How have these relational experiences changed over time?

Q2 How have these relationships provided support for first-generation students?

Q3 How have these relationships provided challenges/barriers for first-generation students and how were these challenges overcome?

The shared experiences of participants included in this study were reflected in the emerging themes, which helped address the above research questions and describe the phenomenon of being a first-generation college student who identifies as a racial or ethnic minority.

With regard to the first research question about the relational experiences of first-generation college students and how these relational experiences have changed over time, the current study has important, contributing findings. Participants discussed relationships that were salient during their undergraduate career, including relationships with family members, on-campus peers, mentors, professors, cultural center staff, and

college counseling center staff. It is notable that participants did not frequently talk about relationships within their community of origin and thus there were no emerging themes that pertained to participants' relationships with their communities of origin. In terms of how these relationships shifted over time, participants reported that many of these relationships grew stronger over time. This was particularly true with many on-campus relationships, especially peer relationships and relationships with mentors. Family relationships were a bit more complicated and some relationships seemed to flourish while others diminished. The overwhelming majority of participants spoke of feeling lonely and isolated on-campus when beginning college. Over time, they were able to strengthen connections on-campus and build a support system.

The findings from the current study illuminate the ways in which participants were able to begin forming these connections. Firstly, participants discussed a number of strengths, including adaptability and perseverance, which likely contributed to their ability to form connections with others. Participants also discussed gradually developing an awareness of professors' humanness and willingness to help, which countered previous expectations that professors were unapproachable or uninterested in helping students. This emerging awareness helped participants gain the courage to seek support from professors and likely other entities with positions of power on-campus. For some participants, that awareness developed from having corrective relationships with professors where they felt visible or acknowledged, which brought realization that they mattered. Finally, in terms of connecting with peers, participants spoke of finding the 'right' people on-campus through avenues such as work or meeting one person who broadens connections to other supportive peers.

Participants spoke of many ways in which their on- and off-campus relationships were supportive and helped them to be successful college students, which addressed the second research question. Participants discussed finding support within cultural centers on-campus and other entities that shared salient identities. These shared identities provided an important support for participants, as many of them became aware of their intersectional identities and how these identities shaped their experiences on a predominately white campus. Participants found role models and a sense of understanding in these relationships. Mentorship was another avenue where participants were able to develop supportive relationships and often participants seemed to appreciate mentorship relationships where their holistic needs, rather than just their academic needs could be met. They spoke of seeking guidance and emotional support from their mentors. In terms of family relationships, participants expressed feeling most supported in family relationships that were able to adapt to their role as a college student and relationships where family members understood the sacrifices they must make to succeed. It is notable that, while family members often could not provide academic advice and support, they often provided emotional support to participants and encouraged them to persevere through the challenges of college. Family also provided very salient motivators for participants. Many participants, especially participants from immigrant families, wanted to make the sacrifices their families had made fruitful and college provided an opportunity to honor these sacrifices with success. In turn, another source of motivation for participants was to pave the way for future generations to succeed in college, just as their families had done for them.

The current study also illuminated some of the relational barriers and challenges faced by first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities, which addresses the last research question. As mentioned, first-generation college students described experiencing a sense of isolation on-campus when they first began college. As soon as they stepped on-campus, many of them recognized that they held minority identities, which for some was experienced as a shock due to attending more diverse high schools. Some participants acknowledged feeling invisible. Differences in cultural values also seemed to make some participants feel alienated, especially participants who lived at home and felt that this made them stand apart from other college students. In addition, participants also expressed that they did not know where to seek help and sometimes were uncomfortable seeking help, for some due to cultural expectations. As participants encountered challenges in college, they often did not know where to turn, whether it was for mental health support or for support with academics, financial aid, etc. This confusion likely increased their sense of isolation. Another relational challenge faced was, as discussed in the previous paragraph, experiencing faculty and staff as unapproachable initially. Participants expressed that this led to reluctance to seek support. Concerning family relationships, there were a number of challenges that participants expressed experiencing within these relationships over time. Some participants expressed the painfulness of experiencing distance in their family relationships or eventually having to cut ties with these relationships. One major contributor to these relationship ruptures, from participants' perspectives, was inflexibility in family roles. Participants noted that family relationships that failed to shift to accommodate their roles as students tended to become less strong. Finally, while

some participants expressed having good experiences with counseling, others acknowledged that there were difficulties that emerged in terms of counselors having a grasp of their cultural identities or experiences as individuals who hold historically marginalized identities.

To create a more coherent narrative of the relational experiences of first-generation college students who identify as racial and ethnic minorities, and to also highlight the ways in which the current research adds new information, I will now contextualize my findings within the literature. As mentioned, many participants spoke of initially feeling isolated on-campus, lacking peer connection and connection to university faculty. They described having few connections to peers and some participants felt disconnected due to being underrepresented on a majority white campus. Participant's experience of isolation is very much in line with current literature, as research suggests that first-generation college students tend to feel disconnected and invisible on college campuses (Means & Pyne, 2017). Tony named this feeling of invisibility several times during his interview, describing how he has experienced invisibility throughout his educational career as a black man, and other participants spoke to this experience as well. Experiencing isolation is not uncommon for first-generation students and students of color on majority white campuses (Owens et al., 2010). These students tend to perceive the campus climate as less welcoming because they are the minority on campus and can identify few others who share their racial or ethnic identity. First-generation students also report experiencing microagressions on predominately white campuses related to their minoritized identities (Ellis, Powell, Demetriou, Huerta-Bapat, & Panter, 2019). These findings are discouraging given the importance of sense

of belonging and social integration to academic success and persistence for first-generation students (Dixon Rayle & Chung, 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Soria & Stebleton, 2012a, b). First-generation students who feel satisfied with their social lives are 16.7 percent more likely to persist from their first year to their second (Pascarella et al., 2004). In contrast, decreased sense of belonging is related to decreased academic achievement, dropout, and decreased school involvement (Williams et al., 2013).

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging was a very important factor for participants in the current study. Sense of belonging has been described as forming functionally supportive peer relationships and holding a belief faculty are compassionate and the student is valued (Hoffman et al., 2002). It involves a sense of "mattering" to peers and the college system as a whole, rather than holding a peripheral role (Dixon Rayle & Chung, 2007). Forming supportive relationships and feeling a sense of "mattering" were both very relevant for participants. Over time, many participants described feeling more socially integrated on-campus and finding more support amongst peers and faculty. A sense of community is a vital need for first-generation students, particularly first-generation students who identify with cultures that value community strongly (Clayton, Medina, & Wiseman, 2019). Thus, building relationships to feel a sense of belonging on-campus was an important factor for participant success. With regards to peers on-campus, participants described finding small sources of connection, through jobs or sometimes meeting just one person, and eventually expanding their connection and their confidence in being able to connect. Participants described the importance of finding the 'right' people amongst their peers and feeling inspired and motivated by these relationships. These findings are new

perspectives, shedding light on how first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities develop peer relationships and what factors influence their choice of peer friendships.

