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AN ABRUPT TRANSITION TO REMOTE LEARNING: THE TENUOUS EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A Dissertation Presented

by

Beth Taylor-Nolan

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
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Specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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ABSTRACT

And just like that, on March 11th 2020, the university released a startling update informing the campus community that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person instruction would not resume after Spring Break and that all classes would shift immediately to remote instruction. What does remote instruction mean? What happened to these students as a result of the university's sudden transition to technology-enabled and online courses? What was their academic and social experience really like throughout emergency remote learning?

Of particular concern to me were first-generation college students who relied upon the university's infrastructure to meet their needs. Consequences associated with reliance on technology, limited access to internet service, lack of parental and community support, and diminished institutional resources raised red flags.

This unprecedented educational circumstance prompted by a global pandemic presented a prime research opportunity. As such, I conducted a qualitative research study utilizing the narrative approach to explore their unique and shared educational experiences as first-generation college students relegated to emergency remote learning. Through the development of trends and themes derived from these students' narrative accounts, I provide insight into their profoundly altered educational experience and offer recommendations that promote a high quality virtual learning environment.

DEDICATION

To Maude Alexander Taylor, Effie Smith Craige and Linda Craige Taylor, who believed in hard work, good humor, and me. How I wish they were here to share in this experience.

And to, Maeve, Seamus, and Jeff Nolan, my wonderful family. I could have never done this without your love and support.

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Your voices are heard and valued.

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CHAPTER 1: ON THE BRINK OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC…

March 11th 2020, the university President released a startling update informing the campus community that in-person instruction would not resume after Spring Break and that all classes would shift immediately to remote instruction. And just like that, the university abruptly transitioned to emergency remote teaching and learning.

Message from the President

Dear University Community Members:

As we face the local, national, and international challenges posed by the coronavirus outbreak ("COVID-19), our primary focus remains on the well-being of our students, faculty, and staff.

Exercising an abundance of caution, the university will shift to remote methods of learning starting Wednesday, March 18, for regularly scheduled classes.

This decisive action reflects our commitment to help slow the spread of the virus, while also promoting the academic progress of our students and protecting the health and safety of our community.

These measures will remain in effect until further notice. Given the evolving nature of the situation, and our continual reassessment, we are not in a position to address future events, such as Commencement, at this time.

I recognize these measures are unprecedented and may be unsettling.

Sincerely - President

Bewildered by the President's update, my mind filled with questions and concerns. There was no precedent for such an abrupt and dramatic shift from campus-

based to remote instruction. No historical references or academic guidelines to rely upon. No words of wisdom to calm a campus-wide state of shock. What does remote instruction mean? How will it impact students, faculty, and staff? How will campus-based instruction, activities, and support services be delivered to fully remote students? How will this forced migration to a virtual learning environment affect their academic and social experiences? How might it alter their ability to maintain a sense of connection to faculty, staff, and peers? Is anyone really ready for the unknown?

Of particular concern to me were first-generation college students who relied upon the university infrastructure, academic resources, and student support services to meet their needs. As a first-generation college student, continuing education administrator, and doctoral student who has dedicated much of my career and schooling to designing and developing academic programs and support services for first-generation students, I could only imagine the hardship associated with such an abrupt transition away from campus. The prospect of moving back home after making a deliberate choice to pursue a traditional campus-based degree program raised all sorts of red flags. Consequences associated with reliance on technology, limited access to internet service, lack of parental, peer, and community support and diminished institutional support flooded my thoughts; I could not help but wonder and worry about them.

The weeks in between the university transition to remote learning and the end of the spring semester were a blur with many faculty, staff, and students struggling to engage in remote teaching, work, and study. Labeled emergency remote teaching and learning by scholars, this tumultuous time period was fueled by uncertainty and fear of the unknown. What happened to these students as a result of the university's sudden

transition to remote learning? What was their academic and social experience really like throughout emergency remote learning? These questions haunted me as I wondered about my students' and countless others who were involuntarily relegated to technology-enabled courses due to a global pandemic.

Throughout the summer months, university leaders, administrators, faculty, and staff debated different academic year scenarios including a full return to campus, a fully remote option, or a hybrid instructional plan. The university selected the hybrid option giving students the choice to return to in-person instruction or remain remote. Academic and administrative continuity planning committees were formed to discuss how to safely reopen the campus with strict COVID-19 testing protocols in place. A "return to normal" mantra echoed throughout each meeting and yet, the university appeared to be anything but "business as usual."

While many students opted to return to campus, a significant number decided to continue with remote enrollment. As the fall semester progressed, concerns about the remote students' experience, feelings of isolation, and the possibility of increased withdrawals from the university topped pandemic planning committee meeting agendas. Faculty members expressed serious concern about remote students' academic performance, diminished ability to engage, limited access to support services, and spotty attendance due to personal and technological challenges. A recurring question dominated my thinking as I participated in meeting after meeting via Microsoft Teams: what is actually happening in this virtual learning environment and how are these students coping?

Research Purpose

While there is significant research about first-generation college students' challenges and attempts made by both traditional colleges and universities and online institutions to meet their diverse academic and student support needs, research and scholarship pertaining to their academic and social experience as emergency remote learners was just beginning to emerge. This unprecedented educational circumstance prompted by a global pandemic presented a prime research opportunity. As a result of months of wondering and worrying about how students were faring as emergency remote and post-quarantined learners, I decided to conduct a qualitative research study to explore this profoundly complex virtual learning environment and the first-generation college students who involuntarily navigated emergency remote learning. My dissertation launched mid-pandemic in January 2021.

Throughout this qualitative research study and resulting dissertation, I explored the unique and shared academic and social experiences of 10 first-generation college students who were enrolled as full-time undergraduates at the time of the campus closure. All 10 were in the process of completing their sophomore year of study at the university despite their different pathways to enrollment as residential first-time/first-year, transfer, and commuting students. Their lived experience as emergency remote learners combined with the university's approach to extend academic resources and support services via technology depicted a chaotic educational environment. Through the development of trends and themes derived from the students' narrative accounts, I strived to provide

insight into their profoundly altered educational experience and offer recommendations that promote a high quality virtual learning environment.

More specifically, the purpose of this qualitative study was to collect the stories and describe the academic and social experiences of first-generation college students who were required to transition to remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through interviews and story-telling, I encouraged the research participants to describe their experience as emergency remote and post-quarantined learners. In order to better understand and contextualize their pandemic-induced educational circumstance, I asked them to talk about their transition to college, pre-pandemic connection to academic resources and support services, and sense of belonging to the university community. I invited them to tell their stories and they did so eloquently describing the ebbs and flows associated with transitioning from home to campus as first-time/first-year and transfer students and back home as emergency remote learners. Their voices shed light on a profoundly difficult period of time and yet, they remained enrolled and committed to realizing their dream of being the first in their family to earn a bachelor's degree.

Conceptual Framework and Guiding Theory

I utilized Terrell Strayhorn's (2012) notion of sense of belongingness or connection to higher education as a conceptual framework. Strayhorn contends that sense of belonging and community membership matters greatly to all students but especially to marginalized student populations such as first-generation college students. Building upon Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs, Strayhorn's framework positions sense of belonging and community connection as the gatekeeper between the student's

basic human needs at the foundation and knowledge attainment and self-actualization at the top.

While this framework appears hierarchical and tiered, Strayhorn (2012) suggests that students move more fluidly dependent upon personal environmental and situational circumstances. As students adjust and adapt to personal circumstances and environmental changes their ability to sustain a sense of belonging varies risking their academic and social achievement. With sense of belonging serving as a prerequisite for educational attainment and self-actualization, it is no wonder that colleges and universities spend so much time and energy developing academic programs and support services that promote engagement.

As such, this framework offered a unique landscape for considering both the students' experience and the institutional response to an abrupt and forced transition to emergency remote learning. With no blueprint in hand, institutions shifted to technology-enabled instruction focusing primarily on course conversion and secondarily on remote learners' educational experiences. There was simply no choice and very little time.

Additionally, I relied upon Schlossberg's (1989) transition theory to better understand the students' pre-pandemic educational circumstance as well as their lived experience as emergency remote learners. Highlighting the significant challenges associated with transitioning from familiar to unfamiliar environments, Schlossberg draws attention to the importance of support and guidance throughout the migration process. While colleges and universities have paid attention to the challenges associated with transitioning to college through the development of gateway and pathway programs

there was little attention paid to the consequences of an abrupt and forced migration to emergency remote learning.

Curious about how their initial transition to college impacted their pre-pandemic educational experience and sense of connection to the campus community and in order to contextualize and better understand their transition to emergency remote learning, I invited the research participants to talk about their journey to and from campus. In keeping with Schlossberg's (1989) theory, the research participants clearly articulated the challenges associated with an intentional migration to campus and the unintended consequences of a forced transition to a virtual learning environment.

As a result of both Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belongingness framework and Schlossberg's (1989) transition theory, I considered the following questions:

- Did this newly configured virtual learning environment support first-generation college students as they navigated unprecedented, unfamiliar, and unwanted circumstances?
- Did this forced migration from campus to home disrupt their ability to satisfy their basic needs such as housing, food, access to technology, and employment?
- How did the abrupt severing of ties to the campus community impact their experience as emergency remote learners?

Exploring the Literature

In search of more information pertaining to first-generation college students and emergency remote teaching and learning, I turned my attention to the research and scholarship. The following literature review explores the challenges and opportunities

that first-generation college students faced as members of a newly configured virtual learning environment. While there is much information regarding first-generation college students' academic and social experiences as participants in campus-based or fully online degree programs, literature regarding the abrupt transition to emergency remote learning and its impact on first-generation college students is emerging.

Sudden changes in access to technology and internet service, academic resources and student support services, faculty and peers were considered throughout this literature review. Higher education's response to complete reliance on technology enabled instruction and their ability to extend campus-based resources to support first-generation college students as they navigated emergency remote learning was also explored. Key considerations that guided this review include the understanding of this particular group of first-generation college students, their lived experience as emergency remote learners, and how their academic and social experience and sense of connection to the university changed as a result of the pandemic and university campus closure.

Research Methodology

According to Miles et al. (2014), some of the major strengths of qualitative research, data collection, and analysis include "the ordinary nature of the study, problem, or circumstance, its close proximity to the situation, and the focus on people's lived experience" (p. 11). The narrative approach to conducting qualitative inquiry further emphasizes the importance of storytelling as a vehicle for gathering data, insight, and first-hand knowledge of lived experiences. I utilized this approach to explore the academic and social experiences of first-generation college students' relegated to remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the study's timeframe spanned the March 2020 abrupt transition to emergency remote learning and post-quarantine academic year, interviews were conducted in February and March of 2021 inviting participants to recount close to a year's worth of pandemic influenced experience. Consistent with narrative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018), these students' accounts were contextualized within this timeframe recognizing the onset of the pandemic and university campus closure as the turning point between what was perceived as "normal" academic and social engagement to "abnormal" remote learning.

Research Design Protocols

In accordance with Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendations, I developed a thoughtful and thorough research process that included the following: specific participant selection criteria; appropriate consent and confidentiality agreements; a clear interview protocol; the development of open-ended questions, acknowledgement of researcher bias; and a protocol outlining data collection, sorting, trend analysis, data verification, and presentation of findings. The research methodology chapter provides greater detail on each of these protocols.

Per my proposal, I planned to recruit 10 to 12 first-generation college students as a result of an outreach plan that included direct email to potential participants and referrals from university colleagues familiar with this student population. Ten first-generation college students responded and agreed to participate in this qualitative study. All participants were undergraduate level students who were in the process of completing their sophomore year when the university shifted to emergency remote learning. All self-identified as first-generation with a combination of residential and commuting students.

All participated in an hour-long interview conducted via Microsoft Teams and were eager to share their educational experience as a first-generation college student relegated to virtual learning community. Appendix A features the research participant invitation and confidentiality statement.

Open-ended Research Questions

Consistent with the narrative approach, I developed open-ended question to guide the story-telling process. Through these questions, I encouraged students to describe their transition to college, pre-pandemic educational experience, transition to emergency remote learning, and sense of connection to faculty, staff, and peers. These questions are featured in Appendix B.

Data Collection and Verification

Due to the pandemic, I conducted the interviews via Microsoft Teams and with the students' permission, I recorded each session for future reference and data verification. The technology proved helpful throughout the documentation, data analysis, and verification processes ensuring the validity of the information presented throughout the findings and recommendation sections. Authentic representation of each student's experience and the ability to provide insight into a turbulent educational experience through the participants' narrative accounts was central to my research process and dissertation.

Research Findings

In keeping with Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendations pertaining to data analysis and the presentation of findings, I followed a step-by-step process converting interview notes into individual narrative accounts. In anticipation of developing trends

and themes, I deconstructed each students' account identifying key words and phrases that resonated with their experience. Key words and phrases turned into themes that were punctuated by each students' stories. Through reconstructing and rebuilding student stories into three thematic areas, I considered the students' transition to college and attempt to identify as a college student, their abrupt transition to and experience as emergency remote learners, and emergence from quarantined learning and commitment to completing their undergraduate degrees. Their voices and stories emphasizing each of these thematic areas and detailing a tenuous time. The findings chapter outlines in greater detail this rigorous process.

Recommendations for Higher Education

By design, the narrative approach provided me with the opportunity to share each participants' educational experience through story-telling. This deliberate approach challenged me to facilitate the story-telling process and listen carefully to their lived experience as first-generation college students engaged in remote learning. Their stories depict a challenging personal and educational circumstance fueled by uncertainty and yet, all 10 students persevered. They chronicled the ebbs and flows of transitioning to campus and pursuing a new identity as a college student only to be forced to migrate away as a result of a global pandemic. Hesitant to attribute specific blame, each student offered recommendations regarding how the university could and should have better supported them throughout their stint as emergency remote learners. They all felt the university should have cared more about their profoundly difficult circumstance. That said, their resilience, determination, and commitment to achieving their educational goal

of earning a bachelor's degree was evident and prominently featured throughout this dissertation.

Their experiences stand to inform the development of more inclusive and responsive academic programs and support services. As such, I incorporated the research findings and student recommendations into a virtual enrichment learning community that is designed to increase access, inclusion, and equity for campus-based, commuting, and online students. This proposal represents these first-generation college students' plea for the continuation of virtual instruction and student services. The Wildcat Enrichment Learning Community proposal serves as my recommendation for higher education.

CHAPTER 2: EXPLORING THE LITERATURE

This literature review considers the research and scholarship associated with first-generation college students, enrollment challenges and barriers, sense of belonging and connection to campus-based and online communities, and emergency remote teaching and learning. While there is much information regarding first-generation college students, their transition to college, and educational experiences as participants in either campus-based or fully online degree programs, literature is currently emerging pertaining to first-generation college students' experience as emergency remote learners. Longer term impacts of emergency remote teaching and learning present a potential gap in the literature as scholars continue to grapple with pandemic related educational experiences and learning outcomes. This provides an opportunity to delve further into more recent literature pertaining to emergency remote learning and the challenges associated with an abrupt transition away from campus and in-person instruction as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The sudden closure of college and university campuses forced students to migrate away from campus immediately, severing ties to the campus infrastructure, academic resources and support services, access to technology and internet services, faculty, peers, and community. These areas of concern as well as the unique circumstances of first-generation college students as a marginalized demographic within higher education and their already tenuous sense of belonging to the campus community are more completely explored throughout this literature review.

First-generation College Students

First-generation college students are simply defined as individuals whose parents have not completed a college degree but their identities, academic and social experiences, successes and failures are far more complex (Cataldi et al., 2018). Characterized as underrepresented and often from underprivileged backgrounds, first-generation college students are more likely than their counterparts to "experience emotional distress and lower levels of sense of belonging and self-efficacy as well as perceived threats, all of which hinder academic success and adjustment to college" (Kim et al., 2020, pp. 288-289). In addition to the above mentioned challenges and barriers, Havlik et al. (2020) find otherness, lack of social capital, family pressure, and a poorly executed transition to college as negatively impacting first-generation college students' educational experiences.

Kim et al.'s (2020) research delves further into the challenges and barriers associated with first-generation college students' enrollment noting the influence of individual factors such as personal knowledge, skills, abilities, and motives; structural issues concerning financial resources, parental support, and access to mentors; and psychological problems on their ability to successfully navigate unfamiliar territory, develop and maintain a new identity as a college student, become a member of the campus community, remain enrolled, and complete a bachelor's degree.

The Global Landscape

In order to better understand their academic and social experience as first-generation college students prior to the pandemic and throughout emergency remote learning, let us consider an increasingly global and technology-enabled educational

landscape that continues to drive enrollment in higher education. The pursuit of social mobility and its connection to higher education historically compels these students to enroll with varying degrees of success or failure. The literature addresses this complicated educational scenario offering insight into the student experience and higher education's response to an increasingly globalized and diverse educational marketplace.

In 2005, Allen wrote:

> The American Dream lies at the very heart of the American cultural ethos. At the center of the American Dream is the emphatic conviction that, in this society, education opens doors to success and that, with talent and hard work, even the poorest American – of no matter what race, creed, or culture – can achieve greatness (Hochschild, 1995). American's Dream, along with her contribution to world civilization, is embodied in the promise that all who arrive on the shores of this unique society will be allowed the unfettered pursuit of their happiness (read "success and prosperity"). (p. 18)

Fast forward to 2021, the sudden onset of a global pandemic, and the profound disruption of "normal" participation in everything from daily life to work to school and the notion of the American Dream is put to the ultimate test. Once widely adopted as central to social mobility and socio-economic advancement, the American Dream continues to lure a diverse group of students from both privileged and underprivileged backgrounds to enroll in postsecondary education (Allen, 2005). Central to this literature review and overall research study is the durability of this age-old premise and how this notion of social mobility and self-actualization through education fares in a rapidly changing global marketplace severely impacted by an unprecedented and unnerving global pandemic.

To set the stage, Puccairelli and Kaplan (2016) explore the pre-pandemic challenges facing American higher education as it enters a "crowded global marketplace" (p. 311). This increasingly global, digital, and dynamic landscape requires institutions to

not only evaluate their current policies and procedures but look strategically at the increased diversification of students entering higher education, reliance upon technology, and entrepreneurial opportunities associated with change (Adams et al., 2017; Allen & Seaman, 2013). What was already considered a dynamic educational circumstance is now exacerbated by a global pandemic and abrupt shift to emergency remote teaching and learning.

Ortagus' (2016) research echoes Puccairelli and Kaplan (2016) suggesting that higher education is poised to adapt and enter the global marketplace, welcome new and more diverse student audiences, utilize technology to expand access, and modernize the development and delivery of academic resources and support services. And yet, some critics point to a reluctance to change noting that higher education is "running very fast indeed, just to stay in one place" (Ortagus, p. 19). Thus, the need to delve into the enrollment data and statistics in order to better understand the current landscape and educational environment that influences and dictates the academic and social experiences of first-generation college students.

Enrollment Data and Statistics

According to Pratt et al. (2019), approximately 20% of the millions of students enrolled in four-year colleges in the United States are first-generation college students (p. 106). With significant challenges limiting access, enrollment, and persistence, first-generation college students are 71% more likely to leave college in their first year than their counterparts (p. 106). This research examines demographic factors such as income, family size, high school preparation, and standardized test scores concluding that first-generation students are less prepared to enter college and persist (p. 106). They also

consider the challenges associated with transitioning to college, adjusting to an unfamiliar environment, assuming a new identity, and attempting to engage with the campus community, finding that first-generation college students struggled to assimilate, motivate, and remain enrolled (p. 106). Lack of support, poor preparation, fear of failure, limited engagement, and peripheral status also significantly influence these students' academic and social experiences and educational outcomes (p. 115).

As an increasing proportion of the U.S. population pursues and completes a bachelor's degree, the educational outcomes and degree completion rates among first-generation college students vary (Cataldi et al., 2018). Their study concludes that "three years after first enrolling, comparatively more first-generation students who began postsecondary education in 2003-2004 had left postsecondary education without earning a postsecondary credential (33%)" (p. 4).

Enrollment numbers and completion rates for nonwhite and rural first-generation college students are far worse than their white and more urban counterparts. As of 2018, "42% of people ages 18-24 were enrolled in all of higher education, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, but only 29% of rural people in that age group were enrolled compared to nearly 48% from cities" (Krupnick, 2018, p. 3). While rural students tend to have higher high school graduation rates, their participation in postsecondary education continues to be markedly lower (Heinisch, 2017; Player, 2015).

Citing similar challenges as Pratt et al. (2019), Cataldi et al. (2018) focus on the academic preparation of first-generation college students in comparison to students whose parents had attended or completed college, finding that proportionally fewer first-generation students completed an academically focused precollege curriculum (16% vs.

37%). Similar differences are associated with participation in advanced placement courses and higher level math courses such as pre-calculus or calculus.

They also found that first-generation college students are more likely to enroll in a public two-year institution than their counterparts and less likely to remain enrolled and complete their degree (Pratt et al., 2019). Historically, community colleges enroll more than 10 million students annually representing approximately 40% of the nation's total undergraduate population (Miller et al., 2011). Significantly more affordable and flexible, first-generation college students often feel more welcome at these two-year institutions and better equipped to pursue an associate's degree or postsecondary credential despite their academic ability and educational goals (Fike & Fike, 2008). Transferring to a four-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree often proves too difficult for vulnerable students, further limiting their educational aspirations and learning outcomes (Miller et al., 2011). According to these studies, academic preparedness, parental familiarity with postsecondary education, and disadvantaged status play important roles in the first-generation college students' educational experience and learning outcomes (Cataldi et al., 2018).

