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### Investigating Major Choice Among 1.5- Generation Immigrant Trinity College Students

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Investigating Major Choice Among 1.5- Generation Immigrant

Trinity College Students

Senior Thesis

Yeabsira Debebe

Educational Studies 400: Senior Research Seminar

Professor Daniel Douglas

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## **ABSTRACT**

Over the past decade, the average number of 1.5 generation immigrant students that have enrolled, attended, and graduated from a liberal arts institution has increased drastically. However, their experiences with higher education and the motivation behind their college major selection have continued to be overlooked in the fields of Social Sciences. This study was administered at Trinity College, a small liberal arts institution in Hartford, Connecticut, with the goal of answering how Trinity College's 1.5 generation immigrant students negotiate college major choices due to parental expectations. Additionally, it will explore and explain how these choices and students' experiences at Trinity College will affect their academic success and economic mobility. Using qualitative research, eight semi-structured video interviews were conducted with 1.5 generation immigrant sophomore, junior and senior students from Trinity College. Interviews focused on the relationship between 1.5 generation immigrant students' parents and the role that they played in their children's educational experience, especially during the college process and their aspirations after graduating. This study was able to identify three groups: students who were influenced by their parents to choose a specific major (Conformists), students who were influenced by their parents to pick a specific major but change it (Rebels) and students who pursued the college major they wanted (Independents).

## **Introduction**

Higher education decision-making is a process that consists of several separate steps, which include whether to attend college, where to attend college, and what field to study. When it comes to 1.5 generation immigrant students, little is known about this process of selecting a college major and career path. The motivation behind this research is the lack of studies on the college decision-making process for 1.5 generation immigrant students and my personal experience navigating through the college application process as a 1.5 generation immigrant student. I immigrated to America at the age of 10 and being the eldest daughter, I was forced to assimilate a lot quicker than the rest of my family. This role meant adapting to a new school, learning a new language and entire new customs. Along with being the only source to translating phone calls, tax documents, visits to the doctor, attend parent-teacher conferences for myself and younger sister and filled job application, all during the age of 10. I was the only one that can quickly communicate both in Amharic and English, so I became an essential part of accessing the necessary resources for my family. As a first-generation immigrant college student, the conversation of college attendance was discussed before the actual process of selecting a college.

When it comes to college major choice, the top three were engrained as the only choices: Law, Engineering or Medicine. Many immigrant students have heard of the stories of struggle within family, and the sacrifices that the parents have had to make to provide a better life for their children. These stories often serve as reminders to work harder and choose a career path that can support the family. As a freshman, I was pushed towards a field of my parent's liking rather than my own. I was expected to be on a pre-med track, in hopes of one day becoming a doctor. I decided to major in psychology, but the course work did not grab my attention. Being that I was at liberal arts school, I took advantage of not settling on a major until I explored my other options. I decided to take a variation of courses in different fields such as education and

sociology. Once I took an education class, I knew that I wanted to work to improve the schooling I experienced in inner-city public-schools, even if it meant that I will be disappointing my parents. I declared sociology as my major sophomore year of college and added education as a second major during the second semester.

Using these experiences, this research will explain the ways that 1.5 generation immigrant students from Trinity College communicate their college major choice with their parents. Trinity College is a predominately white liberal arts college, located in Hartford, Connecticut. With Trinity's students of color making up only 21% of the entire student population, the number of 1.5 generation immigrant students that attend Trinity is even less. Participants have been at Trinity for at least two years and have knowledge of how the major college process works. However, students come from various backgrounds that make their decisions a lot different than their peers. Additionally, I will explore how these experiences shape their academic outcome perceptions of future economic mobility . This led me to raise the question: how are 1.5 generation immigrant students at Trinity College negotiating parental expectations in their selection of college majors? Ho do students perceive this decision will affect their academic success and economic mobility? Throughout this paper, I will seek to answer those two questions as they relate to students' experiences at Trinity College. In order to answer these questions, I conducted a qualitative interviews, specifically one-on-one virtual interviews, with to eight 1.5 generation students from Trinity College to get an insight into the motivation behind their college major choice. I then recorded and transcribed the interviews in order to careful code them. Finding some commonalities and differences amongst students' experiences. My hypothesis is that there are direct and indirect parental influences that will affect 1.5 generation immigrant students' college major choice. I believe that the majority of the

students will cave into the major choice that their parents want them to, even though they are struggling through the course work. There might be a few outliers like students who are the youngest in their family or migrated to America at an early age, who will pick their own college major.

### **Literature Review**

There have only been few studies conducted that examine 1.5 generation immigrant children's experiences and the different modes of assimilation they utilized within their new environments. Additionally, there is a scarce amount of studies that discuss the relationship between 1.5 generation immigrant students and higher education. Unfortunately, most of these studies fail to recognize the role that immigrant parents play throughout this transition. The literature review below presents themes of assimilation, parental expectations, college major choice, and expectations after college. However, this paper will primarily focus on how 1.5 immigrant students from Trinity College negotiated their college major choice with their parents as it relates to their academic success and socioeconomic mobility.

### **Defining the "1.5 Generation" Immigrant Population**

The terminology 1.5 generation was coined by Ruben Rumbaut, an American sociologist who formed this contrast to refer to individuals like himself, who he saw as "stuck in-between" cultures (Rumbaut, 1, Roh and Chang 2). 1.5 generation immigrants are born in their home country but immigrated to America as children or adolescents, typically between the ages of seven to fourteen, and are primarily educated here (Roh and Chang, 3). Roh and Chang (2020) continue to point out that 1.5 generation immigrants are longtime U.S. residents and depending

on their age of arrival, a period of education in their home country, where their family settled and lived, which ethnic group they belong affects the roles that they play at home and school (Roh and Chang, 3). For my research, it's critical to identify some of these aspects in my participants' lives to understand better their unique perspective on how that affects their college major selection. Since 1.5 generation immigrants are moving to America at such an early age, it will be interesting to see how they negotiate their sense of self within a different context.