The current study addressed important gaps in the literature regarding how first-generation college students and students of color experience faculty interactions, as much of the literature to date has focused on college students broadly (Kim & Sax, 2009). In terms of the limited available research on this topic, literature indicated that first-generation students might not have as much access to institutional support and faculty support as other students (e.g., Kim & Sax, 2009; Means & Pyne, 2017; Schademan & Thompson, 2015). In the current study, relationships with faculty had a similar trajectory as relationships with peers, with many participants initially describing disconnect from faculty then, over time, building mentorships and closer relationships. These findings align with previous research suggesting that students tend to have more quality interactions with faculty during their junior and senior years of college (Kim & Sax, 2009). Participants' perceptions of faculty seemed to be an important reason for the initial disconnect, as participants expressed being intimidated by faculty or having expectations that faculty are authority figures and there is need to be formal at all times. Research conducted by Means and Pyne (2017) also found that first-generation college students experience apprehension about approaching faculty, which can become a barrier for accessing support. Over time, many participants were able to overcome this barrier and develop closer relationships with faculty and mentorship. Almost all participants mentioned mentorship as an important factor in their college experience and success. Sometimes mentorships began with a faculty member noticing or acknowledging the

student. Martin provides a striking example of this when he describes a professor telling him to come to his office and talking to Martin about wanting him to speak up more in class. Martin felt acknowledged by this professor. These findings are very much in line with the importance of 'mattering' and other research that suggests that mentorship roles are highly important for belonging and academic success for first-generation students (Garriott & Nisle, 2017; Hurd, Albright, Wittrup, Negrete, & Billingsley, 2018; Means & Pyne, 2017; Wang, 2012).

Honoring Family Sacrifices and Supportive Family Relationships

The literature to date about how first-generation college students experience family support has been mixed, with some researchers finding clear benefits from family support (e.g., Garcia et al., 2015; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008) and other researchers finding no significant benefits (e.g., Purswell et al., 2008). Thus, the current study aimed to provide more clarity about the impact of family relationships and achieved this goal by providing insights about ways in which family relationships provide support and challenges for first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities.

Family relationships, for many participants, were incredibly important sources of motivation to complete college. Some participants had parents who immigrated to the United States to seek greater educational opportunities for their families and others had immigrated to the United States themselves. They described hearing stories from parents about sacrifice and loss or experienced these challenges first-hand. For example, Julio describes his family's immigration to the United States and how the family initially had to live in a mobile home without a kitchen or individual rooms. He describes it as

"chaos." Many of these participants expressed that their college education was a way for them to make their parent's sacrifices fruitful and thus these narratives provided motivation for participants to be the first in their family to graduate from college. This finding overlaps with a previous study, which found that first-generation students often reflected on messages from family about not forgetting the family and where they came from (Wang, 2014). It also overlaps with previous research suggesting that students who are from immigrant families or families that identify as racial or ethnic minorities are more likely to value interdependence, want to achieve for the sake of their families, and feel the need to repay their families (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Tseng, 2004). Thus, interdependence and honoring family sacrifices may be an important motivator for first-generation college students who are racial or ethnic minorities.

Family also provided motivation in that participants were motivated to act as role models within their families, particularly to siblings. Participants spoke of wanting to be the first member of their family to attend college in order to inspire future generations. They found great meaning in this role. The importance of paving the path to college for siblings and future generations is a relatively novel finding in the literature. One other study found that first-generation college students expressed a desire to "set a good example" for younger family members (Wang, 2014, p. 280). It is important to note that while many participants found it motivating to honor their family's sacrifices, some also mentioned that they also felt a great deal of pressure in this role. Participants expressed feeling afraid they might fail and let down their families or that they were responsible for living out other family member's dreams. Kiersten, for example, expressed that she felt she was living out her mother's dream by going to college and the expectation was that

she would provide for her family and get a good career. This finding is strikingly in line with the literature about "healing the hidden injuries of class" (Rondini, 2016). Parents of first-generation students, particularly when they are from lower SES groups, may internalize blame for not being able to achieve the 'American dream' of educational and occupational success and feel a sense of desire to see their children succeed in the wake of their own perceived failures. Thus, they may see their child's success as a narrative of redemption and view their children as "aspirational proxies" (Rondini, 2016, p. 96). The current research adds a new narrative to Rondini's research, adding the perspective of the first-generation student. For participants, being an 'aspirational proxy' seemed to be both motivating and pressure-inducing. They felt driven to be successful in college, but expressed worry that they might fail in the process and let themselves and their families down.

Additionally, it is notable that changes in family relationships over time were not nearly as upwardly linear and clear as peer and faculty relationships. Some relationships seemed to become stronger and more supportive while other family relationships waned and participants sometimes distanced themselves. This fits with previous literature that suggests that parental support provides important benefits and challenges for first-generation college students, suggesting that parental support may not clearly be delineated as a positive predictor of academic success nor a negative indicator (McWhirter et al., 2007; Rondini, 2016; Tseng, 2004). The current study provides a unique and novel perspective on what factors may contribute to first-generation students experiencing supportive relationships from family versus unsupportive relationships.

Supportive family relationships were characterized by adaptability and a willingness to understand the costs of success in college for first-generation college students. Participants expressed experiencing intense demands to succeed academically, make social connections, hold multiple jobs, and make time to remain integrated in the family system. Some family relationships were able to adapt creatively to these demands, like Nora's family, who she lived with during college. Her gendered family roles (e.g., taking care of domestic tasks) and cultural roles (e.g., hosting family members when they come to visit) had to shift because of the demands she was facing at school. Nora felt supported by her family's adaptability and maintained strong relationships with the members of her core family. For other participants, family roles and expectations remained too rigid, and family relationships suffered. This caused some participants, like Tony, to cut ties with certain family members. He said, "There's a difference between family and relatives. Relatives have the same blood, right? They have the same blood, but family's who you get to pick." Thus, lack of adaptability in family relationships seemed to lead to fractures in these relationships and sometimes led participants to reevaluate whether these relationships were worth maintaining

It was clear that having some supportive family relationships was important to participants' overall success in college, as these relationships were an important source of encouragement and emotional support. Participants expressed that while their families were of limited support with academic concerns, due to their lack of college experience, their families were supportive in encouraging them to persevere during difficult moments. Participants noted that it was meaningful when family members expressed their pride in them. These findings align with current literature suggesting that first-

generation college students derive encouragement from their families, leading to decreased stress, and may feel driven by their family's pride in their accomplishments (Dixon Rayle & Chung, 2007; Sy et al., 2011; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008).