To further compound this theme of poor preparation and disappointing learning outcome, Redford and colleagues (2017) compare the demographic, educational experiences, and degree completion rates of first-generation college students versus their counterparts whose parents had earned a bachelor's or master's degree. They also determine that college attainment is unequally distributed and that students whose parents had earned a bachelor's or master's degree fare far better than those students who had parents with no postsecondary education experience. Their research found 46% of

students whose parents had earned a bachelor's degree and 59% of students whose parents had earned master's degree enrolled in four-year institutions versus 17% of first-generation college students. They include household income data, public vs. private institution enrollment, and reasons for not completing a degree program concluding that significantly more first-generation college students come from households earning less than $50,000 per year than their counterparts (77% vs. 29%). With affordability and the need for financial support central to their participation in higher education, first-generation college students are more likely to enroll in public institutions and cite inability to pay for college as the primary reason for withdrawing from their degree program.

Carnevale and Smith (2018) also studied the challenges associated with first-generation college student enrollment, financial instability, persistence, and degree completion. They attribute profound changes in the economy and increased need for postsecondary education and training in order to gain employment in entry-level positions as motivation for first-generation and low-income students to pursue higher education. "In the 21st century, the majority of entry-level jobs require a rich mix of formal postsecondary education along with high-quality work experience, preferably matched to an individual's career pathway or postsecondary field of study" (Carnevale & Smith, p. 2). The connection between postsecondary credentials and employment lures many first-generation college students from low-income families to enroll in higher education. Due to their often low-income status, these students become financially dependent upon federal, state, and institutional aid leaving them vulnerable to high student loan debt.

To further impede continuous enrollment, Ives and Castillo-Montoya (2020) contend that low-income students are more likely to need to work while attending college with disproportionate representation among Black and Latino, first-generation, and new citizens of the US. They also note the prevalence of students who live in homes where English may not be the primary spoken language. These students are also less likely to have financial safety nets or parental support, more likely to have to balance full or part-time work with academic responsibilities, and less likely to earn a credential or degree despite being academically qualified (Carnevale & Smith, 2018).

Finally, a longitudinal study conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) from 1992 to 2000 reports that 43% of first-generation college students dis-enrolled and did not complete a degree (Petty, 2014). An often cited study by Engle and Tinto (2008) reports that first-generation "were nearly four times more likely to leave higher education institutions without a degree when compared to their counterparts" (p. 134). Both studies reinforce the importance of understanding real-life challenges and institutional barriers that impact first-generation college student experiences. The studies also highlight the need for higher education institutions to develop and sustain more inclusive academic programs and student support services.

Barriers and Challenges

Petty (2014) identifies additional barriers impacting first-generation college students' experience and ability to persist, including the need to straddle two opposing worlds, cultures, and identities (p. 258). More specifically, Lucey et al. (2003) consider the challenges that working-class young women experience as they migrate between home and campus in pursuit of social mobility. This tenuous negotiation is fraught with

difficult emotions, feelings of guilt, and diminished academic and social experiences. Their research describes the ongoing and uneasy negotiation that these first-generation working-class women endure throughout their enrollment in higher education. Building upon Bhabha's (1996) research, Lucey et al. (2003) propose the following questions:

> Does having to exist between competing identities mean that the hybrid subject has the best of both worlds, or that s/he is 'forced to live in the interface between the two' (Anzaldue, 1987, p. 37, quoted in Grossberg, 1996). And what of the hybrid who moves back and forth between competing identities? Can the 'border-crosser' ever find a place or condition of her own and therefore some stability (p. 287)

The notion of hybridity, border existences, and living in a third space points to a complicated circumstance that many first-generation college students, especially young women from working-class backgrounds, navigate in an attempt to leverage postsecondary education as part of a social mobility strategy (Martin Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Somers et al. (2004) also explore the consequences of juggling multiple worlds resulting in "boundary spanning behavior that causes significant dissonance" (p. 429) that affects persistence, engagement, and satisfaction.

Duffy (2007) suggests that these students may also experience "a combination of guilt, shame, and anxiety in shedding their blue-collar identity and accepting their new middle class status as college students" (p. 22). Her research further indicates that first-generation college student success is most often associated with the discarding of cultural heritage and the adoption of a new identity. The process of shedding the past and attempting to achieve membership within an unfamiliar campus environment is particularly stressful and sometimes impossible for first-generation and low-income students (Rodriguez, 2001; Somers et al., 2004). "The double bind of higher education

for working-class students is that assimilation constitutes betrayal while holding on to aspects of working-class identity marks out acceptability" (Duffy, p. 19).

Additionally, lack of academic and social preparation for college, poor self-esteem, and difficulty engaging in extracurricular activities designed to foster a sense of belongingness to the campus community also serve as barriers (DeFreitas & Rinn, 2013; Havlik et al., 2020; Hicks, 2006). The significant challenges and barriers presented in each of these studies set the stage for considering first-generation college students as a vulnerable population forced to navigate an abrupt transition to emergency remote teaching and learning (Havlik et al.; Hicks).

The above mentioned challenges and barriers are explored in greater detail below and within the context of the students' transition to and more recently due to the pandemic away from college and throughout emergency remote learning.

Lack of Social Capital

One of the key differences between first-generation college students and their counterparts is a lack of social capital (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). Social capital is defined as "privileged knowledge, resources, and information attained through social networks" (Soria & Stebleton, 2012, p. 657). It encompasses "the norms, information channels, and relational trust within a social organization that, through social networks, influence individuals' capacity to navigate institutions" (McCallen & Johnson, p. 321). Without it, first-generation college students are more likely than their counterparts to struggle with the transition to college, developing a sense of belonging, identifying as a college student, and engaging with faculty and peers (Harpera et al., 2020).

While the important role that Bourdieu's (1986) notion of social capital plays within higher education is not new, there is growing concern regarding the negative consequences associated with first-generation college students' lack of social and cultural capital as it relates to emergency remote teaching and learning (Kearney, 2019; McCallen & Johnson, 2020). According to Player (2015) and Gofen (2009), first-generation college students experience distinct disadvantages leading up to and throughout college, and as they enter the workforce as a result of a lack of essential knowledge, limited family financial support, low expectations, higher rates of dropout, and student loan debt.

Additionally, Canning et al. (2020) consider the negative consequences associated with imposter syndrome and otherness that many first-generation college students experience as a result of lack of social capital, tenuous membership status, and inability to identify as real college students. Their research reveals the prevalence of "feelings of self-doubt, concerns with being a 'fraud' and ultimately a heightened sense of imposter feelings" (p. 648). This diminished sense of self-worth impacts their participation in class, ability to connect with faculty and peers, and learning outcomes. Myers and Rosenberger (2012) reinforce the importance of "finding yourself at college" (p. 14) and overcoming feelings of otherness. While their research confirms this challenging phenomenon within higher education, it suggests that colleges and universities are well positioned to recognize marginalized students' feelings of self-doubt, offering programs and support services that fill the void associated with a lack of social capital.

Rubin (2011) explores the educational experiences of working-class students as they transitioned to and enrolled in traditional higher education institutions. He finds that working-class students experience significant disadvantages due to their lack of

information and exposure to higher education prior to enrollment. They are less likely to obtain good grades, develop intellectually, engage beyond the classroom, and remain enrolled than their more privileged middle-class counterparts. Due to a lack of social capital and support from family and hometown friends, these students rely upon the institution's ability to recognize their insufficient preparation and provide academic and social support. Institutional response to meeting these students' needs vary influencing student satisfaction and learning outcomes (Pratt et al., 2019).

Engle and Tinto's (2008) often cited research indicates that first-generation students lacking social capital are less likely to fully engage in the campus environment, take advantage of faculty and other academic support services and remain on the fringe (Petty, 2014). Less savvy than their more privileged peers, first-generation students are more likely to not engage at all, become disengaged, and potentially withdraw (Havlik et al., 2020).

As first-generation college students pursue social class mobility through higher education, they face the inherent challenges associated with lack of parental guidance, support, and unfamiliarity with the college application, enrollment, and degree completion processes. Often characterized as "careerists" in comparison to their "intellectual" counterparts, first-generation college students are more often relegated to vocational or professional programs that directly lead to employment than their more privileged peers who engage in the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake (Bastedo et al., 2009; Mamiseishvill, 2010; McCallen & Johnson, 2020).

Further compounding their peripheral status, these students are often unwilling to reveal their compromised social capital and cultural status, refraining from interacting

with faculty or asking for help. This greatly diminishes their educational experience and ability to persist (Kim et al., 2020; Oldfield, 2007, 2012). Lacking a sense of belonging and connection to the institution, these students often struggle on their own not knowing that academic resources and support services are available to them. Quite simply, they did not inherit the language and college navigation skills from their parents (Gopalan & Brady, 2019; Winograd & Rust, 2014).

Navigating the Culture of Home and Campus

According to Covarrubias et al. (2019) and Stephens et al. (2012), first-generation college students often experience cultural mismatches between their interdependent family environments and the university that promotes independence and self-reliance. Navigating the ongoing social and cultural expectations of home while transitioning to campus and attempting to assume a new identity as a college student proves problematic for these students (Petty, 2014). "As such, as students transition into these settings, there is an expectation for them to separate from family, to pursue individual paths, and to focus on their personal academic and life goals" (Covarrubias et al., p. 382). This proves to be easier said than done as first-generation college students face significant academic and social challenges associated with lack of social capital and support from family, insufficient academic preparation, and culture shock (Ishitani, 2006).

As previously mentioned, Lucey and colleagues (2003) explore the consequences associated with the painful process that first-generation college students experience as they transitioning to college and de-identifying with parents. While their middle-class counterparts are socialized to follow in the footsteps of their parents who had gone to college and earned a bachelor's or master's degree, these students aspire to move beyond

their work-class status and away from their parents. The students in their research study note a deep sense of shame as a result of having educational and professional aspirations. "Wanting something different, something more than your parents, not only implies that there is something wrong with your parents' life, but that there is something wrong them" (Lucey et al., p. 295). The implications of "wanting more" complicate first-generation college students' academic and social experiences often proving to be too risky or not sustainable (Foster, 2005; Somers et al., 2004).

Covarrubias et al.'s (2019) research also focuses on the interdependent relationship between first-generation college students and their families and the university's inability to recognize this profound difference. Contrary to their more privileged counterparts who are well prepared for independence benefitting from parental support and guidance, these students' roles and responsibilities within their families often require them to provide parents with "emotional support and advocacy, language brokering, financial support, physical care, life advice, and heavy sibling caretaking" (p. 381).

An earlier study conducted by Stephens et al. (2012) focuses on how the American system of higher education promotes individualism, independence, and self-reliance. By design, colleges and universities presume that all students should assume a new student identity shedding prior senses of self and family ties. Cooper's (2013) research suggests that identity development is shaped by interactions and relationships with teachers and peers and by experiences of success or failure in academic, extracurricular, and social endeavors. This middle-class notion does not always resonate with first-generation and working class students who often struggle to fully transition to

college, realize a new identity, and gain membership status. "As a result, first-generation students are likely to experience the university culture's focus on independence as a cultural mismatch, as relatively uncomfortable and as a clear divergence from their previous experiences" (Stephens et al., p. 1181).

To further explore this complicated family dynamic, Harpera et al. (2020) conducted a case study of parents of first-generation college students throughout their transition to college, participation in orientation, and early college experience. Acknowledging the important role that family plays in students' lives, this study examines the students' educational experience, institutional resources, and support services from the parental perspective. Harpera et al. note that parents and families from "marginalized or non-dominant communities may feel unwelcomed in their children's school settings and that these parents are particularly at risk of feeling less engaged and marginalized by the educational system" (p. 2). How their diminished involvement with their children's school translates to their first-generation college students' ability to develop a sense of belongingness to the campus community is of particular concern to these researchers. They recommend the development of intentional transitional programming and university support services designed to bridge the gap between home and campus ensuring that both students and parents feel supported throughout their educational experience.

Transition and Academic Enrichment Programs

With varying results, colleges and universities develop transition programs designed to support vulnerable students as they move from home to campus (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). As a strategic recruitment and retention tool, these programs

are designed to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse undergraduate population including vulnerable and underrepresented students (Park et al., 2017). And, as the literature suggests, there is much more work to be done to support students as they navigate unfamiliar territory as first-time/first-year, commuting, and transfer students (Schelbe et al., 2019). While transition programs traditionally address the migration to campus, the pandemic provides a new opportunity for higher education leaders to incorporate lessons learned from an abrupt transition to emergency remote learning and the post-quarantine migration back to campus-based instruction into new and innovative pathway initiatives.

To better understand the importance of pathway programs, Schlossberg (1989) notes the challenges that marginalized students face as they transition from home to campus stressing the importance of connection, engagement, and mattering. Fast forward to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and Schlossberg's transition theory becomes even more relevant to first-generation college student who elected to enroll in campus-based instruction only to involuntarily migrate to emergency remote learning. Convinced that "people in transition often feel marginal and that they do not matter" (p. 1), Schlossberg normalizes and contextualizes this often temporary and bewildering circumstance. She also stresses the important role that colleges and universities play in supporting students as they migrate from familiar to unfamiliar territory encouraging academic leaders and administrators to answer the following questions: "Do they make students feel they matter? Are their policies, practices, and classroom and co-curricular activities geared to making people feel they matter" (p. 5)? While her theory may be

over 30 years old, these basic questions are central to the design and development of transition programs and support services.

Considering the diverse needs of undergraduate students, there are many different types of transition, pathway, and enrichment programs. As such, the literature presents a variety of options for colleges and universities to consider. The following early college, summer gateway, transfer pathway, and academic enrichment programs serve as good examples of how higher education is addressing the transitional support needs of an increasingly diverse population of undergraduate students.

By design, early college programs intentionally blur the line between high school and college in an attempt to guide students from one learning environment to another (Edmunds et al., 2017). "Early colleges are a comprehensive model of schooling explicitly focused on college readiness for all. They are designed to incorporate characteristics that have been associated with increased enrollment and success in postsecondary education" (p. 297). Addressing the needs of marginalized and underrepresented students, these programs provide exposure to higher education, academic preparation and remediation, and support throughout the college application process while students are still in high school and living in their home communities. Early college programs acknowledge students' lack of social capital and need for a lower risk entry into higher education through intentionally designed academic programs and student support services.

College Promise (Willard et al., 2019) programs serve as excellent examples of early college and pathway initiatives that expand access to higher education for students who thought a college degree was beyond their reach. By design, these programs match

the “promise of college access with the promise of college graduation” (p. 2). Participating colleges and universities commit resources to help students enroll full-time, become better prepared through remediation and study skills building, access financial aid and scholarships, and complete an undergraduate degree programs. In turn, College Promise participants report higher rates of enrollment, degree completion, and overall satisfaction. Boasting a win-win scenario for all involved, the College Promise leaders encourage more colleges and universities to incorporate their academic and social enrichment approach into the institution’s strategic enrollment plan.

Many higher education institutions have developed summer gateway programs to help marginalized students transition to college. These summer gateway programs are designed to introduce students who may be unfamiliar with higher education or the first in their family to pursue a bachelor’s degree (Parks et al., 2017). As an important time period in the students’ transition to college, summer provides a unique opportunity for students to become acquainted with the campus, engage with faculty, and meet other students (Suzuki & Amrein-Beardsley, 2012).

Recognizing the importance of community, connection, and engagement, these summer programs often combine academic and social experiences that welcome students into a ready-made community. Intent on supporting students as they transition to college and retaining them once they enroll, colleges and universities rely on summer gateway programs as an important enrollment management tool citing higher rates of retention, better learning outcomes, and improved satisfaction (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019).

A research team at Florida State University studied the GenOne summer and first-year gateway program that provides ongoing academic resources and support services to

marginalized students such as first-generation, low socio-economic, and other disadvantaged students (Schelbe et al., 2019). Recognizing the need for more continuous support and community engagement, this program offers tutoring, academic advising, and community-based activities that promote engagement with faculty, staff, and peers. While the formal programs end after the first year of enrollment, academic advisors and enrollment coaches remain in place through degree completion. Their research found that the GenOne program plays an important role in retaining and supporting students. "Students repeatedly disclosed that GenOne helped prepare them in terms of personal growth and skill development for the rigors of college, which ultimately helped them succeed and stay in school" (Schelbe et al., p. 68).

Kezar et al. (2020) make a strong case in favor of career-based transition programs designed to help first-generation college students align career aspirations with educational goals. Rather than stereotyping these students as career focused instead of intellectuals, Kezar et al.'s research capitalizes on career aspiration as a motivating factor easing the transition to college, increasing persistence, and degree completion.

> Students come to college with a wealth of experiences that contribute to their knowledge of self, interests, and potential careers. It is the responsibility of institutions to foster their career-related development through interventions and systems of support that are flexible, customized, and responsive to the assets and diverse experiences that students bring with them to college. (p. 300)

In pursuit of social mobility, such a career-focused pathway initiative recognizes these students' need to leverage higher education and completion of a bachelor's degree as part of an over-arching plan to improve their lives. This approach also resonates with their parents who appreciate the connection between earning a college degree and career outcomes. As students migrate away from home and family, there is often tension and

guilt associated with social mobility (Somers et al., 2004). Through the development of a career-related transition program, the institution acknowledges this difficult rite of passage easing the tension between first-generation college students and their families. Somers et al.'s research recognizes "the responsibility of the institution (and institutional agents) to proactively engage students in major/career activities, to address opportunity gaps, and to discover and build from students' unique assets and strengths (Harper 2010; Yosso, 2005)" (p. 300).

Swanbrow Becker et al. (2021) suggest that first-generation college students experience the stress associated with transitioning to college differently than their continuing-generation peers. Lacking social capital in comparison to their peers, first-generation college students often embark on a journey to campus fueled by self-doubt, uncertainty, and stress. Their research focuses on their mental health and well-being needs as vulnerable students. Incorporating the qualitative data gained through focus groups and interviews, they offer

> strategies to reduce the effects of the stressors that first-generation students face including programs that assist these individuals in: accessing situation-specific planning and guidance (Jenkins et al., 2013), getting connected to faculty or institutional ambassadors who are knowledgeable about the challenges specific to this group (Steblton et al., 2014; Wang, 2014a), and increasing involvement in programs designed to provide education and entice their participation in supportive student peer groups (Mehta et al., 2011). (p. 1167)

By design such a health and well-being focused enrichment program welcomes first-generation student into a supportive learning environment that appreciates their stressful transition to college while offering just-in-time academic resources and support services. As a strategic recruitment and retention tool, this program also serves as an important

enrollment management function recognizing the increased withdrawal rates of vulnerable student populations.

Finally, the TRIO Student Support Services program provides important academic resources and support services to first-generation, low socio-economic status students, and disadvantaged students. Mindful of the challenges that these students face as they transition to campus and enroll in undergraduate courses, the TRIO program is designed to provide the social capital, language of higher education, academic resources, support services, and most importantly a ready-built community of peers (Quinn et al., 2019). Research pertaining to the benefits of the TRIO program finds that this inclusive and accessible approach to supporting marginalized students does make a difference in not only retaining students but improving their academic and social experience and learning outcomes.

The Pre-pandemic Connection between Engagement, Belonging, and Persistence

Acknowledging the importance of a supported transition to college, the literature also stresses the importance of connection, engagement, and community involvement. According to Strayhorn (2012), belonging plays an important role in the retention, learning outcomes, and satisfaction of all students but especially vulnerable and disadvantaged populations such as first-generation college students. "Belonging – with peers, in the classroom, or on campus – is a crucial part of the college experience. It can affect a students' degree of academic achievement or even whether they stay in school" (p. VIII). Based on Maslow's (1962) premise that belonging is a "basic human need" (p. ix), Strayhorn presents a way to understand the contextual and fluid nature in which first-generation students experience higher education. For the purposes of this study, sense of

belonging and membership within the learning community is positioned as the gateway between the satisfaction of basic human needs which includes access to high quality internet service and technology and educational achievement.

> A fair amount of research has shown that sense of belonging is also associated with numerous positive, prosocial, and productive outcomes in specific domains such as education. For instance, sense of belonging positively influences academic achievement, retention, and persistence. An absence of sense of belonging, however, often leads to decreased or diminished interest and engagement in ordinary life activities. Students have difficulty sustaining academic engagement and commitment in an environment where they do not feel personally valued and welcomed (Goodenow, 1993b). So the takeaway point seems clear: To excel, students must feel a sense of belonging in school (or college), and therefore educators must work to create conditions that foster belongingness among students. (Strayhorn, p. 9)

This notion of sense of belonging to a community is not necessarily a campus-based phenomenon as it transcends the campus' geographic boundaries to include online and virtual learning communities (Wighting et al., 2008; Yilman, 2016). Sense of community is broadly defined as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (Wighting et al., p. 286).

Rovai and colleagues (2004) further divide the notion of an educational community into the realm of the social community and the learning community. Social community includes the student's level of engagement, perceptions of trust, interdependence, and sense of belonging while the learning community focuses on shared group norms, values, and educational goals. Although these definitions transcend geographic location and instructional methods, they are most often associated with traditional campus-based programs.

While there is much literature pertaining to importance of sense of belonging to either campus-based or online learning communities, it is part of an emerging body of scholarship exploring engagement and connection throughout pandemic, college and university campus closures, and emergency remote teaching and learning. Best practices for campus-based and online community engagement identified by past and more recent research help higher education better meet the needs of emergency remote learners as they emerge from quarantine eager to reengage with faculty, staff, and peers (Nguyen, 2015).