### **1.5 AT HOME AND SCHOOLS**

Studies about language acquisition and acculturation have only focused on the individual instead of also taking the whole family into account. Nevertheless, researchers have continued to identify school and home as the two vital spaces that shape 1.5 generation immigrants' identity and adjustment to their new setting within a migrant context (Roh and Chang, 12). Most immigrants move with their families for better educational and economic opportunities and make decisions in reference to their home country. Essentially, the family and home become the primary setting for socializing children according to their native culture by maintaining cultural traditions and values (Suarez-Orozco and Qin 2006). 1.5 generation immigrants have a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic heritage before migrating to America. However, the informal means of language acquisition utilized by 1.5 immigrant youth quickly makes them a great asset to their new lives in America. In most cases, the eldest child, regardless of gender, acquires enough English-speaking skills from TV, radio, and interactions at school that subsequently force them to assume duties usually left to parents in English-speaking homes (Roberge, 113). Valenzuela Jr. (1997) identifies that immigrant youth engage in the role of tutors, advocates, and surrogate parents, which places a tremendous amount of responsibility on the child for the

everyday functioning of the family (Valenzuela Jr, 729). As tutors and advocates, they serve as translators between their parents and younger siblings and other adults like doctors, teachers, dentists, etc. They are often responsible for completing important documents associated with bank accounts, schooling, and even housing applications and would often intervene when needed during altercations. Lastly, as surrogate parents, they took the lead role in assisting and caring for their younger siblings. However, the research also concluded that although these roles are usually bestowed upon the eldest child, girls played a larger role as bridge-builder and cultural interpreters for their parents and grandparents, often gently correcting them or advising them. Young girls in an immigrant household are perceived to be credible and often oversaw and managed "complex financial matters such as purchasing a home, filing income taxes," forcing them to undertake these specific roles more than boys (Valenzuela JR, Suarez-Orozco and Qin 2006). In their research, immigrant girls shared that they felt burdened by more family responsibilities, and often leave them overwhelmed.

Family investment plays a vital role in ensuring optimal child development, but that's heavily dependent on the support and resources that parents can provide within and outside the family. Zhang and Han (2017) point out that young children of immigrants are more likely to be exposed to poverty and economic hardship than American born children (Zhang and Han, 4). According to Migration Policy Institute, as of 2018, 26.9 million children under 18 lived in low-income families, and of that number, 8.5 million or 32% were children of immigrants. The median family income between the two groups also varied. The median annual household income for immigrant families is \$59,000 (Pew Research Center 2018) compared to \$64,324 for U.S. born families (Census 2018). The disparities in income are due to the low-wage jobs that many immigrant families acquire because of their low education levels, limited English



proficiency, and in some cases, lack of legal immigration status (Zhang and Han, 3). Being that immigrant families usually fall in the low-income status, they don't have the means to invest more into their children's educational resources or have enough time to participate in their school events (Zhan and Han, 3). Therefore, children of immigrants usually face challenges as they relate to access to high-quality education and how that influences their outlook on the purpose of education. However, this research does not mention the parents' expectations for schools to close that achievement gap. In my research, I will expand on some of the different methods and outlets that immigrant parents utilized to support their children in their education in the best way that they knew how.

On the other hand, schools have continued to serve as social agencies where 1.5 generation immigrant students can adapt and assimilate into the dominant culture through interactions with their classmates and teachers. Although they have spent most of their lives in America and are familiar with the U.S culture and educational system, 1.5 immigrant youth are often referred to as "U.S. educated English learners" (Singhal 2, and Roberge 115). They are "oral learners," having learned English through listening and speaking and not through reading and writing. Roberge (2002) points out that 1.5 immigrants grew up acquiring complete communicative skills, which is evident in their knowledge of U.S. social customs and culture (Roberge 118). Therefore, in most cases, they are perceived as U.S. born native English speakers. However, while they can understand spoken English very well and might seem native in their conversation speaking skills, they still might be working to tackle written English aspects, especially in academic writing.

## **College Major**

As 1.5 generation students' progress into higher education, they start to internalize their parents' expectations into their own educational journey. Before students actually make the decision to attend college, they develop an attitude about higher education (Griffin, Pilar, McIntosh and Griffin, 97). Immigrant youth often develop higher educational aspirations out of respect to their parents' struggles in their home countries. They grapple with providing them with a better life in America. The research points out that a student's habitus shapes their educational choices and options, but college attendance was non-negotiable. "College was viewed as a requirement and a part of their future from a very young age" (Griffin, Pilar, McIntosh, and Griffin, 102). Participants from this study also viewed education as a privilege and ultimately placed a high value on it and tied it to success. This research utilizes many methods that are applicable to the way I am conducting my study. For example, I'm also planning to offer \$10 as an incentive for students who participate in this study. I also plan on using snowball sampling by asking participants to connect me with other 1.5 generation immigrant students from Trinity that might be interested in participating in this research.

Ma (2009) analyzes family's socioeconomic status (SES) and parental involvement to find college major choice patterns amongst students. Ma (2009) defines the choice of college major as a fundamental part of education decisions, both as an outcome of academic and socioeconomic success. The research showed that due to language difficulty coupled with parental expectations for rapid upward mobility, immigrant students have a higher tendency to choose STEM fields over Social Sciences, Education, or English (Ma 221; Deenanth 2014). They also revealed that majoring in STEM fields overrides whatever language struggles that they are experiencing. Difficulties in writing stem from a lack of prior instruction in the kinds of writing needed for academic domains. Participants also shared that they often felt pressured to

choose a major and career path preferred by their parents because it was presumed that majoring in these fields will guarantee a well-paying job upon graduation (Ma 2009; Deenanath 2014). Additionally, this research concluded that low-income students often choose far lucrative college majors such as health Science or business (Ma 2009). However, many students dreaded the idea of working just for a paycheck and wanted something fulfilling, so they usually changed their major despite their parent's wishes. The findings from this research prove that when parents are involved in their children's education, they inevitably bring their expertise in a certain domain area if they have any. In turn, immigrant children analyze and make their college major choice in respect to their parents' expectations.