Implications

Theoretical

Previous research about first-generation college students has drawn from literature about Bourdieu's (1983) theory of cultural capital and social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994). Though these theories are dissimilar in many ways, they also share important overlaps. Both Bourdieu's theory and SCCT emphasize that students do not necessarily begin on an even playing field and there are a variety of existing factors in the environment that influence academic aspirations and opportunities for attaining success. Both theories propose that relational factors, such as family support, contribute to academic success and challenges in college. Because both theories overlap on important concepts, within the context of the current research, they served to enrich each other and were used in tandem. Though it is widely used, a criticism of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is that Bourdieu's concepts are abstract and difficult to operationalize (McDonough, 1997; Sullivan, 2002). SCCT offers a clearer model of academic development and variables that are more readily operationalized.

Social cognitive career theory. The findings from the current study have implications for social cognitive career theory (SCCT) and reflect some of the core concepts in this model. As described in earlier chapters, SCCT is a theoretical model that is used to describe performance and persistence academically (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT is particularly useful as a model because it "emphasizes the means by which individuals

exercise personal agency in the career development process as well as extra-personal that enhance or constrain agency" (Lent et al., 1994, p. 79). Thus, it acknowledges that there are contextual affordances and person factors that limit personal agency while also describing malleable aspects of persistence and career development, mainly the sociocognitive core. The sociocognitive core is comprised of cognitive factors, like self-efficacy, that allow for the person to have agency and control over their performance and persistence (Lent et al., 2000). For example, self-efficacy in a particular domain may increase with exposure to the learning material and practice and thus is changeable.

In contrast, person factors, such as culture, race, and gender, are important factors that affect performance and persistence but unlike sociocognitive factors, they are largely beyond the individual's control. While race and sex are biologically-based attributes, they have psychological significance due to reactions from the social environment and the degree of privilege or marginalization associated with these identities (Lent et al., 1994). Person factors may also have other subtle effects on persistence and career development and may affect what a person decides to study in college or what careers they perceive as viable (Lent et al., 1994). For example, there may be cultural value assigned to certain fields of study or careers, which may make an individual more likely to pursue these routes. Contextual affordances are another group of factors that impact persistence and career development and, like person factors, are less tied to personal agency and instead capture more systemic aspects of persistence and career development (Lent et al., 1994). Contextual affordances are environmental factors that can provide supports and barriers for persistence and career development. From the perspective of SCCT, supports facilitate a person's ability to develop and pursue his or her career

interests while barriers can impede academic and career goal pursuit (Lent et al., 2000). Contextual affordances are especially relevant to the current study, as this factor of SCCT conceptualize how on-campus and off-campus relationships can provide support and barriers for first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities. Despite their importance, contextual factors and their impact in the model of academic persistence have been under-researched (Lent et al., 2000) and thus the current research aimed to address this gap.

Reflecting on the application of SCCT within the current study, person factors and contextual affordances were both reflected within themes. The concept of contextual affordances was central to the research questions and the findings of the current study. Participants described how relationships on- and off-campus provided supports and barriers to their educational attainment while in college. Some relationships, particularly family relationships, seemed to be nuanced, providing both support and challenges simultaneously for participants. As discussed earlier in the chapter, relationships also shifted over time, and for some participants, previously supportive relationships evolved to feel less supportive. Thus, supports and barriers in the current study shifted over time, emphasizing the importance of evaluating relationships over time, as these changes may influence persistence and career development for first-generation students. Additionally, it cannot be over-emphasized that participants attributed their successes in college, at least in part, to their support systems on- and off-campus. Support, then, seems integral to success in college for first-generation students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities. This finding aligns with SCCT's model in that it affirms that contextual affordances are important for academic persistence (Lent et al., 1994).

In terms of person factors, the current study provides unique insight into how aspects of participant's multifaceted identities influenced their experiences as a college student. Many spoke of painful aspects of their experience within these identities, such as isolation or perceiving lack of belonging on a predominately white campus. As a result, participants seemed to seek mentorship relationships where the mentor could understand their experiences through shared identity or where they could feel seen. Having self-relevant models, or mentors who share racial or cultural identities, increasing sense of belonging for students with minoritized identities (Fryberg et al., 2013). Participants also spoke of the positive experiences they have derived from their multiple intersecting identities, such as a sense of pride and motivation to succeed because of the sacrifices their families had made. It is also important to note that intersectionality was a salient factor highlighted in the findings of this study. Several participants had numerous historically oppressed identities, such as Jude who identified as Hispanic, a DACA student, first-generation, and gay. For many participants, these identities could not be easily separated and instead each identity existed in tandem with one another, making their experiences unique and multifaceted. Depending on the context, identities were sometimes described to be experienced as more or less salient. Jude, in particular, described how the salience of each of his identities shifted as he entered different environments (e.g., transitioning from the DACA student group to the LGBTQ cultural center). Intersectionality, as a theoretical construct, provides a helpful lens to understand the experiences of first-generation college students, acknowledging the power and oppression embedded within identity and providing a framework to better understand how holding identities that hold both privilege and oppression shapes experience

(Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). The findings from this study highlight the importance of using a lens of intersectionality with first-generation college students who are racial and ethnic minorities, their experiences moving through the world are shaped by the culmination of their various, intersecting identities. It is imperative that individuals who are working with this population be aware of how central identity is for many first-generation students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities. Future research could explore specific intersections of identity, such as the intersection between race and SES, as research suggests that these two dominant characteristics may uniquely impact identity (Destin, 2019).

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. As discussed in previous chapters, Bourdieu's theory proposed three different types of capital that contribute to economic successes and losses, which are economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983). Economic capital can best be described as financial assets and is a form of capital that most people would readily think of when conceiving of the term 'capital.' In contrast, social capital and cultural capital, though not readily transferred into dollar amounts, serve as important forms of human capital and were the primary focus in the current study (Bourdieu, 1983). Social capital describes the breadth of one's social networks and the connections inherent in these networks (Bourdieu, 1983). For example, cultural capital can be knowing people who have connections to job opportunities or internship opportunities in one's field. Cultural capital is best described as a person's preferences, attitudes, and behaviors and the degree to which these align with dominant societal values (Carter, 2003). Bourdieu's research in schools led him to believe that the education system reinforces and passes down generationally values from

the dominant culture, which are derived from the upper and middle classes. He termed this process 'social reproduction' (Bourdieu, 1998). Thus, students who are not as familiar with the dominant culture, coming from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds and perhaps owning other diverse identities, may not have cultural capital and thus may have more challenges succeeding in institutions like the educational system. This connects well with research about cultural mismatch, and how students who do not adhere to individualistic norms, which are highly valued in universities, exhibit lower academic performance (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012) and experience greater cortisol production and negative emotions (Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012).