In keeping with the importance of community connection, Stenbom et al. (2016) and Soria and Stebleton's (2012) research supports the relationship between academic engagement and frequent interactions with faculty, student services staff, and peers, and higher rates of student satisfaction and enrollment. While their research was conducted prior to the global pandemic, it continues to resonate with students enrolled in campus-based, online, and most recently, emergency based teaching and learning. Means and Pyne (2017) note "faculty members' friendliness, helpfulness, and their ability to encourage participation in class as contributing greatly to students' sense of belonging" (p. 908). Dependent upon the classroom as their primary campus connection, first-generation college students rely on relationships with faculty to facilitate and sustain a sense of connection to the campus community (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018; Hargrove & Klondike, 2020).

Mattern, Wyatt, and Shaw (2013) also note that the more integrated students are with the campus culture and environment, the more likely they are to express a greater sense of satisfaction and remain enrolled. Conversely, reasons commonly cited at the

point of withdrawal most often include "homesickness, financial problems, family, obligations, and academic difficulties" (p. 89).

Further complicating first-generation college students' ability to develop and maintain a sense of connection to the campus community, Pyne and Means' (2013) research contends that "traditional education often represses or denies the identities and experiences of students who are least represented, leaving them vulnerable to feeling like outsiders or imposters" (p. 187). Institutions make conscious and unconscious decisions developing academic learning communities and support services that further marginalize first-generation students as they intentionally measure their educational experiences, membership status, levels of satisfaction, and learning outcomes in comparison to predominantly white, middle class, and traditional aged students. Reliant upon notions of meritocracy and race neutrality, colleges and universities

> simplify and homogenize the day-to-day experiences of underrepresented students, erasing contradiction and struggle, ignoring the larger historical systems of privilege and power that are embedded in the institutional fabric of schools in favor of a more seductive myth of success. (Pyne & Means, p. 190)

As such, first-generation students are often required to shed or adapt their identities in an attempt to fit in and achieve membership within the campus community (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). However, gaining this fragile membership and a sense of belonging may not be sustainable without dedicated academic resources and support services (Ferri et al., 2020). Maneuvering in unfamiliar territory, these students often rely upon campus-based bridge programs, community engagement activities, and support services that promote a sense of belonging and connection to the university community (Strayhorn, 2012). This tenuous membership model presents similar challenges and

obstacles for marginalized first-generation students enrolled in either campus-based or online programs (Gillis & Krull, 2020).

So what happens to first-generation college students' sense of belonging and membership status as a result of the sudden onset of a global pandemic and campus closure? How does an involuntary migration to emergency remote teaching and learning impact their sense of belonging and connection to faculty, staff, and peers? While much attention has been paid to the educational experiences of first-generation college students enrolled in either on-campus or online programs, literature chronicling their experience throughout emergency remote and post-quarantined learning is just emerging.

Higher education's sudden and complete reliance on technology throughout emergency remote teaching and learning warrants the careful consideration of best practices and lessons learned from fully online programs. Virtual learning communities and the importance of belonging, mattering, connection, and engagement are not new concepts within these fully online programs (Berry, 2017; Ortagus, 2016). It is also well known that marginalized student status such as first-generation may further complicate their ability to migrate to and navigate within a virtual learning community (Martin Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Shin & Hickey, 2020).

With the abrupt transition to remote instruction, it is increasingly important to scan the literature pertaining to high quality and intentionally designed online programs and virtual learning communities. What key takeaways apply to the emergency remote learning environment? As such, it is crucial for colleges and universities to assume responsibility for the academic and social experiences of remote students striving to

create a viable and engaging virtual learning community (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016; Shea et al., 2006; Westwick & Morreale, 2020).

Historically, higher education institutions throughout the US have felt pressure to incorporate online education into their strategic plans (Ortagus, 2017). Shifting demographics, financial instability, demand for technology-enabled education, pressure to engage in a globalized educational marketplace, and an increasingly diverse student population challenge traditional colleges and universities to add fully online degree programs to their academic portfolio (Lightneis, 2014; Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016). While some elite schools have opted to preserve the status quo, many others have elected to offer a separate set of fully online degree programs (Finn & Petrilli, 2011).

It is well documented that success in incorporating high quality online education into traditional academic environments and cultures has had varied results and is largely dependent upon institutional commitment, faculty training, and instructional design and technology resources (Ortagus, 2016). Members of the academy continue to debate the academic rigor, and quality associated with online education in comparison to traditional face-to-face programs (Ouzts, 2006; Rovai et al., 2004; Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Online learners, on the receiving end of varied institutional commitment to developing and delivering high quality technology-enabled courses, programs, and support services often struggle to remain enrolled (Ortagus). Low persistence rates in online courses and degree programs fuel this debate citing average withdrawal rates between 20% and 50% (Frankola, 2001; Westwick & Morreale, 2020). Factors associated with student persistence in online learning are often unrelated to academic ability and more often associated with "online learning satisfaction, a sense of belonging to the learning

community, motivation, peer and family support, time management skills, and increased communication with the instructor" (Hart, 2012, p. 19).

Persistence and student satisfaction with online education has evolved beyond traditional campus-based data points such as academic preparation, student engagement, and motivation to favor flexibility, affordability, convenience, and virtual connection (Chen et al., 2010; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Maddrell et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2012). Online students, who remain enrolled often have high personal expectations and self-efficacy, seek out opportunities to engage with peers and faculty through discussion posts and other technology-enabled communication tools, and report a sense of community within the virtual learning environment (Bunn, 2004; Holder, 2007; Kemp, 2002; Su & Waugh, 2018).

While many institutions rely on persistence and degree completion rates to measure online student satisfaction, few delve into the students' academic and social experiences leaving out important information pertaining to their need for interaction with faculty, staff, and peers (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014). With withdrawal rates found to be six or seven times higher in online versus on-campus programs, college and university administrators, faculty, and staff are compelled to gain a deeper understanding of the online student experience and the need for connection to academic resources and support services (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Boston et al., 2009; Van Doorn & Van Doorn, 2014).

Virtual learning communities are often designed to meet the needs of online students providing access to university resources and an opportunity to engage with faculty, staff, and peers (Bawa, 2016; Dowd et al., 2013). Done well, these virtual environments offer an important space to online students to exchange ideas with peers

and instructors, experience personal growth, and pursue educational goals. Done poorly, online students withdraw citing lack of timely feedback, poor communication and interaction with instructors and peers, feelings of isolation and decreased engagement, lack of accessible technology, increased work and/or family responsibilities, and diminished sense of belonging (Beck & Milligan, 2014; Bollinger & Inan, 2012; Bunn, 2004; Lischer et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2005; Stanford-Bowers, 2008; Strayhorn, 2012; Su & Waugh, 2018).

Acknowledging varied institutional commitment to supporting and sustaining online students, there is growing concern regarding student satisfaction, community engagement, and educational achievement in online and remote learning environments as a result of the global pandemic (Bunn, 2004; Muljana& Luo, 2019; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Westwick & Morreale, 2020). While there is research citing the importance of academic and social connection to traditional campus-based and online communities, faculty, support services, and peers there is less information pertaining to the relationship between all these factors and emergency remote learners (Shim & Lee, 2020). This is especially true for marginalized populations such as first-generation and low socio-economic status students forced to migrate away from campus and engage in emergency remote teaching and learning (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Karimshah, 2013; Martin Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Wighting et al., 2008).

Emergency Remote Learning

According to Bhowmik and Bhattacharya (2021), “The COVID 19 pandemic drastically disrupted the education sector across the world” (p. 74). With approximately 1.725 billion students globally affected by school closures and the abrupt transition to

emergency remote learning, these scholars explored the educational experiences associated with a forced migration away from face-to-face instruction. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) further emphasized the global impact of the pandemic on students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds citing that "the shutting down of schools have widened learning inequalities and have hurt vulnerable children and youth disproportionately (UNESCO, 2020a)" (p. i). Adopting the notion that education is a fundamental human right and central to social mobility, these authors explore the unintended consequences of a global pandemic on an already fragile world-wide educational ecosystem (Bhowmik & Bhattacharya; Bozkurt & Sharma).

> Apparently, the poorest and most vulnerable members of society are being hardest hit, both by the pandemic and the response (Guterres, 2020). Sadly, for whatever reason, many countries have already been suffering from interruptions to education, and for many, this is not a new narrative. From a Darwinian point of view, survival of the fittest is not acceptable in this case. We teach and explain the ideals of universal values and advice to narrow the gaps, but as shameful as it is, we see that the digital divide is still a threat and many still suffer from unavailable educational opportunities. (Bozkurt & Sharma, p. iii)

The onset of a global pandemic, closure of higher education campuses, and the sudden shift to emergency remote learning caught institutions off guard (Westnick & Morreale, 2020). It also shown a spotlight on an already tenuous and hierarchical educational system that routinely denies or diminishes access to those who needed it the most (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

Czerniewicz et al.'s (2020) research further amplifies the pre-pandemic issues and concerns inextricably linked to social and educational inequality and exacerbated by an abrupt pivot to online enrollment. They contend that the pandemic intensified three categories of inequality: vital inequality as it relates to heightened life chances and survival rates as a result of educational achievement; resource inequalities such as the

satisfaction of basic human needs including housing, food, safety, technology, and access to the internet; and existential inequality most closely associated with dignity, autonomy, and representation. Czerniewicz et al. also recommend that higher education address these heightened inequities through increased reliance on an ethic of care and commitment to acknowledging the disparate impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged and vulnerable populations.

> COVID-19 has threatened our world which includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web' (see Fisher and Tronto 1990: 40). How to 'heal' this world is a practice that Tronto would define as an ethic of care: 'a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. How we in education have attempted to ameliorate the challenges we and our students have encountered have taken the form of acts of care. Yet, every caring act occurs in a larger political context that reflects a given society's values, laws, customs and institutions (Tronto 2015: 10). (p. 948)

Mindful of the profound and disparate impact that the pandemic has had on disadvantaged students, Aguliera and Nightengale-Lee (2020) explore the unanticipated consequences of emergency remote teaching on marginalized communities such as first-generation college students noting their already disadvantaged relationship with higher education due to a lack of social capital, low socio-economic status, and limited exposure to campus. In contrast to framing COVID 19 as the "great equalizer" of social experience, these authors contend that "historically marginalized communities are being disproportionately impacted by this crisis (Oweseje, 2020; Casey, 2020)" (p. 472). Citing data from the NAACP (2020) report, they point to "amplified inequities ranging from limited access to medical resources, to increasingly overt racism and xenophobia, to multiple 'digital divides' constraining schools' and communities' access to distance education (National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA), 2018; Perrin 2019)" (p. 472).

Ferri et al.'s (2020) research reinforces Aguliera and Nightengale-Lee's findings noting that socially disadvantaged groups face difficulties in meeting basic conditions required by online and remote learning. "Lockdowns and the subsequent closure of educational institutions seem to have amplified the gap between rich and poor people. School closures could have a negative impact on learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, widening the gap with their more advantaged peers" (Ferri et al., p. 2).

In addition to the amplification of inequity due to the global pandemic and shift to emergency remote learning, the literature addresses the confusion between intentionally designed and developed online programs and emergency remote learning. Not only is this confusion detrimental to the reputation of high quality online learning programs and the significant work done by progressive colleges and universities to address access concerns and technological advancements in instructional design and delivery, it also fails to acknowledge the unprecedented and involuntary nature of a pandemic induced shift to emergency remote instruction.

To contextualize this forced educational circumstance and better understand the impact of the pandemic on traditional higher education, let us turn our attention to the definitions found in the most recent literature. The literature emphasizes the important distinction between emergency remote teaching and intentional online instruction noting the profound difference between intentionally designed online programs with well-trained instructors and students who elected to participate remotely and disorganized pandemic courses (Gillis & Krull, 2020). Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) offer definitions of distance and online education and emergency remote teaching clarifying the profound difference between these instructional methods. "Distance education is an

interdisciplinary field that has evolved over time. Distance education further places emphasis on interactions between different parties and through different channels to let learners be more engaged in the learning process (Moore, 1989; Riggs, 2020)" (p. ii).

Shin and Hickey (2020) also note that online learning has emerged within higher education as an intentional and important instructional method designed to increase opportunities for faculty and students to connect regardless of time and place. By design and through the use of technology, trained faculty work with instructional designers to develop technology-enabled courses, learning modules that promote interaction and engagement, and online community-based academic resources and support services (Luo et al., 2017; Rovai, 2002). In this scenario, online programs and courses are typically part of a longer term educational plan designed to increase access to an increasingly diverse population of students who either could not or did not wish to enroll in traditional campus-based instruction. The typical online courses are initially and intentionally designed to be delivered fully online and involve several weeks of planning and designing from the very beginning (Hodges et al., 2020; Shisley, 2020)" (Shin & Hickey, 2020, p. 2).

In stark contrast, emergency remote teaching and learning should be treated as a temporary solution to a global pandemic (Hodges et al., 2020) fueled by an abrupt and involuntary shift to technology-enabled instruction, lack of time to deliberately design remote courses and train faculty, poor internet access, and a deepening digital divide (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Shin and Hickey (2020) define emergency remote teaching as a:

> temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances (which) involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for

> instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated (Hodges et al., 2020). (p. 2)

Bhowmik and Bhattacharya (2020) echo the importance of differentiating between intentionally designed and delivered online programs and emergency remote teaching practices:

> Sudden shifting from face to face classroom teaching to online teaching without any prior preparation and training results in parallel growth of many unpleasant issues. The online instructions which are being delivered in these pressing situations are not the same as what we actually know about high quality online education. It is the temporary solution of the crisis evolved due to the threat of COVID 19. It is defined as 'emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al, 2020). Hodges et al deliberately selected the term 'teaching' instead of 'learning' or 'instruction'. In this new system of online education what is missing is learners' contribution. Rather it is the act, practice and effort of the teacher to accomplish the task. In the long run, this practice may hamper the quality of learning. (p. 74)

Gillis and Krull (2020) further considered the stark contrast between intentionally designed online courses and emergency remote learning courses. As a result of the abrupt transition to remote learning, many faculty relied upon the university's learning management system to conducting synchronous remote lectures, modifying exam formats, and reducing opportunities to engage in group assignments. This one-way instructional approach presents significant challenges to students who struggle to remain engaged and committed to their educational goals due to limited access to high quality internet, poor technology, low motivation, and health and safety fears and anxiety (Kauffman, 2015; Khlaif et al., 2021).

To further compound this disorganized educational environment, Shin and Hickey's (2020) research finds lack of preparation, time, and limited instructional design resources as having profound effects on both faculty and emergency remote learners as they attempt to navigate an unfamiliar online environment.

> Since in-person teaching skills and course designs cannot be directly transferred over to the virtual world, instructors need to acquire a new and extended skillset. As digital competencies to cope with ERT might vary depending on the instructors (Sahu 2020), the students' learning can be negatively impacted. (p. 3)

Hensley et al. (2021) also focused on the important role that faculty play in supporting emergency remote learners. They stress the need for instructors to be virtually and authentically engaged with students, emphasizing a profoundly and abruptly disconnected learning environment and the loss of connection to the campus community. Their research "found that behaviors associated with instructor presence positively influenced student satisfaction in online courses likely because they reduced the isolation to which online student are prone" (p. 3).

The negative consequences of disorganized and disconnected learning are especially prevalent among "nonwhite, female, and first-generation college students" (Gillis & Krull, 2020, p. 283). Shin and Hickey (2020) further emphasize the profound impact that lack of technology and poor internet service has on already disadvantaged students. As technology suddenly became a basic necessity and lifeline for faculty and students to remain engaged in educational activities, startling reports of limited or no access to such central support services surfaced. "It is alarming that in the U.S., around 21 million people, or 6.5% of the population, and as many as 12 million school-aged children do not have broadband access (Chavez, 2020)" (Shin & Hickey, p. 2). Ferri et al. (2020) report that technology challenges and limited access to reliable internet service negatively and disproportionately impact disadvantaged and rural students leaving them with "insufficient bandwidth, production delays or connection failures during lessons and video conferencing" (p. 7).

In keeping with Gillis and Krull's (2020) research, additional studies show that women were and continue to be disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Brown et al. (2020) research explores the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on women, citing higher rates of uncertainty, anxiety, and social isolation due to diminished interactions with peers, increased responsibilities at home, and uncertain employment. "Additionally, throughout the pandemic, many women were forced to choose between their professional careers or providing childcare and remote learning assistance" (Brown et al., p. 3).

Comparing best practices in intentionally designed online courses to cobble together with one-way technology-enabled emergency remote courses, Gillis and Krull (2020) highlight the need for colleges and universities to pay close attention to the learning outcomes and instructional experiences of involuntary remote learners and faculty. They insist that lessons learned from emergency remote learning should be incorporated into post-quarantined online and campus-based instruction and support services.

Lack of choice also factors prominently into the diminished educational experiences of emergency remote learners in comparison to fully online courses and programs (Hehir et al., 2021). Due to abrupt campus closures, faculty and students alike were left with little choice but to engage in one-way synchronous instruction as opposed to high quality online courses that feature asynchronous learning modules and optimized synchronous interaction (Gillis & Krull, 2020). Already conversant in online instruction, these researchers recommend the following three goals: "to facilitate student learning while minimizing anxiety connected to the course, maintain student/student and

instructor/student interactions, and maintain consistency" (Gillis & Krull, p. 287). Emphasizing the need for more faculty to student and peer to peer interaction, engagement, flexibility, and communication, Krull incorporated best practices from her campus-based and online courses into her emergency remote learning course welcoming feedback from students through virtual drop-in office hours and group forums.

Through these community building sessions, Krull learned more about the profound challenges associated with involuntary remote learning and the significant barriers impacting her students' ability to remain motivated and enrolled. She also noted that these barriers affected vulnerable students such as first-generation college students at higher rates given their greater dependence upon the university infrastructure and financial aid to meet their personal and educational needs.

MacMahon et al.'s (2020) research also explores the academic and social experiences and learning outcomes of students engaged in emergency remote learning. Like Gillis and Krull (2020), they note the significant impact that the abrupt shift to emergency remote learning had on disadvantaged students citing profound incidences of social isolation, anxiety, and low motivation due to a dramatically disconnected and disorganized remote learning environment. With limited interaction with campus-based resources, these students felt "socially disconnected, isolated from their friends and peers who play an important role in building positive affect, engagement, motivation, and learning regulation (Havlik, et al., 2020; Bierman, 2011; Farmer et al., 2016)" (MacMahon et al., p. 356). MacMahon et al. draw attention to the students' "reduced sense of control of their learning, a lowered sense of achievement and competence, and disconnection from the place and people of learning" (p. 356).

In earlier studies, Boston et al. (2009) and Rovai and Wighting (2005) explore the negative consequences of social isolation and lack of connection to the learning community for students enrolled in online courses and programs. They note that students "who feel isolated tend to be separated from mainstream groups, feel a lack of connection to others, and feel no one cares or pays attention to them" (Rovai & Wighting, p. 98). While this information dates back to 2005 and is in the context of online learning, it reemerges as a common theme throughout emergency remote learning (Shim & Lee, 2020). Isolation, anxiety, and lack of engagement are central themes throughout the literature (Liu et al., 2020).

In theory, the pandemic should have provided higher education with an opportunity to utilize technology and other digital tools to keep students engaged with faculty, staff, and peers but in reality Ferri et al. (2020) find that it severely limited engagement, severing important connections to campus infrastructure and resources recommending a blended approach "should be used whenever possible to reinforce a feeling of community belonging, thereby improving social interaction and collaboration among learners and between learners and teachers" (p. 15).

Shin and Hickey (2020) further address the negative impacts of a massive and abrupt shift to emergency remote teaching and learning citing diminished engagement with faculty and peers, low motivation, and poor learning outcomes. In contrast to a pandemic induced and disorganized educational environment, Iglesias-Pradas et al. (2021) suggest that a sense of community can be created via technology but it takes instructional design, accessible academic resources, trained faculty, virtual student

support services and time. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic and abrupt closure of residential college and university campuses, time was not on anyone's side.

Recognizing the remote students' need for ongoing academic and social engagement with faculty, staff, and peers, Hehir et al.'s (2021) and MacMahon et al.'s (2020) research supports the design and development of a collaborative online learning environment that connects students to their faculty and peers through intentionally designed asynchronous and synchronous learning modules while empowering them to develop independent learning skills and abilities.

While research and scholarship is emerging regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and emergency remote teaching and learning on disproportionately affected groups, there remains significant opportunity to study the longer term academic and social consequences of this world-wide educational disruption. According to Johnson and colleagues (2020), higher education stands to gain important information from this global crisis incorporating lessons learned from remote learners and faculty into post-pandemic virtual and campus-based best practices.

How Resilience, Grit, Determination, and Motivation Lead to Persistence

While much of the literature pertaining to first-generation college students points to barriers, challenges, poor learning outcomes, diminished sense of belonging to the campus community, and lower graduation rates, there is significant research that highlights how resilience, determination, grit, and motivation influence persistence and degree completion. Despite all the above mentioned circumstances that do limit these students' ability to remain enrolled and earn an undergraduate degree, many first-

generation college students navigate higher education and achieve their educational goal of being the first in their family to complete a bachelor's degree.

Resilience is a word that is often associated with successful marginalized students who against all odds persist and earn a degree (Azmitia et al., 2018). Simply defined, "academic resilience is the belief that one can surmount the challenges of going to college, access available resources, and pursue professional careers" (p. 2). While much attention has been paid to the reasons why first-generation college students withdraw from higher education, not as much work has not been done to analyze why disadvantaged students remain enrolled. This is particularly important as researchers consider academic resilience throughout emergency remote learning and the post-pandemic educational era.

