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# Narratives of First-Generation Community College Students in Central Texas: Restorying the Path to Success in Higher Education

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## **Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**

*Nannette W. Glenn, Ph.D.*

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Abilene Christian University  
School of Educational Leadership

Narratives of First-Generation Community College Students in Central Texas:  
Restoring the Path to Success in Higher Education

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Stephanie Diana Perkins

September 2021

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to all first-generation college students past, present, and future who needed or will need a voice in higher education. May the words in this body of work encourage you to find a successful path in college and know that your grit and determination will lead you to bigger and brighter things in your future. I would never have imagined being where I am today as a first-generation college student, finishing a doctoral degree, and looking for employment as an administrator in higher education. It is in our cards to be somebody and have our voice heard. May you always have the wisdom and courage to pull yourself up by your bootstraps and pick up the pieces even when it seems impossible; I know at times it seemed that way for me. I encourage you to keep moving forward and remember that your journey is unfolding exactly as it should be.

## **Acknowledgments**

This body of work would not have been possible without the love and support of my family and friends, who have stood beside me through this entire journey. I am forever in your gratitude for taking my calls, texts, whining sessions, and putting up with me along this crazy ride. Thank you tremendously for never letting me give up, even though I wanted to a million times! I love each one of you.

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To the six participants of this study, you are the most courageous and bold individuals that I have had the pleasure of working with in my lifetime. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of your lives and entrusting me with your treasured stories.

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## Abstract

First-generation college students (FGCSs) face a myriad of issues when entering higher education. As FGCSs continue to enroll in community colleges at high rates, it is important to discuss their pathways to success in higher education. This qualitative study explored the experiences of FGCSs who attended a community college in Central Texas to learn more about their experiences with being identified as FGCS; what prevents them, if anything, to identify support systems that are conducive to their overall retention and success; and if social capital had relevance to their academic success. Through narrative inquiry, a storytelling approach was utilized to portray the participants' personal stories of success and what they have overcome. This study also provided a rich understanding of their struggles as FGCSs within the college. After several cycles of coding and data analysis, four major themes emerged from this study: (a) pride and success; (b) sense of belonging and identification as an FGCS; (c) support systems, barriers, and challenges; and (d) social capital and family influence. The data revealed a need for community colleges to identify FGCSs better, establish mentoring programs, and promote success stories of these students so that future FGCSs are better supported.

*Keywords:* Financial aid, Pell grant, mentoring programs, support systems

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Background of the Study

First-generation college students (FGCSs) continue to capture the minds and the hearts of those involved in U.S. higher education (Pascarella et al., 2004). Altbach (2016) mentioned that higher education has gone through *massification* over the years to allow access to educational services for more nontraditional college groups. Nontraditional student groups seek education to build more opportunities for themselves and better their lives (Pelletier, 2010). FGCSs are students whose parents did not attend college, thus putting them in this nontraditional category. Many colleges struggle to serve FGCSs because of their unique barriers and challenges to success (Thelin, 2011). Even as institutions of higher education attempt to create inclusive learning environments, proper identification of FGCSs and access to applicable resources are still lacking. Additionally, these students lack the social capital given by their parents to navigate the educational environment. Social capital is the knowledge that one shares from their lived experiences with another person (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], n.d.). Because of this, FGCSs have a more difficult time integrating into the college both academically and socially (Tinto, 1975). First-generation students are flocking to institutions, but institutions are not properly equipped to deal with the challenges these students face.

Brazil-Cruz and Martinez (2016) noted that institutions of higher education must have effective policies and practices that address the challenges and barriers facing FGCSs. If appropriate programming is in place, the path to success for these students is more than likely to increase (Wang, 2012). College bridge programs, such as Upward Bound, Gear Up, and TRIO, can assist FGCSs. These programs also assist institutions with identifying FGCSs as early as

possible. Identification of these students is crucial in achieving impactful efforts (Ishitani, 2016). Through early identification efforts, effective policies, and proper programming, higher education institutions pave a more successful path for FGCSs.

It is important that FGCSs create a sense of self-belonging within higher education. Due to the lack of social capital of FGCSs, the need to academically and socially integrate within college is vital (Tinto, 1975). More specifically, colleges can address student's barriers and increase earning a degree by easing the transition to college and encouraging engagement on college campuses (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Students who successfully integrate early are more likely to be successful. Because FGCSs do not have family support, the acclimation to the higher education environment occurs more slowly or may never occur. Last, their willingness to engage may be hindered because of the lack of social support.

### **Researcher's Positionality**

My interest in the topic was propelled by my personal story rooted in early childhood. Education was not something that was highlighted in my household. My parents obtained their high school equivalency through the Texas prison system, and my brother dropped out of school in the eighth grade. School became an outlet for me to escape the home life I endured. I was generally top of my class and liked the praise I received from educators that I did not receive at home. I never imagined attending college, nor was this a topic of discussion or an attainable goal my parents had in mind. It was simply not in my cards to grow as an individual via academic pursuits.

### ***Education Before College***

As a child, one does not have much say about their education. A child is required to attend school until they graduate or become an age where they can decide to quit. School was

always a nuisance to my parents; they did not enjoy waking us up, carting us to school, and worrying if we had our homework completed. My family moved a lot because of bad habits, so I attended one to two schools in a typical school year until middle school. My parents were incarcerated when I was a teenager, so my brother and I lived with a relative. Although we both had to repeat the grade we were in at the time, this change allowed for consistency, and we attended the same school for the first time for several years.

During this time, I was able to make friends and get to know my teachers. I began to learn from my peers and understand the real importance of education and what college was. Of course, I always wondered how I would get admitted to and pay for college, but it became an aspiration, nonetheless. When my parents came home from prison, I decided to take my education into my own hands and not let them influence me as they had done before. Because of this decision, I was considered an outsider who would not conform to my family's values.

### ***Graduating High School***

My senior year was filled with many wonderful memories, but a lot of anxiety regarding what I would do when school finished. All my friends were applying to colleges, taking the SAT/ACT, or making other decisions about their future. I had no one at home helping me make these critical decisions. For the two summers before my senior year, I had driven an ice cream truck to have money to buy my school clothes and supplies. I knew that I did not want to drive an ice cream truck for the rest of my life.

While in high school, I sang in the choir and competed in singing competitions. One day, Odessa College came to audition students for their choir and ensembles. My choir teacher encouraged me to audition; a few weeks later, I learned that I made the choir and ensemble and was given a \$500 scholarship to attend the college. I did not even know what a scholarship was. I

had no idea how much college cost or even how to apply. In the audition acceptance letter, there was an application to the college and information to fill out a FAFSA, but I had no one to help me navigate the documents. Graduation came, and I still had no plans for after high school.

### *Odessa College*

One day, I decided to visit Odessa College. I took my audition letter to the admissions office and told them I needed more information on being admitted to the college. The admissions staff assisted me with the application and told me to get a transcript from my high school, so they could determine if I needed to take a placement exam. I was then sent to the financial aid office, where I learned that because of my age, I would need my parents' tax forms in order to apply for a Pell grant that would assist with paying for college. This was my first roadblock as an FGCS, a term that I did not know existed at this point.

I knew that my parents would not give me this information to attend college. I tried several times for them to give me the information, but they firmly believed this was an attempt for the government to have their personal information. I remember crying to a financial aid staff because if I could not receive financial aid, I could not attend college. However, because of my situation, I was considered an independent student for financial aid purposes, and this requirement was bypassed. Since I did not have an income, my effective family contribution was zero, and I became the recipient of federal financial aid.

My next step was speaking with an academic advisor, choosing a degree path, and preparing to start college in the fall term. I could not believe that I was going to college! But what did I want to be when I grew up? I knew I wanted to help people, but I had no idea how. The advisor recommended nursing, so I registered in the prerequisite courses required to apply to the nursing program, along with my choir classes. I was beyond excited. I went to the bookstore

and purchased all of my materials with my financial aid and was ready for August to begin. I had no idea what lay before me in this new endeavor.

### ***Identifying as a First-Generation Student***

My first semester was quite challenging. I had every barrier imaginable to success and was not equipped with the appropriate tools to succeed in a college environment. I had no champions in my corner to motivate me, and I was having difficulty integrating into the environment. I lacked the social capital of my peers to navigate the landscape of higher education. I found myself in an advisor's office crying and begging for help. I did not have what it took to continue, and my parents were already calling me a failure because I was ready to quit. This was when I was first asked if my parents attended college. I was so embarrassed to answer this question because I felt alienated and judged by my upbringing. However, making the decision to step out of my comfort zone and identify as an FGCS changed my college experience tremendously. I was given access to resources and began to find the previous love I had for education again. I completed my associate degree a few years later.

I am now a doctoral student and pursuing my dreams and career aspirations. As I have grown in my academic journey, I have always pondered the effects of ineffective policies and practices in higher education that are detrimental to success for FGCSs. A question that arises from my personal experiences is, what is it like for other FGCSs who, like me, have not been identified as such and, despite that, have succeeded in pursuing higher education? This question propelled me to pursue this study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Astin (1975) theorized that American higher education has been facing retention for many years (as cited in Morrison & Silverman, 2012). One particular group of students who have

a hard time persisting, more so than their counterparts, are FGCSs (Ishitani, 2016). More specifically, the lack of proper programming and lack of creating memorable messages from important influencers within colleges (i.e., advisors, faculty members, etc.) for FGCSs is potentially detrimental to their overall academic success (Wang, 2012). Additionally, the lack of effective policies and procedures within higher education institutions concerning FGCSs is harmful to these students (Brazil-Cruz & Martinez, 2016).

First-generation college students have been defined in many different ways: students whose parents attended college but did not graduate or students whose parents never attended college (Shumaker & Wood, 2016). For this study, I used the definition of students whose parents did not attend college. FGCSs often come from low socioeconomic families with little support to attend college (Shumaker & Wood, 2016). Rubio et al. (2017) discussed the many barriers students face because of being an FGCS. These barriers include, but were not limited to, financial assistance, academic preparation, and support networks. Rubio et al. identified that FGCSs do not utilize available resources on campus. Brazil-Cruz and Martinez (2016) recommended that higher education institutions collaborate with student services and other resources to ensure the success and persistence of FGCSs. Blackwell and Pinder (2014) claimed that institutions have a problem determining why FGCSs are motivated to attend college, resulting in low retention rates once these students enter higher education.

Importantly, a sense of belonging can be instrumental to these students' institutional support to build up their academic persistence (Means & Pyne, 2017). Williams and Ferrari (2015) noted how a sense of community or belonging in higher education might be related to the success rates of FGCSs. FGCSs must create a sense of relevancy to the institution, both socially



and academically (Tinto, 1975). In doing so, FGCSs build social support and a sense of belonging to institutions that assist with persistence.

FGCSs are an important asset to institutions of higher learning. Yet, there is a lack of empirical studies focusing on specific circumstances under which these students either succeed or fail academically once on the path to higher education (Carpenter & Peña, 2017). Practitioners can find in the research the many barriers FGCSs face. However, notably, there is less evidence of first-hand accounts of their lived experiences in higher education that led them to success and how their social supports and engagement play a role in that path. Additionally, a lack of identification, effective programming, memorable messages, and overall institutional policies and procedures to assist these students can be detrimental to their success and retention (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Ishitani, 2016; McCoy, 2014; Wang, 2012). The aforementioned arguments warrant further investigations of the experiences of FGCSs, and qualitative studies specifically can provide an in-depth understanding of who FGCSs are and what may hold them back from succeeding academically.

### **Research Purposes and Questions**

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the pathways of first-generation community college students to their academic success and retention in Central Texas. Throughout this study, I referred to first-generation college students as ones who attended college first in their families. This notion also implied that neither parent of these students ever attended college (Shumaker & Wood, 2016). For this study, retention and success referred to the first and second year of these students' persistence and the completion of their first academic year. This study examined first-hand accounts of FGCSs and their lived experiences in higher education during their first year of college. Leaders can better understand why early

identification of FGCSs is necessary when building social support and a sense of belonging within the college. Within the accounts of these students' personal stories, I pondered the relevance of identification, or lack thereof, by institutions to their academic accomplishments. Participants included current self-identified first-generation college students in a community college located in Central Texas.

The following research questions guided this study:

**RQ1:** How do the students understand their academic success as a first-generation college student through their personal narratives?

**RQ2:** What are these students' experiences with being identified as a first-generation college student within their institution?

**RQ3:** What prevents these students, if anything, to identify support systems conducive to their retention and overall academic success?

**RQ4:** What is the relevance of social capital, if any, to these students' academic success?

As mentioned above, narrative inquiry is best suited to understand the issues faced by FGCSs. Narrative allows for a sense of search rather than a sense of problem definition and solution (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). With this in mind, narrative research can be characterized as having no particular framework with no beginning and end place to allow for in-depth, almost unstructured inquiry (Squire, 2008). Narrative is not guided by specific theories, but rather seeks to generate theory from first-hand accounts (explained more in Chapter 3). Specific theories can guide qualitative studies in terms of research purposes, questions, and data gathering tools. Bateson (1994) explained how a story is a powerful narrative that informs truth and learning:

Wherever a story comes from, whether it is a familiar myth or a private memory, the retelling exemplifies the making of a connection from one pattern to another: a potential translation in which narrative becomes parable and the once upon a time comes to stand for some renascent truth. This approach applies to all the incidents of everyday life: the phrase in the newspaper, the endearing or infuriating game of a toddler, the misunderstanding at the office. Our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories. (p. 11)

I invite all readers of this study to think narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and read through the lens of a story.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

As a practitioner in higher education, I have had the opportunity to build upon a problem within my profession that needs to be addressed. The identification of FGCSs in higher education is a topic that many institutions are paying close attention to. These students are not lost due to a range of factors and barriers. Most colleges rely on the self-identification of FGCSs when often students do not realize what the characteristics of being a first-generation college student are. It is important to understand the complexities of these students as they have evolved.

Research concerning first-generation college students revolves around personal and academic barriers, persistence, strategies to be more successful, and many more components, as discussed in this literature review. What follows is the analysis of the literature about the experiences of FGCSs centered on the following main themes: (a) an overview of U.S. higher education and FGCSs, (b) the challenges faced by FGCSs, (c) institutional practices and FGCSs, and (d) conceptualizing the experiences of FGCSs. The literature below was found by exploring Abilene Christian University's online library databases, online searches, and hard copy books. The primary term searched was first-generation community college students. Additionally, an inclusion-exclusion process was utilized when identifying secondary sources relevant to the topic. This allowed me to find current peer-reviewed articles published within the past five years.

### **An Overview of U.S. Higher Education and First-Generation College Students**

Higher education has become a staple in society for individuals to earn degrees for better-waged jobs and to enrich one's life. The diversity in American colleges and universities has changed dynamically over the years. More students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and underrepresented groups flock to institutions for a better outcome in life. This includes FGCSs who have a hard time navigating the higher education landscape. These students often come

from low socioeconomic backgrounds, with little support to attend college (Shumaker & Wood, 2016). The issues surrounding FGCSs can be better understood within the changing landscapes of the U.S. higher education system.

Thelin (2011) broke the evolution of higher education into the following eras: the colonial era, 1785 to 1860: building colleges the American way, 1860 to 1890: diversity and adversity era, 1880 to 1910: the university builders, 1890 to 1920: America goes to college, 1920 to 1945: expansion and reforms in higher education, 1945 to 1970: higher education's golden age, 1970 to 2000: higher education as a troubled giant, and lastly, reconfiguring American higher education in the 21st century. These eras brought much change to the landscape of higher education. Changes included allowing women into universities, unsegregated colleges, and rising tuition costs. Universities often thrive in poor economies, as students turn to education to build skills for the workforce; but, in rich economies, enrollment often decreases significantly (Thelin, 2011). During the eras mentioned previously, student characteristics changed, as well. Going from predominately White-serving institutions, over time, many institutions have found themselves serving a more diverse group of learners.

Access to financial assistance also evolved in history to include the G.I. Bill, Pell grants, loans, federal grants, and work-study programs. The G.I. Bill was signed into public law in 1944. This bill provided unprecedented educational benefits for military veterans. By 1951, numbers skyrocketed of how many service members finished high school and attended college under G.I. benefits (Veterans Education Success, n.d.). Many colleges were skeptical of the G.I. Bill, but after witnessing the rise in enrollments, educational practitioners praised the government's enactment of the benefits. Additionally, the federal government continued improving financial access by enacting the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 which was reauthorized in 1972.

Because of the coming-of-age baby boomers, many needy students were on the doorsteps of institutions, but campus-based funds were limited (Evans Consulting, 2019). The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 1972 brought the Basic Opportunity Grant, which is what we now know as the Federal Pell Grant. A Pell grant is considered gift aid that a student does not have to pay back (Evans Consulting, 2019). In 1992, HEA received further amendments that gave greater access to financial aid programs for students. These benefits, along with a handful of other federal grant programs such as the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education grant, began to give many more students access to higher education than before. This meant that student demographics were on the horizon of a very diverse change. In the 21st century, institutions are transforming into places that are more accessible and provide opportunities to students, such as those whose parents did not attend college.

### ***Changing Profile of Students in Higher Education***

In the 1970s, the term *nontraditional student* was coined (Thelin, 2011). Universities found traditional enrollment declining (white, male), and student demographics changed. As mentioned, coming of age baby boomers were beginning to enter the workforce and looking for education opportunities (Evans Consulting, 2019). Part-time students and returning, older students became the focus of institutions (Thelin, 2011). This was due to students coming and going through college as they entered and left the workforce. Additionally, colleges began to pop up in cities everywhere in America. Altbach (2016) noted, “The central driver of academic change in the past century has been the ‘massification’ of higher education, expanding access beyond the small traditional group of elites” (p. 16). Because of the changing student profile, institutions could no longer rely on students to show up for enrollment but rather had to focus on enrollment management to mitigate barriers of this new kind of student (Inside Higher Ed, 2017).