Participants in the current study described challenges with lack of social and cultural capital while attending college as first-generation college students who identify as racial and ethnic minorities. In terms of social capital, participants described experiencing a distinct lack of connection when they began college, from peers, but also from professors and other entities that might provide social capital in the academic system. Professors and other staff may, for example, have connections to internships and relevant jobs within the community. Some participants, like Nora, initially did not even see what value could be garnered from establishing connections with professors. Others expressed a perception that faculty and staff were intimidating or inaccessible. While this may not have been problematic for students who have rich systems of professional connections outside of school, which provide them with career and educational opportunities, for participants in the current study, lack of social capital was more challenging because they often did have these same external connections. Over time, many participants were able to establish greater connection with faculty and staff, and

many noted the personal and educational benefits of mentorship afforded them. Recent mixed method research illustrates how important social capital can be for first-generation college student success through providing aspiration, providing emotional support, and helping with navigation toward career aspirations (McCallen & Johnson, 2019). Thus, participants eventually gaining social capital was important. However, research suggests that first-generation college students are most likely to drop out of college between their first and second year of college (Ishitani, 2006; Soria & Stebleton, 2012b; Wright et al., 2012), and thus it may be necessary to precipitate greater connection with faculty earlier. Greater connection with faculty during their first years of college may improve academic persistence for first-generation college students.

Bourdieu's (1983) conception of cultural capital was also salient for the participants in the current study. It was clear that participant's cultural backgrounds shaped their experiences in college and many of them observed how the values they were raised with did not necessarily cohere with university culture. Both Chloe and Tony described how education is not always highly valued in African American communities, particularly lower SES communities, and how this incongruence shaped their own conceptions of pursuing higher education. Additionally, in line with Bourdieu's theory, participants expressed difficulty knowing how to navigate university systems and realized quickly that their parents could not offer support in this particular arena, given their lack of experience in higher education. Thus, parents could not pass down knowledge about the culture of the educational system to their children, as parents of continuing-generation students may be able to. Participants also relayed difficulty with asking for help, which will be explored further later in this chapter, which further left them grappling for

answers on their own. Some participants ascribed their difficulties asking for help to cultural perspectives about help seeking behaviors, especially around seeking help for mental health concerns. Jasmine, for example, noted that within her family and cultural values there exists a belief that when it comes to mental health, it is a “don't talk about it kind of thing. You know, like something you kind of deal with yourself.” This aligns well with previous research, suggesting that cultural mismatch and a fear of burdening others leads first-generation students to feel that they need to be self-reliant when experiencing problems academically, financially, and psychologically and avoid help seeking (Chang, Wang, Mancini, McGrath-Mahrer, & Orama de Jesus, 2019).

Finally, expectations around family involvement, which was especially common amongst many participants who identified as Hispanic, were incongruent with expectations placed on students from the higher educational system. Several participants described how interdependent values in their families led them to live at home or visit home frequently, which sometimes made it difficult for them to complete assignments at home or be involved on-campus. Participants, particularly those who lived close to home or at home, felt pulled to choose between meeting family expectations and spending time with their families frequently and academic obligations. Some participants also expressed how cultural mismatch made them feel different than other students, or outside of the norm. Vivie, a participant who lived at home, described feeling embarrassed to tell others that she lived with her parents, as she felt different from other students, and was worried about how others would perceive her. Interdependent family cultural values, then, clashed with independent university norms and highlighted participants’ lack of access to dominant cultural values.

Cultural mismatch theory and Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital, then, are useful models to reflect on how universities may adapt to be a more welcoming and nurturing space for all students, rather than solely students who are raised within the dominant culture. In order to make these changes, it is important to consider the systems that perpetuate cultural mismatch and disparity in cultural capital. Critical theory offers a theoretical perspective on how systems like higher education can promote equity through seeking to "actively dismantle oppressive systems" (DeBlaere et al., 2019, p. 946). It is necessary to be aware of the ways in which one is complicit within this system and strive for systemic change. Thus, Deblaere et al. suggest that psychologists must "step outside of the university and the therapy room" to facilitate social change (p. 951). There are practical ways that systemic changes can be made for the betterment of first-generation and diverse students. For example, research demonstrates that a one-hour educational intervention, where first-generation students are taught about how their backgrounds and identities can pose challenges in college but also serve as strengths, can lead to better adjustment for students that persists even after two years post-intervention (Stephens, Townsend, Hamedani, Destin, & Manzo, 2015). Interventions like this one, applied across higher education institutions, could make the transition to college easier for students like the participants interviewed in this study. Thus, the findings of the current study align with Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and cultural mismatch theory and provides opportunities to implement theory-driven interventions to promote success for first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities.

Research and Methodological

The current study was qualitative and guided by a constructivist paradigm where the nature of reality was comprised of several, equally valid realities (Ponterotto, 2005). Given the diversity of participant experiences and backgrounds, holding multiple realities rather than a singular, objective truth was necessary. Recent research emphasizes the importance of qualitative research in the field of counseling psychology to provide "a clearer voice for members of oppressed and marginalized communities, informing theory, promoting cultural understanding, and providing a shift in the praxis embodied by our profession" (Suzuki et al., 2019, p. 833). Qualitative research was also useful with this population because it allowed for personal contact with the participants, which facilitated the suspension of any previously held conceptions or stereotypes about this population (Ponterotto, 2010). Within a constructivist framework, meaning is co-constructed with one's environment, including the researcher (Crotty, 1998). Thus, the researcher is an active participant in co-constructing and must also serve as an interpreter. It was important, then, for me as the researcher to bracket my experiences and biases in order to perceive the phenomenon as naively as possible (Moustakas, 1994). I engaged in self-reflexivity through a digital journal, where I was able to reflect on my experiences of the interviews and my process in developing emerging themes. I found this to be helpful in identifying how my own values shaped some of my initial reactions, allowing me to approach the findings without them being burdened by my own biases. For example, I needed to self-reflect on my own biases about the importance of higher education throughout the research process to truly capture participants' lived experiences.

Phenomenology was the methodology selected for the current research due to the emphasis in phenomenology on gaining a deep understanding of lived experiences with a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This aligned with my goal of understanding, from their perspective, first-generation students' relational experiences, specifically the supports and barriers experienced. Additionally, I aimed to understand how barriers in relationships were overcome and how these relationships changed over the course of their undergraduate careers. Phenomenology proved to be useful for gaining an in-depth perspective of participants' relational experiences, which was a notable gap in previous research. The interviews were rich with information and served to construct a narrative of participants' lived experiences. I was able to capture their voices through using direct quotations from the interviews. From the data collected, phenomenology seeks to construct a shared essence of experience, which reflects the commonalities experienced by participants in relation to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Saturation was attained prior to the 12th participant, when redundancy occurred and no new information was yielded from additional participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). After reaching saturation, I was able to reflect on participants' unique lived experiences while developing a universal essence of what it means to be a first-generation college student and a racial or ethnic minority at a mid-size public institution. Thus, the methodology used in the current study was a strength and accomplished the goals of addressing the research questions guiding the study.