Morales (2014) considers the relationship between educational resilience and persistence among disadvantaged and low socio-economic students who despite daunting challenges and barriers "beat the odds and exceed expectations" (p. 93). He invites higher education leaders to utilize his notion of resilience theory to assess these students' risk factors and vulnerabilities and develop more inclusive policies, practices, and pedagogical approaches. Emphasizing the classroom as a central hub for disadvantaged students, Morales encourages faculty to take responsibility for creating a learning community that promotes self-efficacy and a growth mindset.

> Self-efficacy derives from four primary sources of information: Performance accomplishment (having been successful in the past), Vicarious experience (hearing about others who have been successful, Verbal persuasion (encouragement), and Physiological states (emotional arousal) (Bandura, 1977). (p. 96)

Through inclusive pedagogical practices that incorporate these sources of information, faculty are better positioned to support disadvantaged students navigate an unfamiliar educational environment. Moving beyond their instructional responsibilities, Morales argues that the role of faculty as mentor, helper, and guide is central to the development of self-efficacy and a growth mindset.

In addition to resilience, grit and determination are other attributes commonly associated with first-generation college student persistence. The following studies examine these personal qualities and their impact on student satisfaction and learning outcomes.

According to McClendon et al. (2017), attrition rates in online and remote courses are high and often due to a combination of personal challenges and institutional failures. Balancing work, family, and other responsibilities, students often opt to enroll in online or remote programs for accessibility and flexibility reasons only to find poorly designed courses, limited access to technology support, and instructors with minimal training. And yet, many of these students remain enrolled, complete degree programs, and achieve their educational goals. This research team attributes institutional commitment to designing and developing high quality online and remote courses, faculty training programs, and virtual support services as significantly contributing to online student retention and satisfaction.

In addition to these important institutional resources, they also note that grit and determination are important personal attributes that sustain online and remote learners. Grit is defined as a "passion and perseverance for long-term goals. Grit is the quality of working persistently toward long-term goals, despite failures, challenges, and/or highs

and lows in the process" (McClendon et al., 2017, p. 9). While grit may be a personal attribute, this research suggests that institutions are also responsible for creating an online or virtual learning environment that recognizes these students' qualities and commits to sustaining them through the highs and lows of enrollment.

Finally, motivation serves as a common thread throughout the literature associated with first-generation college student persistence, degree completion, and academic achievement (Petty, 2014). Colleges and universities play an important role in motivating and supporting students throughout their enrollment. Through the development of specific academic programs and support services, institutions are well-positioned to recruit and retain this increasingly diverse population of students. Understanding the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate these students to pursue higher education as a social mobility strategy is key to the program development process ensuring that faculty and staff appreciate the challenges these students face. Motivation starts with having an understanding of the individual, and taking into consideration such factors as their social needs, self-esteem, and the environment in which they are existing.

As more is learned about the academic and social experiences of emergency remote learners, the role that resilience, grit, determination, and motivation played in first-generation college student persistence will likely emerge. Through careful consideration of this emergent body of literature, higher education leaders are poised to learn a great deal about these central student attributes and how to better educate and support a forever changed learning environment.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study is to collect the stories and describe the academic, social, and community-based experiences of first-generation college students who were required to transition to remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through interviews, observation, and story-telling, these students' remote learning experiences are explored, contextualized, and analyzed. A primary goal of this research is to better understand their lived experience, sense of belongingness or connection to the university campus and remote learning community, and their individual struggles and aspirations. Through these first-generation college student accounts, I intend to offer useful information and insight to academic and administrative leaders poised to make important changes to university policies, procedures, programs, and services that better reflect and support the educational needs of remote and campus-based learners.

Research Conceptual Framework and Theory

I will utilize Terrell Strayhorn's (2012) notion of sense of belongingness or connection to higher education as a conceptual framework and Nancy Schlossberg's (1998) transition theory to guide the research development, data collection and analysis, documentation and reporting, and recommendations for higher education processes.

Strayhorn (2012) contends that sense of belonging or community membership is of great importance to marginalized student populations such as first-generation college students. This framework builds upon Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs positioning basic human necessities of food, water, and safety as the foundation with sense of

belonging serving as the gatekeeper to knowledge attainment and self-actualization. While the framework appears hierarchical and tiered, Strayhorn suggests that students move more fluidly dependent upon personal, environmental, and situational circumstances. As students adjust and adapt to their individual circumstances, their ability to sustain a sense of belonging or connection varies, risking their academic and social achievement. With sense of belonging serving as a prerequisite for educational attainment and self-actualization, it is no wonder that colleges and universities spend so much time and energy developing academic programs and support services that promote engagement. Yet, these established initiatives often fall short of meeting the diverse and evolving needs of marginalized students. "Sense of belonging is one of those factors that is intertwined in good institutional practice and program development but is not often the source of evaluation. It changes as conditions and contexts change" (Strayhorn, p. x).

Strayhorn's (2012) framework provides a unique landscape for considering both the individual and institutional responses to an abrupt and forced transition to remote learning. Neither the students nor the institution were prepared for the consequences of the global pandemic. With no blueprint in hand, institutions shifted to technology-enabled instruction focusing primarily on course conversion and delivery and secondarily on remote learners' academic and social experiences. Little to no attention was initially paid to their altered sense of belonging and diminished academic and social experience due to a cobbled together virtual learning environment.

Using Strayhorn's (2012) framework, I will explore the academic and social experiences of a group of 10 involuntary remote first-generation college students. It will be well suited for the consideration of the following research questions.

- How does this newly configured remote learning environment support these first-generation college students as they navigate unprecedented, unfamiliar, and unwanted circumstances?
- How has this forced migration from campus to home jeopardized their basic needs once provided for by the university?
- How has their access to faculty, sufficient technology, and internet service changed?
- How has it altered their peer interactions and support networks?
- In what way has this forced transition to remote learning changed their collegiate membership?

These key questions will facilitate the development of the research purpose statement as well as the comprehensive research methodology.

Additionally, I will rely upon Schlossberg's (1989) transition theory to better understand how anticipated and unanticipated transitions influence student identity, community engagement, and academic and social experiences. Originally, I had planned to focus on the abrupt transition from campus-based to remote learning but as a result of my initial literature review, I expanded my plan to include a more comprehensive consideration of their transition to college and remote learning as well as their difficult choice to migrate back to campus-based instruction or remain remote.

Schlossberg (1989) identifies four factors that influence a person's ability to cope with transitions: situation, self, support, and strategies (Evans et al., 1998). Known as the 4 S's, these factors helped me explore and better understand each student's transition to college, their pre-pandemic academic, social, and community experiences, disrupted and

chaotic remote learning circumstance, shifting sense of self and collegiate membership, and resolve to remain enrolled and achieve their educational goal of earning a bachelor's degree.

Like Strayhorn (2012), Schlossberg (1989) strongly believes connection, engagement, and becoming a member of the campus community matters: "Involvement creates connections between students, faculty, and staff that allow individuals to believe in their own personal worth. This involvement also creates an awareness of our mutual relatedness and the fact that the condition of community is not only desirable but essential to human survival" (p. 1). In this case, the disruption of the student's educational ecosystem due to the pandemic forced an unwanted transition away from campus severing important ties to academic resources and support services.

Positioning Schlossberg's (1989) transition theory within Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging framework provides a useful research ecosystem for considering the academic and social experiences of these first-generation college students. I look forward to exploring how these students transitioned to college, their academic, social, and community standing at the time the university closed and their experience as involuntary remote learners.

Research Definitions

The following definitions of first-generation college students, sense of belongingness, and remote learning environments are drawn from scholarly research. Serving as reference points to facilitate deeper understanding of this population's academic and social experiences, these definitions also highlight the contrast between the remote learning environment and the traditional campus.

Engle and Tinto (2008) define first-generation college students simply as those students whose parents did not attend college.

> They disproportionately come from low income, ethnic and racial minority backgrounds, have lower levels of academic preparation, tend to be older, less likely to receive financial support from parents, more likely to have multiple obligations outside college and are at greater risk of failure in postsecondary education.
> Research has shown that low-income and first-generation students are less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences that foster success in college, such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extracurricular activities, and using support services.
> Due largely to a lack of resources, low-income, first-generation students are more likely to live and work off-campus and to take classes part-time while working full-time, which limits the amount of time they spend on campus. (p. 3)

By definition, first-generation college students enter higher education with greater challenges and obstacles affecting their experience, satisfaction, and ability to earn a degree. Layer on a global pandemic and an abrupt shift to remote learning and there is heightened concern regarding these students' experiences and learning outcomes. As noted in the literature, limited access to technology and high speed internet, academic and student support services, peers, and community engagement activities further complicate their education circumstance.

How the pandemic and campus closure impacted these students is considered throughout the study incorporating Strayhorn's (2012) notion of sense of belonging and Schlossberg's (1989) transition theory into the research framework. Schlossberg contends that anticipated and unanticipated transitions influence the student experience impacting identity, relationships, behaviors, goals, and daily life. Known as the 4 S's – situation, self, social support, and strategies – Schlossberg presents a set of factors for considering and understanding how these students initially migrated to the university,

their pre-pandemic academic and social experience, the forced transition home, and the difficult decision about whether to return to in-person instruction or remain remote.

Strayhorn (2012) offers insight into the relevance of sense of belongingness, connection, and membership for students, especially those within marginalized and minority populations.

> Sense of belonging reflects the academic and social support that students perceive; it is a feeling of connectedness; that one is important to others; that one matters. It may also be particularly significant for students who are marginalized in college contexts such as women, racial and ethnic minorities, low-income students, first-generation students, and gay students to name a few. (pp. 16-17)

Core elements of Strayhorn's concept include:

- Sense of belonging is a basic human need modeled after Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs that assumes knowledge attainment and self-actualization associated with higher education are dependent upon the satisfaction of food, water, safety, shelter, and social connection.
- Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive that drives human behavior such as academic achievement and persistence or conversely, disengagement and withdrawal.
- Sense of belonging is contextual and circumstantial depending on environmental factors.
- Sense of belonging is a consequence of mattering, feeling valued, or appreciated.
- Sense of belonging is influenced by social identity.
- Sense of belonging promotes positive outcomes. (pp. 19-23)

Along with Schlossberg's (1989) transitional theory, Strayhorn's (2012) conceptual framework informed the development of the research methodology guiding the study design, implementation, analysis, and the presentation of findings.

A virtual learning environment is defined for the purpose of this study as a completely remote, online, synchronous or asynchronous educational experience that is facilitated by the use of technology, computers, and the internet (Wighting et al., 2008). Issues concerning emergency remote learning, instructional resources, online course

design, faculty training, technology, support services, and the delivery of community engagement activities within the virtual learning environment are explored throughout the literature review and more directly with research participants.

Research Methodology

According to Miles et al. (2014), some of the major strengths of qualitative research, data collection, and analysis include the ordinary nature of the study, problem, or circumstance, its close proximity to the situation, and the focus on people's lived experiences. The narrative approach to conduction qualitative inquiry further emphasizes the importance of storytelling as a vehicle for gathering data, insight, and first-hand knowledge of lived experiences. I will utilize the narrative approach to explore each student's transition to college; pre-pandemic academic, social, and community experiences; forced transition back home due to the COVID-19 pandemic and campus closure; emergency remote learning circumstance, and decision to return to in-person instruction or remain remote when the campus reopened this past academic year.

While the March 2020 closure of the university campus serves as the primary pivot point, the study will also considers the students' transition to college and their pre-pandemic experience. Serving as important contextual information at the point of departure, I want to explore how their transition to college influenced their pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic educational experiences. Noting the challenges associated with anticipated and unanticipated transitions (Schlossberg, 1989), I intentionally will design the study to consider the impact of movement from one community to another on identity, ability to develop and maintain a sense of belonging and connection to the university community, educational experience, and learning outcomes.

Consistent with narrative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018), the study recognizes the COVID-19 pandemic and campus closure as the turning point between what was perceived as "normal" academic and social engagement to "abnormal" emergency remote learning. The contrasting notion of "normal" versus "abnormal" powerfully reinforces this turning point as the departure from predictable and preferred campus-based living and learning to an unpredictable and unwanted emergency remote learning experience. While this notion is widely adopted by many in higher education and throughout the literature, I wonder if it would resonate with the research participants. Mindful of this bifurcated approach of labeling pre-pandemic and campus-based education as the norm and online and remote learning as abnormal status, I will juxtapose this either/or way of thinking with the more fluid nature of narrative inquiry and look forward to exploring the students' perceptions of these terms and their lived experience.

This study will also acknowledge the need for collaboration between the research and participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, the researcher and participants will co-create the narrative of past and current student experiences while providing opportunities for clarification, reflection, and further inquiry. Despite participants being identified based on set criteria including self-identification as a first-generation college students and enrollment in emergency remote learning at the time of the interview, students will be encouraged to individualize and contextualize answers to the research questions. As the researcher, I look forward to providing students with an opportunity to share their lived experience as first-generation college students navigating an uncertain and unprecedented learning environment.

Research Design

While the narrative approach emphasizes a more fluid communication style, a rigorous research, interview, data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings protocol is relied upon to ensure a high quality research study. In accordance with Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendations, I will develop a thoughtful and thorough process that will include the following: specific participant selection criteria; appropriate consent and confidentiality agreements; a clear and co-facilitated interview protocol; the development of open-ended questions; acknowledgement of researcher bias; a protocol for outlining data collection, sorting, trend analysis, data verification, and presentation of findings. Each of these elements are outlined in greater detail below.

Interview Protocol, Research Participant Identification and Invitation Process

First, I outline the research participant identification plan and how the process will unfold, yielding an excellent group of first-generation college students. Comparing the intended plan to the actual process helps validate the results, ensuring that all steps were carefully and intentionally followed.

In accordance with the research purpose statement, I intended to recruit 10 to 12 self-identified first-generation college students who were enrolled full-time and participating in campus-based instruction at the time of the university's abrupt shift to remote learning. All participants needed to meet the criteria of being undergraduate level students, 18 years of age or older, and pursuing a bachelor's degree at the same traditional residential New England land-grant institution. Invitations to participate in the research study were to be facilitated through contacts within the university's Office of Multicultural Affairs, TRIO student service center, and academic dean's offices.

Through these connections, I planned to identify potential participants and send an invitation via email to ensure self-identification and confidentiality. A formal email acknowledgement would be sent to students confirming their willingness to engage in the interview, data review, and analysis process. A strict confidentiality statement would be provided as well as documentation outlining their ability to end participation for any reason and at any point during the research study. The research participant invitation and confidentiality statement is included in Appendix A.

With this plan as my guide, I initiated the process of identifying potential participants. I reached out to my contacts within the Office of Multicultural Affairs, the Office of Undergraduate Student Support Services where the TRIO program was housed, and the academic dean's offices. Relying upon email due to my own remote working status, I struggled to connect with these contacts. Delayed or no response from these initial contacts forced me to rethink and reprioritize my list of contacts. The initial contacts that did respond either referred me to other staff members within their office or politely declined to help identify potential students. I also learned that the TRIO program had dissolved due to a lack of funding and the former director had moved to another part of the university.

With a new list of contacts in hand, I took a slightly different approach. Rather than relying on email to explain my research project, I set up times to connect with staff via Microsoft Teams. This more personal approach yielded better results. I was able to describe the research project, the participant criteria, and how they might be able to help me. In advance of the meeting, I shared the research purpose statement and participant criteria.

The Office of Multicultural Affairs directed me to the university retention director who referred me to her assistant director. The assistant director was interested in the intent of my study and volunteered to distribute the research invitation to a list of first and second year first-generation college students. This list included approximately 200 names of potential participants and despite two rounds of emails, no students expressed interest. My next stop was the Office of Student Support Services to speak with the director who informed me that the TRIO program had lost its funding but she would reach out to a few students who had regularly participated in the programming. As a result of her personal outreach, one student raised her hand and agreed to participate. Finally, I reached out to my own network and set up meetings with my university colleagues to discuss my research and need for help. Through a combined approach, including the dean's office distributing my invitation to students who met the research criteria and providing me with a list that I could manage myself, I yielded another 9 students. In the end, the list that I personally managed yielded 7 of the 9 students. Only 2 students from the College of Health Sciences raised their hands to participate as a result of the dean's office outreach via email. It was interesting how quickly I received responses from the 7 students who I directly invited. Their eagerness to participate and share their experience with emergency remote learning was immediately apparent and I looked forward to exploring their sense of urgency throughout the interview and data collection process.

I learned a great deal throughout this lengthy recruitment phase. While this phase took twice as long as I had anticipated, forcing me to adjust my research timeline, I learned a great deal about the process and the power of personal outreach. With 10

students confirmed, I scheduled 45 minute interviews utilizing Microsoft Teams and sent each student a participant confirmation, research participant invitation, and confidentiality statement. I planned to conduct 10 interviews in a two week period and ended up having to reschedule several times due to student's school and work schedules. In the end, 10 interviews were conducted in four weeks and once again, I adjusted my research timeline accordingly.

Research Questions

In anticipation of the first interview, I reviewed the open-ended questions that I had developed as part of my proposal and looked forward to engaging in a conversation with these students about their academic, social, and community-based experience prior to the pandemic, throughout emergency remote learning, and beyond. Consistent with the narrative research approach, I intended to use these open-ended questions to guide the story-telling process. Through these questions, students would be encouraged to describe their transition to college and emergency remote learning, feelings of prior and present connection to faculty, staff, and peers, educational and personal challenges, as well as individual hopes and aspirations. By design, these individual narratives would provide insight into the academic programming and student support needs of first-generation college students. Institutional responsiveness and the ability to transform traditional campus-based instruction, support services, and community engagement to a virtual learning environment would also be explored as it relates to student success and satisfaction. See Appendix B for the complete list of research questions.

Interviews

Grounded in Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belongingness framework, Schlossberg's (1989) transition theory, and the pre-approved set of open-ended questions, I conducted 10 interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. At the start of each interview, I reviewed the research purpose statement, expectations for the participants and myself as the researcher, confidentiality statement, option to end participation for any reason and at any time, and asked them to verbally agree to participate. Given the fact that the interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, I also explained the confidential storage of the interview within the system and in accordance with university technology and privacy guidelines. With permission to record the interview, I introduced myself and thanked them for participating in my research and dissertation writing process. I emphasized my primary responsibility of asking open-ended questions and listening rather than leading the development of their story. I further explained the interview, data collection, and verification process including note taking throughout the interview, transcript review and data triangulation, optional follow up to verify information, and once again asked them to verbally agree. Interview notes were incorporated into an official document informing the post-interview reflection that immediately followed the session.

Each interview followed the same protocol featuring the same open-ended questions, noting taking, story-telling, and an opportunity to ask any questions about the research or process. While the protocol remained constant, each conversation revealed a uniquely authentic lived experience as a first-generation college student subjected to emergency remote learning. I envisioned the interview in three phases positioning the

questions within the transition to college and pre-pandemic educational experience, abrupt transition to emergency remote learning, and decision to return to campus-based instruction or remain remote upon the reopening of the university. This phased approach provided a framework for each student to describe their experience, explore their feelings, and offer insight into an uncertain and unprecedented educational circumstance due to a global pandemic.

To get started, I asked each student to describe their pre-pandemic experience, including their transition from high school to college. This question was designed to provide a common starting point for each student inviting them to talk about their migration from home to campus, college student identity, sense of belonging and connection to faculty, staff, and peers, and pre-pandemic membership status. The students quickly engaged in a dialogue regarding their transition to college and pre-pandemic academic and social experience. With permission to take notes and reliant upon the interview recording, I focused on the students' voices as they eagerly shared their stories. At times, I struggled to keep up with listening, note-taking, and participating due to their rapid story-telling pace.

The next set of questions focused on the abrupt transition to emergency remote learning and their academic and social experience as virtual learners. I invited them to describe the forced migration away from campus and how it impacted their personal and educational experiences. I asked them to explore their feelings, fears, and concerns with remote learning. Each student, willingly and authentically depicted a profoundly difficult and uncertain circumstance. The narrative approach worked, drawing students into a dialogue informed by open-ended questions and fueled by their lived experience.

Through the final set of questions, I asked students to talk about the university's reopening and their decision to return to campus-based instruction or remain remote. What was it like to make that decision? How did the decision play out? With three transitions in two years, I invited them to talk about this past academic year and how the on-going pandemic continued to influence their academic, social, and community-based experience regardless of whether they returned to campus or remained remote.

In closing, I thanked them for their participation and reiterated the data collection, analysis, and verification process. I encouraged them to reach out to me with any questions or concerns and reminded them of the confidentiality clause and the fact that they could opt out of the research project at any time or for any reason. I also let them know that I would be back in touch with them if I had any follow up questions or needed clarification but it would not be required to participate in a follow up conversation.

The findings section outlines in greater detail the information gleaned from the interviews reliant upon their narrative accounts and lived experience. These open-ended questions prompted each student to not only reflect on their personal and educational circumstance due to the pandemic but also their sense of self and status within the university community. Their raw and genuine accounts are shared throughout the findings section and inform the implications and recommendations for higher education.

Data Collection, Analysis and Verification

Per my dissertation proposal, I planned to follow Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendations regarding data collection, analysis, and verification converting each interview's notes and my observations into a detailed document. Following each interview, I reviewed my notes, added additional information regarding the conversation, and documented any questions requiring further exploration. I also wrote a field memo capturing each student's answers to the open-ended questions as well as capturing their stories. These field memos were very helpful as I attempted to authentically record the essence of each student's lived experience through their own words. Without concern for structure, I wrote about each student, their profound experience with emergency remote learning, their transitions to and from campus, and feelings associated with being a first-generation college student. This process was essential to the data collection, verification, and analysis processes serving as the foundation for the findings and implications for higher education sections.