As enrollment management emerged, colleges began to identify and classify students into various groups (i.e., nontraditional, part-time, and first-generation). Colleges began to realize that these students had unique barriers that hindered their success more than their peers.

As mentioned above, the 21<sup>st</sup> century changes in higher education also involve students whose parents never attended college. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that 34% of undergraduates were the first in their families to go to college in the 2011-12 academic year (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Administrators realized that troubled urban high school students, working Americans, and FGCSs added a perplexing problem to higher education. Many higher education institutions did not understand their barriers or teach this type of student in the classroom (Bok, 2013). According to Bok (2013), “60% of students who enroll attend part-time, and 80% have full-time jobs or part-time jobs. 45% are minorities and 42% are first-generation college students” (p. 12). Many will enter higher education without college-level skills in reading, writing, and math and require remedial coursework (Bok, 2013). This lack of basic skills and a plethora of internal and external barriers makes serving these students difficult.

### ***Role of Community Colleges in Higher Education***

Two-year colleges have become a dynamic partner in communities when serving students because of their unique characteristics. The U.S. Department of Education (2014) reported that 48% of FGCSs enroll in two-year schools, compared with 32% of students whose parents attended college and at least one of them had a bachelor’s degree. Due to the nature of programs offered within two-year institutions, students who need skills quickly turn to institutions that can provide these skills within a short period of time. Thelin (2011) mentioned that in the 1920s, junior colleges emerged and became the American invention where students could earn the first two years of their bachelor’s degree. The popularity of the college that serve communities

blossomed, and a more vocational or technical curriculum arose and soon eclipsed the idea that a four-year education was necessary to enter the workforce. Many community colleges are funded by local property taxes and depend on enrollment and completion measures for funding from state entities. In the beginning, many universities found community colleges to be a threat to enrollment, but students and the communities they served were elated with this new era of education (Thelin, 2011).

During the early years of community colleges, two-year colleges were seen as an extension of high schools (Kasper, 2002). As more low-income students began to flock to community colleges, the idea of having a two-year institution became a necessity more than a luxury. Wells (2008) discussed that community colleges offer students an alternative to completing a two-year degree rather than a four-year degree when they need to obtain skills for a job more quickly. Community colleges provide unique, in-demand degrees that will hopefully make FGCSs feel they are successful and contributing to their communities. These colleges have traditionally benefited low-income students who use two-year colleges to access higher-wage jobs (Santibàñez et al., 2007). Community colleges also offer another unique service; they allow students to mature and strengthen their academic capabilities (Nunley & O’Keefe, 2007). This growth can help FGCSs understand their potential and possibly pursue further academic pursuits. The American Association of Community Colleges (2019a) mentioned in their *Fast Facts 2019* that as of fall 2017, 58% of students enrolled in college attend a community college, and 29% of those students are identified as being FGCSs. FGCSs are a diverse population of students who turn to community colleges for support and a new outlook on life through academic pursuits.

**Texas Community Colleges.** Two-year schools in Texas fit the normal profile of most community colleges. Some serve suburban communities (i.e., towns that sit around major cities



known as metropolitans), others are in highly populated metropolitan cities, while there are quite a few who serve rural areas where the population is scarce. In major metropolitan areas, some colleges have multiple campuses in districts, while small rural community colleges operate with minimal resources under one roof. With Texas ranked the second-largest U.S. state, it is important to know the diversity of the colleges that serve this immense landscape.

Texas has 50 community college districts broken into several regions: north, south, east, west, southeast, and central (Texas Association of Community College, 2020b). Most two-year institutions have an open-door admissions policy and are funded from performance-based measures that are evaluated by student success points (i.e., first-time in college, college readiness, first college-level course taken, progress to credential, a credential earned/graduation, and transfer to a four-year institution; Texas Association of Community College, 2020a). Because of this funding structure, community colleges focus a great deal of effort on meeting these student success point measures. Each legislative term (Texas operates on a biennium), the Legislature designates how many dollars will be appropriated to student success point measures (Texas Association of Community College, 2020a).

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) performs the role of a state agency that assists colleges in various ways. In 2015, THECB launched 60x30TX, the state's higher education strategic plan, "which aims to position Texas among the highest achieving states in the country and maintain its global competitiveness" (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, n.d.). THECB mentions that the primary goal of this strategic plan is for 60% of young adults (25-34) in Texas will hold some sort of postsecondary credential by 2030 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, n.d.). This admirable strategic plan challenges colleges in Texas to become very student-focused with an emphasis on getting more students in

the door and retaining them to completion. This includes individuals who will be the first in their families to attend college.

FGCSs are students who feed into the Texas measures mentioned above; however, with the barriers these students face, their ability to be college-ready, complete their first college-level course, make progress towards graduation, and transfer to a four-year school, can be more challenging. Understanding the barriers and challenges of these unique students is vital for higher education professionals and institutions.

### ***Challenges Faced by First-Generation College Students***

FGCSs are met with many challenges when they enter higher education. Navigating an unfamiliar context is intimidating and overwhelming. Becoming aware of the challenges faced by this student population and understanding the various components that make up their lives is important for colleges. According to Ward et al. (2012), “First-generation students need to be more visible to educators, and they require a unique support system to prosper and succeed in college” (p. 21). Understanding why FGCSs struggle in academia and the retention issues that result is crucial for institutions to know.

### ***Barriers Experienced by First-Generation College Students***

FGCSs face a myriad of issues when entering higher education. Some of these factors may involve the educational system, while other factors are external to academics. Rubio et al. (2017) discussed the many barriers students face because of being an FGCS. Barriers to entering higher education can include financial, academic preparedness, support networks, and the lack of social capital or know-how when entering higher education.

In a recent data point report published by the American Association of Community Colleges (2019b), the top three challenges to success as cited by students are work, expenses,

and family issues. Work hours often do not leave time for studying. Students' wages do not cover the expenses incurred while in college (i.e., tuition, books, etc.; American Association of Community College, 2019b). Attending college makes balancing a healthy relationship between family and friends difficult, leading to lost relationships or maintaining social support. Other challenges mentioned in the report include parking, faculty, health, doing college-level work, having to take online classes, and registering for classes in general (American Association of Community College, 2019b).

**Financial Barriers.** Byrd and MacDonald (2005) reported in their study that FGCSs lack the awareness of the financial aid process or the financial burden that comes with attending college. Most FGCSs are working before they enter higher education to meet basic life needs. FGCSs typically come from families who are low socioeconomic where both parents work full-time to maintain a household, and the student began work at the youngest age possible (Hand & Payne, 2008).

Because most FGCSs come from a low socioeconomic background, their qualification of federal Pell grants is greater. Pell grants are monies given to higher education institutions from the federal government that students do not have to pay back. The amount of aid given depends on the student's financial need (Dollarhide, 2019). However, many FGCSs have issues navigating financial aid paperwork or lack financial literacy to assist them in being successful in higher education (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

FGCSs often must work part-time or full-time during college (Pascarella et al., 2004). Since they do not have the financial freedom to attend college without working, FGCSs more than likely will not attend college full-time and elect to attend classes online or in the evening. Unlike their peers who have college-educated families, FGCSs often have their aspirations to

attend college halted by the need to work to support their family or dependents (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). While Federal Work Study programs are more than likely available to FGCSs, the amount of pay and hours allotted are not enough for a student to live on and support a family. Martinez et al. (2009) informed us that no matter how the FGCS finds their way into higher education, they will rely on scholarships, grants, and loans to pay for college. However, their lack of preparedness leaves them in an unfortunate situation of navigating how to obtain financial assistance.

**Lack of Academic Preparedness.** There are various means by which an FGCS can be identified as college ready. However, most of the identifiable markers come by way of test scores that are not consistent from college to college. Merisotis and Phipps (2000) mentioned that the labeling of underprepared students is arbitrary and differs between colleges. Before entering college, FGCSs do not complete high school at an acceptable level (Bricker, 2008). This could mean that FGCSs did not receive the academic preparedness in high school to be successful in college. Próspero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) reported that FGCSs, as compared to non-FGCSs are less likely to have higher placement test scores such as ACT/SAT, have lower GPAs, and/or have not had an opportunity to take more rigorous high school courses or dual credit offerings.

Several factors can contribute to this anomaly: the lack of resources that parents have that allow FGCSs to participate in college readiness activities or the motivation to make academics in high school a priority because of various life factors (Bricker, 2008). Additionally, if an FGCS lacks the motivation to attend college after high school, the lack of drive might hinder them from being more academically prepared, and counselors may not give much attention to their future because the student seems disinterested (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Other items that can affect academic preparedness, as identified by Byrd and MacDonald are study skills, failure to focus on goals, and the inability to advocate for oneself. Underprepared FGCSs also allude that difficulties with time management (Reid & Moore, 2008) and awareness of the college culture (Collier & Morgan, 2008) affect their academic success. The adjustment to college is a challenge for FGCSs due to the lack of academic preparedness and the disconnect they have from the college and their peers because of their first-generation status (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014).

**Lack of Social Capital, Support Networks, and Engagement.** Alvarado et al. (2017) noted that FGCSs have a hard time navigating college due to their parents lacking knowledge of higher education practices. FGCSs report trepidation in interpersonal and small group settings and anxiety within a college environment (Francis & Miller, 2008). Their parents lack first-hand knowledge of college and the experiences that come with that (Dennis et al., 2005). Family tends to be the first level of support for an FGCS; however, parents of FGCSs are understood as less able to provide academic guidance (Aries & Seider, 2005). If that support is lacking, then the student more than likely will not want to engage with anyone on campus.

Parents who are unfamiliar with the contexts of higher education and do not encourage their children to pursue a degree create a disadvantage for students because that social network must be in place and FGCSs must feel supported by family to raise success rates (Martinez et al., 2009). Ward et al. (2012) added:

First-generation students enter and proceed through our institutions carrying a weight that most students do not: they are underprepared academically for what the college experience holds, and they lack some of the knowledge, called cultural capital, that most of their peers possess. It is this deficiency that distinguishes first-generation students

from other students. The knowledge about college life that non-first-generation students receive is a key factor in their capacity to succeed in higher education; first-generation students, because they lack the knowledge, struggle with institutional expectations and the student role. (p. 9)

Entering higher education can be daunting and confusing for an individual who lacks cultural and social capital. This knowledge is obtained from parents who attended college previously; however, this is an integral piece missing for an FGCS. Bryan and Simmons (2009) noted that family support and positive peer influence play an important role in the success of FGCSs.

FGCSs have lower levels of engagement than their counterparts (Pike & Kuh, 2005). In their study, Pike and Kuh (2005) found that FGCSs perceived the college environment as unsupportive and were less engaged because their housing is typically off campus, they have little to no interaction with peers, and their parents often do not support campus activities. Additionally, FGCSs feel out of place in higher education due to social and economic factors and see that their backgrounds are burdensome to success (Granfield, 1991). Because of the lack of a support network such as family, and the uneasiness of engaging with the institution, FGCSs tend to wonder if higher education is meant for them.

**Feelings of Guilt and Inadequacy.** FGCSs might have what Covarrubias and Fryberg (2015) described as survivor guilt. This can be described as having guilt for attending college when family members have not attended. Instead of working or taking care of family members, FGCSs choose to attend college, which can cause feelings of guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Adding to the lack of social capital, FGCSs may struggle with higher levels of PTSD and depression and experience less life satisfaction (Jenkins et al., 2013). FGCSs also face the idea of

being looked down upon by their peers and have feelings of inadequacy and inferiority (Winograd & Rust, 2014). Additionally, FGCSs have a more difficult time being successful because they can judge themselves more harshly and compare themselves as inferior to others (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009).

Everett (2015) noted that further inadequacy barriers FGCSs face are low-income, having no goals, needing developmental classes, and low retention rates. Morest (2013) described how community colleges take a more equitable approach to assist FGCSs in dealing with their barriers to persist more successfully. According to Shumaker and Wood (2016), “Because of the achievement gap that has been identified within the FGCSs, coupled with the budding population of FGCS in community colleges, institutions are now faced with the responsibility of addressing the needs of this student population” (p. 10).

FGCSs also have lower self-esteem, and their external locus of control appears to influence their adjustment to the college environment (Aspelmeier et al., 2012). Their overall success depends, to a great extent, on institutions of higher education and how well these institutions are prepared to assist FGCSs in overcoming feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Institutions are charged with empowering FGCSs and helping them understand that they can succeed in college.

### ***Access to Services and Resources***

Rubio et al. (2017) identified that FGCSs do not utilize available resources on campus. Educational practitioners ponder if students who identify as first-generation have access to appropriate services and resources. Shumaker and Wood (2016) found that FGCSs have issues with service access and service efficacy. This means that FGCSs are utilizing services, but their takeaway from these services does not benefit them as much as their non-FGCS counterparts. A

lot of research regarding FGCSs and resources focuses on how these students do not utilize services. However, Shumaker and Wood argued that the services provided are not adequate for FGCSs, therefore, hindering the process of creating a sense of belonging. The proper resources need to exist, and there must be a clear path to how these services are accessed.

Brazil-Cruz and Martinez (2016) recommended that higher education institutions collaborate with student services and other resources to ensure the success and persistence of FGCSs through various services. Results from their study indicate that college culture should be exposed to students at a young age and that higher education institutions should build on students' knowledge throughout their academic careers by providing adequate services.

Everett (2015) mentioned that FGCSs need (a) financial accessibility; (b) geographic accessibility; (c) programmatic accessibility; (d) academic accessibility; and (e) cultural, social, and physical accessibility in order to be successful. Additionally, colleges need to understand that FGCSs seek purposeful activities that promote their success and give them the appropriate tools to succeed (Taylor et al., 2019). Through all of these accessibility points, FGCSs can create a sense of belonging and have the opportunity to integrate both academically and socially.

### ***Retention and Persistence of First-Generation Students***

The measurement of retention and persistence has become one of the most complex ideas within higher education (Habley et al., 2012). FGCSs have lower retention rates (Fike & Fike, 2008; Gibbons & Borders, 2010) and are at a higher risk for attrition than non-FGCSs (Gibson & Slate, 2010). While these concepts have been around for centuries, the ever-changing educational landscape and student population have institutions continuously redefining how these ideas are measured.



FGCSs often perplex higher education administrators and why they have issues retaining these students. Because of various factors, FGCSs drop out at higher rates than their counterparts. What was once seen as a student shortcoming has now shifted to an institutional responsibility (Habley et al., 2012). Because of the challenges they face, FGCSs have a difficult time progressing and becoming involved with institutions. Due to the lack of academic and social integration from these students, persistence and retention suffer (Habley et al., 2012).

FGCSs have a more difficult time acclimating to the higher education environment because they do not have the proper familial supports as others. Additionally, if proper programming does not exist to help bridge the gaps that FGCSs face both academically and socially, these students will not persist. Institutions must focus their efforts on keeping these students enrolled through graduation. Tate et al. (2015) found that student support programs can increase retention and persistence because FGCSs find them helpful in navigating the educational environment.

### **Institutional Practices to Support First-Generation College Students**

The challenges that FGCSs face needs to be met with proper programming and support services from higher education institutions. Research shows that persistence increases when a student has the proper support systems in place. Gibbons et al. (2019) mentioned there is limited research that discusses the actual activities that help FGCSs adjust to the college environment. However, when students find the intrinsic value of higher education and institutions find ways to involve students, a sense of self-belonging occurs.

### ***Memorable Messages and Advising***

One way for students to create a sense of belonging with institutions is to have intrusive advising practices that assist students in understanding that college personnel is willing to

understand their experiences and barriers. Helpful and supportive mentors appear to increase college success (Stephens et al., 2014). Wang (2012) discussed the importance of memorable messages provided by mentors for FGCSs. Wang identified five college themes and three family themes in relation to the memorable messages given by mentors. College themes included pursuing academic success, valuing school, increasing future potential, making decisions, and support and encouragement. Family themes were comparing and contrasting, counting on family, and recognizing the importance of family. Wang notes that FGCSs state that the memorable messages provided by on-campus mentors influenced their approach to college.

Dockery and McKelvey (2013) documented that FGCSs felt counselors could have done more to assist college planning and support. First-generation/minority students were less likely to participate in group counseling sessions, as well (Dockery & McKelvey, 2013). Due to the lack of understanding of lived experiences, FGCSs have difficulty seeking advice and discussing barriers they face that hinder their success (Dockery & McKelvey, 2013).

However, when FGCSs feel a sense of self-belonging to the college, they tend to seek advising, and counselors become a vital part of their academic journey towards graduation (Stebbleton et al., 2014). Advising plays a vital role in creating a sense of self-belonging to institutions. FGCSs must know that in a foreign environment, someone cares and will listen to issues. This personnel must be adequately trained to assist this student population.

### ***Creating a Sense of Belonging in Higher Education***

Programming to create a sense of belonging has been a topic of discussion in regards to FGCSs. With appropriate programming, FGCSs may be able to identify resources quicker and begin to academically and socially integrate into the college environment sooner (Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Williams and Ferrari (2015) discussed how a sense of community, or belonging,

in higher education might be related to FGCSs' success rates. FGCSs must academically and socially adapt to their college and can have conflicts with their family/culture that prohibit this from happening (Alvarado et al., 2017). Alvarado et al. (2017) noted that emotional intelligence could be a tool to assist FGCSs in acclimating to the college environment.

Demetriou et al. (2017) found that FGCSs are more successful when they are active agents within their environment. This means that these students create self-belonging by seeking out enriching activities, engaging in purposeful relationships, and finding ways to participate in their college community. Additionally, Olson-McBride et al. (2016) posited that programs that occur in the first year of attendance that target FGCSs, assist with acclimating students to the learning environment and social constructs.