One of the aims of the current study was to understand how relationships both on- and off-campus change over time for first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities. This was certainly accomplished through this study and

illustrated in the emerging themes. Longitudinal research might be another great approach to understand changes in relationships over time. Participants could be interviewed at different intervals over the course of their undergraduate career to better understand the evolution of their relationships. A possible advantage of longitudinal research would be that it would not rely as heavily on participant memory, as was the case in the current study. Many factors can impact past memory retrieval, including factors such as mood, and may make past memories less reliable (Eich, Macaulay, & Ryan, 1994). It is also important to note that, given the relatively flexible inclusion criteria, a diverse group of participants were included in the current study. Some participant experiences were very unique. Jude, for example, was a DACA student and his experiences were certainly uniquely shaped by this identity. Jude's experiences with the 2016 presidential election were notably different than his peers, given his DACA status. Future research focused on the unique experiences of DACA first-generation college student is warranted.

Another possible approach for future research could be to use quantitative methods to better understand the impact of on- and off-campus relationships and how these variables influence outcomes such as sense of belongingness, mental health, and academic persistence. For example, there is a scale that can be used to measure sense of belongingness for college students called the Sense of Belonging Scale-Revised (Hoffman et al., 2002). It encapsulates factors such as perceived peer support, perceived faculty support, and perceived isolation, which were all important factors reported by participants in the current study. Quantitative approaches that focus on changes in perceived support over time would be especially helpful, and may help to illuminate how

changes in support systems impact academic success and mental health outcomes for first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities.

Concerning the research methods employed, the current study had implications for future research. Recruitment of participants was accomplished through approaching cultural centers across campus and reaching out to professional contacts and listservs. Snowball sampling, where participants are asked to refer other potential participants, was also utilized (Merriam, 2009). Once they participated in the study, participants became eligible to receive one of two available Amazon giftcards. Recruitment was more challenging and took longer than anticipated. These challenges may be attributed to some of the methods selected. Cultural centers varied in their responsiveness to providing information to students and some never responded to requests at all, despite follow-ups. Only one participant was recruited through cultural centers. My professional contacts as a member of the university community, such as instructors at the university, proved to be the best method of recruitment, as I was able to reach students from different majors across campus in this approach. Information about the study was easily disseminated this way and proved to be an effective recruitment approach. However, it was notable that some potential participants, despite initially indicating they were interested, asked about the financial incentive to participate and did not choose to participate after this information was given. Thus, having a different incentive system for participation or raising the amount may be helpful. For example, potentially paying each participant rather than offering a raffle would have yielded more interest. Additionally, snowball sampling only accrued two additional participants. This was surprising, as snowball sampling is one of the most frequently used sampling methods in qualitative research, as

it relies on natural social networks for recruitment (Noy, 2008). It is possible that my participants did not have social networks that contained other potential participants with similar characteristics, such as being first-generation. Overall, while recruitment was eventually successful, and saturation was reached, the current research has implications for differential methods of recruitment and sampling of this population.

Practice

Participants in the current study expressed dealing with significant stress and four participants explicitly named struggling with major mental illness, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and bipolar. They often needed support managing their mental health, which is consistent with literature that suggests that first-generation students experience higher rates of mental health concerns (Covarrubias et al., 2015; Miller-Graff et al., 2015). While there is no way of knowing how many of my participants experienced trauma because I did not ask about trauma, three explicitly named traumatic experiences they experienced and described the impact of this trauma. The fact that first-generation college students experience high rates of mental health concerns certainly has implications for their ability to remain in college and be successful. Mental health is an important predictor of academic performance, persistence, and graduation rates for college students, as many students who leave college without a degree are struggling with mental health concerns (Kitzrow, 2009). Participants spoke of how academic stressors contributed to periods of poor mental health and emphasized the negative toll this had on their academic performance and overall well-being. For example, Tony described dealing with symptoms of PTSD from experiencing a traumatic event. He did not receive mental health support and continued

to suffer from these symptoms, ultimately leading to severely diminished academic performance and homelessness for a period of time. It is also important to consider the physical toll that academic pursuit may have on students, like first-generation college students, who are often minorities on many college campuses (Destin, 2019). Destin suggests that future research should further investigate potential negative effects on physical health in order to more holistically conceptualize the experiences of minority students in higher education. Thus, health concerns pose a barrier to academic success and retention of first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities.

While there are likely many contributing factors to mental wellness for this population, it is clear that social support and sense of belonging are connected to decreased stress and increased mental health (Azmitia, Sumabat-Estrada, Cheong, & Covarrubias, 2018; Dixon Rayle & Chung, 2007; Sy et al., 2011; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). Supportive relationships and a sense of belonging are vital for first-generation college students to thrive. For participants, this was certainly true. All participants spoke of how supportive relationships helped to get them through difficult times and stressful situations during college. They spoke of conversations with family members where they considered dropping out of college but were encouraged and supported to persist. Lack of support sometimes led to decreased mental health. For example, Jude described dealing with symptoms of depression when the political environment on campus seemed to shift after the current president was elected. He described how he began to isolate himself and felt less connected and supported by others, which increased his feelings of depression.

Thus, it is imperative that mental health professionals working with first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities are aware of how important social support is to their well-being and success in college. On a practical level, in counseling, it is necessary to assess and identify existing support systems, whether that be family or otherwise, and help these clients to maintain close, supportive relationships. Mental health professionals can help the client to define what a supportive relationship looks like for them, as we found from the current study that there are individual differences in how participants assigned meaning to their relationships. Metanalysis research suggests that helping to shift perceived support, which is a cognitive evaluation of support, and improving the individuals' access to supportive persons may be among the most helpful interventions for increasing social support (Hogan, Linden, & Najarian, 2002). Cultural centers or other-identity based social or counseling groups on-campus are great recommendations that mental health professionals should consider, as they improve the access to potentially supportive relationships (Clayton et al., 2019). As participants discussed, having access to others who share salient identities can be impactful, particularly when you are in a minority group on-campus.