The next important step included revisiting each student's recorded interview. With each interview securely stored in Microsoft Teams and in accordance with the university's technology guidelines, I replayed the entire interview taking additional notes, documenting key words and phrases, and verifying the student's accounts captured in the field memos. This technology allowed me to carefully revisit each set of questions, hone in on specific answers, and more confidently tell their stories. Microsoft Teams also provides a written account of the interview which provided an additional securely stored resource for data verification and analysis.

With these important resources in place, I developed a comprehensive document for each student intent on capturing key words and phrases in anticipation of developing themes. The literature review yielded important concepts, theories, and notions pertaining to first-generation college student identity, transitional issues associated with migrating to and from campus, sense of belongingness and connection, and emergency remote learning due to the global pandemic. With this literature-based information positioned as background knowledge, I documented each student's interview in a phased approach: the transition to college and pre-pandemic experience, abrupt transition to emergency remote learning, and return to campus-based instruction or ongoing remote learning. This process also provided the opportunity to expand the field memos into more in-depth narrative accounts. These in-depth narrative accounts are prominently featured throughout the findings section serving as a story-telling vehicle.

Each student's document yielded key words and phrases that were highlighted in anticipation of developing themes. This lengthy process provided me an opportunity to consider the information gleaned from the literature review in light of the student's narrative accounts. Their authentic and genuine lived experiences produced themes associated with the following phases: the initial transition to college, developing a new identity as a first-generation college student and building the foundation for academic and social engagement; the forced departure from campus and in-person instruction and disruptive emergency remote learning circumstance, and the difficult decision to return to the university or remain remote. These individual documents reflect highlighted key words, phrases, and themes.

The next step in the data analysis and theme development process involved revisiting the recorded interviews and Microsoft Teams transcripts. I also reached out to all the participants inviting them to an optional follow up meeting to discuss the themes that emerged from the data analysis process. Five of the 10 students raised their hands to participate in this follow up data verification process. Mindful of confidentiality, I described the general themes that emerged across all 10 interviews, providing them with the opportunity to reflect, agree, oppose, or clarify the information to be included in the findings section. This opportunity to reengage with half of the participant group was an extremely important part of the data verification process. Once again, the students carefully considered each theme, offering additional information and in-sight that is reflected in the upcoming findings section. As I thanked them profusely for their ongoing contributions to this study, each student expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share their stories.

Researcher Identity

The lens through which I conducted this qualitative research study was influenced and distorted by my own experiences, short-comings, and aspirations. As a white, middle-aged, professional woman working in a traditional higher education institution, I have a personal interest in this topic area. My own undergraduate experience as a first-generation college student was greatly influenced by a diminished sense of connection to my undergraduate institution due in large part to a poorly executed transition to college and the need to straddle home and work responsibilities with campus-based academic and social opportunities. Expected to return home every weekend to work, I never fully developed a sense of belonging or connection to my learning environment. However,

fueled by motivation, grit, and determination, I persisted and became the first in my family to earn a bachelor's degree.

These experiences also grounded me as a doctoral student and higher education professional committed to better understanding the academic and social needs of first-generation college students and helping my institution create and sustain a high quality virtual learning environment.

Milner (2007) provides a framework to guide the researcher through a process of racial and cultural awareness, consciousness, and positionality highlighting the dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen that are often missed. This framework recognizes the cultural and experiential bias that researchers inherently possess due to their own identity development, educational experiences, and position within the world. Acknowledging this important framework and my position within the research project, orientation to this unprecedented educational circumstance, and with deep appreciation for first-generation college students who helped me design, conduct, analyze, present findings, and offer recommendations for improving the student experience, I looked forward to presenting lessons learned from pandemic learning.

Research Participants

Ten first-generation college students, all with sophomore standing at the time of the university's transition to remote learning, responded to the invitation to participate in this research project. These students participated in an approximately hour-long interview sharing not only their unique academic, social, and community-based experiences as remote learners but also their transition to and from campus, pre-pandemic sense of belonging to the university community, college student identity challenges,

educational goals, and personal aspirations. Their stories illuminate the uncertain and unprecedented remote learning environment and provide important insight for higher education leaders grappling with a complicated post-pandemic landscape.

Mindful of confidentiality, I would like to introduce you to these first-generation college students and provide some important information in anticipation of hearing their stories throughout the upcoming findings section. Each student selected an alternate name and I refer to them as such throughout the research documentation and dissertation. While each student had an authentically unique experience, they shared many common concerns associated with being the first in their families to pursue a bachelor's degree, remote learning obstacles, diminished sense of belonging to the university, and disrupted educational and personal plans. When asked why they wanted to participate in this study, they all clearly stated that it was the first time they had been asked to tell their story and they wanted their voices to be heard.

> **Zoe** is an in-state student who recently transferred from Art Education to the School of Business. She self-identifies as a New American since she moved to Vermont through the state's refugee resettlement initiative when she was in elementary school. She lives in a multilingual household and her parents have limited English language skills and little familiarity with higher education. She also describes herself as independent, resourceful, and determined.
>
> She lives within walking distance to campus but chose to enroll as a full-time residential student. She had a supported transition to college and credits a local community-based organization with helping her apply, enroll, and become a college student. Zoe acclimated to campus well and enjoyed spending time with

new friends in her residence hall and classes. She relied upon the university for financial-assistance, housing, food, and technology services.

She had a difficult transition to home and experienced significant technology problems due to outdated and broken computer equipment. Feeling isolated, Zoe struggled to retain her identity as a college student and connection to the university, faculty, classmates, and friends. She described emergency remote learning as a major step back, citing diminished motivation and limited opportunity to engage with others.

Determined to remain enrolled and earn her degree, Zoe decided to remain remote during the fall 2020/spring 2021 academic year. With health and safety risks weighing heavy, Zoe hunkered down at home, focused on completing her courses, earning good grades, and letting go of her need for community interaction and engagement. She is looking forward to returning to campus in the fall 2021 semester.

Grace is an in-state student from a rural community. She is an Exercise and Movement Science major with a concentration in Health Coaching. Her parents work blue collar jobs and are committed to supporting her goal of earning a bachelor's degree. Grace describes herself as independent, hard-working, and determined.

Despite having very little familiarity with the college application and enrollment process, Grace made a good transition to college. She credits the first-year living and learning program and ready-made student community with easing her transition from a small town to campus. Grace quickly established herself as a

member of the university community through her cohort-based classes, work-study job in the athletics department, and the Wellness Environment Learning Community. Grace relied upon the university for financial-aid, housing, food, work-study employment, and support services. Her sense of belonging to the university was greatly enhanced by a supported transition to college and an intentionally designed living and learning community.

Grace was shocked by the forced transition back home when the university closed and was ill-prepared for emergency remote learning. Leaving campus equated to a complete loss of community, academic resources, support services, and financial instability. Returning to her rural home on a long dirt road with no neighbors in sight during mud season was extremely challenging. Shock quickly turned to isolation and depression as Grace struggled to remain connected to campus via technology. With spotty internet connection, Grace was unable to participate synchronously. Her internet service did not support the use of video or her camera, forcing her to navigate her coursework on her own. Trying to hide her diminished motivation, Grace avoided sharing her concerns with her parents, noting that she felt extremely guilty complaining about her isolation and struggles with online learning when her parents were required to go to work throughout the pandemic.

Grace decided to return to campus-based instruction as soon as the university reopened in the fall 2020 semester. She felt relieved to be back on campus and living in an apartment with friends. Through a combination of in-person and online courses, Grace transitioned back to campus and reestablished her

connection to her faculty, classmates, and peers. She credits her pre-pandemic status with helping her migrate back to campus. That said, she described a different and intentionally smaller community, noting that she is determined to complete her degree.

Harry is the only male participant in the study and self-identifies as a minority first-generation and low socio-economic status college student. He is bi-lingual and indicated that his home community is quite diverse in comparison to the university. He is an Environmental Studies major with a minor in Mathematics. He describes himself as motivated, out-going, and determined.

Harry participated in the Summer Enrichment Scholarship Program (SESP) which is designed to help students of color, first-generation, and low socio-economic status students transition and acclimate to campus. Harry noted that SESP provided support during a very stressful time since his parents were not able to help him with college and financial aid applications. Harry relied upon SESP to introduce him to campus during the summer, provide access to work-study employment, and become part of a ready-made community. By the time Harry fully transitioned to college in the fall semester, he had already completed summer courses, established a friend group, had a job, and felt connected to the campus community. This pathway program positioned Harry for academic and social success. Harry's pre-pandemic connection to the university was strengthened by a supported transition to college and a ready-made community of peers.

Harry was shocked by the campus closure and resisted leaving campus until the last minute. He did not want to go home and lose everything he had worked so hard to achieve, including strong connections to faculty, classmates, and friends, as well as his student employment. Going home felt like a huge step backwards. His concerns regarding diminished motivation, spotty internet connection, and financial insecurity played out as he resisted becoming dependent on his family for the satisfaction of his basic needs. Proud of who he had become as a university citizen, Harry felt guilty asking for financial support and looked forward to returning to campus and reestablishing his independence.

The decision to return to campus-based instruction was easy for Harry as he had never fully re-entered his home community. He quickly and easily reestablished important connections through in-person classes, rejoining the Asian-American Student Union, getting his work study job back, and joining the intermural volley ball team. Mindful of the support that the SESP program afforded him the first time he transitioned to campus, Harry credits the pathway program and ready-made community with better preparing him for participation in campus-wide activities and clubs. Membership matters to Harry and he is ready to reclaim his university citizenship.

Kristen is an out-of-state student enrolled in the College of Nursing and Health Science's nursing program. She has a strong connection to her family and feels supported as a first-generation college student. Kristen credits her family with enabling her to pursue a nursing degree despite the financial challenges and limited familiarity with higher education.

Kristen describes her transition to college as smooth with lots of support from the nursing program faculty and staff. She attributed this successful migration from home to campus to a ready-made learning community due to the program's first year cohort and strong orientation. She noted that she was initially homesick but quickly gained a sense of belonging to her new environment. She made friends within her program and worked closely with her nursing advisor to make enrollment decisions. Also crediting her nursing professors, Kristen described the learning community as welcoming, helpful, and committed to connecting students to key academic resources and support services. "Nurses help each other out. It's part of our work ethic." She was very well positioned for success prior to the university's sudden transition to remote learning.

At first, Kristen was relieved to be at home with her family thinking it would be a good break from a very academically stressful semester but as the campus closure became permanent, she began to worry about her ability to complete difficult science courses remotely. She struggled to remain focused, self-motivated, and connected to her beloved nursing community. She tried to hide this from her family and felt guilty complaining about remote learning. Kristen turned her attention away from her schoolwork and focused on her multigenerational family. They created a space in their home to post daily hopes and dreams. She credits this daily ritual with keeping her optimistic about her future as a nurse.

Kristen jumped at the chance to return to campus in the fall semester and reengage with the nursing community. She expressed great relief in being able to walk around the campus, see professors and classmates in person, and regain a

somewhat altered sense of self and college student identity. With health and safety concerns and strict protocols in place, Kristen noted a different academic and social experience. The once open and welcoming campus community was guarded and cautious and she felt a similar sense of wariness. Committed to staying on track, Kristen forged ahead, attempting to regain her connection to her coursework and community. Kristen describes herself as optimistic, resilient, and determined to become a nurse.

Danielle is an in-state student who self-designed an early college experience which allowed her to complete her senior year of high school while enrolled as a full-time university student. She is an only child with strong support from her parents and community. Danielle is an excellent student and highly motivated to complete a degree in political science and philosophy.

Concerned with making a smooth transition from high school to college, Danielle worked with her high school guidance counselor and a university advisor to develop a pathway program that satisfied her remaining graduation requirements while earning college credits. This self-designed pathway also provided her with access to the state funded dual enrollment scholarship program and a reduced tuition rate for high school students. She navigated her home and campus community well, gaining valuable insight into the university with lots of support from her parents, guidance counselor, and university advisor. She described this pathway experience as central to becoming a "real college student."

While her methodical and supported transition to college put her in good pre-pandemic standing within the university community, her abrupt transition to

emergency remote learning was anything but smooth. She described this transition as shocking, depressing, and sudden, resulting in a complete loss of her identity as a university citizen and low motivation to complete her coursework. She noted that she was not prepared for the challenges of remote learning and missed seeing her faculty, classmates, and friends. She resented the fact that she had to leave campus, lost her identity as a college student, and missed the opportunity to interact with others. Most of her classes were asynchronous and when there were opportunities to meet in real time, no one turned their cameras on, leaving Danielle very frustrated and alone. She struggled to remain optimistic but persevered.

Danielle was eager to return to campus and quickly reassumed her membership within the campus community. Recognizing her need for connection, Danielle joined a sorority and a few clubs. She relied upon the lessons learned from her initial transition to college to help her once again migrate back to campus. Determined, outgoing, and independent, Danielle survived emergency remote learning and reported that she was very relieved to be back on campus.

Mary is the only non-traditional student in this study and was also completing the spring semester of her sophomore when the university closed. She was home-schooled as a child and did not finish high school. Mary and her family struggled financially and she started working full-time at 16 years old. This tenuous financial circumstance forced Mary to delay taking the GED exam, postponing her dream of going to college. Many years later, Mary successfully earned her GED and enrolled at the local community college. Eager to become a “real

college student," Mary balanced full-time enrollment and full-time work, completing the university's admission requirements at the community college and later transferring into the university as a public communications major.

Mary credits her community college experience with giving her the confidence to pursue a bachelor's degree. She loves learning and participating in discussions with faculty, teaching assistants, and classmates. Conscious of her home-schooled educational background, Mary opted to enroll in all in-person class even though online courses would have been more flexible. While her transition to higher education was delayed and indirect, Mary felt a strong connection to the university community and welcomed by her instructors and peers. She described parking her car and walking to class as a daily transformation from one identity to another. Despite her non-traditional and commuter status, Mary felt warmly welcomed into the academic community and truly valued the opportunity to pursue her dream of earning a bachelor's degree.

Like all the other students in this study, Mary was devastated by the campus closure. She used similar words like shock, extreme isolation, and depression. Mary also struggled with poor technology and no internet service at her rural home. In fact, she participated in the research interview from her car on a very cold February evening borrowing internet service from a local bakery. Mary spent most evenings in that parking lot completing her homework assignments and hoping for a return to campus. Despite this extreme circumstance, Mary said she was honored to participate and that no one else had asked her about her experience as a remote learner. She felt compelled to share her story in hopes that

the university might extend more resources to students struggling to remain enrolled.

Mary remained remote for the fall/spring semesters with the exception of an in-person exercise class. She needed the flexibility of online classes and noted that there had been significant improvements to the courses and increased participation. The pandemic took a toll on Mary's financial situation due to an extended furlough from her job. Her mental health also suffered as she struggled to balance work and school responsibilities. One of Mary's professors heard that she was having a difficult time accessing the coursework and offered his office as a place with reliable internet service and a stable learning environment. This act of kindness was very much appreciated, helping her to stay on track with her academic plan. Mary is kind, humble, resilient, and determined. She is an excellent spokesperson for non-traditional first-generation college students balancing multiple roles and responsibilities.

Amy is an in-state student who self-identifies as a Vietnamese-American. Amy's parents have limited English language abilities and work in a local factory. She is an only child with lots of parental support despite their inability to help her navigate higher education. She lives within walking distance to campus but elected to live on-campus upon transferring to the university from the community college. Amy hoped that by living on-campus, she would have more opportunity to make friends, become a member of the campus community, and realize her dream of becoming a "real college student." Feeling like she was labeled "not college material" by her high school guidance counselor and teachers, Amy

struggled with the college application process, did not complete all the admission requirements, and ended up enrolling in online community college courses. It was not until she gained confidence through an internship that she "dared" to apply as a transfer student. Amy credits this experience with changing her personal and career goals.

Amy stated that her transition to college was challenging but she felt good about her pre-pandemic standing within the university community. Focused on her schoolwork, Amy felt very fortunate to have gained admission to the Community & International Development program with a minor in Public Communications. She had a work study job that she really enjoyed but felt like she had missed the opportunity to make friends and become part of the university's social scene due to transferring from the community college. Despite having a dorm room on-campus, Amy elected to spend most of her time off-campus with her boyfriend. Amy described walking to and from campus as a very important part of her day as she visually interacted with other members of the university community and longed to fit in. Seeing and being seen by others was central to Amy's pre-pandemic experience. A simple smile or hello from a faculty member or classmate sustained Amy and made her feel like a quasi-member of the campus community.

The university's abrupt transition to remote learning presented Amy with a choice whether to go home and live with her parents or stay at her boyfriend's apartment. Worried about the health and safety of her parents, Amy decided to complete the spring semester with her boyfriend. It was a difficult decision but Amy felt like

she needed to protect her parents from exposure to COVID-19. Amy described remote learning as isolating, and depressing. She missed walking to campus and seeing other students. She tried to engage with her professors and classmates during synchronous sessions, often being the only one willing to turn on their camera. She lamented the loss of her fragile college identity and struggled to remain focused on her goal of earning a bachelor's degree.

Fearful of health and safety risks, Amy elected to remain enrolled as a remote learner. She moved back in with her parents and was very protective of her parents as they have health concerns. While Amy continued to struggle with motivation and missed her daily physical and visual interaction with faculty and peers, she focused on completing her coursework, getting good grades, reengaging in her work-study job remotely, and spending quality time with her parents. Amy developed a daily routine which included coursework in the morning, a walk in the afternoon, and evenings on zoom with her boyfriend who also moved home. She described her afternoon walk and seeing people from a distance as the most therapeutic activity. Resigned to remote learning until vaccinations become available, Amy settled in and tried to regain her optimism about her educational goals and her future. Amy is outgoing, optimistic, resilient, and determined.

Lily is an out-of-state student who was raised by a single mother and was never sure she wanted to go to college. She moved around a lot during elementary and high school and was not deemed college prep material by her guidance counselor or teachers. Her mother knew very little about the college application and

financial aid processes, so Lily felt very ill-prepared. She identifies as a person of color and has struggled with her identity and community standing. She also described herself as a loner and fiercely independent. She is an environmental studies major and credits her interest in climate change with motivating her to pursue a bachelor's degree. She was enrolled as a sophomore when the pandemic hit and the university transitioned to remote learning.

Lily had a very difficult transition to college struggling to acclimate to the university. Attending new student orientation, she described this first visit to campus as overwhelming and scary. In her words, "everyone else seemed to know what they wanted to study and what they wanted to do and how to do it." She felt like she lacked the necessary language to participate in this important college student rite of passage. Lily almost withdrew after this early failed attempt at becoming a "real college student" but she was decided to give it a try. Her pre-pandemic academic and social experience was profoundly difficult and included the tragic loss of one of her only friends due to suicide. Lily was not prepared to deal with this devastating loss and felt unsupported by the university. She was making some progress with establishing a sense of belonging to the university community prior to the abrupt transition to remote learning. Through her residential assistant position and participation in the TRIO program, Lily was beginning to feel more comfortable and engaged with her community. The TRIO program provided a safe space and support. The program advisor understood her financial pressure, academic and social insecurity, and offered a non-judgmental

approach to helping Lily navigate a very uncomfortable circumstance. It took a year and a half but Lily was finally realizing her identity as a college student.

At first, Lily was shocked and did not believe that she was going to have to go home as a result of the pandemic. She was angered by the thought of having to retreat from campus just when things were starting to get better for her academically and socially. She stayed with her mother until the end of the spring semester but found it too stressful, isolating, and depressing. Lacking the motivation to remain enrolled, Lily decided to take a leave of absence for the fall semester and work. Her financial situation was so difficult that she opted to find a full-time job to cover her expenses. She had been completely reliant on the university to satisfy her tuition, housing, food, and technology service needs. The sudden transition away from these resources presented a profoundly challenging circumstance. Working at an urban farm, Lily began the process of healing from this turbulent period and appreciated the time to restore her financial stability and mental health.

Lily returned to campus for the spring semester determined to reengage with her environment studies coursework. While she still struggled socially, Lily felt a renewed connection to her academic advisor and professors. Two of her professors had reached out to her while she was on leave and encouraged her to return, inviting her to participate in an academic fellows group. Focusing on her academic goals, Lily credits the pandemic and emergency remote learning experience with helping her find her voice and earn a bachelor's degree. She is determined to finish.

Jade is an out-of-state student majoring in plant biology. She participated in a dual enrollment program in high school that allowed her to earn college credits prior to graduating. This program required Jade to attend a high school several miles away from her home, limiting her ability to participate in extracurricular activities and make friends. She described her high school experience as academically strong but disconnected, leaving her ill-prepared for college. Jade has a difficult relationship with her family and was anxious to leave home. Her family offered little guidance and support throughout the college search process forcing her to navigate with limited information and social capital. She stumbled upon the university and hoped for the best.

She described her transition to college as very difficult, exacerbating her struggles with anxiety and depression. Jade was extremely homesick, overwhelmed, and overstimulated by the campus environment. By her second semester, Jade was making progress toward making friends and fitting in. She focused on her coursework, professors, and classmates. She noted how ironic it was to feel homesick when she was so determined to escape a difficult home environment. As time progressed, Jade learned how to manage her anxiety and depression, improve her grades, and realize a less tenuous sense of self.