Means and Pyne (2017) studied a sense of belonging and how institutions must have support in place to assist FGCSs in persisting. The authors discovered identifying support structures that enhanced self-belonging, which included need-based scholarships, social identity-based student organizations, study abroad, academic support services, supportive faculty, and community-building residence halls (Means & Pyne, 2017). Aruguete (2017) discussed how the lack of academic and social integration negatively impacts the persistence of FGCSs. Because of the lack of support and preparedness, institutions have difficulty retaining FGCSs (Aruguete, 2017). However, Swecker et al. (2013) found that when students met with an advisor consistently, retention rates improved drastically. As mentioned earlier, integration into the college environment is vital for FGCSs. Having a sense of belonging to the institution can assist with that integration.

### *Motivating First-Generation College Students*

London (1996) noted that “for many first-generation students, college is a transforming experience—one that requires students to play out powerful intellectual, psychological, family, and cultural dramas” (p. 9). Educational motivation is a concern for FGCSs. Petty (2014) comprised a literature review to discuss research relevant to FGCSs’ motivation and psychological motivating theories associated with this group of students. The theme found in the literature included motivating FGCSs to devote enough time to achieve academic success and college completion (Petty, 2014). Petty proposed that high schools and institutions of higher education implement bridge programs for FGCS, so their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is higher.

Blackwell and Pinder (2014) identified that institutions have a problem determining why FGCSs are motivated to attend college, resulting in low retention rates once these students enter higher education. By questioning FGCSs at various stages of their academic career, the authors determined the motivation and drive of why these students decided to attend college and graduate (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Carpenter and Peña (2017) discussed self-authorship and how FGCSs reach this much earlier in life because of their lived situations. This self-authorship allows this population of students to be more motivated to reach goals, including obtaining a degree (Carpenter & Peña, 2017).

Ishitani’s (2016) research assisted institutions in identifying when FGCSs are more likely to drop out. Ishitani found that the majority of FGCSs dropped out in year two. Through this research, the author added a time-varying factor so that institutions can identify why these students are leaving college at that time. As identified by Ishitani, many schools spend most of their efforts making sure freshmen become acclimated to college. However, institutions must

continue those interests into future semesters, especially for sensitive populations such as FGCSs.

### ***Measuring the Satisfaction of First-Generation College Students***

Practitioners have learned in higher education that one of the ways to improve services to students is through measuring their satisfaction as learners. Additionally, students who see that their opinions and concerns are considered and addressed are more likely to acclimate to the environment and have a sense of belonging to institutions. Learning how institutions serve this population, and making any necessary adjustments, can help assist future FGCSs (Mahan et al., 2014). Mahan et al. (2014) conducted research regarding FGCS' satisfaction with the learning and college environment at their institution. By having this type of exit interview with FGCSs, future programming can be influenced by what this population thought was useful and/or not helpful.

McCoy (2014) examined FGCSs' transition experience into higher education. Through student interviews, McCoy found that student satisfaction was measured by the admissions process and who assisted them during their transition process. McCoy implores student affairs and enrollment management to adjust practices, so that satisfaction for FGCSs would increase. This front-end measurement allows institutions to better understand how admission processes affect FGCSs. If these students have a favorable experience during the admissions process, the sense of belonging to the institution begins at a very early and vital stage of integration into the college.

### **Conceptualizing the Experiences of First-Generation College Students**

There are several ways to conceptualize the experiences of first-generation college students, and the theories of retention, social capital, and social support are worth considering

with regard to this study. These theories provide the basis for framing research purposes and questions, as well as informing data-gathering tools (see Chapter 3). Theories regarding retention and social support emerged in the 1970s and have grown to primarily based on social perspectives that compare students who depart college before attaining a degree with their degree completing counterparts. Major contributors to these theories include Astin (1975), Bean and Metzner (1985), Scholossberg (1989), and Tinto (1975, 1990).

### ***Theories of Retention***

There are several retention theories regarding students in higher education. Astin (1975) recognized two main predictive factors of retention: personal and environmental: Personal factors include academic background, family background, educational aspirations, study habits, expectations about college, age, and marital status. Environmental factors include residence, employment, academic environment, and characteristics of the college” (as cited in Morrison & Silverman, 2012, p. 67). Astin (1975) posited that the less negative personal and environmental factors contribute to a student’s life, the more likely that student will succeed in college. Additionally, the more a student becomes involved and gains from learning opportunities, the greater the chance of retaining the student (as cited in Morrison & Silverman, 2012).

FGCSs may have many negative personal and environmental factors that contribute to their lack of success. Because of low socioeconomic backgrounds, access to poor secondary education, and their lack to acclimate to educational environments, the retention rate of FGCSs is less than their counterparts. Institutions of higher education must look at policies and procedures to ensure that proper protocol is in place to assist with FGCS retention. These policies need to address the negative personal and environmental factors that affect these students.

**Academic and Social Integration.** Tinto (1975) developed the theory of departure with two main dynamics: academic and social integration:

Academic integration is manifested in a student's academic performance and intellectual development during college whereas social integration is developed through informal interactions with peer groups and faculty. Higher levels of integration in the academic and social domains ultimately influence students' decisions to persist and ultimately graduate from college. (p. 92)

Tinto's theory has been used in many studies regarding FGCSs. This theory considers the academic and social benefits of integration into college (Ishitani, 2016). Tinto (1990) noted that "Despite variation in structure and activities of campus retention programs, successful programs are similar in the way they approach retention, emphasis given to retention efforts, and objectives" (p. 35). Integration into the educational environment is vital for FGCSs, since the processes are foreign to this student population. People tend not to excel in unknown environments unless given the proper tools. Tinto's academic and social integration theory explains why it is necessary for college students to acclimate to their environment and why institutions need to be invested in that process.

**Nontraditional Students.** Pelletier (2010) mentioned that there are seven different classifications of a nontraditional student:

1. has delayed enrollment in higher education,
2. attends college part-time,
3. works full-time,
4. financially independent for financial aid purposes,
5. has dependents beyond their spouse,

6. is a single parent, and/or
7. does not have a high school diploma.

FGCSs can fit into any of these categories, so understanding retention theory around nontraditional students is important. Bean and Metzner (1985) theorized an idea of retention for nontraditional students. Since nontraditional students are typically commuter students who do not have time to spend on campus, this theory lends less to social integration and more to academic performance, intent to leave, background and defining variables, and environmental variables that influence retention (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The predominant theme of this theory is that external factors have a greater influence on nontraditional student persistence, such as family and work. This idea is central to the idea of social support for FGCSs.

**Sense of Belonging and College Experience.** Schlossberg (1989) explained in theory how retention could be determined by student involvement within a college. Students who do not create a sense of self-belonging with the college often feel marginalized, which can have negative effects such as attrition (Schlossberg, 1989). On the contrary, Schlossberg mentioned that students who are more engaged have more motivation to attain their goals. Engaging students and ensuring that they are involved in the college environment is critical for their success (Schlossberg, 1989). Making students feel like they matter can come in the following forms: attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation (Schlossberg, 1989). This mattering and involvement can increase retention and assist with students attaining their goals. FGCSs often do not acclimate to the college environment due to various external factors discussed by Bean and Metzner (1985). The experience of college has been made important by Tinto as well. Even though FGCSs have many non-college commitments, their sense of belonging and the college experience is critical to persistence.



### *Social Capital and Social Support Theories*

Social capital is a term found in literature dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century but has been used more widely starting in the late 1990s (Bourdieu, 1977; Coleman, 1988; Hanifan, 1916; Jacobs, 1961; Putnam, 1995). Social capital is defined as networks with shared norms, values, and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups (OECD, n.d.). This can be through social bonds, bridges in shared identities, and linkages of groups of people on the social ladder. Larsen et al. (2004) described:

Without "bridging" social capital, "bonding" groups can become isolated and disenfranchised from the rest of society and, most importantly, from groups with which bridging must occur in order to denote an "increase" in social capital. Bonding social capital is a necessary antecedent for the development of the more powerful form of bridging social capital. (p. 65)

Bridging social capital from family networks to educational networks can be difficult for FGCSs to navigate. Pascarella et al. (2004) found little research discussing FGCSs' college experiences and the cognitive and psychosocial development during this time. Pascarella et al. posited that FGCSs have less interaction with peers and a more challenging time acclimating to college environments. Because of their lack of social capital, or their familiarity with collegiate environments, FGCSs are less likely to persist from freshman to sophomore year (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Because FGCSs do not have parents who are familiar with the higher education system, they lack the social capital to understand the system themselves. Due to the lack of college acclimation and social capital, Pascarella et al. (2004) suggested FGCSs develop and transition at a lower rate than traditional college students who do not face the same challenges of

development and transition. FGCSs often do not have the social network around them that understands the college environment, which prevents their attainment of social capital regarding the educational landscape. Without that basic assistance and knowledge, acclimation to the environment is hindered, potentially leading to attrition. However, through social support, Putnam (1995) mentioned that child development strongly shapes social capital and that capital continues to build positive outcomes, particularly in education.

Social support has increased in popularity as retention theories have taken on a more social lens. According to Costa-Lobo et al. (2017), “The basis of social support is the ability to provide and obtain care that is relevant to the individual and the group according to vital needs” (p. 2593). There are several social factors within the college that can influence social support, such as college peers, faculty, and college staff. Factors external to the institution that can play a social role in supporting FGCSs are friends, family, and others who make up the student’s social network (Goldsmith, 2004). Goldsmith (2004) also explained that social support is often linked to academic achievement, personal relationships, and improved health. Baldwin et al. (2003) believed that there is a link between academic persistence and social support because social support reduces stress. The authors posit that students who feel support often can accomplish their goals, traverse college life, and persist (Baldwin et al., 2003). The studies mentioned lean more towards the four-year student, so taking a deeper look at the social support of first-generation community college students would be beneficial for this study. In some cases, the social support built by FGCSs is the only balancing factor in their lives. However, their social supports may or may not have the social capital to share regarding higher education.

## Summary

The review of the literature focusing on the FGCSs has resulted in several conclusions. First, FGCSs are an important group of students to higher education institutions due to their diverse backgrounds and nontraditional characteristics; therefore, it is important to investigate the barriers and challenges these students face when pursuing higher education. In particular, the studies by Carpenter and Peña, McCoy, and Wang target these issues. Also, there is a need to better understand their social supports and if those factors have played a role in their success (Goldsmith, 2004). If FGCSs are building social supports while in college, institutions must know who these students are in order to give the proper tools for them to build such supports.

FGCSs need to create a sense of self-belonging within institutions to acclimate to the environment (Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Academic and social integration are critical elements that will assist FGCSs in taking ownership of their education and create a trust that the institution they chose has their best interests in mind (Tinto, 1975). Because of the factors discussed in this literature review, higher education institutions ought to be concerned with how they are identifying FGCSs and at what time this identification is occurring. If FGCSs are not identified early in their academic career, they do not receive resources in a timely manner, and a sense of self-belonging does not occur because barriers retain these things from happening naturally.

Several theories pertaining to FGCSs were relevant to this proposed study. Tinto's theory of academic and social integration informs FGCSs' acclimation to higher education and the importance of proper integration. Creating a sense of self-belonging, both academically and socially, is imperative to FGCS success (Ishitani, 2016). Astin's (1975) work on retention theory allows one to ponder on how the negative effects of barriers and challenges create roadblocks in the path to success for FGCSs. Pascarella et al. (2004) suggested that the lack of social capital

and familiarity with higher education practices also affects FGCS success. Additionally, Putnam's (1995) ideas on social theory and the need for appropriate bridges can inform this study by exploring how FGCSs bring their familial, social capital with new capital obtained in higher education. That bridge can effectively assist with success and retention. This idea proves to be critical in this study as the pathways to success are explored. Goldsmith (2004) and Baldwin et al. (2003) brought importance to social support for college students. The social supports and networks that students build while in college have a lasting effect on their retention. If FGCSs are not identified as such when they enter college, and colleges expect students to self-identify, building solid social supports may be hindered due to the lack of resources and tools provided by the institution.

Finally, narrative inquiry into the first-hand experiences of prospective participants of this study provided a powerful testimony to what it means to be and to live through the experiences of an FGCS. Having an in-depth knowledge of these students' barriers, motivational factors, and social supports can allow others to better understand their identities and pathways to success.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter addresses a methodological approach to the study, narrative tradition, the components of research design, ethical considerations, and validation criteria. To reiterate the purposes of this narrative study, it sought to explore the pathways of first-generation community college students to their academic success and retention in Central Texas. The following research questions guided this study:

**RQ1:** How do the students understand their academic success as a first-generation college student through their personal narratives?

**RQ2:** What are these students' experiences with being identified as a first-generation college student within their institution?

**RQ3:** What prevents these students, if anything, to identify support systems conducive to their retention and overall academic success?

**RQ4:** What is the relevance of social capital, if any, to these students' academic success?

This narrative study fills in important gaps in existing research and scholarship regarding individual experiences of the first-generation college students, their unique positions on the impact of identification of them as such, and a variety of issues that accompany their paths to academic success.

#### **Positioning the Study Within the Narrative Research Tradition**

This study is positioned within the narrative research tradition (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012; Polkinghorne, 1983; Riesman, 2008). Polkinghorne (1983) described the roots of narrative inquiry in the ancient traditions of hermeneutic (interpretive) philosophies, storytelling, and existential phenomenology (descriptive). Holstein and Gubrium (2012) described narrative as extended speech acts in interviews or fieldwork that can encompass one's entire life or a specific

event such as social change. Additionally, narrative, in one form or another, is one of the most “important sources of research material since the inception of social sciences” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012, p. 3). The authors go on to say:

No matter the approach, narrative research is becoming increasingly complex and rigorous. Like other modes of social research, it involves conceptualization, working hypotheses, data collection, data management, analysis, and different forms of representation, such as report-writing, therapeutic insight, and cultural criticism. (p. 4)

For the purposes of this study, storytelling is used to learn more about FGCSs experiences in higher education.

Storytelling is rooted in our lives since we were children. Whether it was a fictional story being told to us by way of a bedtime tale, or a family member recalling an event in their lives and sharing it with a new generation to carry on family values, narration allows one to express themselves in a manner that brings meaning to life and existence. The use of expressions and illustration can frame cultures and bring meaning to one’s life (Giovannoli, 2000). Narrative in research allows one to record, transcribe, and share stories through a lens of inquiry (Cajete et al., 2010).

A narrative approach is best suited for this research because it allows reconstructing the first-hand accounts of the participants in-depth and in detail. Narrative inquiry provides the opportunity to explore the “how’s” and “what’s” of the lived experiences of FGCSs that may offer new ways for educational practitioners to think about how they are served within colleges. Narrative tradition integrates an inquiry of personal perspectives and social change (Andrews et al., 2013). Andrews et al. (2013) explained:

Most often, perhaps, we frame our research in terms of narrative because we believe that by doing so we are able to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change. (p. 11)

Bold (2012) mentioned that narrative approaches had enabled the development of critically reflective practitioners. Additionally, narrative is used for “developing skills of critical reflection, and subsequently as a valid, reliable and most appropriate research method for students in professional educational and other social contexts for use” (Bold, 2012, p. 8). Creswell (2013) mentioned that narrative exploration allows one to study individuals, collect data by gathering stories, and then report on an individual’s experiences in a meaningful way.

Narrative research approach focuses on first-hand accounts of one’s background. Taking the form of storytelling, narrative allows for a person’s story to compel readers to learn about human experience and intimate details (Riessman, 2008). Riessman (2008) also mentioned how stories serve as the basis for historical documents, social movements, and cultural processes. Stories have a static place in history and serve a purpose in individual’s lives daily. Narrative stories also highlight the way an individual sees themselves (Creswell, 2013).

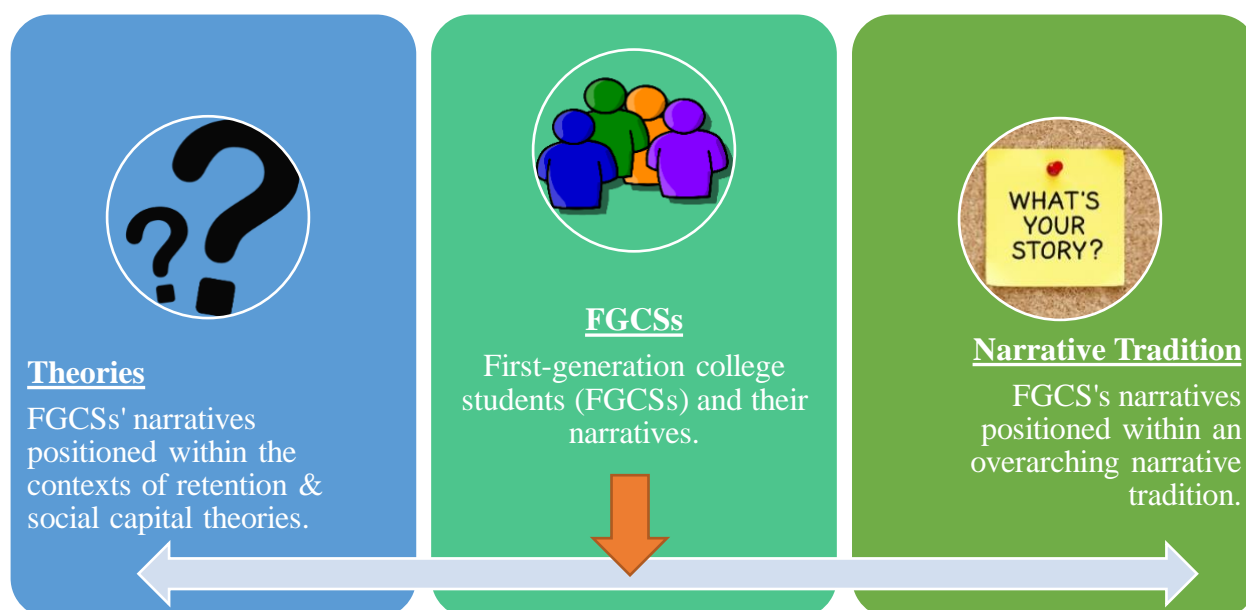
Through restorying, this research allowed me to understand FGCSs lived experiences and the way they see themselves within higher education institutions. Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) defined restorying as “gathering stories, analyzing them for key elements of the story, and then rewriting the story to place it within a chronological sequence” (p. 332). Further, restorying is an approach that allows me to consider personal, student-generated reflection as a data point (Slabon et al., 2014). Allowing one to share their story is powerful, and as Mills et al. (2010) explained:

Restorying opens up a space of discourse to question narrative representations of recurrent individual and collective memory. It is a journey of reflexivity about how one storytelling is related to others, or how it nests other stories that deserve to be told. There are always more sides of the story, more traces to other stories, and each version dissolves the idea of a beginning, middle, and end. (p. 900)

The participants of this study had the opportunity to relive their experiences as students and recall how they were identified by the institution and whether that impacted their pathway to success. Their stories allowed me to better understand their social supports and networks. While narrative inquiry, broadly conceived, does not claim any specific theoretical framework, several theories were prominent to conceptualize the experiences of the first-generation college students, namely, retention and social capital theories.