When it comes to how that translates into students' academic success, Deennath (2014) conducts a study to analyze the graduation rate between students who choose their own majors and those that took their parents' advice. Students who pursued majors in humanities and social Science were most likely to continue with that major and graduate. In contrast, students who enrolled with a major in STEM fields switched within two years. Students who changed out of STEM majors were all ethnic minorities who were struggling with the course and wanted to pursue something where they could support and give back to their communities (Deeannath 11). The data proved that students who choose their own major graduated at higher rates than those who did not. Participants often felt pressure from their parents who don't have the college experience but still have high expectations for their child's academic success in college and financial success in their career (Deenanath, 11). Students also revealed that they found it challenging when they wanted to change their college majors due to their parents' major expectations for them. In turn, students often struggled to get through their coursework and did not change their majors in fear of disappointing their parents. Deenanath (2014) was able to

recruit participants through on-campus students' organizations, which is an equally good space to find 1.5 generation immigrants on Trinity College's campus. This research was relevant to my research based on the methods they used to find their target sample.

### **College Writing**

College writing was a common topic among the few studies focused on 1.5 generation immigrant students and higher education. Although 1.5 generation immigrants received most of their education in the United States, their educational experience is still inconsistent. Harklau (2003) points out that while the number of 1.5 generation immigrant students enrolling and attending higher education has increased, students are still learning English (Harklau 1). 1.5 generation immigrant students are often placed in low-ability classes throughout high school, so they have limited experience in academic reading and writing (Harklau 3). When it comes to placement in college writing courses, students experience challenges that convince them to steer clear majors that require extensive writing. Harklau (2003) points out that "while some generations of 1.5 students come to college prepared for academics required in a college context, many do not" (Harklau 4). She continues to point out that this often stems from "the lack of prior instruction in the kind of writing needed for academic domains and lack of attention to the problems that interfere with students' ability to show what they know in writing." Once students enroll in college, they often find themselves taking ESL courses designed for international students or ESL courses geared towards students who have limited exposure to the English language and U.S customs and education (Harklau 5). However, both of these courses aren't fit for 1.5 generation immigrant students who have the U.S. education system's experience and have enough English speaking skills. The authors echo on some points made by Deenath (2014) that

colleges needed better to accommodate 1.5 generation immigrant students' academic needs to have an easier time adjusting to college courses.

### **Methodology**

For this research, qualitative data was collected and analyzed. The primary data source is the semi-constructed eight one-on-one interviews with 1.5 generation immigrant students from Trinity college who have already declared their college major. These interviews were conducted from October- November 2020.

### **Data Collection**

The sample of Trinity College's 1.5 generation immigrant students was selected through an email sent out to cultural organizations on Trinity's campus. It included organizations like The African Student Association (TASA), La Voz Latina (LVL), and Asian American Student Association (AASA) and a mass email sent out on my behalf from the Office of Multicultural Office (OOMA).

The email summarized the purpose, requirements for participation, and a link to a Google Form with five survey questions that determined if students could participate in the research. The letters sent out to cultural organizations on campus is listed as Appendix A. The survey questions are included as Appendix B in this paper. Through the Google Form survey, I connected with four 1.5 generation immigrant students at Trinity College, who have already declared their college major. Afterward, I used the snowball sampling method, where I asked participants to connect me with other 1.5 generation immigrant students from Trinity that met the sample target of my research. Although Trinity College has a small population of immigrant students,

participants could easily navigate through their close-knit network to connect me with other students.

Due to COVID, the majority of the initial communication with participants was held through emails. I emailed participants an informed consent form that contained information about procedures, benefits, and risks of the research, including the emphasis on voluntary participation. The consent form is included as Appendix C. Participants were required to sign and email back the consent form to participate in the research. The 45-minute interviews were conducted over Zoom, WhatsApp, and FaceTime calls. Before setting up interview dates, I made sure which mode of communication the participants preferred. The majority of participants wanted the interview over Zoom, so before my first interview, I took the time to learn about Zoom and its features to create a safe space for them to share. I've had experience using Facetime and WhatsApp video call features, so I felt more confident about navigating through those two applications.

At the start of each interview, I asked participants for permission to screen record. I also gave students the option to mute their camera for the entirety of the interview. The interview questions served as a conversation starter and made students comfortable enough to share their personal experiences. The interview guide started with open-ended questions about the participant and any recollection they had about their schooling in the home countries. The interview continued with a more in-depth questioning about how their parents contributed to their schooling experiences, specifically in their college major selection and their expectations for after graduation. The interviews assisted in identifying the main patterns and themes of the research. The interview guide is included as Appendix D. Participants were compensated with a \$10 Amazon gift card for their time and cooperation.

It's also important to highlight that my positionality as an interviewer might have influenced the responses that students felt comfortable enough to share. As a 1.5 generation immigrant student, I resonated with a lot of their experiences. I even shared some of my own, which prompted them to reveal more details about their college application process and their experiences at Trinity College. Although I was dissatisfied that I had to conduct virtual interviews at the beginning of this research, I found that majority of the participants prefer it instead of in-person interviews. There was an agreement amongst students that virtual interviews took the pressure out of the formal interviewing process and they didn't feel overwhelmed sharing their personal life stories. Additionally, students were also in the comfort of their one spaces, but at any moment they felt uncomfortable , they turned off their cameras.