Jade clearly stated that "being sent home was the worst thing that could have happened to me." With nowhere else to go, Jade found herself back in her old room falling into the old ways due to unresolved family challenges. She recognized that she had worked very hard to move away from this difficult circumstance and through no fault of her own was forced to leave campus. She

quickly lost connection with her professors and the motivation to complete her coursework. She felt extremely isolated with too much time alone and little support from her parents. With an unstable financial situation due to the loss of her campus housing and food subsidy, Jade was expected to find a job to support not only herself but her family. Balancing work and remote learning was stressful and Jade resented the fact that her parents required her to work. "They simply did not understand or appreciate my need to focus on my schoolwork."

Facing another transition back to campus, Jade was relieved to leave her difficult family situation and looked forward to seeing her professors and classmates. She reconnected with the few good friends that she had made prior to the campus closure and focused her energy on her work in the university greenhouse. She found working with plants and being in nature calming. It helped relieve her profound anxiety motivating her to remain enrolled. She is determined to complete her degree and get a good job working with plants and the environment. She recognizes her mental health challenges and is better able to manage her stress when she is on-campus and away from her family. She appreciates her faculty and their commitment to helping students reengage in the coursework but is critical of the university's handling of emergency remote learning. Like many other students, Jade felt "someone from the university should have reached out to me to see if I was ok or needed help." While she could not pinpoint who she thought was responsible for this important outreach, she emphasized how much this would have helped her and other students. Jade learned a great deal about herself and her need for connection and engagement. She is determined to

become more involved with the campus community, pushing herself beyond her comfort zone academically and socially. She appreciated the opportunity to share her story in hopes of helping the university better understand students' diverse needs. In the end, she encouraged the university to "just care more about me and other students like me who have a hard time." Jade is cautious, introspective, genuine, and determined to earn a bachelor's degree.

Shay is an in-state student who lives at home with her family and commutes to campus. She self-identifies as bi-lingual and New American as she and her family migrated to the United States from Iran when she was in elementary school. Her parents speak very limited English and have no experience with higher education. She describes herself as "totally self-reliant, independent, and determined." Shay stated that she was not deemed college prep material and directed toward a vocational program designed to prepare her for a dental assistant position when she is interested in becoming a dentist. Despite repeated attempts to correct this misdirection, Shay ended up enrolling in the vocation program and becoming a dental assistant. She repeatedly stated that she does not trust anyone when it comes to her educational goals and relies solely upon herself to figure out how to navigate higher education. She credits her job and the dentist that she worked for with recognizing her talent, giving her the confidence to apply to the university, and believing in her dream.

Shay's transition to the university was difficult. Distrustful of the university, Shay transferred from the community college, enrolling as a full-time commuting student. She tried to make friends and connections but found it difficult to do so

without living on-campus and participating in extracurricular activities. Noting that she "gave up" on fitting in, Shay focused on her coursework, emphasizing her goal of getting good grades, earning a bachelor's degree, and gaining admission to dental school. Her focus on becoming a dentist sustained her, giving her "an excuse" not to care about feeling like a "real college student." She spent all day on-campus utilizing the library and campus internet services when not in class. She enjoyed seeing other students and pretending to be a part of the community. "Even when I am having a difficult time and feel like I don't have any friends on-campus, I remind myself that I am here to get an education and then I feel lucky." Shay described the transition to remote learning as very difficult and isolating due to the fact that she could not see or be seen anymore. She felt completely disconnected from her professors and classmates with little motivation to engage in asynchronous online courses. "Suddenly, there was nothing, no more learning, no more discussions, and no more classrooms." The classroom was the only place where she felt like a part of the university community. Walking to and from campus afforded her the opportunity to assume a different identity as a college student as opposed to a family member. The pandemic stripped her of this opportunity to transform herself on a daily basis, relegating her to a small bedroom with spotty internet access and no one to see or talk to. Like many other students, Shay did not blame her instructors as she said they were struggling too but she did fault the university for doing a poor job of helping students. She felt like someone should have cared that she was struggling.

Shay elected to remain remote when the university reopened in the fall semester. Concerned with bringing the virus into her home and exposing her parents, she enrolled in online courses hoping for a better experience. While she did note that the courses were better designed and the instructors better trained, she still longed for the ability to interact with other students and be visually and physically present. She is looking forward to returning to in-person instruction once it is safe to be with others on-campus. She is more determined than ever to reach her educational and professional goals of becoming not only the first person in her family to earn a bachelor's degree but become a dentist. Shay is persistent, self-reliant, capable, and determined.

CHAPTER 4: LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH STORY-TELLING

According to Strayhorn (2012), "Sense of belonging among students has real consequences on a variety of outcomes ranging from personal happiness and comfort to college completion and academic success. It changes as conditions and contexts change and students develop perspective with maturity" (p. x). It is through this lens that I conducted my interviews exploring the academic, social, and community-based experiences of 10 first-generation college students relegated to emergency remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and how their transitions to and from campus and sense of belonging to the university evolved and/or devolved.

Strayhorn's (2012) framework based on Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs (Hopper, 2020) positions sense of belonging as the gatekeeper between the satisfaction of basic needs and self-actualization. Schlossberg's (1989) transition theory is positioned within Strayhorn's framework, acknowledging the dynamic nature of these students' collegiate experience. This conceptual framework serves as the ecosystem within which I developed and implemented this qualitative research study. Utilizing the same set of questions and the narrative approach, each student was encouraged to describe their transition to college and pre-pandemic student experience, abrupt shift to emergency remote learning, and their current educational circumstance.

While each student's story is genuine and authentic, common themes emerged from the group emphasizing the power of transitioning to and from the university, evolving and devolving sense of belonging and community membership, and their tenuous educational experience due to the global pandemic. These themes are considered in association with Strayhorn's (2012) framework, Schlossberg's (1989) transition

theory, and other perspectives derived from the literature review section. Narrative accounts from student interviews illuminate each theme, emphasizing their lived experience leading up to and throughout the global pandemic.

In order to fully explore, develop, and consider each theme, I organized the following lessons learned through story-telling into three phases: transition to college and pre-pandemic; emergency remote learning; and current enrollment experiences. The first section addresses the students' transition to college and pre-pandemic collegiate experience. Through their narrative accounts, I learned about how each student attempted to build a new foundation, realize a new identity as a first-generation college student, and become a member of the university learning. The second section explores the abrupt transition to emergency remote learning as a result of the campus closure. I invited students to talk about this forced migration away from campus and their experience as remote learners. They described a profoundly disrupted foundation and dismantled educational ecosystem that left them disengaged from their living and learning communities. The final section considers the students' decision to return to campus or remain remote as a result of the university reopening in fall 2020. With the pandemic still looming, students made the difficult decision to transition back to campus or stay at home. Intent on sharing their lived experience through their own narrative accounts, I asked each student to talk about each phase. Their stories are compelling and provide deep insight into an uncertain and unprecedented time.

Transition to College and Pre-pandemic Experience:

Building a Foundation, Belonging to a New Community, and Becoming a College Student

The sudden onset of COVID-19 and the abrupt shift to remote learning presented the perfect storm for first-generation students and a great opportunity for me to explore their educational experience leading up to and throughout the pandemic. With this unprecedented scenario serving as the research ecosystem, I was interested in establishing a baseline understanding of each student's educational experience and sense of belonging to the university. I asked them to describe their transition to higher education and their pre-pandemic connection to the campus community.

Utilizing the narrative approach, I invited students to share their educational experience as first-generation college students, their transition to college, and their academic and social experience prior to the onset of the pandemic. Their stories and lived experiences informed the data collection, development of themes, data analysis, and presentation of findings.

Lack of Social Capital

Each student described a lack of social capital, reporting an inability to access important precollege information and difficulty navigating the college selection, application, financial aid and registration processes. These students expressed frustration with the lack of support from parents, high school teachers, and guidance counselors. Sharing common concerns regarding their disadvantaged precollege starting point, students alluded to the foreign language associated with the college preparation and application processes using phrases like:

> I didn't even know what they were talking about and I didn't have the right words or the courage to ask a question. I went to the information session and it was like everyone else knew what was going on and I couldn't even understand the words. (Lily)

Other students felt like they had been passed over and deemed "not college material" based on their first-generation, low socio-economic, home-schooled, or other disadvantaged status. While their circumstances and demographics may have varied, they shared a common concern that they had been at best overlooked but more likely classified as "not college material."

> I don't think they took me seriously when I said I wanted to become a dentist. They sent me to the vocational school's dental assistant program. My parents don't speak English so I had no one to speak up for me. And just like that, I was on a different pathway and missed all the requirements. And because of that, I don't trust anyone to help me with my education. (Shay)

> I was a good student in high school, so I don't know why no one ever talked to me about going to college. Someone should have asked me if I needed help or what I was going to do next. I think I just fell through the cracks. (Amy)

Like many first-generation students, Shay and Amy struggled with the transition from high school to college due to lack of parental support, limited access to and understanding of the process, and a misinterpretation of their potential to succeed in college. They navigated the process on their own, were not flagged by a teacher or guidance counselor, or did not know about support services or pathway programs designed to help students like them make a smoother transition. Some stated that they

simply did not self-identify as a worthy recipient of help. Of the 10 students interviewed, half of them noted a very stressful and circuitous pathway to the university fueled by feelings of ignorance, insecurity, and isolation. These students felt invisible within an educational system that they said should have recognized their first-generation circumstance and need for help. No one blamed their parents.

> We moved around a lot while I was in middle and high school so I never really established any connection to my teachers or guidance counselors. I didn't have a clear plan about going to college. We never talked about it at home. It's just me and my mom. She was supportive of the idea but we didn't know where to start. I stumbled upon the university and decided to apply. I was shocked when I got in and even more shocked when I figured out that I could afford it. My mom just kind of stayed out of my way, like in the background. She didn't stop me from going to college but she would have been ok if I had decided not to go. It's not her fault. She had no idea how to help me. (Lily)

Other students found alternative sources of social capital and support through community organizations, high school teachers, guidance counselors, and college student advisors who recognized their academic ability, talent, and potential, directing them toward college preparatory resources and pathway programs designed to guide first-generation students throughout the transition from high school to college. These five students were identified by educators and community leaders as potential college students and invited to participate in precollege pathway initiatives and learning community programs. They were lent the social capital that they lacked due to their first-generation

status. The extension of social capital through these intentionally designed programs and support services significantly improved their experience.

> My high school did not prepare me for college at all and my parents don't speak English so I'm not sure I would have made it without my club mentor. The club has a program that helps kids like me go to college. They actually think I can do it and they make sure I have all the information I need. I still ask my club mentor for help. I ask her the questions that other kids ask their parents. I don't want to bother my parents. I feel guilty asking them about stuff that they don't know anything about. I don't want them to worry about me or feel like they have let me down. (Zoe)

Other students like Harry gained social capital from precollege advisors assigned to him as a participant in the university's summer pathway program. This program is designed to help first-generation students navigate unfamiliar administrative processes such as financial aid, residential housing and registration, acclimate to campus, become part of a ready-made community, and develop a sense of belonging to the university. By design, the advisor recognizes the social capital void associated with first-generation status, anticipates a lack of familiarity with the university's policies, procedures and language providing guidance throughout the transition to and early college experience.

> My parents didn't go to college but my older sister did so I watched her struggle with the process. I received an invitation to participate in the summer pathway program and signed up. I had no idea how much I needed this program. It filled in all the gaps in information. I was assigned an advisor who helped me fill out

all the forms and register for classes. This person stayed with me throughout my first year. It made a huge difference and made me feel more confident. (Harry)

Supported Transition to College

Four of the 10 students interviewed noted participation in a pathway, early college, precollege, or residential living and learning program as significantly easing their transition from home to campus. A fifth student credited her highly structured and cohort-based nursing program as providing a ready-made community designed to embrace incoming first year students upon arrival. In each of these scenarios, the university and community organizations acknowledged the importance of assisting first-generation students with the transition from familiar to unfamiliar through intentionally designed academic and social programs. These programs acknowledged the students' diminished social capital as first-generation and their need for information, guidance, and support.

Through the following narrative accounts, these five students expressed their appreciation for a supported transition from high school to college and described their reliance upon these institutional resources.

Boy's and Girl's Club Early Promise Program (Zoe)

I had a pretty good transition to college and am really thankful to the Boy's and Girl's Club Early Promise Program. I'm not sure that would have been the case if I hadn't had that program as an introduction to college. I was assigned a mentor in the program and she helped me figure it all out. She still helps me fill out my financial aid forms and make decisions about my major and what classes to take. My parents don't know anything about college and don't speak English so I'm

pretty much on my own. My high school guidance counselor and teachers didn't really know my situation and they didn't help me. I don't think they thought I was college material. The club believed in me, that I should go to the university and not just the community college. The program gave me confidence. I'm so grateful since I don't think I would have made it without their help.

Summer Enrichment Scholarship Program (Harry)

I participated in the Summer Enrichment Scholarship Program prior to officially starting in the fall. The program helped me so much. It introduced me to the campus, provided a ready-made community, like-minded friends who were worried about fitting in and feeling like an outsider, and the confidence that I could do it. When I arrived in the fall, I already knew my way around campus, was welcomed by the program staff, and already had friends. By the end of my first year, I had made other friends and had kind of outgrown my original group but it's nice to know that they are there if I need them. We came in together as a group and we are always here for one another even if we don't need each other as much. It made me so much more confident.

Early College Program (Danielle)

My guidance counselor suggested that I create my own version of an early college program at the university since I had taken everything I needed to graduate by the end of my junior year. She helped me figure it all out and stayed in touch with me throughout. She put me in touch with a precollege advisor at the university so I got a lot of information and support from her too. Between the two of them, I felt really supported. I live about 45 minutes from campus, so I thought it would

be great to enroll full-time at the university as a commuter student. It was an awesome experience. I pretty much had the best of both worlds. I could take classes that counted toward my potential degree while still living at home and participating in high school activities. I felt really comfortable on campus and made a lot of important connections to faculty and classmates. The idea of starting early and being able to go back and forth from home to campus was really exciting. I like meeting new people and I look like a college student so it didn't matter that I wasn't a real university student. In a way, I got to pretend that I was a college student before I had to commit to it. I felt so much more confident when I finally arrived in the fall as a real student.

Living and Learning Community (Grace)

I don't know anyone else who is a first-generation college student or maybe I do but I don't think it's something that is talked about. I had to figure it all out by myself. I was smart enough to get into the university but was not very smart about the process and all the paperwork. My parents support me and work really hard to help me but I had to do it all on my own. So at the admitted student visit day, I heard about different programs that provide a ready-made community for me to join. I knew I had to become part of that environment. It was exactly what I was looking for, a community that already existed and I could fit right into. I could just show up and become a part of an already functioning community. I didn't have to go looking for friends or things to do. I could just move into it and become a part of it. It worked. I moved in and got involved in activities. I met other students like me who cared about the same things and they became my

friends. I'm not sure if I would have made it through the transition to school and my first year without this community.

Structured First-Year Nursing Program (Kristen)

I didn't really have to worry that much about the transition to college since the nursing program pretty much laid it all out for me. The program is highly structured and very welcoming. I met my professors, advisor, and other students at orientation and it seemed like I was joining a ready-built community. The program stayed in touch with me throughout the summer and helped me get ready to move to campus. There is a university nurses club and everyone is a member and that starts at orientation. By default, I was already a member of the nursing program community which was hugely reassuring. When I arrived in the fall, I already knew my cohort and had stayed in touch with other students I met at orientation. It's really helpful to have familiar faces on day one and I think the program does a great job of welcoming you. I didn't have to worry about fitting in or making friends. I already belonged. They set it up that way.

Unsupported Transition to College

In contrast to the previous students' transitional experiences and early development of sense of belonging to the university community, the next five students present a very different perspective. These students did not participate in supported programs designed to facilitate and ease the transition to college and were not welcomed into ready-made or predetermined campus communities. As such, these students described a more tenuous and difficult migration from home to campus full of ambiguity, uncertainty, and an inability to realize full community membership status. While three

students transferred from the local community college after one year, the other two students entered directly as first-time-first-year students. They all reported similar challenges associated with a lack of support throughout the transition process, a diminished sense of belonging to the university, college student identity concerns, and a more fragile pre-pandemic educational trajectory.

Homeschooled (Mary)

I always wanted to go to college but I was home-schooled and didn't have the money to take the GED exam. So I got a job and once I was financially stable enough, I got my GED. I had no experience with public school much less how to navigate the college application process, financial aid forms, and course registration but I was so determined to go to college, to really become a college student in the classroom learning from professors and sitting with other students. I couldn't believe how much it meant to me to take classes in-person first at the community college and then at the university. I had to keep reminding myself that I belonged there, in the classroom, like I was a real college student.

Community College Transfer Student (Amy)

I think I missed the opportunity to make friends and really become part of the campus community. I took a year off after high school and took online classes at the community college. My cousin helped me fill out my application to the university since I was a year out of high school and my parents don't understand the process. It's ok. I'm used to being on my own. I had to figure it all out by myself. No one helped me with my financial aid forms, housing forms, and registration. I decided to move on-campus thinking it would help me make

friends and feel like a real college student but it didn't work. I felt like an outsider. I don't think I followed the right path. It's no one's fault. I was just late to the game.

Vocational Track to Community College (Shay)

I think I got guided in the wrong direction in high school. As a New American with English as my second language, I don't think they took me seriously when I said I wanted to become a dentist. I wound up in the vocational program for dental assisting. I guess they thought that was a better fit for me but they were really wrong. From there I was sent to the community college but that's not "real college." So I finally found my way to the university and I'm going to get my bachelor's degree and go to dental school. I don't trust anyone to help me since I was misguided so many times and misjudged as someone who wasn't good enough to become a university student and eventually a dentist. I do everything on my own and I don't ask anyone for help. I can't risk being sent in the wrong direction again. So you can see why I don't worry about fitting in or becoming a member of a learning community. I'm here to get an education and I don't have time to worry about fitting in. That's the least of my problems.

Direct Entry into University (Lily)

I don't think I ever really thought of myself as college material and I don't think anyone else did either but I applied and got in. I even got enough financial aid to cover my tuition, housing, and food which takes a lot of pressure off my mom. So I signed up for orientation and it was a disaster. I immediately felt like an outsider. It seemed like everyone else knew what was going on like they had

been given a handbook and I missed it. I didn't know the rules. I didn't know the language. Even though on paper I was academically qualified, I was so not prepared and no one helped me. It didn't get any better in the fall semester. I felt like everyone had made friends at orientation or signed up for a living and learning community. I didn't even know that was an option. I didn't bond with anyone in my dorm. I just went to class. It was very lonely.

Dual Enrollment Precollege Program (Jade)

I had a really rough transition to the university. I find transitions really difficult so I knew it was going to be really hard but I wasn't prepared for how hard it really was. I chose to leave home. I left there for so many reasons but I didn't expect to be so homesick and feel so lost. I felt like everyone else knew what to do and how to make friends and fit in. I was completely overwhelmed and overstimulated by the process. I felt like I was invisible and no one helped me or wanted to be my friend. Maybe I just wasn't socialized to really become a real college student.

Pre-pandemic Academic and Social Standing

With each students' transition to college in mind and a better understanding of their early college circumstance, I invited them to describe their pre-pandemic academic and social experience. As a result of their supported or unsupported arrival to the university, I asked them to recount their first year and partial sophomore year sense of belonging and connection to the campus community. I wondered how their sense of membership was influenced by their transition to college, identity as a first-generation college student, and status as either residential or commuter students. I was interested in

how Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging framework might resonate with their lived experience as first-generation. Were their basic human needs in terms of money, housing, food, water, safety, and essential educational resources such as technology addressed through financial aid, student or community employment, and other university facilitated support services? If so or not so, how did their sense of belonging or lack thereof to the campus community influence their education, personal goals, and outcomes? These questions helped inform the development of the open-ended questions.

Each interview yielded important information underscoring their need to have their voices heard. In alignment with Schlossberg's (1989) transition theory, the tenuous nature of the students' transition to college and whether they did or did not have support upon arrival to campus emerged as an ongoing source of concern. Students also expressed concern about their identity as a "real college" student as a result of frequently migrating between the communities of home and campus. This theme of hybridity and bifurcated identity resonated with most students and was especially profound for those students who transferred or commuted to the university. Cultural fragmentation and an inability to fully identify as a "real college student" or full-fledged member of the campus community also resonated with the participants and emerged as a consistent theme.

Additionally, each student repeatedly used the phrase "seeing or being seen" in the context of describing their sense of belonging within the campus environment. Each student, regardless of their transitional circumstances, residential or commuter status, or affiliation with a university sponsored program spoke of the importance of seeing other students and faculty in the classroom or as they walked around campus and being seen by others. It was as if "seeing or being seen" was a common denominator of membership

and synonymous with belonging to the campus community. In this scenario, visual representation served as proxy for in-depth engagement and interaction with others. To see and be seen by others within the university community was central to their sense of belonging and an important part of their academic experience and social standing. This common theme comes up again for students as they discussed their abrupt transition to emergency remote learning.

College Student Identity

While all 10 students expressed concern about the process of becoming a "real college student," some described a more supported and facilitated shift. Other students spoke of more complicated and circuitous attempts to realize this new identity. Each students' quest to shed one identity and assume a new position within the university community was often influenced by a supported or unsupported transition from home to campus and residential or commuter enrollment status. The students who participated in pathway programs, residential learning communities, and structured degree programs fared better with identity development affirming the label and characteristics associated with being a college student. These programs facilitated the identity development process through the introduction of a new naming convention, intentional learning opportunities, support services, and community engagement.

These students did not have to interpret the new language of higher education by themselves or chart their own identity development course. By design, these programs anticipated the needs of first-generation college students, welcomed them into a ready-made community, and normalized the process of adopting a new identity. Accepting the

title of college student upon arrival helped them acclimate to campus and establish an early sense of belonging.