Figure 1 demonstrates an integration of the theories of retention and social capital within an overarching narrative paradigm of research. Central to this study were the experiences of FGCSs. First and foremost, their experiences were examined within the narrative tradition (see the above section), framing an overall theoretical discourse. More specifically, the theories of retention and social capital informed the study's research goals, research questions, and interview guide questions (see Appendix A).



**Figure 1***Theoretical Positioning of the Study****Retention Theories***

Various retention theories inform this study. Tinto's (1975) theory of departure, and deep look into academic and social integration, helps to shape the interview questions. It will be important to understand how academics and social domains influence these student's decisions to persist. Additionally, FGCSs can be seen as nontraditional students. External factors to academic persistence are the main focus of nontraditional student theory (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Through this research, I sought to better understand these external factors and why they may play a role in retention. I also gained a better understanding of the sense of belonging that FGCSs experienced while in college. Schlossberg (1989) explained that retention could be determined by student involvement in college.

***Social Capital Theories***

Social capital has proven to be an interesting subject in regards to FGCSs and their persistence. Putnam (1995) discussed a bridge of social capital from one context to another. It

will be important to ask in this research if FGCSs feel that a bridge of social capital exists from family life to college life. Rose (2000) mentioned that social capital had generated an interest in the educational setting because one goes from generalized trust within a family to more of an importance of individual free choice. In this research, I explored how FGCSs experienced the issues of navigating an idea of free choice because of the social capital their parents passed to them. Does that social capital have any traits of higher education within it if their parents never attended college?

As mentioned in the previous chapter, retention theory has developed into a more social lens. As retention theories take a more social turn, the idea of social support and social factors come to the forefront. This includes several social factors affecting retention: friends, family, and others who make up an FGCSs social network (Goldsmith, 2004). Social support reduces stress which can lead to better academic persistence (Baldwin et al., 2003). In this research, I asked the participants whether they had support from key influencers or whether their social networks had changed. It was equally important for me to determine whether the college played a role in their social networks.

### **Narrative Research Design**

Narrative offers inquiry to an individual of unfamiliarity to a place, time, and context. It allows one to connect this new information to what is familiar and then think about a way that may not have previously existed. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explained that researchers must situate themselves relationally with participants. Narrative research typically begins with storytelling, but more importantly is “a more difficult, time-consuming, intensive, and yet, more profound method is to begin with participants’ living because in the end, narrative inquiry is about life and living” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 378). The plot or story line for this study

will employ Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space: the personal and social (the interaction); the past, present, and future (continuity); and the place (situation). This story line also includes information about the setting or context of the participants' experiences. Additionally, I relied on an activity-meaning system design (Daiute, 2018):

A useful concept for organizing dynamic narrative inquiry. An activity-meaning system depicts an environment of everyday life—a cross-context slice of life—wherein relationships across different points of view by different actors in the system interact in some way. (p. 36)

Activity-meaning design encompasses: (a) having a research focus or question where narrating plays a role in expressing and developing meaning; (b) identifying or creating space-time contexts where narrators interact in familiar and extended ways with others and environments; (c) recognizing the key participants in diverse relevant social and intra-personal relations (actors/stakeholders); and (d) gathering and eliciting narrating activities by stakeholders for subsequent narrative analyses addressing the relation, materiality, diversity, and use functions of narrating (Daiute, 2018, p. 36). Narrative researcher's task is to gaze inward and outward, backward and forward (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This means that I focused on inner feelings and emotions and the place as a broader social context that moves between the then and now.

### ***Participants***

As a qualitative researcher, I employed purposeful sampling because it ensured choosing the best participants, allowing for the best data (Leavy, 2017). Six students from a college in Central Texas agreed to participate in the study. The main criteria for the selection of participants

were their status as an FGCS. Convenience sampling allowed me to select participants from a college in the Central Texas region within close proximity to where I reside. Also, being a practitioner in higher education allowed me to utilize gatekeepers at this college in Central Texas to recruit participants. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) noted that gatekeepers are individuals within a context who has a leadership or significant role (i.e., presidents, provosts, and/or vice presidents of colleges).

Additionally, I used a snowballing strategy where “a participant recruits people he or she knows to be in the study, those new participants then recruit people they know to be in the study, and so on” (Allen, 2017, p. 1543). Since FGCSs tend to self-identify, this type of recruitment strategy proved useful for this study. The college I chose to recruit participants from did not have institutional documents where students self-identified as FGCSs. I recruited participants by having the college personnel send an email invitation to the student body. The email identified who I was, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and how to contact me. Once a student emailed me, I asked follow-up questions to determine if they were a suitable participant for the study. The follow-up questions were very crucial:

1. Are you the first in your family to attend college?
2. How long have you been enrolled in college?
3. Are you willing to do a 90–120-minute virtual interview that will be recorded?
4. How often do you check your email and provide timely responses?

### ***Sources of Data and Data Collection Strategies***

For this study, I used several sources of data: interviews, documents, artifacts, and observational and self-reflective researcher notes.

**Interviews.** Semistructured interviews constituted the main data collected for analysis. An interview guide (Appendix A) was used to provide the direction for the interviews in an organized manner. According to Saldaña and Omasta (2018), interviews allow researchers to gain insight into participants' personal experiences related to a study's topic, including values, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of the topic. A semistructured interview model is best when a researcher wants to adjust during the interview analysis (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). During the interview process, I listened attentively and took mental notes of potential follow-up questions and personal impressions. Tracy (2010) recommended that when interviewing, it is necessary to consider the number of questions asked to keep the participant engaged. The topic should be meaningful and worthy to participants, so their inputs are sincere. A semistructured approach allows for several structured questions and, at the same time, for space to develop a free-floating conversation and to adjust some planned questions, if necessary. This type of interviewing provided access to important details in the participants' narratives.

Based on the ethical principles of researching with human subjects, a consent form (Appendix B) was presented to the participants, so they are aware of the research process and their rights as participants (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). I recorded the interview and then transcribed the recordings verbatim. Interview transcripts were sent to participants for verification of accuracy. One participant responded that their transcript was accurate. No other responses were received.

**Researcher's Observational and Self-Reflective Notes.** According to Saldaña and Omasta (2018), "Reflexivity is individual reflection on one's relationship with the data, the participants, the nature of the study, and even with one's self as a researcher" (p. 50). In the field, the researcher's personal feelings should be jotted down during the entire data collection process

(Bailey, 2018). Throughout the research process, I kept a journal of observational and self-reflective notes to analyze my own thoughts and create a safety measure against potential bias. These notes also assisted me in the data analysis process.

### **Data Analysis Strategies**

Once interviews were conducted, I started the coding process to develop the themes for the study. Coding is a technique that qualitative researchers utilize to analyze interviews and other types of data. Coding is a form of symbolism—condensing data into a richer and compact form of meaning (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). During the coding process, I utilized Microsoft Word and created a table for a document for each participant. I created a table and used different colored fonts to differentiate between different coding passes within each document. At the top of the document, I had my research questions to always have them at the forefront of my mind when reading the participant's transcript. The left column was for codes, the middle column was for excerpts from the transcript, and the right column was for emergent themes or repetitive words. I also utilized an online qualitative data software called MAXQDA that assists with finding repetitive words in transcripts to develop themes. It also compares multiple participants' transcripts to one another for similarities. Based on these data analysis strategies, the following types of coding that served this study well were *in vivo*, process, and emotion coding.

### ***In Vivo Coding***

*In vivo* coding allows a person to code a participant's own language as a symbol system (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Words and phrases are called out to indicate emphasis of what is being said by a participant. Saldaña and Omasta (2018) suggested that *in vivo* coding is a great way for a person who is new to coding to learn how to make coding passes. Leavy (2017) mentioned that *in vivo* coding allows one to prioritize and maintain a participant's language.

Full-sentence coding is cumbersome, so it is best to only use phrases that are identifiable and simple. I will create a document that allows me to color code words and phrases and call out commonalities. This will also allow me to use the participant's own words and find shared aims between interviewees.

### ***Process Coding***

Process coding utilizes gerunds to identify a participant's action, reaction, and interaction suggested by the data (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). This type of coding allows researchers to apply symbolic and subtextual meanings to words. Additionally, process coding allows a researcher to “search for routines and rituals of human life, and the actions and reactions that occur as we deal with conflicts or problems to solve” (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 79). Process coding captures actions in phrases. I will need to be sure to capture these action words and find similarities.

### ***Emotion Coding***

Emotion coding, according to Saldaña and Omasta (2018), is the emotional state experienced by a participant or inferred by the researcher. Since emotions are present in just about everything a person does, this type of coding allows one to apply emotions to words that assist researchers in relaying the message intended by the participant. Since FGCSs were asked questions regarding their identity and institutional effectiveness, their emotions within their answers needed to be analyzed.

I organized, transcribed, and coded interviews. Data analysis typically begins with the close reading of the interview transcripts accompanied by open coding. Transcripts are often reviewed several times and require several cycles of coding resulting in the identification of meaningful themes that unfold the participants' experiences. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) mentioned that analyzing and interpreting data involves “drawing conclusions about it;

representing it in tables, figures, and pictures to summarize it; and explaining the conclusions in words to provide answers to research questions” (p. 10). One method to assist with coding is to create a chart where questions and comments from the interviewer and interviewee are recorded side-by-side. In an additional column, using color coding, each coding pass can be recorded (i.e., process, in vivo, and emotional, with color codes and notes of keywords and themes). This will help draw out the most relevant points in the interview(s). Creating this visual representation of the interviews assisted me in drawing the necessary conclusions to address the research questions.

### **Validation Criteria and Researcher’s Self**

Qualitative researchers are guided by several criteria to validate their research findings. For this study, I relied on the following criteria: trustworthiness, rich and thick descriptions, member checks, and reflexivity. According to Sousa (2014), “Trustworthiness of the method implies a series of procedures that involve the clear and rigorous description of all methodological steps in the research process, from the adequacy of the research question and participant sample to the theme under study” (p. 213). Choosing a narrative study for this research allowed me to answer the research questions that I posed.

I employed member checks with the participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Once the initial interview with participants was conducted and interviews were transcribed, each participant was sent their interview for them to check for accuracy. They were also asked if there was anything else they would like to add. Each participant was also given the invitation to reach out to me if they wanted to provide any further details. Participant’s feedback assisted me in improving the accuracy, credibility, and transferability of the data collected from participants during the study by each participant validating their transcript. This ensured that their personal



narratives were accurate and that transcribing did not misinterpret their words. Reflexivity is a researcher's conscious and deliberate effort to be attuned to one's own reactions to participants and to how the research account is constructed (Sousa, 2014). It was an important method of validating the findings since the nature of narrative inquiry is my own self-involvement in the research. During the interview process, I listened attentively, but I also took notes of the participants' emotions, reactions, and personal space during our time together. At the end of the interview, I reflected upon the participant's narrative and the relevance of what was shared that came to my mind firsthand to the research questions. Also, during the process of restorying the participants' narrative, I continued to journal anything important that I might need to reflect upon later in the data analysis or concluding chapter.

Since this is a narrative study, my own story is very relevant to those of the participants. Throughout the study, I have been mindful of this fact to avoid inserting my own assertions of FGCSs and institutions. It was important for me to continuously reflect on this in my journaling which became my own outlet for my opinions. This study complied with the legal and procedural ethics held by Abilene Christian University's IRB requirements. Beyond institutional policy, I gave ethical considerations at all phases of the data collection process. Clandinin and Huber (2010) explained that "ethical considerations in narrative inquiries are commonly thought about as responsibilities negotiated by participants and narrative inquirers at all phases of the inquiry" (p. 15). I will also aim to adopt an approach of empathetic listening that is not judgmental and suspends any disbelief I may incur (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007). Guided by the ethical principles of researching with human subjects, I made sure to show utmost respect to my participants throughout the research process.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Interpretation

This chapter is my favorite—restorying the experiences of the six participants in this study has been inspiring, rewarding, and revealing. I was honored that these individuals shared their personal life stories, some of which were told with tears. Because of the pandemic, the interaction was not as personal, but the virtual meetings were nonetheless valuable. The first-generation student experience goes beyond statistical data and is far richer when told from a first-hand perspective.

This qualitative study restored each participant's life from childhood to the point they are at in the educational journey. Commonalities shared across participants included struggle, grit, and pride. Through narrative inquiry, this chapter assisted with answering the primary research questions for this study. Telling one's story can be difficult, but Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that retelling a story is even more challenging. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), "The construction of narratives of experience, therefore, is a reflexive relationship between living a life story, telling a life story, retelling a life story, and reliving a life story" (p. 71). While creating a safe space for open dialogue with participants, I realized that reliving a life story is challenging; however, retailing that story became my task to present these individuals authentically, just as each person shared their authentic self with me.

The intention of this chapter is to share personal narratives of the participants that have emerged as a result of data analysis and interpretation. This allows me to amplify the voices of each individual and give meaning to their lived experiences. Storytelling has the power to convey the participants' struggles, accomplishments, and a myriad of other experiences over time. Each individual participant of this study showed strength, pride, resilience, and perseverance in their respective narratives. Participants were given a pseudonym to conceal their

identity and a signifier that captures the personality of each participant as it relates to the researcher's personal identity. What follows is a portrayal of individual participants as they appeared to me when retracing their journey of success in higher education.

### **The Significant Six: Participants' Individual Stories**

#### ***Amelia - The Resilient: A Road Full of Hardships and Life Lessons***

I will have to admit, my first interview was with Amelia, and I was extremely nervous. Would Amelia feel like she was in a safe space to speak? How was she going to feel about meeting virtually? Would not meeting face-to-face devalue the authenticity of my questions and approach? How would I be able to establish rapport with her if she could not read my body language, because a webcam can only portray so much? All of these questions loomed, but when I "met" Amelia for the very first time, I was welcomed by someone who was just as enthused or more about the study as I was. Amelia was clearly on a mission to help others who struggled as she did when she entered higher education by sharing her story.

When our virtual meeting began, I started by asking if she was in a distraction-free area and if her cell phone was on silent. She was quick to respond that she wanted no interruptions during the interview because the topic of discussion was too important. Since I was not meeting Amelia in person, I paid close attention to her surroundings. From what I could tell, there was a recital poster behind her which she later shared with me what it was. She dressed comfortably as if we were close friends about to share how our day had been and vent to one another about odds and ends. My tensions began to ease because of her relaxed nature. In my mind, I thought I am more nervous than she is.

We jumped right into things, introducing ourselves and establishing trust. I conveyed the purpose of our meeting (it was shared in the invitation to participate, but for me it was important

to verbally share the information again). Eager to begin, Amelia started to share her lived experiences as a young woman who has experienced quite a lot in her life.

Native to the town where she started attending community college, Amelia explained that her family dynamic growing up was interesting: “My parents were the black sheep of the family and there was always the mentality of you work until you die kind of thing.” Her family has predominately stayed and worked in the same hometown for as long as she could remember. Her father was in the military, but she explained that he did not excel in it. However, he pushed for her to go into the military, but she rebelled and went to college instead. Amelia had a passion for music and education. Recounting her biography, Amelia said:

My dad was always pushing me to be in the military and he wanted me to be in the military band, but I'm just an arts and education person. That's what is really in my soul. So, I have always had a passion for music since I was very young. I've always been one of those people that just always had determination to do what I want to do, regardless of what the people around me and my family think. Luckily, I've made some pretty good decisions, but I've also made some bad ones. Growing up, I was uh, I was made fun of a lot by not only you know, people at school, but by my family and my friends. That caused a lot of turmoil for me and made me feel very different than my family. I think I feel like I used education to set myself apart from them and show that I was worthy of having a good life; I always felt like it was my duty for myself. For at the time, I was thinking of my future students: I needed to be a well-rounded and educated person so that I could be a better educator because I've always wanted to be a teacher.

Because of her father's time in the military, Amelia has access to the Hazelwood grant. “I remember the moment I got that I was sitting in my high school counselor's office, and I just

started crying because I never thought that I would be able to go to college so easily. You know, for people like me, it's very inaccessible.” She was currently living in student housing, and “milking the benefit because it is insanely cheap.” Even though she felt she had a resource to attend because of the Hazelwood money she would receive, Amelia was met with various challenges as she entered college. No one in her family would help her with the process. Her parents and older siblings simply told her no when she asked for assistance or advice. Her mother often ignored her, which gave her more of a drive to do things for herself. Her older brother was in prison, and she felt her mother sang his praises even though she was in college and doing her best. Amelia had no choice but to think of it in a way that her parents did not have to worry about her like they had to worry about her brother.

Amelia also faced other hardships:

There's been a lot of pain in my life, especially in the early part of my life. It changes you in ways that you may not expect or want. Needless to say, I had some issues. My parents are both a little bit into drugs, but nothing too heavy. There is assimilation involved in that, you know, you grew up seeing people doing things. I was arrested for drug possession when I was 18, and I got a felony. It was really just like the cliché story that I was hanging out with the wrong people at the wrong time. I ended up with some drugs on me that I didn't even know were on me. I took it like a grown woman, and I paid all the money they wanted; I worked my ass off and I had to drop out of college for one semester. I took care of everything, went to rehab, did all the education classes, and you know, completely changed my life. I'm grateful for that ability to be able to learn from my mistakes, and hopefully it doesn't cost me too much.