### **Participants**

The sample size for this research included two sophomores, three juniors, and three seniors students, who identified as 1.5 immigrants and have been taking courses specific to their major for at least a semester. As liberal arts students, they shared their knowledge of Trinity College's major selection process, which meant that they had to declare their major as sophomores but still have the flexibility to take other courses in different fields over their undergraduate career.

Participants in this study include two male students who migrated from African countries of Ethiopia and Ghana and one female student from Ghana. Three students migrated from The Caribbean, two of the male students are from Trinidad and Tobago and Haiti. The female student is from the Dominican Republic. Lastly, there are two students from Asia, the female student is

from China, and the male student is from India. Students also identified the age of their arrival to the United States, which ranged from ages nine to fourteen years old.

Table 1:

**Description of Sample:**

Name	Country of Origin	Age of Arrival	Year	Initial College Major Choice	Changed their major?
Lydia	Ghana	13	Junior	Biology	No
Umar	Zimbabwe	13	Senior	Engineer	No
Kim	China	14	Senior	Neuroscience	No
David	India	12	Junior	Computer Science	No
Addisu	Ethiopia	13	Junior	Economics	No-> added theater minor
Jean	Haiti	9	Sophomore	Political Science	No
Kayla	Dominican Republic	9	Sophomore	Political Science	Yes-> Sociology
Josiah	Trinidad and Tobago	10	Junior	Biology	Yes-> Sociology

**Data Analysis**

The eight semi-structured interviews were conducted through FaceTime, WhatsApp, and Zoom video calls and were immediately manually transcribed. Before working on the qualitative data, I printed and reread the transcript to get a sense of what it contained and wrote down any questions, thoughts, or ideas I had on a separate page. I continued to review and explore the data to find any common relationships or differences between students' experiences and marked some of these themes along the way. To make sense of the data, I found it effective to manually code



the transcripts to describe and answer what they represent. I searched for anything that will disclose the motivation behind students' college major choices and if there were any parental influences along the process, indirectly or directly. Taking notes along the way also helped me keep track of other findings that didn't directly answer my research question but are relevant to 1.5 generation immigrant college students' experiences. I continued to use highlighters, notes in the margins, sticky paste on the transcripts to identify and label recurring themes, language, and opinions to help me analyze and connect the data. I ended up with about ten essential themes in the first look over, but I combined some ideas which I thought fit together to better understand students' experiences, leaving me with eight codes/themes.

Table 2:

*Themes/Codes Used*

Code	Brief Description
UEX	Unreasonable Expectations
ATR	Access to resources
SIB	Siblings
PUH	Poor Understanding of Higher Education in USA
CSA	Career Satisfaction
ACC	Academically Challenging
FGS	First Generation Student

COM	Work in their community
HOM	Returning to their home country
FSE	Financial Security
GUI	Guilt
AFF	Affordability
CCO	College Counselor
LAE	Liberal Arts Education

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations in this research that are worth noting when analyzing the data collected. It is crucial to mention that I conducted this research during the fall semester of 2020, and with COVID –19 still being a big part of our lives, formal ways of communication had to be through email or phone. Additionally, the fact that Trinity College has a small number of students of color makes it hard to find willing participants who met my target sample. Even after the Office of Multicultural Affairs sent out an email on my behalf, only first-year students were interested. However, since they have not yet declared their majors, students were automatically excluded from participating in this study. With snowball sampling and word of mouth on social media, I was fortunate to connect with other 1.5 generation immigrant students from Trinity College.

In terms of the actual interviews, the interview guide served as conversation starters. It allowed students to expand on any part of their experience that they were more comfortable and interested in sharing. It should be noted that the sample size for this study is only eight 1.5

generation immigrant students from Trinity College and they were interviewed to share their personal motivation behind their college major choice. Their contribution is particular to the Trinity College community, and the results from this study should not be taken as a generalization to understand a broader context. As an interviewer and my identity as a 1.5 generation immigrant student, could also create potential biases. Students are aware of this fact, and it might have affected their responses. It might also be due to their comfortability level, and it was reflected in the amount of time that students were willing to spend and the amount of information they were willing to share. At the same time, my identity could've made students comfortable enough to share some aspect of their experience that will strength the data.

### **Ethical Components**

To conduct interviews with Trinity College students, I had to file for an IRB approval. After my application was accepted, I sent out written consent forms to students, which they had to read, sign, and email back to me to participate in the research. I used pseudonyms to protect all participants' identities. The recorded data or findings can't be traced back to individual students at Trinity College. After the interviews were completed, recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed, any traces of the interview were destroyed.

### **Findings**

As I coded the interviews, three groups emerged: Conformists, Rebels, and Independents. For the first group of participants, Conformists, I further divided into two sub-groups: Happy and Unhappy Conformists. Participates in this group were influenced by their parents to choose their college majors and stuck with it. While Happy Conformists were lucky to match with one of their top three majors, Unhappy Conformists want to change their majors but fear the disappointment of their parents. Rebels groups students who were also influenced by their

parents to pick a major, but changed their majors regardless. Lastly, Independents students picked their own majors without parental pressure.

Happy and Unhappy Conformists	Rebels	Independent
Lydia  Umar  Kim	Kayla  Josiah	Jean

### *Happy Conformists*

Most respondents revealed that they had considered their college major before they even arrived at Trinity College. Participants displayed and expressed high aspirations for their future through two primary things: their own experiences growing up as a 1.5 generation immigrant and their parents' unrealistic expectations for them. Participants echoed the internal conflict between pursuing their passion or those of their parents as they made decisions about their education and career desires.

As Lydia started her college application process, she was confident that she wanted to pursue a Biology major at a small liberal arts college. Born in Ghana, Lydia recalls that her father relocated to America for a couple of years before bringing his family. Lydia was about 13 years old when she moved to New York, and her father immediately enrolled her and her two younger siblings into a public school in Manhattan.