> I really felt like a "real college student" even though I wasn't technically yet. The Early College Program helped me so much. I didn't feel different. I look like them and the professors treated me like a "real college student" so I went with it. Before I knew it, I really felt like I belonged there. I was really a part of the community. (Danielle)

> The Nursing Program was so structured and organized. They welcomed us and immediately called us nursing students. All the orientation materials and welcome packet addressed me as a nursing student. They told me I was part of an important health care community and it was all very believable. They made me feel like a "real college student" and that I belonged there. (Kristen)

For other students, realizing a new identity as a "real college student" and achieving membership status within the campus community was fraught with disappointment. Using words like imposter or outsider or misfit, these students failed to fully achieve membership status within the campus community. Many of these students felt like they were just starting to develop and/or sustain a sense of belonging when the pandemic hit. On the cusp of fitting in, establishing friend groups, and engaging in campus-life, these students articulated a clear sense of loss and missed opportunity. Relegated to imposter status, two students reported that their inability to identify as a "real college student" was a direct result of a poor transition to college. Citing a lack of social capital and support, they claimed that they were set up to fail and were never expected to or positioned to become a "real college student."

> I felt like an outsider, like an imposter, like I didn't have the right background or language or information. It was like they all knew how to do it, how to become college students and I missed the memo. (Lily)
>
> I think I lacked the proper socialization to become a "real college student." I had a really hard time fitting in and never really felt like a "real college student." I was just starting to make friends and feel like I wasn't pretending anymore when we got sent home. I might have made it. You know, become real instead of fake. (Jade)

Hybrid Life and Cultural Mismatch

Lucey et al. (2003), suggest that "the notion of upward social mobility is the desired outcome of social improvement" (p. 286). Higher education is often credited with providing the credentials associated with social mobility. As such, a college degree often lures first-generation college students to campus in pursuit of a career, improved earning potential, and a better life. While the relationship between earning a college degree and social mobility may be statistically significant, it is not without risk, consequences and struggle. This is especially true for first-generation students who often straddle the disparate communities of home and campus never fully realizing or retaining membership in either space.

Several students expressed concern regarding the migration back and forth between competing communities. Zoe, Jade, and Grace described the difficult choice to leave home and goal to become full members of the campus community. They clearly articulated the consequences associated with pursuing a new identity as a "real college student." As transfer and commuting students, Shay, Mary, and Amy described their

hybrid and migratory educational experience as particularly challenging requiring them to maintain different and often opposing identities.

All students spoke about changes to relationships with family and old friends. They spoke about the anxiety they felt as a result of having to choose one community versus another or having to straddle both worlds, and how it influenced their ability to realize their educational goals. Their experiences are more fully explored through the following narratives.

> I chose to go to campus and live there. I knew I had to leave home and that it would be hard but I didn't think I had a choice. My parents supported me leaving home. They didn't want me to fall into the trap of going back and forth. I forced myself to really become immersed in my residential learning community and not go home until Thanksgiving. I considered myself pretty well connected through my classes, my hall friends, and my work-study job. The school took care of me and I didn't need to go home. (Grace)
>
> I picked the university. I picked to live on-campus even though I live within walking distance. I wanted to become part of the university community and I had watched others not make it. They had to go back and forth and they never really made it. I spent 95% of my time on-campus. I spent a lot of time studying in the library, hanging out with people in my hall. I felt like it was so much better for me to be totally focused on-campus and not going back and forth. It wasn't easy but I did it. (Zoe)

Other students such as Shay described feelings of culture clash due to her hybrid circumstance. Commuting back and forth between home and campus left her feeling

isolated and unable to fully acclimate to the campus environment. She described an inability to gain membership within the campus community or maintain her status at home leaving her in between and unsuccessfully straddling both environments. She expressed significant anxiety as a result of having to navigate a bifurcated identity. These disparate communities were regulated by different customs, values, language, roles, and responsibilities. Managing a compromised educational experience, she self-identified as more vulnerable and at risk of not reaching her educational goal.

> I stopped trying to fit in. The university is not very diverse. There aren't very many students like me and on top of it all I don't live there. It's like I try to be a "real college student" and then I go home and have to be someone else. I don't worry about it anymore. It didn't work out for me, the fitting in part, so I just focus on getting my education. Even when I have a difficult time and feel like I don't fit in, I remind myself that I am here to get an education and then I feel lucky. (Shay)

While this circumstance was limited to just some of the students prior to the pandemic and university's transition to remote learning, the notion of hybridity and culture clash reappeared as a dominant theme for all students in emergency remote learning. Considering their individual circumstances, orientation to campus, and sense of belonging to the community prior to the pandemic provided important context for exploring and understanding their profoundly different experience during the remainder of the spring 2020 semester and throughout the 2020/2021 academic year.

Seeing and Being Seen

The notion of "seeing and being seen" as proxy for sense of belonging and community membership emerged as a prominent theme throughout each interview. Though expressed and contextualized somewhat differently by each student, the phrase "it's important to see my professors and other students and be seen by them" was clearly articulated and featured in all interview documents. I was intrigued by how powerfully this theme resonated with each student.

The interviews revealed that students who participated in a pathway, precollege, or residential learning community fared better and described this notion of "seeing and being seen" as an important part of their early academic and social experience. They were welcomed into a ready-made community with established parameters and rules of engagement. Being physically and visually present in a classroom, residential or dining hall, or campus walkway, afforded them the opportunity to authentically assimilate, develop a sense of belonging, and gain membership status. They referenced the repetitive nature of walking to and sitting in class with familiar students and professors as part of a process or disciplined way of becoming a college student and member of the campus community.

> I really liked walking around the health science building and seeing my classmates and professors. I walked the same path to and from class, so I started to recognize the same faces and it made me feel like I was a part of the campus community. I got a lot of comfort from seeing my classmates and professors around campus and recognizing them. I think they got to recognize me. It helped me feel like I fit in and was part of the program. (Kristen)

> I felt like if my professor could see me then I was a real student in the class and a real member of the community. I would sit in the front row so they could see me and know that I was taking it seriously and I wanted to learn. I walked the same route everyday so I would anticipate seeing the same people and them seeing me. It was really important to me and helped me feel more comfortable. The same faces. Some people would acknowledge me or even say hi. (Zoe)

Other transfer or commuting students relied upon this notion of "seeing and being seen" as proxy for authentic membership status. They attributed a different experience with being physically and visually present, noting a false sense of belonging and diminished membership status. These students noted that the act of "seeing and being seen" allowed them to pretend that they were members of the campus club. They described their physical and visual participation as superficial but "good enough." This complicated circumstance afforded the appearance of equal access to becoming a member of the university community but in reality it served as a façade.

> I recognized some people from my high school and I know they recognized me. I didn't try to become part of their group. I think I missed the opportunity so I just try to stay positive and focus on my education. I sit next to the same people in class and my professor smiles at me. I like being in class and seeing everyone and they see me so in a weird way that makes me part of it. (Amy)

> I park my car at my job and walk to campus. I really like pretending that I am a real student. I like watching it all in motion, being in class and being a part of it. I was homeschooled so I love going to class and seeing other students and talking to them and my teachers. Even though I'm so different from them, I get to

participate and then I leave and walk back to my car. It's like I walk in between worlds. (Mary)

This theme of "seeing and being seen" emerged as an important theme for all students as they abruptly transitioned to emergency remote learning. Exploring their initial orientation to campus and the power of physical and visual representation proved to be very important as our conversation shifted to the university's abrupt shift to remote learning and their forced transition away from campus.

Pre-pandemic Student Experience and Sense of Belonging

Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging framework, modeled after Mazlow's (1962) hierarchy of needs (Hopper, 2020) aptly positions community membership in between the satisfaction of basic human needs including food, water, shelter, safety and knowledge attainment and self-actualization. For the purposes of this study, I intentionally included technology in the category of basic human needs as all students relied upon consistent access to the internet to maintain their enrollment status.

This sense of belonging ecosystem provided an excellent framework for the students and I to explore their pre-pandemic standing within the university community. I described Strayhorn's (2012) framework and asked them to comment on the notion of sense of belonging as the gatekeeper to self-actualization and knowledge attainment. While each student had a slightly different take on how this model applied to them, they all agreed that enrollment in the university, financial assistance, and campus-based support services played a large role in their daily lives. All relied upon federal and institutional financial aid to pay for their educational expenses, year-round living expenses including on and off-campus housing and food. The university also provided

access to technology and reliable internet service. By virtue of enrollment, these first-generation students relied heavily upon the university to satisfy their basic human needs, affording them the opportunity to pursue the ultimate goal of a college degree.

Their stories emphasized the importance of how they transitioned to campus, adapted to a traditional and rigid university infrastructure, and navigated often conflicting identities and communities. They painfully articulated the risk and consequences of failed membership attempts and the loss of educational and personal opportunities.

They affirmed Strayhorn's (2012) concern that sense of belonging was fleeting and conditional upon the strength of the students' foundation. The ebb and flow of their gaining, losing, and regaining standing within the pre-pandemic environment helped inform the next transitional stage to emergency remote learning. While their pre-pandemic experiences varied based on personal circumstances, enrollment status, campus engagement, and support services, their transition to and lived experience with emergency remote learning was eerily similar. The pandemic and closing of the campus served as a great equalizer, rocking each students' foundation and upending their sense of belonging to a campus-based community. Their reliance upon physical participation and visual representation wrapped up in the powerful theme of "seeing and being seen" was suddenly challenged by the campus closure and an unwanted transition home.

> It was as if they shut the lights off and I couldn't see them anymore and they couldn't see me. My family's old desktop computer doesn't have a camera so I was literally invisible. All I could do was listen. (Zoe)
>
> I didn't have access to WIFI at home and depended on the university for everything. I didn't have the right cell phone so I couldn't use a hot spot. Now

what. Not only could I not see my classmates and professors, I literally didn't know how I was going to remain enrolled. (Mary)

Emergency Remote Learning:

Disrupted Foundation, Dismantled Educational Ecosystem, and Disengaged Learners

On March 11, 2020, the university President released a startling update informing the campus community that in-person instruction would not resume after Spring Break and the university would finish the spring semester remotely. The COVID-19 pandemic had arrived, threatening the health and safety of faculty, staff, and students, resulting in the shift to emergency remote learning. This abrupt transition sent shock waves throughout the community with panicked student, faculty, and staff left to wonder how they would not only transition away from familiar classrooms, offices, residential learning communities, and dining halls but adjust to remote instruction. Hoping for a temporary disruption, the entire university pivoted to remote instruction and work. No one anticipated the longevity of the pandemic nor its powerful impact on students' academic and social experiences.

Based on their earlier accounts regarding their transition to college, I wondered what their transition away from campus and back home would be like. How would their pre-pandemic membership status influence their ability to navigate remote learning? Once reliant upon the university to satisfy their basic needs, would these students experience financial difficulties, food or housing insecurity, technology challenges, and feelings of isolation and anxiety due to their disrupted connection to friends, classmates, faculty, and community resources. Through no fault of their own, they abruptly lost their

academic and social community and were forced to join an unprecedented and uncertain remote learning environment. The students addressed these questions throughout the next phase of the interviews.

Strayhorn (2012) notes that sense of belonging is contextual, circumstantial, and subject to disruption. With sense of belonging already tenuously positioned as the gatekeeper between the satisfaction of basic human needs and achieving their educational goals, the interviews revealed a profound loss of membership status with unforeseeable academic, social, and personal consequences.

> Sense of belonging is still largely malleable and susceptible to influence in both positive and negative directions. Disruption of one's need to belong can have negative consequences and individuals must engage again in activities and interactions that foster belongingness to regain a sense of acceptance or inclusion. Deprivation of belongingness needs often leads to diminished interest in life activities, loneliness, self-hatred, disengagement from life or, in the context of education, disengagement from college through attrition. (Strayhorn, p. 23)

The students described how the university's transition to remote learning disrupted their foundations and dismantled their educational ecosystems, leaving them disengaged from their school work and academic plans. Resonating with all 10 students, the powerful theme of "seeing and being" reappeared as a negative consequence of emergency remote learning. Citing financial insecurity, relocation challenges, and feelings of isolation, anxiety and depression, all 10 students described a tenuous academic and social circumstance as emergency remote learners. The university infrastructure that once provided financial aid and stability, housing, food, community, technology support, academic support, and student services suddenly closed, disrupting their individual foundations, sense of community belonging, and educational plans.

Phrases like “no one at the university cares about me,” “I stopped learning anything,” “I’m all alone,” “I’m so isolated,” “I’m invisible,” “I can’t see anybody and no one can see me,” and “I’m so lost” emerged as a collective refrain. With a fractured foundation, fragile sense of connection, and a dismantled learning environment, each student described their unnerving and unprecedented academic and social experiences amidst the early pandemic.

Disrupted Foundation

Consistent with the research conceptual framework, I asked each student to consider their own disrupted foundation and how they navigated the sudden and significant changes to their basic human needs. While many students did not experience housing and food insecurity or physical health and safety concerns, they all noted serious mental health challenges including isolation, depression, and anxiety, financial instability, technology problems, poor equipment, and limited access to the internet. To modernize Maslow’s (Hopper, 2020) hierarchy of needs, I added mental health, financial instability, and technology to the list of basic human needs as they were integral to each student’s foundation.

> I depended on the university for everything. It was all wrapped up in my financial aid and I lived on-campus and I had a meal plan and a work-study job. I was doing just fine and then I got sent home. My family expected me to get a job and support myself and kick back to support our household. They didn’t understand that I had to continue to study and go to class. They didn’t care that I lost everything. (Jade)

> I lost all connection to my classes – literally. I live on a dirt road with really spotty internet connection so I missed at least half of every class fighting with technology. My connection was never strong enough for me to be able to turn on my camera so I felt completely invisible to my professors and classmates. Day after day, I sat at home alone after my parents went to work in our only car and I struggled with school, motivation, anxiety, and depression. I should have asked for help but I figured everyone was struggling and overwhelmed so I kept quiet. It felt like no one cared. I was really struggling to maintain my mental health so I let go of my school work and lost sight of my goals. (Grace)

Foundational concerns such as financial instability, isolation and depressions, and limited access to technology clearly resonated with Jade and Grace. As emergency remote learners, they experienced significant disruption to their financial security and mental health impacting their motivation and ability to remain engaged with their school work. Their narrative accounts aptly described the tenuous academic and social circumstance experienced by all 10 students.

Dismantled Educational Ecosystem

All 10 students recounted a dismantled educational ecosystem as a result of the university's transition to remote learning. Regardless of their pre-pandemic membership status, all 10 students reported a loss of educational community and a diminished sense of belonging to the university. Emergency remote learning was chaotic and disorganized with limited opportunities to engage with faculty or classmates. The notion of "seeing and being seen" re-emerged as a common denominator and central part of their dismantled educational ecosystem. Prior to the pandemic, the students equated "seeing

and being seen" with sense of belonging and community membership, noting the importance of physical and visual representation. What had been viewed as positive by many was now a negative consequence of remote learning for all students.

Upon entering emergency remote learning, all 10 students grieved the loss of the campus community and inability to see faculty and classmates. With no road map in place, faculty and students alike struggled to navigate an unprecedented and unpredictable remote learning ecosystem. Lacking physical proximity to campus and unable to visually engage, all 10 students described a severely diminished academic, social, and communal experience due in large part to a dismantled educational ecosystem that relied upon campus-based infrastructure and in-person instruction. According to the students, the emergency remote learning environment featured limited interaction and participation, poorly designed courses, and minimally trained faculty, staff, and students. These students felt displaced and disappointed with this newly and poorly reconfigured educational ecosystem.

> I lost all connection to my professors and had no motivation to participate in remote learning. There was literally no one there. I couldn't see anyone. No one turned their camera on. Even the professor's screen was dark. I tried to turn my camera on to see if anyone else would follow me but no one did. It was just me and I was all alone. I felt so incredibly isolated. It was really hard to stay motivated and care about school. I really felt like no one at the university cared about me. They should have reached out to see how I was doing. I really needed help. (Amy)

The students cited the lack of participation, dark screens, and no one turning their cameras on during class as one of the most disheartening remote learning consequences. Faculty and classmates' unwillingness to turn on their cameras and be visually present significantly contributed to their loss of community and academic and social detachment.

> Everything is harder now that no one can see me and I can't see them. It's like there is no one there and the camera on my computer doesn't work so I might as well not even try. School was already hard for me and now it's impossible. (Shay)

> I went from happily being in person and seeing everyone to literally sitting in the local store parking lot stealing their internet because I don't have WIFI at home. It just doesn't come to my house. It's February and freezing and the signal isn't strong enough to run the camera too so I just listen. I guess it's for the best since it would be embarrassing to turn my camera on and have them see me sitting in my car in the dark. It's really hard to remain focused and motivated. (Mary)

The dismantling of the university community that had once upheld these students led to a chaotic and impersonal remote learning environment. This was a source of great concern for all 10 students. Regardless of their pre-pandemic status, they all struggled in this newly cobbled together learning environment longing for virtual engagement and support. While none of the students blamed their instructors for this diminished learning environment, they all expressed a lack of concern and outreach by the university. The phrase, "it was as if no one cared that I was struggling," resonated with all students and yet they could not specifically name who they thought should have conducted this important outreach.

> No one checked in on me. It's like no one cared. I guess everyone was struggling but it would have helped if someone/anyone had checked in with me. (Grace)

Disengaged Learners

As a result of the abrupt transition to emergency remote learning, all 10 students described the process of disengaging from the university community and the stark consequences of misplaced college student identity, hybrid roles and responsibilities, lost academic and social standing, and derailed educational plans. Their collective sense of shock and profound isolation affected their motivation and ability to remain engaged with their immediate course work and longer term educational goals. They described a severely interrupted, detached, impersonal, and anonymous remote learning environment. Their membership status within the campus' academic and social community had uniformly transitioned to a state of disengagement fueled by uncertainty and confusion.

Loss of College Student Identity

Despite varying degrees of success in attaining and sustaining a new identity as a college student, all 10 students reported a total loss of identity upon shifting to emergency remote learning. Similarly and severely impacted by the pandemic, they described a destabilized sense of self and an almost unrecognizable college student identity.

Grace, Danielle, Harry, Zoe, and Kristen strongly identified as college students in large part due to a supported transition and receptive academic and social community and yet they all reported an immediate loss of identity and status. Their ability to identify as traditional college students was intertwined with their physical proximity to campus and participation in a ready-made residential living and learning community and programs.

These students' identity development was aided by intentional and deliberate programs designed to guide their transition from precollege to college status. With academic advisors and student affairs professionals shepherding them through their transition to an early collegiate experience, this group strongly identified as college students achieving full membership status within the university community.

Conversely, Shay, Jade, Mary, Lily, and Amy described a more fragile and complicated relationship with their college student identity. Struggling to develop and maintain a new identity as a college student, these young women straddled disparate communities of home and campus due to their tenuous residential, commuter, and transfer experiences. Their unrealized, underdeveloped, and dualistic identities depended largely on their own perceptions of themselves as imposters within their campus and home communities. Regardless of their physical proximity to campus, these first-generation students struggled to reconcile their sense of self and identity as a college student on a daily basis. While these students described an unsupported transition to college and a limited sense of belonging to the campus community prior to the pandemic, they mirrored their counterparts' total loss of identity and membership status as emergency remote learners.

> I lost everything when I had to go home. I lost my predictable schedule, my friends, my university community. I don't feel like a college student anymore. I feel like I'm trying to still be a college student but I'm also home now and I don't like being in both worlds at the same time. It's confusing and complicated and I don't fit in anywhere. It's a big step backwards. I felt like a real college student before the pandemic and now I don't know who I am. (Zoe)

> Being sent home due to COVID was the worst thing that could have happened to me. I was just starting to feel like a real college student. I was just starting to find my way, make friends, and feel like a university student. I chose to leave and try to become someone else, to get away from there, and all of a sudden I was sent home. Just like that I was no longer a college student. (Jade)
>
> It's hard to feel like a real college student where I live. I am an only child and I live down a very muddy dirt road. I liked living on campus. I was really a college student and overnight it was gone. (Grace)

Hybrid Status, Culture Clash & Associated Guilt

Prior to the pandemic and university's sudden transition to remote learning, the students who commuted to campus were most likely to describe a hybrid circumstance requiring them to maintain dual identities and often conflicting membership status in both their home and campus communities. They described the challenges associated with upholding dual citizenship and the consequences of switching roles and responsibilities based on proximity to campus and home. As commuting students, Mary, Amy, and Shay clearly articulated the tension associated with disparate communities and opposing cultural values, norms, and expectations. They described their movement to and from campus as part of a daily ritual whereby they switched their identities, roles, and responsibilities, transitioning from non-college to college student dependent upon their geographic proximity to campus.

> I really enjoyed my long walk to campus from my boyfriend's apartment. I felt like I could switch gears and become a college student every day. The closer I

> got to campus, the more I felt like I belonged there and not at home. At the end of the day, I would walk back to my other world and become someone else. (Amy)
>
> I stayed on campus all day because I needed to be there to feel like I was a real college student. Once I got home, I had to be someone else. They didn't acknowledge me as a student so I had different responsibilities. They didn't respect the fact that I had to do my homework and expected me to cook, clean, and drive them around. I liked being on campus. It's hard to move back and forth. (Shay)

Fearful of this tenuous circumstance, other students such as Zoe, Lily, and Jade made the difficult and intentional decision to leave home and move to campus. They anticipated the potential culture clash associated with straddling disparate communities and opted for full immersion into the university community. Regardless of their transitional experiences and fragile sense of belonging, these students achieved membership status relying upon the university to help satisfy their basic human needs of health, safety, food, shelter, and access to educational resources and technology. Though tenuous at times, their enrollment and financial aid needs were met by the university, allowing them to focus on their academic goals and social aspirations.