Determined to “dig herself out of the poverty hole,” Amelia took great pride in realizing the value of education, and she used this as a tool to move forward in her life. At this point, she became very emotional and explained that it was “very cathartic to speak to someone who understands (talking about me) that life is difficult, but we must move forward and use life’s lessons to propel us forward.” Amelia felt that she hit an all-time low when she left home.

I'm in this dead-end relationship. I'm waiting tables. I'm a felon, I'm on probation. I'm drinking every weekend. And really, I'm not committed to my music and I'm not committed to my education at this point. I was 18 or 19. I just wanted to get away from my parents, and not that they're inherently bad parents, but you know, they're not really the best. I do love them, and I appreciate a lot that they did for me, but I don't think they see a lot of what I experience. I'm a young woman at this point, I'm in this dead-end relationship, and in trouble with the law. It was a really sad situation, so I moved out on my own sort of. I ended up being homeless. I was living in my car and my mom found out about it. She asked me if I wanted to go stay at her apartment and I was like, heck yeah, I hate living in this car.

In addition to experiencing homelessness, Amelia experienced a different kind of trauma as an adult. This is how she described the experience:

There was an incidence of sexual violence in my life. I was single and was dating around having casual sex. I was raped in my apartment and it was really terrifying. It was very violent, there was a lot of hitting when it happened. I've since been to therapy and I can talk about it without it affecting me a lot. But when that happened, I really had hit rock bottom, I wanted to crawl into a hole and die and never come out. I think being alone and being without a support system because I couldn't tell my family. My dad is one of those

people that would take it upon himself to rectify the situation or blame himself. I told my mom actually and it seemed she cared, but I don't think she knew how to react.

From Amelia's open sharing thus far, I knew that she had overcome so much in her life, but she remained resilient. She continued to share personal aspects of her adult life with me about not being able to afford therapy, but she knew she needed to take better care of herself. She met her current fiancé and began to find her life again.

In this "self-discovery" phase of her life, she was also navigating her education. At this point in the interview, we moved to the more specific questions regarding her educational journey. Amelia explained that her parents did not encourage her to attend college or help her with any matters related to going to school. However, she was attuned to her environment at the college and learned that if you "pay attention to smart people, you'll learn things." She mentioned a specific professor that showed her what resources she needed to be successful and encouraged her to assimilate to the environment she was in by interacting with her peers in the academic community.

I asked Amelia what success meant to her. She told me that she believed there were different types of success:

I think the most important kind is probably intrinsic or individual success and how one defines living their life in a successful way. To me, that means doing something that I can be proud of. If I decide to have children that they'll have a safe and happy life and that's really all it boils down to. I'm not someone that has ever been super interested in monetary gains. I think being successful just means doing things with passion and doing them all the way.

I asked Amelia what it meant to her to be a first-generation college student. She proclaimed:

I'm very proud of it. It's not something I'm embarrassed by at all. I love telling people that I am the first in my family to attend college. I love being an inspiration to other people where I can if I can be. I try to push my friends to go in education and if they want to, you know if they feel like they should, I try to be very supportive. I try to help people that I know that are scared of education because it changed my life. It really is just the springboard for my entire life. And I think some people really neglect to realize just how important it actually is and how valuable it can be to any one individual person, because sometimes they're just there to get a business degree so they can get a better job. But for some people, it's your life's work and your passion and everything you have, every, every last thing you have, you've put into your education.

I believed I could feel her passion in her response. She realized that by going to college, she was “pulling herself up by her bootstraps” and getting herself “out of poverty.” She told me she would not even allow herself to get in her way.

When discussing barriers with Amelia, she explained that work was a huge barrier when she entered college. She had to make money to live, but that was hard to manage while going to school full-time. Because of work, she dropped out of college from time to time because working was more important than going to class. She also told me that housing insecurity was another issue. Between living in her car and in and out of her mom's apartment, the thought of not knowing where she would live next bothered her. Additionally, she had food insecurities but knew she could go to her dad's if she was desperately hungry. Amelia also had an unreliable vehicle, and anytime it had a flat tire or broke down, she was faced with walking to work and classes until she made enough money to fit repairs in. This is how she described her situation:



It was just another thing that you have to deal with when you're living in poverty and you're trying so hard to live a normal life and have a higher quality of life. You have to get places, but if your car is crappy and you can't afford a nicer car and you can't afford upkeep on it, it's just gonna keep breaking down. I feel like that happens to a lot of students and not being fully educated on how to just live your life sensibly is devastating to some students. When I started living practically and sensibly, I realized that it was probably all I ever wanted in my life was to live a normal life. Bumps in the road like this though can just really ruin your day, ruin your month. I don't think some people have never had to deal with that, realizing how devastating something like that can be.

Coupled with mental health issues, it's a lot. I've said before my mom has bipolar my dad actually has a brain injury, he has epilepsy. That was traumatizing and has been for many years. There was a lot of scary stuff with that, but I knew I was trying so hard to maintain and work to stay healthy. If you've never had a proper example of living life and going to college, anything can be a barrier to if you if you don't have the tools to overcome and to adapt. I feel like I'm lucky but I realized that I wish I would have learned these concepts a little bit earlier in life.

Amelia explained that when she first entered college, there was no college culture and opportunities to engage with peers were minimal. She mentioned this had changed over time, especially in the music department. She felt the music faculty and students lived like family, very tight-knit and inclusive. She discussed a poverty initiative the college started that began to change the college culture for the better.

I asked her to reflect on her fears when she entered college. She mentioned that she worried if she was smart enough, if she was ever going to finish, and if she would have enough

money. However, in hindsight, she feels that she overcame all of that, and the college gave her the proper tools to enter the workforce. Amelia prides herself on her education, being debt-free, and all while doing that as a first-generation college student.

I learned from Amelia that grit and determination would get you far. No matter your circumstances, as long as you keep a goal in mind, you can do anything. It truly was inspiring to hear Amelia's story as a first-generation college student.

### ***Clara - The Perseverer: Pushing Through Life's Ups and Downs***

Clara was confident and poised when I met her for our virtual interview. She was dressed nicely and professionally, and the environment that I could see through her camera looked neat and tidy. I began building trust and rapport with her in hopes that she would feel comfortable sharing her life story with me.

I quickly learned that Clara was succinct with her answers, very straight and to the point. She was born in a small Texas town, and she was the youngest of three girls. Her parents divorced when she was 13-years-old. Shortly after her parent's separation, her mother passed away. She described her family as an average family:

I graduated high school in 2004, and I didn't start college until 2010. I went to a school after high school where I got a certificate in medical assisting. I didn't ever utilize that because at the time medical assisting wasn't really big. It was in 2004 and 2005 when I attended. It wasn't really a big thing in the area, and I couldn't find a job to utilize that certificate. I didn't go to college partly because my family couldn't afford to pay for college for me and also because I knew that I wouldn't be considered an independent student for financial aid purposes until I was 24. My dad did not even know that I started medical assisting school until I told him. He just said okay, and didn't ask any further

questions. Education was important in the terms of making good grades. I was an AB honor student all throughout elementary, junior high, and high school and my parents were proud of me for that. But as far as attending college after graduation, it wasn't ever really talked about or pushed for.

She explained that her father did not help her with any aspects of attending college. He worked very hard in laborious jobs to provide for their family. He felt that he had a good-paying job and did not have to have a college degree to make money. Her father supported a family of five without education, so she felt she could perhaps do the same thing for a long time. Her older sisters have never attended college and do not discuss that component of her life. There is a lack of interest from other family members when it comes to pursuing higher education. Clara did mention that her spouse was a big motivator to attend college.

When Clara turned 24-years-old, she knew she could apply for financial aid. She explained that she had been waiting tables for several years and was not making decent money. Her spouse worked for a college, so all of these things prompted her to attend college. She knew that she could not afford college on her own, so financial aid was necessary for her to attend.

When asked about what success means to her, she explained, "It can be looked at in many different ways. Success to me would be setting a goal, sticking to whatever you need to do to obtain that goal, and just overall being a better person for that." She was very proud of herself when she decided to attend college and better her life through academic pursuits. She mentioned that she waited tables while in college but knew at the end of the day she would have a better job in the future.

Clara discussed her worries when she entered college:

I was working full time and attending school full time, so being able to juggle full-time work and full-time school was a worry. I've been out of school for so long, so being able to go back to learning, and you know, the learning environment and being able to retain that information was a stressor. Also, I was technically an older person going back to school, just being looked at differently by the younger students at the college was a worry too.

She mentioned that realizing she was a first-generation college student when she started college was a prideful moment for her. She believed that she was setting a new standard in her family and a good example for her nieces and nephews. She also knew that she could help any family member who wanted to go to college with questions because she knew what it was like to do that on her own without family assistance.

When we moved onto the college-specific questions, Clara could not recall being asked by any college professional if she was a first-generation college student. She mentioned that through some of her classes, an instructor would occasionally talk to students about tutoring opportunities and the library on campus. However, she did not hear about student support services on campus formally through advising. She also did not feel engaged with her peers on campus. She wanted to be active in student clubs on campus, but since she identified as LGBTQ, she felt out of place and was always met with closed doors when she sought resources in this area. Clara discussed how she might not have cliqued well with her peers because of her age difference.

Through my interview with Clara, I interpreted that she was a person who persevered through her life with work and health hurdles that she had to jump. While her interview was succinct, I learned a great deal about her and her experiences in higher education. The time we

spent together reminded me of the various struggles I have endured as a first-generation college student.

***Beau - The Valor: Finding a Purpose Much Later in Life***

Beau was a fun person to interact with. He was upbeat and open about discussing his story. The space he chose for our virtual meeting was neat and tidy. He was dressed professionally and listened attentively as I opened up the conversation.

Beau grew up with sort of an absent father who traveled a lot for work. His mother took care of everything for him and his two younger siblings. His parents separated when he was 11-years-old, and he talked about his stepmother preparing him a lot for his first future career, the military. This is how he remembers the episode:

My stepmother grew up in a military family. Her dad retired as a colonel in the military. She was really structured and if it wasn't done right, you did it until you were done. So yeah, that obviously hurt because I wasn't used to that. But a lot of how I am now I owe it to her because I was able to leave home when I joined the military and take care of myself. I wasn't that kid that always asked where mommy and daddy were. I knew how to do laundry. She had me cooking at 14. I had a little cookbook and she would said, okay, going to the grocery store. Find your recipe out of your cookbook, you're cooking Wednesday nights now. If had dirty laundry, that was my fault because she taught me. It's not her fault anymore. I remember sweeping the back porch because they were getting that ready to put the washer and dryer out there. That was my portion of the duties. I spent probably three hours out there because I just kept thinking I was done and it was never done to her standard.

Instead of attending a regular high school, Beau attended a vocational school to learn job training skills. He felt as if he was judged for attending this type of school because only “techies and dummies” attend vocational school. His senior year, he was forced to change schools which led him to not having any friends and feeling out of place. However, watching his parents work hard all of their lives, the roadmap for him was to work before thinking about education. Beau mentioned that education was not given much attention to in his family, and he never really thought college was an option for him.

Beau worked in several restaurant jobs, trying to start a career in culinary arts. He found himself at a fork in the road at one point, join the military or take an internship with a company to get hands-on training as a chef. Because of the stability the military would provide, Beau took that route even though there was the stereotype that only “dummies or cop outs” joined the military as a last resort. The military provided housing, medical benefits, and a reliable/steady income. Eventually, the military opened his eyes to the world of postsecondary education. Beau mentioned that the military, along with soldiers who were educated, were role models for him to attend. He knew that when he eventually left the military, he would need skills to join the civilian workforce.

Beau talked about his pride in being a first-generation college student and how his parents shared in that pride:

My mom and dad, they were really proud of me when I finally finished my degree. I mean, it took me nine years to finish my associate degree in general studies because of deployments and other military commitments. It felt really good to finally have that thing done and finished. When I had kids, for them to see that I'm still doing school to this day that really sets a good picture for them. They already know they want to go to college.

They're already talking about going to college. I wish my brother and sister had gone to college, but they already have the mentality that they started working and that they are just too old to start an academic career. I'm already working. I got a good job. I don't need education.

Beau almost appeared to be empathetic when discussing this because he had realized the importance of education, but that was not shared amongst his siblings. However, he was hopeful for the children in his family, including his own, who seemed to have bright futures ahead of them with college in mind.

When we moved into the more specific questions regarding the college, Beau mentioned that he could not recall conversing with college personnel about being a first-generation college student. He almost felt like the college “assumed” he knew what he was doing being an older student and having the experiences he had. Beau mentioned that his biggest barriers while obtaining his education were time and motivation. He also felt that he was not academically prepared for college. It was also difficult for him to take the military hat off and put the academic hat on. In his words, be more “refined.” Beau found himself working as a student worker and felt that this helped him focus on school and help other students navigate the process of attending, so they would not be as lost as he was when he first started.

Beau felt that he did not know much about student resources on campus until he became a student worker and received one-on-one advising from the Veteran Affairs Office. Again, he felt that the college assumed he knew the ropes because of his age and previous experiences. Beau also discussed how he was discouraged at times because he did not feel engaged on campus with his peers. There was not much opportunity for student clubs because most learners commuted to school, went to class, and left to go to work.

Overall, Beau attributed most of his successes and self-motivation to gain the next “title.” I learned from Beau that no matter where we are in our lives, anything is possible. It reminded me of a quote I always had in my office, “Your journey is unfolding exactly as it should be.”

***Ingrid - The Courageous: Overcoming a Nonexistent Support System***

Ingrid was the first participant where I sensed hesitancy. I think the unknown of what this interview entailed was what perhaps brought about her sense of unease. I made sure to open our conversation in a very trusting way. I could tell that her tension eased. Ingrid sat at her kitchen table for our interview and sat with her arms crossed as if she was guarding herself.

Ingrid opened her dialogue by sharing with me that she was the middle child of 11 children. Coming from a big family meant that priorities looked very different from an average family:

Yeah, and with all of us, I mean, I knew that I wasn't going to go to college. It's something that you just don't think about. Nobody talks to you about it coming from a family where nobody else went to college: my brothers didn't go, my oldest brother went to the Marines, that's about as far as he got. Everybody else it was just high school and either got married or, you know, just working wherever. My sister is younger than me, she went to a trade school. But um, you know, that's about as far as any of us got.

Because we were a big family, there wasn't the money to go. When the schools don't tell you what your options are, you just think there aren't any options. Then if you do decide to go, if you do attempt to be the one that's going to go, you go and you enroll, but for whatever reason, you don't have the resources as far as how to get there. I remember attempting to go. However, you realize that you can't do it because you know, X, Y and Z, the time or the money, or you don't have the support really to go that route. So, when



you know that nobody else has done it, you kind of think, well, you're not going to do it either. That's how it was. That's how it was growing up. I went from there to getting married and having my kids like the rest of my siblings.

Ingrid opened up about how the idea of getting married and having children above everything else was a generational thing within her family. She knew that the cultural norm was to stay at home and let the husband provide, so she followed suit. She truly believed she was her own role model when she decided much later in life to attend college because she never had a career. Her husband passed away, so she was widowed and needed to provide for her children. She believed they were old enough at this point in her life for her to attend college. Additionally, Ingrid was plagued with anxiety and panic attacks as an adult. She could not drive herself and felt she did not have a support system to attend college due to this. However, she made the courageous decision to start college, and she conversed what that was like in the beginning:

I started with one class because of the kids and because of my panic. I didn't know how long I can be in school. I started really slow taking one class here, one class there. I'd been out of school for 20 years. So, they started me in the developmental classes. When I started those, my teachers wanted me to test out because they were like you don't need to take these classes. I felt that I needed need to re-learn how to think and all the basics like how to study again and prioritize your time and all that stuff. So, I did almost two years of developmental and then just as many classes that I could take without taking from my kids because again, I am a single mom now and I just did it slowly, one class here, two classes there. Life gets in the way and kids with their stuff, and I've always done my schooling around their life, their sports, their extracurricular activities. Again, I figured they didn't ask to be born and everything, and I wasn't going to put them on the back

burner to. That's just a personal preference. I know that there's other women who've done it different. I didn't have the family support to help me with the kids. It was just us.

I perceived that Ingrid was a family woman who cared dearly about her children, but she also needed to do something for herself, even if it was at a slower pace.

Ingrid spoke about being misinformed by the college on several occasions, stating:

I think I would have already completed what I was set to do, but I wasn't informed correctly. I didn't know of all the resources that were available to me. So, I just basically did it by myself knowing what I knew, which isn't a lot.

She was very passionate about this and mentioned her son was experiencing the same issue with this college. She felt as if “advisors” did not listen to her but rather just told her what to do.

Ingrid felt her biggest barriers were her panic attacks, academic preparedness, and understanding technology as an older student. She felt the college assumed that she knew these things, so she was sometimes afraid to ask questions.

Even as an adult in college, Ingrid still feels like she lacks an adequate support system. When she attends face-to-face classes, her daughter will take her to class and sit in the parking lot and wait for her. She feels her children are her only level of support. She discussed that it was not until she was accepted into the nursing program that she felt more of a connection with the college and was given resources to assist her. However, before this occurred, she had no assistance from the college staff. She mentioned that she was in her “fourth year of college and was barely finding out about all that was available to her as a student!” Ingrid felt engaged with her peers but felt like there was no sense of community within the college as a whole.

I learned a great deal about self-motivation from Ingrid during her interview. She has had the bravery and courage to step outside of her comfort zone. She even mentioned that if she

finishes college and never works, at least she finished. Everyone does things in their own timeframe, even when it seems like a farfetched idea!

***Pearl - The Grateful: Never Take Anything for Granted in Your Journey***

Pearl was eager to share her story when we met. She looked as if she was in a comfortable space from my bird's eye view through the webcam. She understood what we were meeting for, and she was ready to do the talking. I was ready to listen.