When participants were asked, “*How involved you would say your parents were in your schooling at your birth country?*”, and the following questions urged students to share how that

translated once they enrolled in schools in America. The majority of the respondents reported being heavily conscious of their parents' tremendous sacrifices and made it their mission that their parents' efforts didn't go unnoticed. Hence, they majored in fields that can improve their family's socioeconomic status.

Whenever Lydia talks about her schooling experience in Ghana, she recalls her father's sacrifices to ensure that she was enrolled in an international school. He worked two to three jobs to hire tutors and buy the necessary materials to complete her course work. Lydia kept referring to herself as privileged and thankful that she has a great support system like her father and resources that helped her academic success while she was in Ghana. "...But that didn't stop there! When we got to America, I remember he used to love taking us to Barnes and Nobles to get Math , Science or American history textbooks for the upcoming school year." As the eldest daughter, she was also expected to set an example for her younger siblings by helping them complete the school work . "They complained about it being too hard or boring, but I didn't mind because Science was a passion that I shared with my father". Her father always has been fascinated with medicine and often reminded her that he didn't have the same opportunities to pursue his dreams of becoming a doctor while he was back in Ghana.

So, when it came down to her to pick her major, the conversation with her father was as she expected. Although he wanted her to continue with Biology and pursue a medical degree in graduate school, he warned her that it might be academically challenging. Lydia admits that being exposed to her family's hardships from a very young age influenced her to study in a field that can promise her financial security and improve her community's lives. As a junior on a pre-med track, she recalls how hard the course work was initially, but her father encouraged her to seek out tutors on campus and not shy away from reaching out to professors for help. Lydia

gleefully said that she couldn't wait to start to attend medical school and hopefully go back to her country to build hospitals.

There was a common theme amongst the group of students typified as Conformists; they often expressed that they've internalized their parents' struggles and picked a major that can provide them with the means to escape the cycle of poverty. Like Lydia, Umar shared similar stories of living in an impoverished state in his home country Zimbabwe. Even when he moved to America, his family continued to live in low-income communities. He communicated similar stories about the sacrifices that his mother made to provide him with access to a proper education in Zimbabwe. As a single mother, he recalled how she sold fruits and vegetables on top of her job as a cook to help pay for these schools' application and scholarship fees. Fortunately, Umar scored one of the top test scores for the Math sections and accepted a full scholarship to the private institution. Umar recalled his mother use to say, "People can take away your clothes or shoes, but they can never take away your knowledge." Umar and Lydia both had access to private education while they were in their home countries. They both recognized this as a privilege that shaped their outlook and strengthened their relationship with education. As other participants in this study have mentioned, there is a strong emphasis on the power of knowledge for upward socioeconomic mobility.

Umar and his mother moved to New York when he was about 13 years old, and their roles were immediately reversed. He learned how to speak English through interactions his neighborhood and school, TV shows, and music. Umar adapted to the American culture and system a lot quicker, forcing his mother to make him responsible for his family's welfare. "I was told to focus on my school in Zimbabwe, but coming to America, I had to be the leader and take care of my mother in the best way I knew how." As a 13-year-old, he was exposed to family

struggles, which he says reinforced his desire to attend higher education and obtain a job to improve their lives in America.

Umar pointed out that he started to take control of his future by going to the library and taking additional Math courses throughout high school. "I continued to work with Math because it made sense to me...I didn't enjoy the other subjects as much...". Unlike Lydia, Umar didn't think it was necessary to have a conversation with his mother about potential college major choices. She didn't grasp the college application process for starters, so he sought out his college counselor for advice. His college counselor, being aware of his circumstances, helped him with his college personal statement, connected him to SAT prep programs, and helped him apply to small liberal arts institutions like Trinity.

After many conversations, Umar knew that he wanted to major in the field, with an emphasis on Math; something that can guarantee financial security upon graduation. As a senior, Umar reflects on his freshman year at Trinity as one of the worst years of his life. He didn't have the financial or emotional support to get through his first year. He shared that he often felt alone, and his mother didn't understand that his mental state was deteriorating as the months passed. Over time, he was able to adjust to the coursework and even improve his failing grades.

Similarly, Kim recalls similar events once she emigrated from China to Boston with her family at fourteen. Kim was one of few students who didn't spend too much time speaking about her home country's schooling experiences. Instead, she expanded on the promises of a better life America was supposed to grant. "My father always talked about the "American Dream"...him getting a well-paying job...his children getting a good education and finding a great job to support the family". She felt optimistic about the move to America. However, with both of her parents having to find a job to support their family, as the eldest daughter, Kim had to play the

role of what she called the "mini adult" in her household. She recalled the routine of having to wake her siblings, making them breakfast before dropping them off at school. In the afternoons, she would then pick them up before making them dinner and helping them with their homework. As Kim detailed her day as a high school student, she recalled how tired she felt by the end of the day but still had to come home to take care of her siblings. She mentioned that, "I usually did my homework during my lunch break or free period."

Participants, (emphasis on those who came to America during high school age), were asked what subjects they struggled with or which they felt they excelled in. Like Umar, Kim did not invest as much time in her other classes as she did with Math and Science. She did not have time to read books assigned in her English class and often skipped out on classroom discussions because she couldn't articulate herself as well as her peers. Like Lydia, Kim took AP Biology, as well as AP Statistics in high school. She loved the subjects and became curious about the way that our mind and behavior worked. Likewise to Umar, Kim found support in her college counselor, and after several conversations, she knew that she wanted to major in neuroscience or psychology.

When asked how she negotiated her college major choice with her parents, she laughed and said, "I just told them I wanted to go to med school and maybe become a doctor." Her father was ecstatic at the idea of his daughter becoming a doctor. He kept pointing out what a great example she was setting for her younger siblings. Kim also mentioned how he called their family back in China to tell them the great news. Upon her arrival at Trinity, she took an introductory to psychology course and compared it to the introductory neuroscience course. During her second semester, she focused on neuroscience courses before declaring it as her major in a pre-med track.