Additionally, particularly with family relationships, it is important for mental health professionals working with first-generation students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities to be aware of culturally-embedded expectations and to actively avoid interventions that may be biased toward independent cultural norms. Participants, especially those from cultural backgrounds where interdependence is generally valued, expressed difficulties maintaining the level of connectedness expected from their families

when faced with intense academic demands. In the literature, this is often referred to as competing demands and research suggests that first-generation college students who originate from interdependent cultural backgrounds tend to struggle to balance the competing demands of school and family connectedness (McWhirter et al., 2007; Soria & Stebleton, 2012a; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Tseng, 2004; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2014). Research suggests that mental health professionals may hold biases about interdependence, which can negatively affect the therapeutic relationship and may lead to mental health underuse for clients from cultural backgrounds where interdependence is valued (Yeh, Hunter, Mandan-Bahel, Chiang, & Arora, 2004). Thus, for the sake of effective therapy and a strong therapeutic alliance, mental health professionals must be aware of their biases around interdependence, which can be achieved through training, self-reflection, and supervision. Counseling psychologists and other mental health professionals working at college counseling centers will likely need to support first-generation clients who identify as racial or ethnic minorities in navigating family relationships and academic obligations, as these students are likely to experience competing demands. Counselors should help clients to evaluate their values, including their value toward interdependence, and aid them in negotiating daily family demands and academic demands (Tseng, 2004). It may also be necessary to help clients renegotiate their cultural identities if family roles shift due to increased academic demands (Jenkins et al., 2013). Finally, it is important to highlight the challenges that parents and families of first-generation college students face in navigating the education system, particularly when they did not grow up in the United States (Chlup et al., 2018). Parents and families of first-generation college students can be empowered to support

their students through gaining more information about college and the college transition (Sy et al., 2011). "The Transition Year Project" is a website created by the JED Foundation to help families navigate the challenges of the transition to college and can be used by parents to become more informed (The Transition Year, n.d.).

As described previously, the significance of mentors was described by almost all participants, which is aligned with recent research suggesting that mentorship is connected with positive mental health outcomes for underrepresented college students on predominately white campuses (Hurd et al., 2018). For participants, there was an emphasis on finding mentors who were willing to provide more than just academic support and guidance. Students of color often benefit from more holistic mentoring, where the focus of mentorship is beyond just academic support and may address personal and familial concerns they are facing as well (Luedke, 2017). From these close mentorships, participants seemed to feel a sense of trust and willingness to be open. Faculty members were sometimes the people who participants felt most comfortable disclosing about their mental health concerns. Tara, for example, described connecting with her mentor in an abnormal psychology class. She felt she could trust her professor and opened up about her ongoing struggles with bipolar. From this connection, Tara gained a mentor that she maintained through college and was provided with referrals and resources to receive support for her bipolar disorder.

Participants disclosing to faculty and mentors about their mental health concerns important finding that has implications for mental health and contributes novel information to the literature, highlighting the vital role faculty may play in noticing when students need to seek support for their mental health. Thus, mental health professionals

working in a college setting should foster relationships with faculty and staff on-campus in order to best serve first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities, as faculty and staff members may be the first people they open up to about mental health concerns. Mental health professionals should also provide trainings to faculty and staff about making mental health referrals and how to identify common warning signs of mental health concerns, as counseling psychologists and mental health professionals have unique knowledge that many faculty members do not share about the treatment of mental illness.

Participants also described difficulties asking for help and knowing where to find help on-campus, which is in line with research that suggests first-generation students are often self-reliant and prone to underutilize social support because they are concerned about burdening others or being judged (Chang et al., 2019). They described sometimes having difficulty connecting with counselors or others in a helping role who do not share salient aspects of their identities, such as being first-generation or a person of color. Chloe eloquently described how her intersecting identities as a first-generation "chocolate" female influenced all aspects of her life and she had difficulty connecting deeply with mental health professionals who she did not feel understood these identities. Difficulty locating resources on-campus and finding counselors who share salient identities also have important implications for the mental health of first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities. Firstly, there seems to be a need for more diversity and representativeness amongst mental health professionals in college counseling centers. Research suggests that counseling center utilization of racial and ethnic minorities is predicted by the counseling center staff representativeness

(Hayes et al., 2011). That is, when more African American counselors are on staff at counseling centers, there tends to be more utilization of counseling services by African American clients. Hiring diverse counseling center staff, then, is a priority and will likely lead to greater utilization of services for students of all backgrounds.

Additionally, these findings highlight the fact that cultural competence is paramount when working with first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities. Social justice necessitates understanding and dismantling systems of oppression from an intersectional lens, recognizing the affect that these systems have on multi-faceted identities (DeBlaere et al., 2019). Many of the participants spoke of cultural competence directly in their interviews, saying that mental health professionals need to be aware of the cultural backgrounds of their clients and how this shapes their experiences, without overgeneralizing. Counseling psychology as a field holds diversity and social justice central to the profession's identity (Scheel et al., 2018) and thus counseling psychologists in college counseling centers must uphold this important aspect of the profession's identity and strive for multicultural competence.

Sue and Sue (2013) describe the journey toward cultural competence in three main parts. The first is gaining awareness of one's own beliefs, values, and biases. The second is awareness of the worldview of culturally diverse groups. The third is learning and utilizing culturally appropriate interventions. Thus, it is important that mental health professionals engage in self-reflection and become aware of their blind spots when working with diverse clients. Gaining education and delving into research about diverse populations, such as the current research, is also an important part of gaining cultural competence. Finally, it is important to actively seek out interventions that align with the

cultural worldviews and values of diverse clients. One recommended intervention that I would like to suggest, given the findings, applies to white counselors working with clients of color. When this dynamic is present, research suggests that being able to talk about race and other salient identities can be meaningful to diverse clients (King & Borders, 2019). King and Borders (2019) found that broaching the topic of race and difference in racial or ethnic identities that exist in the therapeutic relationship could be beneficial, particularly in the client's evaluation of the counselor's cultural responsiveness. Thus, transparency and openness to talking about issue of diversity is paramount for white counselors working with first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities.

Lastly, to address the fact that participants often did not know where to find help and resources, the current research suggests that it may be necessary for college counselors to be more flexible and move outside of the counseling center to meet student needs. While it may not be possible to provide traditional counseling in some spaces due to privacy concerns, counselors can hold workshops, engage in prevention programming, and provide psychoeducation about where to find help. Given that many first-generation college students arrive on-campus without much knowledge about what to expect from the transition, there are a wide range of interventions that could be used to help these students have more realistic expectations about college and knowledge of the system. For instance, mental health professionals can provide, or advocate for, transitioning to college life workshops or peer mentorship programs, which would likely help ease the transition for students (Sy et al., 2011). This falls in line with research that suggests that greater outreach to first-generation college students may promote help-seeking behaviors

(Kitzrow, 2009). Additionally, counselors may be able to help students make connections on-campus to address relevant academic and financial needs, such as connecting with financial aid, the dean of students, and other important resources, as participants in the current study found aspects of higher education, like navigating financial aid and FAFSA, difficult to manage. It is important to remember that first-generation college students generally come from lower income households and median family incomes for first-generation students is $41,000 per year, whereas continuing-generation mean family income stands at $90,000 annually (RTI International, 2019a). Research suggests that first-generation college students are more likely to apply for financial aid, borrow, and take out larger loans than continuing-generation students, contributing to higher rates of indebtedness (Furquim, Glasener, Oster, McCall, & Desjardins, 2017). Thus, helping first-generation students to find scholarships and grants, as many of the participants described receiving for being first-generation or minorities, may be important. Research suggests that first-generation college students are more likely to persist when provided with scholarships and grants (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Finally, the current study addressed important gaps in the literature regarding the strengths and resiliency factors of first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities. Interestingly, while there has been a large body of research dedicated to exploring the academic, financial, and psychological challenges first-generation students face when entering universities and college, which has been described in previous chapters, there have been very few studies that explore strengths first-generation students possess (Tate et al., 2015). Research aimed at improving

educational outcomes of students, particularly students from minority backgrounds, can "inadvertently and subtly adopt aspects of a perspective that emphasizes presumed personal deficits" (Destin, 2019, p. 1075). Limited research has been devoted to how first-generation students overcome the numerous challenges that they may be faced with throughout their college education. This is a critical gap in the literature, as strengths-based research, assessment, and treatment has been a fundamental value of counseling psychology as a field since its conception (Gelso et al., 2014). Thus, research on the unique and valuable assets of diverse students is necessary (Destin, 2019).