Pearl's parents were married in Mexico when her mother was 13-years-old. Their first child was born when her mother was 14. She mentioned that her mother was sometimes scared that her children would be taken away from her because she was so young, and she experienced trauma as a child with her own mother. Aside from these factors, Pearl discussed that the mentality within her family was to finish high school. Any education beyond that was not discussed. Her junior year of high school was slightly different because her family moved to Cancun, Mexico for her father to take a job. She attended a Christian Academy where she completed packets of work and then took tests to assess her knowledge. Pearl and her siblings were very behind in school because of how they had to attend their final years of high school. She also knew that her parents could not afford for her to attend college, so she did not attempt to attend.

Pearl's cousin became a role model and driving force for her to attend college:

She was like, you have got to go to college! There are so many jobs that you can qualify for, but you don't have a college degree. She took like a two-year technical computer program and gets paid well. So, she was the one that planted the seed: you have to go to school and don't be dependent on a man. You need to take care of yourself. I was like, yeah, I'm like drinking the Kool Aid. So, I stayed with her. I asked my parents if I could

live with my cousin and they were like, yeah, if you live with her, you have all these ground rules!

When Pearl first began college, she was in remedial classes due to her math and reading being behind. She struggled financially and eventually had to drop out and move back in with her parents. She mentioned that no one ever discussed with her what financial aid was or how to apply. Pearl found herself in a place where she was struggling financially again and “was a slave to her bills.” She married soon after this, and in discussing future goals, Pearl decided it was time to return to college.

We talked about various items related to college, including her struggles with math being an older student. She discussed her children becoming college-bound and how she felt high schools do not spend enough time with students discussing college and the various options available to them. She mentioned this was an issue for her as well when she attended high school. Pearl showed great passion in informing folks about college. It was inspiring and I almost felt she needed to become an educational practitioner because this type of advocacy is greatly needed.

As we moved more into the college-specific questions, Pearl did not recall being asked if she was a first-generation college student on any admissions forms or by college personnel. She mentioned that her biggest barriers with the college were digital literacy and getting assistance from a tutor. She revealed that the lack of appropriate resources was “discouraging.” She attended a satellite campus that is quite a distance from the main campus. The only advice her math instructor could give her was to attend tutoring elsewhere if she was not getting what she needed at that campus. Pearl discussed that the way she identified resources on campus was usually through her own research of the college’s website.

When asked what her involvement on campus was, she said there were not many opportunities to be part of groups or student clubs. She often would seek to form study groups with her peers, but no one was ever interested. Pearl was so upbeat during her interview. Her interview was the shortest of the participants, but her story was similar to the others and humbled me. Even though she had trials and tribulations in life, she remained grateful and pressed on.

***Nora - The Determined: When All Else Fails Keep Pushing Forward***

Nora, by far, was one of the most interesting interviews I had. She sat in a room with a door closed because her children were home, and I could hear them in the background. I could tell she was a busy person, but I enjoyed the banter of her children in this context. It almost seemed as if our meeting was a break from life.

We started off talking about the current pandemic we are facing in our world. Nora discussed how working from home was distracting, and she missed the sense of community that comes with being in the workspace.

Clara began to discuss the dynamic of growing up:

For the majority of my young life, my parents were together. My parents married and divorced twice. They would break up and get back together. My parents both experienced drug addictions. I did see a lot of my parents going in and out of rehab. One of my parents was a functioning addict, which was my dad where he could, you know, get up and go to work every day and still make money to take care of the bills, but then my mom, she was nonfunctioning. It was harder for her to maintain a job and to get out of bed.

While Nora discussed her family dynamic growing up, I could see the pain in her eyes, especially when she talked about her brother. There was a 5-year gap between them (Nora is the

oldest) and Nora often found herself taking care of him. She mentioned that oftentimes all they had were each other. When I asked Nora if her parents gave attention to education when she grew up, she explained:

My mom actually was really firm on me about my education, even though she only obtained her GED. My dad barely got by in high school and then went right to work. He made good money, so he didn't understand the point of education. My mom was always firm and hard on me about making all A's. I graduated the top 30% of high school, and she was like, you could have been the top 10% if you would have applied yourself. My mom always felt guilty about a lot of the decisions she made, so I think she wanted to make sure I did not struggle like she did. She just always wanted the best for us.

Nora talked about how her biggest fear was failing when she started college. She felt pressured by her mother's expectation to be successful. She was also unsure if she had what it took to attend college. However, she remained optimistic:

I'm smart. You got to tell yourself good things to believe those good things. So, I told myself you're smart, you're knowledgeable, you can do this. When I first went to school, I originally went for engineering drafting and design and it was really hard. However, it wasn't something that I was interested in. I was optimistic, though, because I was trying something new. You don't know if you like it until you try it. So, I tried it for two semesters, but I wasn't really liking it. I just kept a positive outlook on it because there are some days where you get tired and you get frustrated. I'm so ready to be done, but I'm so close and you just sometimes have to pep talk yourself and think positive thoughts. Don't give up because you're worth it. Education is worth it.

She then went on to discuss what success meant to her. “It is being the best person that you can be by achieving goals and dreams you set for yourself. I feel like it's important to have one-year goals, five-year goals, 20-year goals, and even monthly goals.”

The next portion of our conversation moved me more than anything I heard. I asked Nora what it meant to her to be a first-generation college student, and she began to cry. She explained that they were not tears of sorrow but tears of being proud and accomplished. She cared that she made her parents proud and her kids proud, but most of all, she wished her brother could see all that she accomplished. Nora’s brother had passed away in a tragic accident that has affected her tremendously. However, she knew he was always near, and she was grateful that she had given “blood, sweat, and tears” to get where she was.

Nora revealed to me that she had never been asked by the college if she was a first-generation student. The first time she heard the term was when I sent the solicitation email to students at the college. She then began to start asking questions about it and realized she was indeed first-generation. She had an overwhelming sense of pride when she realized there was an official term for how she identified. We went on to discuss her biggest fears when she started attending college, and she cited motivation and knowledge of what to do once she got there. She also mentioned being distracted was an issue. She became a mom at 21-years-old, so life got a little more complicated when it came to attending college.

In talking about her support system, Nora mentioned she did not have one until she started college, and then she met college personnel, instructors, and peers who became support for her. She also became an employee with the college and felt that support grew after that. She was very active on campus and overall was happy about where she was in life. Even though she has been working on her associate degree for 10 years, she was determined, nonetheless.

## **Researcher's Reflections**

Interviewing these participants left me with what I believe to be a deep understanding of the various contexts shaping their personal and academic lives. Each person's story served as an indispensable source of rich data that was significant to this study. Their narrative provided a deeper understanding of their families and how that impacted their choice to attend college. After analyzing their stories, one thing was apparent: each participant's pathway to higher education was unique and rocky. For Beau, Clara, Pearl, and Ingrid, the arrival into higher education came later in life. For some, much later in adulthood. Amelia and Nora began college soon after graduating high school, but because of various reasons, they find themselves still working on their academic pursuits.

Even though their pathways were different, one idea that rang true for all participants was that they were determined to meet their goals as first-generation college students no matter what stood in their way. After interviewing these participants, I was left wondering how their pathways would have been different if they had the social capital knowledge of higher education from family members. I pondered if each one would be in a different place in their careers if they had attended college sooner in life or had proper resources to obtain their degree in a timelier manner. I also wondered if each one would have had a different higher education experience if they did not have the typical first-generation college student barriers. However, when I think about the sense of pride that rang true in each interview, I think that all of the participants are glad their journey unfolded the way it has because, above anything, these first-generation students do not take anything for granted. As Amelia stated, they have all pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and pressed on.



At the time of this study, three of the six participants have begun to pursue education beyond the community college they were attending. The other three are nearing completion of their programs with hopes of continuing academic pursuits. Each participant was in various places within their current careers. Through their personal stories, one can learn about the struggles of a first-generation college student from a first-hand perspective that can begin to change the narrative of the various contexts that shape these students' lives. Often, the lens of FGCS success is from statistical data such as GPA, test scores, and dropout rates.

Restorying the participants' paths to higher education assisted me in addressing several research questions. First, their narratives shed light on how they understood their academic success as an FGCS. Additionally, restorying the participants' narratives provided insight into their experiences of being identified as an FGCS, or the lack thereof. Finally, the individual participants' portraits provided a wealth of detail with regard to the support systems and the feeling of self-belonging within the college. The following section presents the analysis of the themes that speak to the participants' common experiences.

## **Thematic Analysis**

### ***Climbing a Mountain: Always Feeling Like the Underdog***

Many have heard the term of constantly feeling like one is on an uphill battle with themselves and their external environment. However, some face these battles with tools and resources that others do not possess. Not only do FGCSs face an uphill battle without the proper support and tools, but many of these students feel like an underdog. They feel as if success was not meant for them because of the situations they have seen within their families and within themselves. I always felt like the underdog, like I was never going to get ahead. It was not until I took ownership of my barriers and realized that I had the power to change generational curses

and go against what I was taught was the norm. As I immersed myself in this study, I found that this rang true for participants too. Once they tasted success for themselves, no one was going to stop them, no matter what stood in their way.

When it comes to climbing a mountain that seems as tall as Mount Everest, do colleges do enough to help FGCSs reach the top? According to Kuh et al. (2010), colleges that are most successful with student persistence pay attention to the whole student. This is typically achieved through comprehensive programming and an all-hands-on-deck approach to advising and mentoring students. Advising does not have to solely be with an advisor. Leadership and faculty should be listening to students and assisting with students on a firsthand level by communicating with learners, listening to their needs, and addressing their concerns (Kuh et al., 2010).

Based on the participants' responses and additional data sources, four major themes have emerged as a result of the data analysis. The process of how I arrived at these themes was done through coding, which was described in Chapter 3. Additionally, concept mapping and Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) 3-D Design using interaction, continuity, and situation were utilized to restory the events of participants' lives.

Concept mapping, as described by Leavy (2017), is a useful process that allows a researcher to visually show how perspectives and knowledge of participants relate to the main topic, or in this case, the research topic of FGCSs. Figure 2 is the concept map or word map I used to tie participants linking words together through word frequencies. This map was constructed by uploading participants' interview transcripts to an online qualitative data software titled MAXQDA. If a word appears larger in size, this means that the word was found more frequently throughout the six participants' interviews. In this case, the family was found more frequently throughout.

**Figure 2**

*Word Map Used to Link Participants' Words Together in Interview Transcripts*



As mentioned above, I focused on interaction, continuity, and situation in the three-dimensional-space narrative structure. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) described that continuity from Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) work focused on the past, present, and future. It is very important to have a construct like this when restorying participant's lives. When interviewing, the interview protocol asked participants to discuss their past, present, and future very intentionally as readers viewed in Chapter 4 through the restorying of their experiences. Additionally, interaction focuses on two spaces: personal and social. The personal space has one look inward to internal conditions, feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral disposition (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The social space has one look outward to external conditions in the environment with other people and their feelings, emotions, intentions, purposes, assumptions, and points of view (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Last, the situational space of 3-D Design has one look at the context of time and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with characters' intentions, purposes, and different points of view (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Figure 3 is a visual explaining Clandinin and Connelly's 3-D Design work.

**Figure 3**

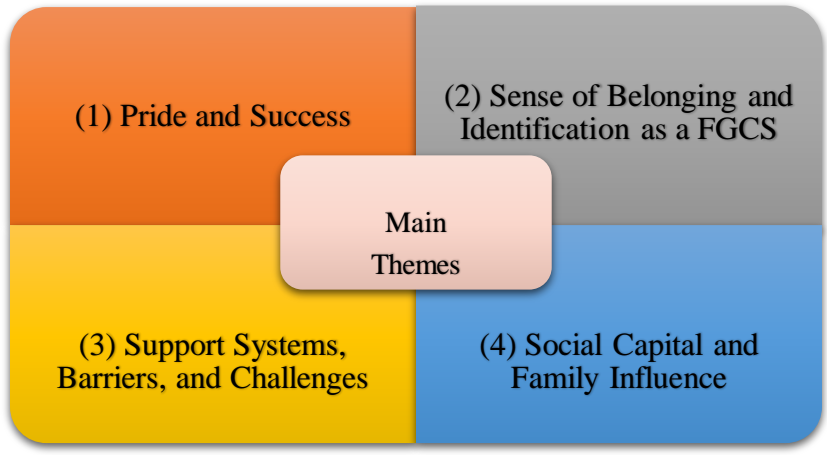
*Definitions of 3-D Design*

<b>Interaction</b>	<b>Continuity</b>	<b>Situation</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <u>Personal</u>- Look inward to internal conditions, feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions.</li><li>• <u>Social</u>- Look outward to existential conditions in the environment with other peoples' feelings, and their intentions, purposes, assumptions, and points of view.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <u>Past</u>- Look backward to remember experiences and stories from earlier times.</li><li>• <u>Present</u>- Look at current experiences, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event.</li><li>• <u>Future</u>- Look forward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Look at context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spacial boundaries with characters' intentions, purposes, and different points of views.</li></ul>

While conducting the thematic analysis, the research questions were always at the forefront of my mind to ensure that the personal narratives gathered were relative to the information I was seeking. Figure 4 presents the findings of this study visually and lists the four major themes that emerged.

**Figure 4**

*Four Major Themes*



### *Pride and Success*

As I analyzed the data and recalled the personal stories of each participant, it was apparent that pride and success rang true even through the struggles of being a first-generation college student. Even though each of them had unique situations and various ways they reached milestones in their lives, they considered themselves to be very successful and proud to be where there were. I could gather from their narratives that they took nothing for granted and were thankful for what life had given them thus far.

For the participants in this study, higher education meant a change in their life as they knew it. Higher education was not something foreseeable for them. Their families could not afford it. They simply did not talk about it. So, when they decided to enter college and found out they could be successful at it, they had an unimaginable sense of pride for themselves.

For instance, Amelia spoke highly of her sense of pride and success throughout her interview. Higher education gave her a renewed sense of purpose.

Being a first-generation college student is not something to be embarrassed about at all. I love telling people my story and being an inspiration to others where I can be. I try to push my friends to go into education and be supportive to them because I know they are scared just like I was. College was a springboard for my entire life. I think some people really neglect and fail to realize the true importance of education. This has become my passion and my life work.

Clara mentioned several times during her personal narrative that it was always hard to talk about education with her family, but in the end, they were very proud of her, and she was a great role model for her nieces and nephews.

I was very proud of myself. I remember always sharing my schedule with my sisters and

dad and talking about how many classes I was taking at any given time. I waited tables and worked full-time all throughout college, but I knew at the end of the day it would make me a better person in the years to come once I got my education. It would be something that no one could take away from me and that it would be a good example for my nieces and nephews when they got older since I am the only person in my family that has pursued higher education.

Beau talked about the pride he had for himself and the pride his family had for him, stating:

My mom, dad, and stepmother were all very proud of me when I finally finished my degree. It took nine years between deployments and combat arms, but I finally got that associate degree done! Now my kids see that I am furthering my education and it is providing a great example for them. They are in middle school and they already know that they want to go to college. They always tell me that they are proud of me and that in itself is the ultimate reward for me. I feel that I have done my job as a father...not only has education benefited me, but it has provided a future for my children.

Ingrid's pride and success came in several different forms. She was prideful of being an FGCS, but she has a lot of pride and success in being a widowed mother and raising her children by herself:

I have been successful in surviving as a widow and raising my kids on my own. I take great pride in knowing that I have conquered this in my life. I knew that I wanted to go to college, but I knew I needed to wait until my children were the right age for me to do that, so I waited. When my home was stable and my children were old enough, I entered college, and found a new sense of pride and success within myself, and set a new

example for my children. Being a first-generation college student has been a great personal accomplishment for me. I made this decision on my own for the betterment of myself and my family.

Pearl discussed the importance of being proud of herself and that being successful was good for her family, but that she wanted a better life for herself and not struggle like she saw her family struggle.

I know that my parents will always be proud of me and I want them to be proud, but that should not be the only reason people should go to college. I decided to be the first in my family to go to college because it was for me. I wanted to be proud of myself. I saw my cousins doing great things in their lives because they made the decision to go to college (they were much older than me) and I knew I wanted to feel that same sense of pride. I wanted to be successful like them. They were architects, doctors, photographers, and successful businesspeople. I did not want to struggle like my family did. Also, I want to motivate the younger generations in my family like the older generation motivated me. I want my younger cousins and nieces and nephews to see me as a positive influence and example.

Nora felt a lot of emotion when she discussed pride and success. She cried during this part of her personal narrative because she missed her brother, who was lost in a tragic accident.

I am proud of myself. I wish my brother were here because I know he would be very proud of me too. I am crying now, but it is a good cry, a joyous cry. I am happy, I promise. I know my family and kids are proud of me as well. I only have four classes left to finish my associate degree and it is such a good feeling to have that I have been successful navigating college when no one else in my family has done this before. It is

crazy to think of our journey and the blood, sweat, and tears that get us to where we are, but it is also a joyous celebration. Sometimes tears are of joy and sometimes they are of sorrow. Overall, though, this has been an exciting ride!

Pride and success was a theme that crossed all participants' interviews in various capacities. However, one commonality rang true, they were all very proud to be an FGCS and felt successful in their academic pursuits. Their backgrounds and timelines were different, but a sense of pride and success was evident no matter what. I felt a sense of pride for all of the participants when it came to hearing their narrative of being proud and feeling successful. Even though each of them had overcome so much, they continued to climb the mountain and overcome their fears.

### ***Sense of Belonging and Identification as a FGCS***

A significant part of this research was determining these students' experiences with being identified as an FGCS within the institution. This included whether this was determined at the beginning of their academic journey or much later. In their narrative, participants did not mention any type of programming that helped acclimate them to the college or introduce them to college resources. Many found resources on their own. I found this to be interesting since FGCSs need to have resources almost immediately when they enter college.