While Umar and Lydia committed to their major by sophomore year, Kim took advantage of the liberal arts education system and explored her options before settling on a specific field. While Lydia's family had some sort of understanding of the college application process, Kim and Umar didn't feel the need to share their college major plans in detail. Both participants pointed out that their parents support them in the best way they can because they know that they are studying majors that require a lot of time and energy. Although the Happy Conformists reported that they have struggled through some courses and labs, both agree, their end goal outweighs the temporary struggles.

### *Unhappy Conformists*

86% of the participants identify as first-generation students, which meant they had to navigate the college admission process without their parents' help. Most participants shared that even though their parents do not have the expertise in any aspect of the higher educational system in America, they continued to advocate that expectations around participants' college majors and future career choices were very high. Although this section of this paper discusses five willing Conformists' experiences, David and Addisu are the outliers grouped as the Unhappy Conformists. Both participants shared that although they are dissatisfied with their college major choice, they won't change it for fear of disappointing their parents.

David mentions that he majored in Computer Science because it will help him acquire a career approved by his parents. David moved with his family from India to New York when he was about 12 years old. His father was a Math professor at a local University in Mumbai, and once they moved to America, he wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. Like Lydia's family, David shared that his family had the means to provide him with the external support to study,

apply and enroll in a selective specialized public high school in New York City. These schools provided students with rigorous college-level academics which were often dominated by white and Asian students. David recalls the courses to be very difficult but having a tutor and external after-school programs helped him get accustomed to the workload. Because he studied Math and Science in high school, his father expected him to continue with the field. His father was even offering college major suggestions such as Math, engineering, or computer Science. David emphasized that although he enjoyed the Math courses, he didn't see himself continuing with the subject. However, like Kim's father, his family also put the pressure of the American Dream to persuade him into majoring in the lucrative field. Being in a robotics club has intrigued his interests in computer Science, and he considered it something his father would approve of him to study at Trinity. He concludes that he doesn't regret his computer Science choice, he presumes that it will promise him a well-paying job upon graduation. However, like the other students before him, he remembers struggling through the course work as a freshman and even considered dropping out. However, as a junior, he points out that he has endured through the challenging part of his major.

Like David, Addisu is a first-generation college student, which he disclosed comes with many expectations and responsibilities. Addisu's parents wanted him to pick a major that was familiar to them, which usually revolved around anything that would result in him in the medical, law, or business career sectors. As other participants have mentioned, immigrant parents' primary goal for their children's college education is for their child to acquire a job that provides financial security. His father ran a business in Ethiopia, and he wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. Although Addisu has seen the benefits of running his own business in America, he has always been passionate about working on Broadway. Addisu shared his love for music

from a very young age and tried to be a part of the choir, singing groups and perform at talent shows at school whenever he got the chance.

However, as other older siblings in this study have disclosed, their needs usually took the backseat to their younger siblings. Addisu was thirteen when his family moved to Houston, Texas. He shared similar frustrations as Kim about being responsible for his younger siblings' well-being, which usually left him emotionally drained even to finish his schoolwork. Although his parents didn't have background knowledge of the college application process, they knew the importance of a high SAT score and the differences between community and private institutions. His parents supported him by hiring a tutor, buying SAT prep books, and connecting him to external sources like David's family. When it came to picking his actual college major, Addisu shared his interest in theater. Still, his family reminded him of his other options, these options that will secure him a well-paying job to take care of his future family. Eventually, Addisu budged into majoring in Economics.

However, as a sophomore, Addisu decided to take advantage of the liberal arts education and took a couple of theatre courses. After talking to his advisor, he has since added theater as a minor. Addisu wants to make his parents proud of his accomplishments thus far at Trinity, but he also talked about repaying his parents for all their sacrifices once he gets a job in the field of economics.

### *Rebels*

While most participants came to Trinity with a college major in mind, there were only two out of the eight students who ended up switching their major despite their parents' wishes. Both students articulated that they could study the field of their choice and have a satisfying

career that can support their families. As a former political Science major, Kayla shared that she switched her major because the field didn't grab her attention. She added that she couldn't see herself studying something that was white male populated. As a first-generation student, there was a lot of pressure in what she should major in as it will affect her potential career options. Her family urged her to become a lawyer, not knowing the intensity of the course work. Kayla points out that she didn't mind it at first because she moved to Boston with her family around the age of nine. She remembers how she spent an extensive amount of time at the local library, reading everything from Harry Potter to world history. Her love for historical books led her to analyze the legal system and its implications. "I fell in love with history, writing and diplomacy, I also noticed the gap in the socioeconomic status of those in power and the average American", she explained that ignited a passion for working in politicians to help create more inclusive laws. However, after a year of taking political Science classes, she knew that one person really couldn't disassemble the system on their own. Her interests deviated from what her parents wanted her to major in, and she took classes in social Sciences. Kayala switched her major to sociology as a sophomore, and she has continued to explore her career interests. When asked how she discussed her choice with her parents, she pointed out that she had to sit through the classes and choose a career that will make her happy, not her family. She has explained to her parents and although that has created a little temporary rift in the relationship with her mother, Kayla is happy to have picked a major that will someday help her change lives in her community.

Josiah echoed Kayla's concerns about the course work and the lack of representation in these majors. "My parents always wanted me to be a doctor, and since they struggled to get me this far in life, the least I could do is become a doctor." However, once he arrived at Trinity, he decided to major in biology. He perceived the workload to be manageable as he took some

college-level courses in high school. Even so, Jean notes that nothing had prepared him for a place like Trinity, he explained that white students and professors dominated his classes. Granted, he was at a PWI, but he just didn't feel comfortable in these spaces. When asked what attracted him to Trinity in the first place, Josiah noted that attending a liberal arts school meant he could also take options in classes aside from biology specific courses .