Most participants identified strengths that could be grouped into the categories of a strong work ethic, perseverance, and adaptability to change. These strengths were clear from their stories, as many of them had faced personal and academic challenges to achieve success in college. These identified strengths echo research finding that first-generation students tend to identify with a strong work ethic and internal drive (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Focusing on individual strengths, rather than pathology, and the positive effects it can have on mental health and retention is becoming an increasingly popular source of interventions (Koydemir & Sun-Selışık, 2016; Soria & Stubblefield, 2015; Victor, Teismann, & Willutzki, 2017). Research suggests that strengths-based interventions in counseling can have positive effects such as lower distress, greater protective factors, greater self-reported happiness, and greater self-reported quality of life (Koydemir & Sun-Selışık, 2016; Victor et al., 2017). Thus, it is recommended that psychologists and other mental health professionals working at college counseling centers assess for client strengths, as clients may not readily recognize them, which was true for participants in the current study. Identifying

sources of strength and helping clients to realize how these strengths contribute to ability to overcome the obstacles that have been placed in front of them can help build insight. Mental health professionals in college counseling centers should also use strengths-based theory and interventions, such as self-compassion or strengths-based CBT, to bolster mental health and well-being (Victor et al., 2017).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

A possible limitation of the current research is that participants were asked to recall experiences, emotions, and thoughts from early in their college career, which, as briefly discussed, relies on their memory of these events. It is possible that participants' memories of these events have been altered with time, as research suggests that memory retrieval can rely on a variety of factors (Eich et al., 1994). Thus, they may not accurately remember some of the information that I asked them to recall during the interviews. However, participants did not report difficulty remembering and for many participants, the questions only asked them to remember a few years previous. Given the limitations of memory, future research could limit reliance on participant memory by conducting longitudinal research where participants are asked to reflect on their off- and on-campus relationships several times throughout the duration of their college career. Thus, they would be asked about their current experiences, rather than past experiences, and these experiences could be compared across time.

Additionally, while the sample of participants who chose to be a part of the current research were relatively diverse, not all racial or ethnic groups were represented in the current study. Given that race and ethnicity were an important factor of the current research, it is notable that certain voices were not heard. For example, no participants in

the current study reported identifying as Jewish. As the researcher, I wanted to allow people to self-select to participate in the research and not try to select participants to achieve equal representation of various racial or ethnic groups. I did not want to limit certain participants from being involved in the research just because they were not from a racial or ethnic group that I wanted to sample. Future research could focus on attaining participants from other racial or ethnic groups and ensuring that voices from other ethnic and racial backgrounds are heard. Additionally, more research could be aimed at other subgroups, such as first-generation college students who are also immigrants. Recent research suggests that immigrant culture has some defining features that may impact immigrant college student experience and decision-making processes (Brady & Stevens, 2019). In the current study, there were several participants who were immigrants to the United States or whose parents had immigrated and they shared interesting perspectives on how this shaped their experiences. Future research should explore more deeply the experiences of immigrant first-generation college students. Future research focused on the unique experiences of DACA first-generation college student is also warranted, as Jude's experiences illustrated how being a DACA first-generation college student presents unique challenges.

Concluding Thoughts

It cannot be emphasized enough that first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities are a strong, resilient population and those who are able to successfully complete college are tasked with the challenges of navigating an educational system that is not designed for them. Universities embody and reproduce middle-class cultural norms of independence, which create an "unseen academic

disadvantage for first-generation transitioning to university settings" (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012, p. 1192). From a social justice perspective, the solution, then, involves addressing this disparity through making changes to the culture of higher education (DeBlaere et al., 2019). For example, Stephens, Fryberg, et al. (2012) recommends that university culture could make small shifts to "recognize, appreciate, and accommodate more than one cultural model of how to be a student" through changing communication tools such as student guidebooks and mission statements and altering the everyday rules of what it means to be a successful student (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012, p. 1194). These changes would likely take time, as systems are often slow to make changes, but would ultimately benefit students who come into college from marginalized backgrounds and are further marginalized by the education system.

On more of a microsystemic level, it is important that the challenges this population faces be recognized so that first-generation college students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities can be empowered to succeed. The current research serves as a foundation to understand the challenges and strengths of this population and provides implications for practice. Those surrounding first-generation college students, including family members, friends, mentors, and faculty members, must also be empowered to provide the support these students need as they navigate higher education. As participants described, they want to pass along this support to future generations, to lay the foundations for siblings, cousins, and nieces and nephews to attain a degree. To conclude, I would like to include a salient quote from Tony's interview about the importance of support and how he hopes to support future generations. He said:

> It's always a tough road wherever you go, but just know like you have family, who love and support you and that's going to make it a little lighter, you know,

and understand like why you're doing it for. So those are the things I always try to give to my family.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

DATE:	June 5, 2018
TO:	Megan Martinez
FROM:	University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB
PROJECT TITLE:	[1239341-1] Supports and challenges of first-generation students: The roles of family, community, and on-campus relationships
SUBMISSION TYPE:	New Project
ACTION:	APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE:	June 5, 2018
EXPIRATION DATE:	June 5, 2022

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

Megan -

Thank you for your patience with the UNC IRB process during the summer. Your application materials and protocols are very thorough and clear and it is verified/approved exempt.

Best wishes with your participant recruitment and data collection for this interesting and relevant research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Megan Stellino, UNC IRB Co-Chair

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or Sherry.May@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
University of Northern Colorado

Study Title: Supports and Challenges of First-Generation Students: The Roles of Family, Community, and On-Campus Relationships

Researchers:
Megan Martinez, BA, Doctoral Student; mart0778@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor: Basilia Softas-Nall, Ph.D., Professor of Counseling Psychology, Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education
Phone: 970.351.1631 E-mail: basilia.softas-nall@unco.edu

Purpose and Background: The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand the relational experiences of first-generation students who identify as a racial or ethnic minority.

Using one-on-one interviews, conducted in-person or via Skype, participants will be invited to share their experiences in being a first-generation college student and navigating both on-campus relationships and relationships with their families and communities they grew up in. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed and analyzed to develop core themes about their experience. Interviews will take approximately 60-90 minutes. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym for all analysis and reporting purposes. Consent forms will be kept in a locked file in the Research Advisor's office for three years.