A component that I focused on through the interview protocol was the interaction participants had with the college admissions, financial aid, academic advising, college resources (e.g., tutoring and the library), and student activities. I wanted to know specifically if participants were identified as an FGCS by these areas when they first entered college or if they were told if college resources and student clubs existed on campus when they first began college. This type



of identification, or academic and social integration as described by Tinto, is vital for FGCSs to feel a sense of self-belonging with colleges.

When talking with Amelia about her first experiences with the college, she mentioned that she did not have much interaction with actual college advisors:

I was a music major when I first started college. My high school was no help at all. I advised myself really when I first started. It was hard when I first started which is why I probably dropped out a few times. I finally started to get help from a faculty mentor in the music department who started to point me in the right direction of resources on campus and this is when I found out that I was a first-generation college student, but this did not happen when I first started. I was very lost in the beginning. However, once I felt connected to the proper resources, and connected with students in the music department, things seemed to naturally fall into place.

Clara could not recall being asked if she was an FGCS with the college at any time. She also did not have a great experience finding resources on campus and joining student clubs.

I was never asked on any forms or by an advisor if I was a first-generation college student. I was fortunate that my spouse worked in higher education, so I was familiar with the term and she educated me about it. I found resources on campus by roaming around and finding them on my own. Once I entered more intensive writing courses later in my degree plan, the writing center was mentioned as a resource for me to get writing help, but the staff in that office were not helpful at all. At one point I wanted to join the LGBTQ club on campus, but the person in charge of student life was not a friendly person. I could tell from the beginning that she did not like gay people. This college is in a conservative community, but all students on campus deserve a voice. It was hard to feel

a sense of community on campus when you do not feel like you fit in. I finally realized I was just there for my academics, so I focused on that.

This was an unfortunate revelation shared by Clara. I found it to be deeply concerning that a community college would not support students from all backgrounds. Beau had a very different experience when he entered college as a Veteran Affairs student.

I do not recall being asked initially on any forms if I was a first-generation college student, but when I was referred to the VA office, I was asked this question and told what it was. Additionally, I was given ample resources and was made to feel very comfortable with attending college. I mean I had to put the work in, but I knew I was supported.

Eventually, I became a student worker in the VA office and that made my educational journey even easier knowing that my support network was with me all of the time outside of the classroom. Being a student worker meant that the VA office was flexible with my class schedule and understood when I needed time to study for exams, or needed more time to go to tutoring [or do other things]. It really did make a difference for me and I am grateful that I had that opportunity.

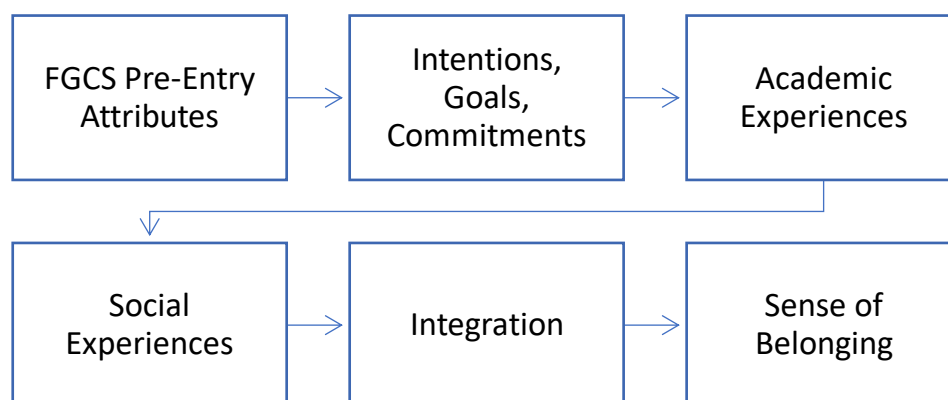
Ingrid, Pearl, and Nora mentioned in their narratives that they were not identified as an FGCS during their initial stages of becoming a student at the college, but did not provide much detail about their sense of belonging with the college. Their focus was to concentrate on their studies due to their family commitments outside of their studies, so they did not have much time for anything else.

As one can see, creating a sense of belonging within the college is vital for students. I found through the data analysis that most participants struggled with this component. Through the narrative it was apparent that it had affected some of the participants in some ways.

Integrating socially and academically can assist with the overall experience for FGCSs. When Amelia became involved with the music department and the faculty member led her to the proper resources she needed, she felt as if she found her purpose. Clara had a much different experience when she could not find her place as an LGBTQ student. Beau felt supported from the beginning as a VA student. The narrative from the students proved that having support from the college was critical for them to acclimate to the environment. Figure 5 is a visual of how integration occurs and creates a sense of belonging for students. When FGCSs enter higher education, they bring their own set of attributes and build upon those attributes with new intentions, goals, and commitments that involve their pursuit of a degree. Participants elaborated on their academic and social experiences, some positive and some negative, and how integration has or has not occurred. For most participants, sense of belonging has not occurred, and the cycle has not completed itself.

**Figure 5**

*Academic and Social Integration*



### *Support Systems, Barriers, and Challenges*

There is plenty of literature that discusses the barriers of FGCSs. Even though it is widely discussed in the literature, it is worthy to converse in this study because the participants faced many of their own barriers before entering higher education and during their academic journey. FGCSs often have challenges and barriers because they are the first to attend college in their family. First, they are not financially and academically prepared to attend college, and when they do enter, they often do not know how to navigate the landscape of higher education institutions. Because FGCSs are academically underprepared and they cannot navigate the college appropriately, their responsibilities as a student are unclear, and their pathways to success have wavered. Additionally, establishing a support system is important to FGCSs overall success. I believe that in order for these students to overcome their barriers, a support network must be established within the college to assist FGCSs with eliminating existing barriers or ones that may arise.

For instance, Amelia discussed several barriers that existed for her when she started college and during her attendance as a student:

When I started college, it was very hard for me to work and I desperately needed money. I needed money more days than I needed to attend school. I had housing insecurities and lived in my car a lot. I also had food insecurities and found myself eating at people's houses a lot; I found myself leaning on my parents a lot for food. I was always scared when I had issues with my car. When I got a flat tire that was money I did not have. I remember I had a dead battery once, and I had to figure out how to come up with that money. Scary times for sure! I also had academic barriers that I did not expect because I was a good student in high school, but college was on a whole new level. I almost felt

like high school did not prepare me properly. However, I knew that by getting my education I was preparing a future for myself to get away from my struggles, so I knew it was worth it.

Clara mentioned two distinct barriers for herself:

I had two barriers that I thought were going to keep me from being successful: I knew I had to continue working fulltime because I had to survive, and I thought my medical issues were going to be an issue. I had been a waitress since I graduated high school. I was worried that my job would not work with my class schedule. I often worked double shifts to make ends meet. I knew this meant that my class schedule was going to be crazy and I was probably going to have to take some online classes which scared me because I had no idea what to expect since I had been out of school for a long time and had never taken a class online. Not to mention, the college was 20 minutes from my job.

Additionally, I was just diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and it was taking a toll on my physical health. I was tired all the time and my body hurt. I was not sure if I had the energy to take on full-time work and full-time school. It just seemed like way too much. I was very scared of being overwhelmed and stressed which was not good for my health at all.

Beau believed the military prepared him for college in different ways, but certain barriers did still exist for him.

When I entered college, I still felt nervous but probably not as nervous as others who had never attended before. I had already dealt with being orderly and dealing with responsibilities and instructions. Now we did have colorful language in the military, so I

had to refine myself in those regards. I was no way in hell academically prepared for college. The military does not prepare you for that.

Ingrid described mental health, academic preparedness, and age being a barrier.

I suffer from panic attacks and anxiety which has been a big barrier for me at times. I have good days, but when I have bad days, I cannot drive. My daughter has to drive me to school and wait in the parking lot for me to get out of class. I feel sorry for her, but she is so patient with me. Also, being an older college student has been a challenge. I learn differently, so it can be a challenge adapting to different teaching styles and getting tutoring assistance. I am also not technology savvy and you have to have that knowledge in college for everything. If I had to choose my biggest barrier, it would be technology. My children try to do it for me, but I need them to show me. I have issues editing and submitting papers. I have issues with Zoom and online classes. They have classes at the college that help with this, but I do not even know how to turn it on. This does not help with my anxiety either.

Pearl had several challenges and barriers as well.

I was discouraged when I entered college and took the placement test and had to take developmental classes because I did not pass. I knew those classes would not earn credit and would not count towards my degree. I could not pass the math classes and tutoring was a joke at the campus where I was at. It was held in a small computer lab with one tutor. My instructor was not helpful and told me to go to another campus that is like 20 minutes away. That was not feasible for me. I did not have a car at the time. I felt that no one cared if I passed the math class even if I was paying for it. Also finances and time management was a huge issue for me when I started college. I lived with my cousin and

did not have a car. I eventually dropped out because it was too much. It wasn't until I married my husband, that I felt more stable and returned to college.

Nora was very open about the barriers that existed for her when she decided to attend college:

I had the lack of knowledge of what college was like, where to go, where to start, and who to talk to. I was also not motivated. I was young, so I did not feel smart enough. I was focused on boys, partying, and having a social life. I ended up getting pregnant, so I dropped out. I tried to go back again after having my first child and I was working part-time but ended up dropping out again. Time management was an issue with having kids and eventually a fulltime job, but eventually I realized that education was going to provide a better future for myself and family. It became a priority rather than a burden.

Even though these students experienced diverse barriers and challenges, they found their way through them in differing ways. They all know that their education is bigger than their barriers and challenges and that some of those things will effectively disappear with a degree and a better job. I expected each participant to have barriers as FGCSs, but to find through the narrative that the college did little to nothing to support these students was interesting. FGCSs have a difficult enough time getting to college, but without the proper support and navigating their existing barriers, dropping out may be the only option for them when they do not feel that the college is assisting them properly.

### ***Social Capital and Family Influence***

Another important element of this research was looking at the social capital of participants and determining if there was any relevance to academic success. Through the participants' individual narratives, it was apparent that their parents did not have any knowledge about college to assist them with the upfront processes to enter college. However, those who still

had their parents around, they considered their family a major support system for them even though they did not contribute social capital.

Amelia discussed the back-and-forth relationship she has had with her parents.

I knew I was not going to get any help from my parents, or any family members for that matter, regarding college. No one had been to college, so it was not important. This was something I was going to do on my own. Once I finally found my footing after a few semesters, my dad cared more than my mom, but my mom and I have always had a rocky relationship. I would say that my family's lack of knowledge regarding college had little impact on me personally. Perhaps looking in hindsight if they had more of an educational background maybe I would have been more successful in the beginning and not dropped out as much. Some of my peers have more support like that at home, but I had to take care of myself and that made it much more challenging. I had to worry about things that they did not.

Clara had always had a supportive family but knew that when it came to college, she would be on her own.

My family had no knowledge of what to do to attend college. I knew I had to wait until I was 24-years-old to attend because I was still considered a dependent of my father for financial aid purposes and I could not afford college on my own. I was fortunate that my spouse knew how to navigate higher education because she worked at a college, so she helped me, or I would have been lost. It was a lot of paperwork and there were a lot of offices I had to go to when I first started. Very overwhelming to say the least. It would have been helpful growing up in a family that talked about education and emphasized it. I think being familiar with it probably would have made me less nervous. Also, if I could



have attended right after high school, I probably would have felt more academically prepared. My family always encouraged me though and they were proud.

Ingrid had no social capital regarding college and no family support.

I grew up in a very large family. I was the middle child of 11 children. We had no money to attend college. The expectation was to go to work or get married once we finished high school. It just was not an option and was not discussed. My parents really did not pay attention to our studies growing up because there was no time. My dad worked all the time and my brothers worked with him. My sisters and I would help my mom with house chores and cooking. When I graduated high school, I got married and had children. I became a housewife just like my mother and raised my children. If my parents had attended college, perhaps I would have been more empowered to attend college at an earlier age too. It was not until after my husband passed, and my children were grown, that I decided to be my own role model and make a change for myself and attend college.

It may seem late in life, but it is my journey, and I am okay with that.

Beau did not speak too much about social capital as far as his family was concerned and if that added value to him attending college. He joined the military and that influenced him to attend college. Nora as well did not talk much about her family's influence on attending college. Her focus was more on herself, her own family, and how she would juggle the ins-and-outs of that. She mentioned a rough upbringing that did not include college conversations. Pearl's social capital came from others outside of her immediate family:

I grew up hopping from school to school. My math and reading skills were very far behind in middle school. When we finally ended up in Houston, my last years in high school were through a private high school where we basically took tests to pass the grade.

I would study at home and then take a test; It was a horrible learning experience. I got a diploma, but that was about it. It was not until I started talking to my cousin that I learned about college and that it could benefit me in different ways. My parents were workers and pushed me to go to work to make money for the family. However, my cousin pushed me to go to college to get a career instead, so I moved in with her to do that. She wanted me to be independent. I struggled for a while, but I knew it would be worth it. If it weren't for my cousin showing me the way, I do not think I would have ever gone to college because my parents would not help me. They were unfamiliar with it and they did not support me going.

The study participants did not attribute an important role to social capital in their lives in terms of higher education attainments. Perhaps if their parents had attended college or had knowledge of higher education practices, they may have been more adept at being successful in the beginning. However, each of the participants found different ways to make things work, either through a member of campus, some resource, or another member of their family. It seems that this proves that FGCSs are resourceful and they can find a way to make their situations work.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The six participants in this study, all FGCSs at a community college in Central Texas, provided insightful context into their personal lives that allowed one to understand the factors shaping their lives and their identities. Individual participants' stories and the common themes identified as a result of data analysis provided compelling evidence for inadequate identification of these participants as FGCSs, which, in turn, was one of the reasons that these students confront in terms of their academic and social integration. The participants' lived experiences

testify to substantial barriers and challenges that FGCSs often experience on campus. The participants of this study experienced a gambit of emotions and involvements during their educational journeys.

The findings of this study point to the participants' diverse upbringing and contexts that brought them to the decision to attend college. For some of them, the role of social capital played little to no role at all. Their families did not discuss college, but they decided to attend to better their lives on their own accord. Other's family dynamic and social capital was much different. Their family was raised to either go to work immediately or start a family. Once their family was raised, they made the decision to attend college and change the trajectory of their life much later. What did resonate across all participants was the fact that had college been discussed in their households, and had been encouraged, the decision to attend college would have been easier and probably would have happened sooner for participants. Even though social capital did not seem to have bearings on the participants' experiences with regard to their gains in higher education, they admitted that if they were to create social capital for their own children, they would consider it as a great resource for future generations.

Concerning the sense of belonging to the college community and finding support systems, most participants revealed this had been a very unsuccessful part of their academic journey. The narrative portrayed a harsh reality for students and a place of growth for the college. The participants were underprepared to attend college with little to no resources, so their hopes that the college would provide the tools needed to succeed were often not there. Either they were not told where they were, or they could not find them on their own. Because FGCSs are often too timid to seek resources independently, they depend on college personnel to point them in the right direction. The narrative of the participants described a different scenario for

most. Either it was assumed they knew what they were doing because they were an older nontraditional student, or they were not told at all. Many participants mentioned they only spoke with an advisor once, and that was to schedule their initial classes. After that, they could register themselves online even when they did not know what classes to take.

When participants cannot locate support systems and resources, it makes it even more difficult to integrate with the college and feel a sense of belonging. Many were unaware of student clubs, with one participant feeling like an outcast because of their social status. One could assume that it is not easy to feel a sense of belonging if they feel like an outcast, because of feeling academically unprepared or because of one's social status. Participants of the study made it clear that they attended the college to take classes and go home. There was no sense of community with the college or a want to socially integrate with peers. One participant even mentioned they tried to take online classes as much as possible to avoid being on campus because they did not like the dynamic of the college. Getting a degree is an important component of college, but the experience is as well. It helps shape and mold students as adults, and they carry those experiences into their adulthood and their next paths, such as the workforce or other academic pursuits.

Finally, and most importantly, none of the participants except for one was identified as an FGCS by the institution when they began college. It makes one wonder if the above issues could have been avoided if they had been. One participant did not even know that they were an FGCS until they were invited to participate in this study. Knowing the myriad of barriers these students face, the resources FGCSs need, and the importance that academic and social integration plays to their overall success, identification becomes one of the most important components of entry to college. None of the participants could recollect being asked on admissions forms, being asked

by advisors, or others if they were the first in their families to attend college. One was asked later when they received individual advising through services that only certain students receive and another through a faculty member who noticed a struggling student. The others never received that individual attention or intrusive advising component. Are students just a number to colleges?

Even though these participants had faced many barriers and challenges, they were all proud of their success and where they were in life. They were proud to provide a good example for their children and families even though they were not provided that same example. It was amazing to hear these participants speak in a roundabout way that they wanted to break generational curses and set new precedents.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings, Conclusions, Recommendations, and Reflections**

First-generation college students have long been members of higher education institutions. Through barriers, challenges, and adversity, they prove time and time again that motivation, perseverance, and grit can push them through just about anything in life, but as it pertains to this study, the path to a better future is educational pursuits. The six participants in this study showed tremendous pride in their roots and successes thus far in life and were glad that they decided on their own to turn to go to college to better their lives. For most of them, it was a choice for themselves and their families. It may not have been an option that they thought was their future as a child or even a young adult, but it became an option for them on their timing when it was right for them. That is the thing about first-generation college students, namely: not only are they extraordinary, but they also define odds and go against all traditions that educational practitioners expect. FGCSs are phenomenal to say the least.

FGCSs often are underprepared and do not have guidance from their parents to help them find their way when they enter academia. They are thrown out of the nest in hopes that they will land on their own two feet (Carter, 2017). For an average student, college can be “fun” and a new experience, but for an FGCSs it is often a daunting, even terrifying experience. FGCSs often require a more hands-on approach and mentorship, but they often find their way with lessons learned (Carter, 2017). However, through those lessons learned, they find themselves with the necessary tools that not only help them navigate college but also prepare them to be successful in their professional careers.