Born in Trinidad and Tobago, Josiah doesn't recall much about his schooling experience there. He migrated with his family at the age of ten, and was enrolled in a catholic school. Once the talk of college came around, his parents were firm in their expectations: med-school after a STEM-related major in undergraduate. After a semester of intense Science and Math courses, Josiah decided to take a social Science class as a break. In the Intro to Sociology course, and Josiah stated that he felt like he learned something related to his life. As a sophomore, he took more classes and knew that he had to "drop his parents dreams "and continue to study sociology.

Unlike the participants' parents, Kayla and Josiah also had a different definition of success, especially after changing their major. Kayla continued to point out that her time at Trinity made her realize that she didn't want to be a lawyer but work directly within her community. On the other hand, Josiah also intends to return to his neighborhood to start a non-profit organization that will acquaint low-income students and their parents with higher education. Although participants did not want to face the same financial struggles as their parents, having career satisfaction was just as important to them as financial success. However, their experience consequences were different due to gender expectations: while Josiah did not receive any consequences reactions for changing his major, Kayal is constantly guilty for her choices. Josiah's parents were a lot more lenient when he explained to his parents about his major change, whereas Kayala did not speak to her family for a couple of months after the change. As

the eldest daughter, Kayala echoed some of the struggles shared by Kim and Lydia, where she had to take responsibility for her older siblings that translated into the choices she had to make as a college student. These choices, as other students have mentioned, also effect the whole family.

### *Independent*

Out of the eight participants, only one student picked their major to their own accord and passion. Like Lydia, Umar, and Kim, Jean expressed that his major selection was solely because of his own passion and interests in his future career aspiration as an environmentalist lawyer. He has always been involved in student government or law programs in the summer, so it made sense to him to major in Political Science once he got to Trinity. Jean is the youngest of four brothers, and his family migrated to New York when he was about nine years old. He doesn't recall much of Haiti's schooling experience, but he remembers being enrolled in ESL classes as soon he moved to Boston. Jean recalls how his parents learned how to navigate the Boston public schools to higher education from his older siblings. Jean echoed the same rhetoric from his parents as the previous participants in this study: they moved to America for better educational opportunities, so college was mandatory. Jean's parents also shared the same concerns as other immigrant parents of having their children majoring in something that could guarantee them a job and financial security after college.

However, Jean being the youngest out of four children, felt more comfortable talking about college with his older brothers. The majority of the participants in this study have shared that they have a close relationship with their siblings. In most cases, the younger siblings showed gratitude in the way that their older siblings had to take on the surrogate parent role in their household. Jean credits his siblings, especially his older brother, for aiding him through the

college process of choosing colleges, applying for scholarships, and talking out his options for a college major. He recalls that conversation and the horror stories they shared about majoring in what their parents wanted them to do instead of making their own decisions. In addition to being emotionally supported, his older brothers also financially supported him throughout his time at Trinity. They expressed how much they wanted him to stay focused without worrying about some of the financial hardships of college. As a political Science major, Jean shared that his parents believe it will earn him a respectable career with financial security.

### **Additional Findings**

This study exposed that unreasonable expectations from parents continued to influence students' college major choice, but it also showed some of the mental health strains this can create on students. In most cases, students shared that they did not share these feelings with their parents because they knew how much their family was depending on them. Others disclosed that their parents wouldn't understand how depression can affect their grades. However, the majority of the participants had close relationships with their siblings and confided in them about their college experiences. Participants who had older siblings shared their admiration and gratitude for their older siblings. The older siblings on the other hand, discussed how they will work to support their younger siblings when it was time for their college application process.

This research also found that families from African and Asian families were encouraged to take STEM majors and work in fields of Medicine, Engineering, Law or anything that would be considered as a respectable career in their home countries. They also didn't have a lot of room to negotiate with their parents on their college major choice with their parents, it was almost expected that they would attend college and major in something that was expected of them.

Students from the Caribbean shared that although their parents had expectations for them in the same fields, they were lenient about letting their children explore their options, even if the participants mentioned that they had to fight for that right to choose. Most participants also expressed that they didn't want their parents to dictate their college major choice but instead want them to support them while they make their own choices.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research aimed to capture the lived experiences of eight 1.5 generation immigrant students at Trinity College as they negotiated parental expectations in their choice of college majors. Drawing on the eight semi-structured interviews, it underscores some clear themes amongst participants in how their college major choice will influence their path to academic success and socioeconomic mobility. I hypothesized that participants' parents will influence them to pick a specific major and continue in that field in fear of not letting their parents' sacrifices go unnoticed. Across the board, students shared similar experiences of the unrealistic expectations that their parents had to take full advantage of all the opportunities that the American education system had to offer. This is often translated to earning a graduate degree and obtaining a career that will support their family (Ma 223).

This study exemplified how 1.5 generation immigrant students' culture, gender and immigrant background shapes the weight they put on education as well, as how they will engage with higher education. Even though most of the participants chose majors that were somewhat unfamiliar to their parents, they were still expected to secure a profitable job that will advance their families' socioeconomic status. The three groups— Conformists (unhappy or happy), Rebels, and Independents —that emerged from this research prove that many indirect or direct



parental influences affect what students will major in college. Being that Trinity is a liberal arts institution, only a few students confirmed that it helped them explore other options aside from those expected of them from their parents.

While the Happy Conformists agree that their parents do have expectations for them to major in a certain field, it wasn't explicitly communicated. Students shared that they picked their majors because it was not only something that their parents would approve of, but it was a field that they could see themselves being appeased with in the future. Whereas Unhappy Conformists continue to study in the field because they also know what is expected of them, but they don't enjoy the coursework like Happy Conformists. Then, the Rebels were at first influenced by their parents to pick a college major, but after becoming aware of their options at Trinity, they changed their majors. It was interesting to see that both students picked Sociology as their major. Finally, there is the Independent group, where there was no type of direct parental involvement. Instead, that responsibility was taken by the older siblings who have already gone through the college application process, allowing them freedom.