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:
• you will be asked demographic information, such as age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.
you will be asked questions about your experience as being a first-generation college student who identifies as racial or ethnic minority
• you will be asked about your experience navigating on-campus and off-campus relationships

Confidentiality: Your responses will only be shared with members of the investigation team. By participating in this study, you have given us permission to release information to these persons.

Initials______

Although confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, every effort will be made to maintain your confidentiality. The results of this study may be published in the professional literature, but no publication will contain information that will identify you. The research data will be kept in a secure location, and only the researchers will have access to the data. After transcription, identifying information will be removed. The consent forms will be kept in a locked file in the Research Advisor's office for three years.

Risks: Foreseeable risks are not greater than those that might be encountered with conversations with fellow colleagues about experiences being a first-generation college student. If emotional distress occurs, the UNC Counseling Center may be contacted for free counseling services. Contact information is below.

UNC Counseling Center
1901 10th Ave., Greeley, CO 80639
970-351-2496

Benefits: There will be no direct benefits to the participant. Through the nature of the interview questions, there is potential for gained insight into one's experiences as a first-generation student and strengths or methods of persevering through college. Additionally, participants will be enrolled in drawing to receive one of two Amazon gift cards valued at $20 each.

Costs: The cost of participating in this study is the time invested to participate in the interview and for transportation related to the interview. No compensation will be provided to you for participating in this study.

Questions: If you have any questions about the study, you may contact the researcher by phone or email. You may also contact the researcher's advisor, Dr. Basilia Softas-Nall, by phone or email.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Sherry May, IRB Administrator, Office of Sponsored Programs, 25 Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

Participant's Signature
____Date___________

Researcher's Signature
____Date___________

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear interested participant,

I hope all your semester is going well! My name is Megan Martinez, and I am a Ph.D. student in Counseling Psychology at UNC. I am working on my dissertation, examining the relational experiences of first-generation students who identify as a racial or ethnic minority, exploring both on-campus and off-campus relationships. This study has been approved by the UNC IRB (Approval Number _______). I am hoping you will consider participating.

I am looking for individuals, between the ages of 20-25 years of age and who are enrolled as an undergraduate student, willing to participate in an interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. If you are interested and identify as a **first-generation undergraduate student** (the first individual in your family to attend college or community college) as well as identifying as a **racial or ethnic minority**, you may be eligible to participate. Additional criteria include being a **junior or senior** and **not being a transfer student or student athlete**. If you meet these criteria and are interested in participating, please continue reading below.

Those who choose to participate will first be asked to fill out a demographics questionnaire via email. Individuals may then answer questions related to your experiences as a first-generation student. The interviews will be conducted at a coffee shop or public library. The interview requires up to **60-90 minutes** to complete and will be audio recorded. The interview will not ask for any identifying data (e.g., name, address), and I will work to maintain your confidentiality to the best of my abilities through the process through processes such as choosing a pseudonym. **Students will be eligible to win one of two $20 Amazon gift cards.** Emails will be collected on completion of the interview. The results of this study could contribute to better understanding of strengths and challenges of first-generation students and help to provide support for these individuals.

To participate, please email me at mart0778@bears.unco.edu.

Sincerely,

Megan Martinez
University of Northern Colorado
Counseling Psychology Doctoral Student
mart0778@bears.unco.edu

APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic Information

1. Do you identify as a first-generation student (the first member of your family to ever attend college or community college)?
    a. Yes
    b. No

2. What is your age? ____________________

3. What is your gender
    a. Male/Man
    b. Female/Woman
    c. Non-binary
    d. Transgender
    e. Other (Please Describe_________________________)
    f. Prefer not to answer

4. What is your current class standing?
    a. Freshman/first-year
    b. Sophomore/second-year
    c. Junior/third-year
    d. Senior/fourth-year
    e. Super senior/ fifth-year and beyond

5. When did you begin college? _____/______/________

5. When is your anticipated graduation date? _____/______/________

6. What is your current major? ______________________________________

7. What is your current GPA? _______________________

8. Which of the following categories best describes your race or ethnicity?
    a. Caucasian/White
    b. African-American/Black
    c. American Indian or Alaskan Native
    d. Hawaiian Native or Other Pacific Islander
    e. Latino/a or Hispanic
    f. Asian
    g. Other (Please Describe______________________________)
    h. Multi-racial/multi-ethnic (Please Describe_________________________)

9. Please list current occupation for each parent:
    a. Mother's occupation _____________________________________
    b. Father's occupation _____________________________________

10. What is your marital status?
    a. Single
    b. Married
    c. Separated
    d. Other

11. What is your current living situation?
    a. Living in on-campus housing
    b. Living off-campus
    c. Living with family
    d. Other (Please Describe_______________________________)

12. Are you a student athlete at UNC?
    a. Yes
    b. No

13. Are you a transfer student
    a. Yes
    b. No

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

1. Visualize the moment when you first decided to go to college. How did you decide that you wanted to go to college? What messages about college did you receive from your family and friends within your community? (Bourdieu, cultural and social capital)

2. Tell me about what it has been like, from your experience, to be a first-generation student who identifies as a racial or ethnic minority? What challenges and opportunities have you been presented with? (SCCT person inputs, potentially Bourdieu social and cultural capital)

The following questions will be prompts to further explore meaning. The order in which these questions are asked may vary depending on participants' responses to the first questions.

3. When you first began college, during your first year, tell me about your relationships with other students and faculty. (SCCT- Contextual affordances)

4. Since your first year, how have these relationships with other students and faculty changed or not changed? (SCCT, potentially tapping into dominant and non-dominant cultural capital (Carter, 2003))

5. Tell me about an incident where you needed help with your studies or in school and would have liked more support from faculty and other students. (SCCT- contextual barriers, Bourdieu- lack of cultural capital)

6. What ways have your relationships with your family members and friends from the community you grew up in have changed since you began college? (SCCT- contextual affordances)

7. How would you describe your relationships with your family members and friends from the community you grew up in currently? (SCCT- contextual affordances)

8. Tell me about an incident where you needed help with your studies or in school and would have liked more support from family members or friends in the community? (Bourdieu, cultural capital)

9. How have your relationships with faculty and other students provided support to help you succeed during your undergraduate career? How have you been able to overcome any barriers? (SCCT- contextual supports)

10. How have your relationships with family and community members provided support to help you succeed during your undergraduate career? How have you been able to overcome any barriers? (SCCT contextual supports)

11. What strengths have helped you to get through your undergraduate career as a first-generation student? (Strengths-based focus)

12. What would you like college mental health professionals to know about working with first-generation students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities? (SCCT- person inputs)

13. Is there anything you would like to say that you haven’t gotten the chance to say yet?