In a recent study conducted by the Center for First-Generation Student Success, NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and Phase Two Advisory, they reported that “over half of surveyed colleges (58%) reported having a formal definition for first-generation

students. Twenty-nine percent reported having no definition, and 13% were unsure if an institutional definition exists” (Mechur Karp et al., 2020, p. 13). This means that even today, colleges are still not equipped to identify FGCSs efficiently and accurately by having a definition in place of who these students are.

### **Revisiting the Study and Addressing Research Questions**

As a researcher, I propose that the participants' stories in this study must be told to enhance the qualitative, narrative context around FGCSs and foster a culture within colleges where identification, clearer pathways, and a better understanding of their firsthand experiences are better understood. This study emerged from the lack of narrative research that I could not find regarding FGCSs and the need for student’s voices to be heard and understood. The National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity (2020) employs colleges to utilize the student voice to transform education and inform policy and practices. It is important to note that student perspective was the central component of this study. Through the in-depth analysis of the first-hand accounts of the participants, this study explored their academic success, their experience of being identified as an FGCS, and anything that perhaps prevented them from identifying support system conducive to their retention and overall success, and the relevance of social capital to their academic success. As such, this study contributed significantly to existing research conducted, for instance, by Aspelmeier et al. (2012), Dennis et al. (2005), Fike and Fike (2008), and Francis and Miller (2008) focused on the retention of FGCSs and their barriers. It is important to note that the aforementioned studies were quantitative. This qualitative study also contributes significantly to the lack of research addressing lived experiences of FGCSs adjustment to the college environment (Gibbons et al., 2019).

### *How Successful Are FGCSs and Why?*

More specifically, it is the themes of pride and success that address the first research question about how FGCSs understand their academic success as first-generation college students. The data from this study provided convincing evidence that FGCSs carry a very strong sense of pride and success for themselves. Their motivation to finish their goals once they find their footing within higher education rang true throughout the interviews. While all of the participants struggled at the beginning of their academic journey, once they recognized success, it became a goal for them to achieve the next milestone to better their lives. Each participant detailed how their families were proud of them, but even more so, they were impeccably proud of their success. Baxter and Britton (2001) claimed that some students use higher education as a conscious decision to break from their past lives and identities. Some may see this as a negative thing, but for those who have lived a life of struggle, a potential change in identity can mean all the difference.

One of the findings of this study suggests that motivating FGCSs is a huge factor for them to reach the precipice of feeling a sense of pride and success for themselves. This finding echoes what Petty (2014) claimed about FGCSs who do not devote enough time to college due to time commitments out of their control, therefore, making it difficult for them to be motivated to complete a degree. Similarly, Blackwell and Pinder (2014) found that it was important for colleges to have conversations with FGCSs throughout their entire academic career to keep their motivation on a continuum. Carpenter and Peña (2017) discussed self-authorship and how this notion allows FGCSs to be motivated sooner than their counterparts because of their lived situations and the need to want more for themselves in life.



In this study, the participants confirmed much of the above-mentioned previous research. FGCSs generally have commitments that other students do not have. Beau confirmed that he had two small children when he entered college. Clara worked a full-time job and had a lot of uncertainty about how she would juggle a full class load and work. Additionally, all participants mentioned having little to no contact with college personnel when they began college. Amelia mentioned that she eventually became close with a faculty mentor who changed her whole perspective about college. However, the lack of interaction from college staff throughout these participants' time at the college may have affected their initial motivation. Last and most interestingly, the notion of self-authorship is most compelling in this study. Because these students are mainly self-motivated lead one to believe that their lived experiences and the want for more for themselves have led them to be the most motivated.

Overall, the participants of this study were more than ready to discuss how proud they were of themselves and felt they had reached great success thus far in their academic pursuits. The idea that FGCSs struggle is a true statement, but it is not inevitable that all of them fail. It may take them longer to be motivated due to external factors, but they do have goals and dreams and have great pride in themselves.

### ***Do FGCSs Find a Sense of Belonging Within Colleges? How Are They Identified?***

Most of the participants of this study proclaimed that they had difficulty identifying support systems on campus and creating a sense of belonging. All six struggled with this initially, while two eventually found support and a sense of belonging with faculty/college assistance. Others eventually found resources on campus by happenstance on their own accord. This finding confirms Tinto's (1987) theory in which he posited that the most important factor was the student's experience within the college, which he referred to as integration (Seidman,

2012, p. 71). Kuh et al. (2010) discussed how transition programs into college help students such as FGCSs acclimate to the college environment by helping them understand institutional values, academic expectations and introducing them to campus resources and opportunities (p. 242).

Creating a sense of belonging within the college and accessing resources is critical for FGCSs retention and persistence. As Tinto (1987) asserted, this is crucial for academic and social integration (Seidman, 2012). Additionally, Schlossberg (1989) posited that engaging students and ensuring that students are involved in the college environment are critical to their overall success. These factors assist students with feeling important, dependent, and appreciated (Schlossberg, 1989). Research indicates that it is important that all students, especially vulnerable populations such as FGCSs must create a sense of self-belonging with institutions and be able to access resources in a timely manner.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, all participants had difficulty acclimating to the college environment and accessing resources except Beau. Beau was a veteran student and received assistance from the VA Office, so he received guidance and resources from the beginning, which he mentioned was very beneficial. Amelia was fortunate after a few struggling semesters to find a faculty mentor in the music department who steered her in the right direction of resources on campus. She was also able to find peers in her major, where she began to find a sense of belonging within the college. For the other four participants, their journey was not as easy. Clara had several difficulties with acclimating to the college as an LGBTQ student. She also had issues finding resources, and when she did, she found the office staff to be nonhelpful. For others, their time constraints outside of college did not afford them the opportunities to integrate socially on campus and create a sense of belonging.

An additional major component of this study was to determine if the participants were identified as FGCSs within the institution. I wanted to know specifically if this identification happened at the beginning of their entrance to the college or later. All participants, except Beau, were not identified as being an FGCS upfront. One participant did not know that they were a first-generation college student until they received solicitation to participate in this study. The interview protocol specifically included questions around their interaction with college entrance processes such as admission, financial aid, and advising to determine if these offices asked any questions regarding if participants identified as being FGCSs. All participants answered negatively, except Beau, who received more individualized advising through Veteran Affairs services.

Even though most participants did not have great success with a sense of belonging, being identified as FGCS, and accessing resources on campus, this did not hinder their overall academic success. Some participants mentioned that it sometimes made going to college difficult, but their perseverance and grit pushed them through to figure it out. These students always found a way to make it work for themselves showing they were resourceful on their own accord.

### ***How Are FGCSs Supported? What Are Their Barriers to Success?***

FGCSs enter college with a unique set of barriers and challenges. Existing studies (Alvarado et al., 2017; Aspelmeier et al., 2012; Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Means & Pyne, 2017) have shown that FGCSs have a myriad of barriers to their success that include financial, motivation, academic readiness, sense of belonging, social belonging, among many other issues. Persistence is often affected by challenges and barriers because FGCSs do not understand the institution's characteristics and culture (Habley et al., 2012). They also proceed through their

academic journey with the same or a new set of issues. This was a major topic discussed in the personal narratives of the participants of this study. Participants were open to expressing their hardships as they grew up and as they moved through adulthood and decided to attend college. Participants confirmed these issues through their interviews, bringing light to how they navigated barriers often on their own without the help of the college. Because each of them knows how hard it was for them to begin their educational journey and then stay focused to continue their studies, many of them expressed they hoped sharing their story would empower future FGCSs to pursue higher education even when the odds are stacked against them.

There is a plethora of existing research around the myriad of barriers and challenges FGCSs face when entering college. Rubio et al. (2017) described that FGCSs entering higher education could have barriers that include financial, academic preparedness, support networks, and the lack of social capital or know-how when entering higher education. Additionally, the American Association of Community Colleges report (2019b) recorded that the top three challenges as cited by students were work, expenses, and family issues. Byrd and MacDonald (2005) mentioned that FGCSs often lack the awareness of the financial aid process or the financial burden that comes with attending college and do not maximize their benefits as potential Pell grant recipients or seek out scholarship opportunities. FGCSs also face a lack of academic preparedness. Bricker (2008) asserted that the lack of resources that parents have that allow FGCSs to participate in college readiness activities, or the motivation to make academics in high school a priority because of various life factors, can attribute to the lack of preparedness. Byrd and MacDonald (2005) added that other items such as the lack of study skills, failure to focus on goals, and the inability to advocate for oneself could explain why FGCSs are underprepared for college.

Significantly, all participants discussed their barriers and challenges before and during college, and Amelia's story can perhaps best illustrate these struggles:

I had food insecurities, housing insecurities. I needed money more than I needed to attend college. I lived in my car a lot. Because of these things, I dropped out a few times. I worried that if my car broke down, or if I got a flat tire, I would have to drop out again because that was just more money I did not have. I was also not academically prepared to attend college. I was a good student in high school, but college was a whole different level, and I was nowhere near prepared for this level of academics.

Beau, Nora, and Ingrid had families to take care of when they entered college. This type of life factor did not allow them to immerse themselves fully into the college experience. It also took away from their potential study time. Clara mentioned particularly having to work a full-time job while attending college as a full-time student. It was a lot for her to juggle and she was fearful that college would have to take a backseat to work because she could not stop working full-time. She had also been out of school for quite some time and worried that she was not going to have the skillset to pass her college classes. She mentioned that she struggled in the beginning and had to take developmental math classes even though she was an outstanding math student in high school. Ingrid described that age was a barrier for her. She waited until her children were older to begin her college journey and she felt that technology was her biggest barrier and challenge. On the contrary, Nora mentioned that her young age was a barrier because her priorities were not aligned with college. She cared more about living a social life than attending college when she first graduated high school. She attended but dropped out a few times before she made college a true priority for herself.

Altogether, participants alluded that the barriers and challenges they faced were contributing factors to why they may have dropped out or dropped classes from time to time. Their barriers also contributed to why they may not have attended college directly out of high school like their nonfirst-generation counterparts. However, overcoming barriers and being resourceful on their own accord was how these participants persisted.

### ***Social Capital and Family Influence***

Social capital theory informed the final research question of this study. Specifically, Pascarella et al. (2004) suggested FGCSs have issues with development and transition due to not having parents who are familiar with the higher education system, therefore, in turn, lacking the social capital to understand the system themselves.

FGCSs are students whose parents did not attend college; therefore, the notion of the lack of social capital regarding how these participants navigated the landscape of higher education became a critical component to research. Since FGCS parents did not attend college, there generally are not conversations in the household about attending college. Most of the time, FGCSs come from families where working or other priorities comes before college. Additionally, because parents do not have knowledge of the admissions process, financial aid, and other obstacles, they do not know how to assist their FGCSs to go to college.

The research that focuses on social capital and family influence for FGCSs was impeccable when I began looking into this aspect of the study. Alvarado et al. (2017) mentioned that FGCSs have a hard time navigating college due to their parents not providing critical information about their experiences in college because they did not attend. Aries and Seider (2005) claimed that family tends to be the first level of support for students, but unfortunately for FGCSs, their parents cannot provide academic guidance. Parents of FGCSs also lack the

knowledge of the experiences and challenges that come with being a college student (Dennis et al., 2005). Martinez et al. (2009) asserted that parents who are unfamiliar with the contexts of higher education and do not encourage their children to pursue a degree create a disadvantage for students because that social network must be in place. FGCSs must feel supported by families to raise success rates.

The participants of this study made it clear that their parents had no influence on their decision to attend college. There were no discussions about college in their households, and their parents did not assist with any of the processes to attend college. When asked if they felt as if this affected them in any sort of way, they all mentioned that it probably would have been easier if their parents could have assisted them with the process. They also mentioned that if college had been a topic of discussion in their household, the decision to attend would have been easier, perhaps. This was consistently discussed across the interviews, which adds validity to the existing body of research.

Again, even though these participants had no family influence to attend college or family support while in college, they still relied on themselves to persevere. Their grit and determination have been their main source of what has gotten them from point A to point B. These participants have proven that having the motivation and drive for themselves provides the support they need to succeed in college.

### **Recommendations for Educational Professionals**

The findings of this study can warrant the following recommendations for institutions of higher education, especially community colleges, to consider:

1. Partner with area high schools to identify FGCSs: The need to identify FGCSs as soon as possible is apparent. Partnering with area high schools to identify these students and

provide them with college literature at an appropriate time is critical. Additionally, this could be an opportunity to have conversations with FGCSs parents about college and the benefit it could provide to their children. This could provide a major recruitment stream for the college as well. Amelia and Clara mentioned in their narrative that their high schools never talked with them about college. Since they did not take dual credit or advanced placement courses, they were not part of the “college group.” This is an unfortunate revelation from their narratives. Research has shown that such programming like bridge programs have proven to be effective for FGCSs. Not only do they help identify this population of students, but they also help transition them from the high school environment to higher education.

2. Establish mentoring programs for FGCSs: It is important that college personnel establish and maintain contact with first-generation college students. Research shows that this population of students is affected by memorable messages by advisors and that first impressions can make or break their academic career. Mentoring programs would also assist these students by college personnel informing FGCSs about resources on campus that they would benefit from. Mentoring could also come in the form of peer mentoring. FGCSs within the college who came before new FGCSs could become peer mentors and assist new students with navigating the college. This peer-to-peer interaction could help with social integration as well.
3. Promote success stories of FGCSs: The participants of this study have proven through their narrative that they are success stories and are worthy of their success to be shared, so that future students like them know that they can succeed too. Many of the students in this study wanted to share their stories in hopes that by sharing their unique situations



they could inspire others to take a leap of faith and pursue higher education, even if it meant making sacrifices and struggling. They realized that higher education was going to change their trajectory in life for the better. Promoting the success of FGCSs not only shows future students that anything is possible, but it also shows that colleges are champions for these students and supports students that come from all walks of life.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There are several ways in which this study can be further developed. First, a case study involving a focus group on peer mentoring of first-generation college students would be an asset to the body of research. Clara mentioned that she would have benefited by knowing peers in her same position as an FGCS and how they dealt with barriers and academic struggles. Perhaps if there had been peer mentoring in place, she would have benefited from a program such as this. An inclusive program such as this would help practitioners better understand this approach and possibly serve as a model for other institutions that would like to implement a program like this.

A multi-site longitudinal case study could provide further opportunities to trace the record of the FGCSs academic and professional experiences over time, thereby painting a much broader picture of what can be done to support these students from the very first term of their enrollment in college classes. A mixed-methods case study project at a particular institution could be an alternative to examine the issues raised in this study ever much more in-depth and in greater detail. Alternative qualitative research methodologies, such as ethnography, can be considered should a cultural component be added to the study.

Finally, when thinking about FGCSs, they will continue to be in colleges for many years to come. It is important for the body of research to grow and stay relevant. When I first started my research for this study, many of the articles I found were not up to date. If they did have a

newer published date, the information drew from older data. While FGCSs may still have some of the same barriers and challenges as FGCSs from generations before, newer generations of FGCSs are unique in their own ways and deserve the due diligence of being added to the body of literature that exists.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The findings of this study provide valuable understandings into the unique lives of six first-generation college students who attend a community college in Central Texas. Their narratives of pride, success, barriers, challenges, sense of belonging, and family influence provide rich, firsthand knowledge of their lived experiences as FGCSs.

As a first-generation college student, I found that I related closely to the personal narratives of the participants. Throughout the study, I remained devoted to proceed with no expectations or predetermined notions. This study did confirm that FGCSs do not get identified early in the admissions process and do not get the resources they need in a timely manner. It also confirmed that FGCSs have difficulty acclimating to the college environment and creating a sense of belonging within the institution. However, I am enlightened to know through the beautiful stories told by the participants in this study that even though these challenges still do exist for FGCSs like they did for me when I entered higher education, it is possible to push through, achieve greatness, and graduate college.

To sum this unforgettable journey into just a few words, this has been a true blessing to share this space with six incredible human beings and hear student's voices and their perspectives. As a first-generation college student reaching this precipice in my academic journey, I am forever grateful, humbled, and inspired by all current and first-generation college students who are in whatever part of their academic journey with me.

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### Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. Please tell me what it was like to grow up in your family. Follow up questions: Was education given attention? If so, how? Have you had role models in following your educational path?
2. Did your parents encourage you to pursue higher education? If so, then how? Follow up questions: Do you think that your parents not attending college might have had an effect on your knowledge to attend college? If so, please explain. Did your parents help you with admissions, financial aid, etc.?
3. Tell me how you made the decision to come to college? What does success mean to you?
4. What does it mean to you to be the first-generation student?
5. Do you remember being asked if you were a first-generation college student on the admission application, or any admissions form? If so, did the application/form explain what a first-generation college student is?
6. Has anyone with the college ever asked you if you are first-generation college student? Can you remember when this happened if it did? Follow up questions: Can you explain the circumstances of the situation when you were identified as a first-generation college student with the college (i.e., time, place, during an event such as advising, etc.)?
7. What barriers exist for you outside of college that might keep you from succeeding?
8. Do you have a support system? If so, what is it?
9. How do you seek resources on campus? Did someone with the college inform you about resources?
10. Do you feel engaged with the college and with you peers? Please explain if you are involved in student clubs, study groups, etc.
11. Looking back at your decision to pursue higher education, would you say you are succeeding in it? If so, then how? If not, why not?
12. Again, looking back at your entry to the college, would you say your overall experiences could have been different if someone helped you in a more hands-on way with finding support systems? Please explain.
13. Are there any other comments that you would like to add related to these questions?

**Appendix B: IRB Approval**

**ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY**  
*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885



April 27, 2020

Stephanie Perkins

Department of Organizational  
Leadership Abilene Christian  
University

Dear Stephanie,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Narratives of First-Generation Community College Students in Central Texas: Restorying the Path to Success in Higher Education",

(IRB# 20-056) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.

Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