In retrospect, further research is needed to determine how socioeconomic status influences and students' cultural background, gender, and age of arrival determine how that affects their college major choice. In my research, I neglected to ask students their family income to compare it to their parents' resources. For example, several parents had the means to provide their children with external support that other families were not aware of or couldn't afford to get for their children. In most cases, access to these resources also impacts how students navigate their college application process and determine their college major choice.

Throughout this research, I realized that institutions like Trinity College also have the responsibility to support 1.5 generation immigrant students in becoming more acquainted with

college writing. Such institutions need to distinguish between students who are not fluent in English and 1.5 generation immigrant students who may have problems with Standard English. The difference is that while the first group needs ESL courses, 1.5 generation students need a more structured English writing course to strengthen their writing skills (Harklau 5). In turn, helping them make choices in a major that doesn't necessarily have to be hyper Math, and Science focused. If schools have a clear understanding of their students' educational background, it will encourage them to try a field out of their comfort zone or never know possible.

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## Appendix A

Dear (President of ORG),

I hope you had a great week! My name is Yeabsira Debebe and I'm a senior here at Trinity College studying Sociology and Education Studies. As part of my senior thesis, I'm researching how 1.5 immigrant students negotiate their college major choice with their parents as it pertains to their academic success and economic mobility. I'm looking to interview 1.5 sophomores, juniors and seniors on the motivation behind their major choice. 1.5 immigrants are individuals who were born in another country but migrated to America in their preteen years (10-14). As cultural organizations on campus, I'm reaching out to you in hopes of finding willing participants that fit the criteria. I've attached the link for Google Form, that will determine if students fit the demographic as well as give them the option to be contacted to participate in the research. The survey is only 7 questions and shouldn't take longer than 2 minutes. Students that fit the criteria and are chosen to participate in the research will receive more information on the interviewing process, which should take about 20-30 minutes long. Once the interview is over students will receive a \$15 Amazon gift card. Both the survey and interview are entirely voluntary. If you have any questions you can reach out to me by email or cell phone: [yeabsira.debebe@trincoll.edu](mailto:yeabsira.debebe@trincoll.edu) or 646-232-2452. Thanks for your time.

Gratefully,

Yeabsira Debebe

**Appendix B**

1. Were you born outside of the United States?  
\_Yes  
\_No
2. At what age did you migrate to America?  
\_Before the age of 10  
\_Between the ages of 7-14  
\_After the age of 14
3. How involved would you say your parents are when it comes to your schooling?  
\_Very involved  
\_Involved  
\_Neutral  
\_Not as involved
4. What's your major right now \_\_\_\_\_
5. Are you happy with you major choice?  
\_Yes  
\_No
6. Do you want to be invited as a participant if you fit the criteria for this research?  
\_Yes  
\_No
7. If yes, please provide your first and last name and email on the line below:  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### CONSENT FORM:

#### **Informed Consent to Participate in:**

[Trinity's 1.5 immigrant students major choice]

The purpose of this research project is to learn about the motivation behind Trinity's 1.5 immigrant students' college major choice, and how that influences their academic success, socioeconomic status and overall college experience. The benefits of this research project include sharing some of the experiences of students in hopes of understanding better on how this group of students go about choosing their college majors. This study involves only minimal risk, meaning that the probability of harm or discomfort is not greater than ordinarily encountered in daily life.

Participants will be compensated after the interview, as they will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card.

By signing this form, the participant is aware that the entire process is voluntary, this interview will take about 45 minutes, and that you can stop or withdraw at any time, without being penalized.

I would like your permission to screen record and transcribe your interview, with the reminder that

I will not use your name.

By signing this form, the participant is aware that pseudonyms will be used, all of their responses in this study are confidential and to be used only for research purposes.

If the participant has questions or want more information about the study, they can contact the student Yeabsira Debebe at [yeabsira.debebe@trincoll.edu](mailto:yeabsira.debebe@trincoll.edu) her research supervisor Daniel Douglas at [daniel.douglas@trincoll.edu](mailto:daniel.douglas@trincoll.edu), or the Trinity College IRB administrator at [irb@trincoll.edu](mailto:irb@trincoll.edu).

Participant Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Name (signature): \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

All signed forms will remain confidential. Participants may keep a blank form if desired.



## Appendix D

First I'd Like to ask you some general questions,

- So tell me, where were you born, and at what age did you migrate to the United States?
- Do you remember any part of your schooling in your home country?

### Schooling

- If you recall, can you briefly explain your schooling experience in your home country?
- How involved would you say your parents were in your schooling during this time?
- How was the transition, in terms of your education, from your home country to America?
- How did that differ from your experiences of schooling in your birth country?
- How involved would you say your parents were in your schooling once you started school in America?
  - How would you compare your parents' involvement from your home country compared to once you arrived in the United States?

### Let's talk about Trinity

- How did you first learn about Trinity College?
- Why did you decide to apply here? What was the motivation behind this decision?
- Did you apply/receive any financial aid, scholarship? Or get recruited for a sport, etc?

### Major

- Did you have an idea of what you wanted to major in high school?
- Why attracted you to this major?
  - What are some career opportunities for this major?
  - Did you think Trinity was strong in this major?

- Did you decide your major freshman year or did you enroll as undeclared until sophomore year? If so, why did you end up choosing this major?
- Did you speak to anybody before making your decision? If so, who?
- How did the conversation go?
- How did your parents feel about your major choice?
- What did you know about this major before enrolling?
- How are the classes?
- Have you seen a change in your grades from when you started this major?

#### Work

- Do you have a job on campus? Where do work?
- Is it hard to attain a job with your major?
- How long have you had this job?

#### Career

- What kinds of career options are associated with this major?
- How did you become aware of these options?
- Are these aspirations similar to the ones your parents have for you?