> I was so reliant upon the university for everything. My financial aid and RA job covered all my expenses so I didn't have to worry and could focus on school. And, my RA job led me to a friend group. I finally fit in. I was doing really well in school and had a few friends. I also really appreciated the TRIO program. Their space was awesome and I spent a lot of time there with the staff. Going to the dining hall made me feel anxious because everyone else had someone to eat

> with. I brought my food and homework to the TRIO space. They helped me and didn't judge me. (Lily)

Fast forward to March 2020 and suddenly all 10 students described identity confusion and culture clashes associated with hybrid and conflicting roles and responsibilities. The students who intentionally chose to live on campus and make a full transition from home to campus community described a painful re-entry process riddled with regret, identity confusion, and misaligned expectations. Those students who already struggled to maintain dual citizenship at home and on campus noted increased identity confusion. Losing their ability to switch identities, these students went from self-described imposters to complete outsiders.

All students voiced significant concern about their forced retreat from the campus community, educational resources, and support services due to the onset of the global pandemic. They articulated the painful consequences of diminished membership status in both their home and learning community. While each of these students pursued a different pathway to the university with varying degrees of success, they all experienced a similarly challenging transition to remote learning with bleak academic and social experiences. Their shared sense of culture shock and despair served as a powerful common denominator.

> At first I didn't believe it. It was really shocking to have to go home because of COVID. I went home to stay with my Mom but that was really stressful. I didn't belong there anymore. It was really hard to return to that place that I intentionally left. I felt really isolated and missed campus. After the end of the spring semester, I left home. I couldn't be there anymore and campus was still closed.

> So I moved out and on my own for the first time ever. I was pretty lost between my student life and my home life with my Mom. It was a huge relief to start over. I made peace with being alone and on my own. (Lily)
>
> I walked to campus every day and became a real college student every day. I go there to get an education but now that I can't go there anymore and I feel even more disconnected. The only real difference between now and pre-COVID is that I don't get to go to class or the library anymore. I miss going there and seeing people, even if they aren't my friends. I felt like more of a college student when I walked there and now I have to stay at home. My family is very supportive of my education but they don't understand online or remote learning. They think I am either hiding or avoiding them when I am in my room and working on my computer. If I come out of my room, they immediately think I am available to do house stuff so I stay in my room. Too much alone time. Too much time in my room. I feel like I have stopped learning. (Shay)

Additionally a theme associated with guilt emerged in connection with the abrupt transition to remote learning. All 10 students reported feeling guilty about complaining to their families about their remote learning environment and bifurcated identities. They appreciated the support that their families provided them and the financial sacrifices made on behalf of their educational goals. Downplaying or hiding the stress associated with transitioning from campus and engaging in emergency remote learning, these students described the arduous process of resuming full-time residency at home while attempting to remain engaged with their schoolwork. Mindful of the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, all students felt obligated to conceal their struggles with re-entry,

dual citizenship, and an uncertain learning environment. Simply stated, "it wasn't anyone's fault" and they certainly did not want to put any more pressure on their parents who were also struggling.

> I don't want to bother my parents. I feel guilty complaining about school stuff, having to move home, and our really old desktop computer with no camera. They worry about me and the fact that they can't help me adjust. They don't speak English so explaining the campus transition to remote learning and all my stress is really hard and they are already stressed about having to work during COVID. I act like everything with school is fine even though it is not. (Zoe)
>
> My parents didn't go to college so they barely understand what I'm going through when I am on-campus let alone when I am trying to learn online. I feel really guilty complaining about being home, being so totally isolated on this dirt road, the spotty internet connection, and the fact that I have no one to talk to when they leave for work every day. They still have to go to work during COVID and I have to stay here all alone but I don't let them see how stressed I am. They don't deserve that when they work so hard to help me get my education. They really want me to get my degree, a better job, and not have to do what they have to do. (Grace)
>
> For their sake, I tried to get back into my old patterns but things had changed. I tried to stay in touch with my school friends but that quickly fell apart. I tried to adjust to being at home but I wanted to be at school. I didn't want them to see how upset I was because they were trying so hard to support me. How could I

complain when they were working so hard to keep everything going during the shutdown? (Harry)

Stopped Learning Anything

I asked the students to describe their emergency remote learning experience and how their academic and social circumstances evolved as a result of online and predominantly asynchronous courses. They voiced concerns regarding poorly designed courses, lack of technology training for themselves and their instructors, internet challenges, and limited participation. They painfully articulated a profoundly stressful, insular, and lonely educational experience. Though all students reported a personal commitment to completing the semester, they struggled to stay focused, motivated, and engaged in a detached and impersonal learning environment. Reporting severely limited instruction and little participation on the part of their instructors and classmates, these students described a self-paced and self-destructive educational environment full of uncertainty and doubt. Comments ranged from, "I'm completely on my own and no one cares whether I make it or not" to "I was completely on my own and stopped learning anything."

The students noted a change to their sense of self-reliance and self-direction, viewing it more positively in the pre-pandemic campus-based environment and more negatively as remote learners. The involuntary, imposed, and unfair consequences of being relegated to emergency remote learning left these students feeling ill-equipped to navigate. Phrases such as "get by," "do the absolute minimum," "stop caring," and "stop learning" were commonly expressed by all 10 students. Their painful accounts of dark screens, no interactions, poorly designed assignments, and struggling faculty and

classmates so powerfully and authentically illustrated their disengaged learning experience.

> I stopped learning anything! There was literally no one on the other side of the screen who cared about me and how I was doing in class so I stopped trying. I had so much pressure to finish my degree but it just wasn't worth it anymore. My school work had been the one thing that kept me going. I was completely focused on getting my degree but everything changed – overnight. It went dark. What should have kept me going (my school work and connection to my teachers) had completely let me down. So I decided to take a leave of absence. It simply wasn't worth it. (Lily)

> I never really know if anyone is really there so I stopped caring. I'm not learning as much and it's all on me. No one cares. No one engages, no one turns on their camera. It's really lonely trying to do this all on my own. (Zoe)

> I do everything on my own. I didn't trust them before the pandemic and I sure don't trust them now. I have to keep reminding myself that I am here to get my education and this will pass but it's really hard, so much harder to stay focused and motivated. (Shay)

Deferred Educational Plans

While Strayhorn's (2012) framework positions knowledge attainment and self-actualization through reaching one's educational goals at the top of the hierarchy as a result of sustained sense of belonging and the satisfaction of basic human needs, what happens to it when the entire ecosystem abruptly shifts sending the faculty, staff, and students into uncharted and unprecedented territory? More specifically, what happens to

the educational plans and aspirations of 10 first-generation college students displaced from the university? While some of the students hoped that the derailment of their educational plans would be temporary and that they would return to campus quickly reassuming their pre-pandemic position within the campus community, others feared longer-term disruption to their educational plans and goals.

All students professed that their educational plans were simply deferred with only one student, Lily, taking a short-term leave of absence. They developed innovative coping strategies, deployed different persistence strategies, described the need to reexamine their educational goals, adjusted their remote learning expectations, and resolved to finish their courses.

> I felt really lucky to have my family as a support network. I created a hopes and dreams board that everyone had to write a daily hope or dream. By the end of the summer, the board was overflowing with everyone's hopes and dreams. I wrote everyday about my dream of becoming a nurse and thanked my family for supporting me. I have to keep going for them and me. (Kristen)
>
> I'm really determined to get my degree and I'm optimistic about getting back on track after the pandemic. My family has been through so much and I won't back down from my goal of earning my degree. I can do this. (Amy)
>
> I was home-schooled, so I think I was better prepared for remote learning. I've always had to fend for myself so this isn't so bad. I let my advisor know that I was having to participate from my car and he donated his office to me. Can you imagine? I am now using his office and don't have to sit in my car. It's amazing and so helpful. (Mary)

With deferred but not derailed academic plans, the students spoke of the serious challenges presented by the pandemic and sudden transition to emergency remote learning. They professed a shared commitment to repairing cracked personal foundations, restoring their connection to the university community, and recommitting to achieving their educational goals regardless of their geographic proximity to campus.

Academic Year Return to Campus or Remain Remote:

Repair the Foundation, Restore Membership and Recommit to Educational Goals

While I initially planned to focus primarily on the academic, social, and communal experiences of first-generation college students during the emergency remote learning phase of the pandemic, I expanded my research proposal to include the transition to college and pre-pandemic academic and social experience, and emergence from a quarantined educational environment. Their profound academic, social, and communal experiences during emergency remote learning were inextricably linked to their pre-pandemic membership and influenced their post-quarantine enrollment decision. To have limited the consideration of this disrupted educational experience to just the emergency remote learning period would have missed the opportunity to more fully explore their rich and diverse educational experiences. Their lived experience as involuntary remote learners was predicated by a complicated rise and fall of community engagement, academic interaction, and social standing, leaving them precariously positioned for re-entry into the university.

Despite fragile, fledgling, or firm educational foundations, each student described challenging academic and social consequences as a result of a dismantled and disengaged learning environment. This was followed by a difficult post-quarantine enrollment

decision to re-enter the campus community or remain remote. The important distinction made at this phase was choice. Upon the fall 2021 campus reopening, the university presented students with an enrollment choice to return to in-person instruction or remain remote. Each student's enrollment decision was carefully weighed considering the health and safety risks of returning to campus versus remaining remote.

While they all expressed a preference to return to in-person learning, individual circumstances prevented 5 of the 10 students from returning to campus. The other five students emerged from emergency remote learning with renewed energy and stabilized resources allowing them to make the difficult decision to return to in-person instruction. With the forced quarantined remote learning phase behind them, all the students looked forward to reengaging in a more active academic experience.

Resilience, determination, and grit emerged as shared characteristics among all the students. The pandemic and university's abrupt transition to remote learning had severely disrupted their educational ecosystem and yet, they persevered. Their narrative accounts described a harrowing remote learning experience punctuated by resilience, optimism, and determination. Their educational goals may have been dissuaded by the pandemic and emergency remote learning but they did not give up.

Repairing the Foundation

Strayhorn's (2012) notion that academic achievement, self-actualization, and knowledge attainment are dependent upon a student's ability to satisfy their basic human needs clearly resonated with this group of first-generation college students as they emerged from quarantined learning. They all expressed concern with their inability to consistently satisfy their basic human needs. Referencing technology problems,

insufficient access to the internet, financial insecurity, and mental health challenges, these students articulated the profound impact the pandemic and emergency remote learning had on them. Quarantined learning had rocked their foundations, stripped them of their university membership, altered their identities, diminished their motivation and yet, all but one student remained continuously enrolled. Only one student, Lily, took the fall semester off to work. She returned to the university in the spring semester.

> I wasn't learning anything on my own and I stopped caring. It just wasn't worth it to stay enrolled so I took the fall semester off. I got a job and became financially stable and started to feel like myself again but I worried I would not go back to school and earn my degree. It's a huge privilege to get an education and I wanted to finish no matter what. I decided to enroll in online courses in the spring semester. The decision to return as a remote student really helped me. This time it was my choice. (Lily)

Additionally, all students cited mental health concerns as contributing to their lack of motivation, limited engagement, and poor learning outcomes. Acknowledging the need for help, some of the students reached out to the university's student health and counseling services and were disappointed by an insufficient response. They felt the university had an obligation to not only provide counseling and support services but to care how they were doing in emergency remote learning. This feeling of being "ignored" and "not cared for" was clearly articulated throughout the research interviews serving as a prominent theme and important opportunity for improvement. The students recommended increased virtual access to mental health support services regardless of whether they returned to campus or remained remote.

> I recognized that I was really struggling pretty early on in quarantine. I couldn't focus on my school work and that was so unlike me. I needed help so I reached out to the university's counseling center but they were overwhelmed and couldn't help me. I guess I didn't qualify as someone who really needed their services but I was falling behind. I gave up on the university and finally got help through the employee assistance program at my job. It made a huge difference to have someone care about me. I had to slow down and recalibrate my priorities to get back on track. (Mary)

> I had a lot of guilt about losing my financial independence and having to rely on my family again. The pandemic forced me to leave campus and I lost my job and I lost my focus. It was really stressful and I couldn't focus on my schoolwork. I needed help but the university counseling center was overwhelmed and didn't care about me and my small problems. I got a private therapist and that has really helped me get back on track. (Kristen)

Despite these significant challenges, all students remained committed to achieving their educational goals. Their resilience throughout quarantined learning was evident and clearly articulated through their narrative accounts. Determined to persevere, these students navigated an unprecedented and uncertain educational environment, making slow but steady progress toward earning a bachelor's degree.

Restoring Membership

Mindful of their own disrupted foundations, each student talked about the process of restoring connection to the university community and reengaging in a more deliberate and active educational environment. I encouraged each student to explore their

emergence from quarantined learning and their decision to return to campus or remain remote. How had their pre-pandemic and pandemic experience influenced their ability to navigate this next phase of their education? For Harry, Danielle, Kristen, Jade, and Grace, restoring membership and reengaging with the campus community was straightforward resulting in a renewed sense of connection to their educational environment, faculty, friends, and classmates. Their decision to return to campus and live in the residence halls or off-campus apartments with friends enabled a more direct reentry to the university. Through in-person and hybrid instruction, these students reported the significance of being physically and visually present. Their renewed ability to "see and be seen" within the university's infrastructure reinforced their ability to regain a sense of belonging and identity as a "real college student."

While the university aspired to "return to normal" through reopening classrooms, residence halls, and dining facilities, these students noted that it was anything but normal. Relieved to be back on campus and reengage with faculty and peers, their return to campus was punctuated by COVID-19 restrictions and pandemic learning protocols. Despite the ramifications of an ongoing global pandemic and the associated health and safety risks of in-person instruction, these students reported a profound sense of relief to be back on campus. They were optimistic about their educational goals and determined to restore their membership status.

> I was really relieved to return to the university and be back in the residence hall and classrooms but it's really different. It's weird. It's not the same as it was when I left so I decided to go in a different direction and not worry about what it

was before. I joined a sorority and have a new community. It's really good to be part of group. (Danielle)

I was really excited to return to campus and the classroom. I live off campus now so my community group has gotten a lot smaller but that's ok. I'm just relieved to be back. I also realized how much I need to be involved in extracurricular activities so I joined the volleyball club and the Asian Student Union. I like being involved. It makes me feel connected and like I belong here. I go to practice and the meetings to see people and they see me too. I need these things to stay connected to the university otherwise I could really be a student anywhere and it would not matter. (Harry)

The other five students made the difficult decision to remain remote citing the health and safety benefits of online learning. They also recognized that this delay in restoring their connection to the university community could potentially jeopardize their ability to remain enrolled and achieve their educational goal of earning a college degree. Noting personal circumstances including financial instability and fear of exposing vulnerable family members to COVID-19, these students were far less concerned with restoring a social connection to the campus community and more interested in reengaging with the university's academic resources. These students looked forward to emerging from quarantined learning and reengaging with faculty and classmates in a more interactive and supportive online environment. Much like their campus-based counterparts, these students also expressed the need to "see and be seen" by faculty and peers via intentionally designed and developed online and hybrid courses. Reliant on

technology, internet access, and cameras, Shay, Lily, Zoe, Amy, and Mary wanted a more interactive and participatory academic experience.

> I decided to continue with the stay at home option. I live with my parents and they have health problems so I couldn't risk going back to campus. I don't trust the other students. They don't have as much to lose as I do. I miss walking to class and seeing my professors and being a real university student. I miss seeing the other students in class. I had hoped that more students would turn on their cameras but there are usually only five of us plus the instructor. Sometimes my professor forgets we are on the screen and that makes me feel invisible. In some ways, I prefer my fully online class because there is no one there and no expectation for live interaction. It's ok. I'm focused on getting my degree and a good education. I'm not here for the social stuff but it would have been nice. It's all on me and I'm going to make it. (Amy)
>
> Being away from campus is really hard but I don't have a choice. I can't bring COVID-19 into this house. My parents don't speak English and have health problems. I could never take that risk. So I sit here all by myself and pretend to be a "real college student." Remote biology was just terrible and I ended up dropping the class. English is my second language so I would watch the videos over and over again but I just couldn't do it on my own. I have very little connection to my teachers. I used to go to their office hours and ask questions. Now I don't even know how to ask for help. I think it's really important that they see me in person and not just on a screen or not just hearing my voice or reading my email. They need to see that I am a real person and a real student. (Shay)

Recommitting to Educational Goals

With somewhat restored personal foundations, the students and I turned our attention to the top of Strayhorn's (2012) framework and explored their renewed commitment to achieving their educational goals. Despite all their challenging personal circumstances, tenuous relationship with the university, and precarious emergency remote learning experiences, all 10 students emphatically recommitted to their goal of earning a bachelor's degree. Thrust into emergency remote learning as a result of a global pandemic, these students suffered the consequences of a disrupted foundation and dismantled educational environment and emerged resolute to persist and complete their degree programs. Resilience, perseverance, and the ability to navigate unprecedented and uncharted educational territory was a common denominator throughout the research. While each student's academic, social, and communal experiences may have varied, they were all equally committed to realizing their dream of becoming a college graduate.

Through the final analysis of each recorded interview and subsequent documents, participant check-ins, and the careful consideration and development of individual and collective themes, it all came down to resilience, and determination. Their complicated transitions to college, tenuous pre-pandemic and unprecedented emergency remote learning experiences, and challenging post-quarantined reengagement with the university were profoundly influenced by a shared sense of resilience, perseverance, and determination. These first-generation college students embarked on an uncertain educational journey as a result of a global pandemic and persisted. The following narrative accounts as final evidence.

I chose to come to college and get my education. Going remote really wrecked it but I'm back and going to make it. (Harry)

I made my own way. No one helped facilitate that. I take advantage of opportunities and know it's important to join stuff, fit in, and figure stuff out on my own. (Danielle)

I'm a big fan of self-advocacy and self-reliance. I try not to go it alone but in the end it's on me to get my degree. (Kristen)

I had a combination of in-person and mixed delivery courses this fall. My field based course really saved me. Being outside and back in nature completely saved me. I think I feel more connected to nature as my community than the university and that's ok. I go outside, go get food, see other people and that reminds me to take care of myself. (Jade)

I'm happy to be back in town. My little apartment is my university community now. I kind of feel like a real college student again but I'm not sure I feel like a university student again. It will never be the same but I'm ok with that. (Grace)

Totally self-reliant. Everything is on me. I'm not very connected to the university and that's ok. I'm there to get an education. My total focus is on getting good enough grades to go to graduate school and the rest of it – I try not to think about it. (Shay)

I'm back to teaching myself how to do everything. I know how to do this but it's lonely. It's all on me. (Amy)

It's a huge privilege to get a degree. I don't want to waste time. I need to finish no matter what. (Lily)

I passed my GED and took a fresh start at my education. I figured out how to get my GED, apply to the university, fill out the financial aid forms – all by myself with no help and no exposure to higher education what so ever – all me – by myself. (Mary)

I don't really like being in two worlds. I don't feel like I'm a university student anymore. I don't really fit in anywhere but I'm going to finish no matter what. My focus is on my education and I don't worry about the rest of it. (Zoe)

CHAPTER 5: HIGHER EDUCATION'S OPPORTUNITY TO BETTER SUPPORT FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

As colleges and universities continue to reopen their campus communities, classrooms, and residence halls, there is concern that a "return to normal" mentality will override the opportunity to incorporate the important lessons learned from pandemic education and emergency remote learners. The 10 first-generation college students that participated in this qualitative research study clearly articulated the challenges associated with emergency remote learning as well as the need for more intentional and deliberate outreach and support from the university.

Higher education has an opportunity to emerge from quarantined learning, incorporate lessoned learned from emergency remote teaching, and adopt best practices associated with inclusive and responsive pedagogy. The need for structural and systemic change as a result of this unprecedented educational circumstance is clear and yet, many institutions will shy away from this opportunity to make meaningful change. The following proposal identifies opportunities to transform the post-pandemic educational environment serving as just one of many approaches that higher education can consider.

Additionally, this proposal provides an excellent research opportunity to explore other aspects of these students' identities, cultures, perspectives, challenges, and aspirations. While my dissertation focused on the academic and social experiences of first-generation college students amidst the pandemic, other parts of their identities emerged and are worthy of consideration. The influence of race, gender, ethnicity, and culture on their educational experience as emergency remote and post-quarantine learners would be an interesting and worthwhile next phase of research. The intersection of these

important personal, cultural, and social circumstances would greatly contribute to the development of this virtual learning community. As four of the students in the study self-identified as New American, it would be interesting to explore their unique or shared experiences as virtual or campus-based students. Better understanding their academic and social needs as a result of their transition to the United States would be a compelling research topic and would inform the development of a culturally sensitive virtual learning environment. Mental health concerns emerged as significant with all students in the research study expressing concerns with anxiety, fear, and depression. The virtual community could serve as a triage space fostering social connection and community and a referral source for students with more serious mental health needs. The needs of faculty and student affairs professionals warrant further research and consideration as they play a central role in the development and management of an effective and responsive virtual learning environment. And finally, this proposal presents an opportunity for mixed methods research considering the quantitative retention, persistence, and degree completion rates in collaboration with the qualitative experiences of students engaged in virtual learning and connection.

While they all preferred to return to in-person and campus-based instruction, these students stressed the need for more flexible and just in time access to administrative and student support services. Many of the research participants commuted to campus and worked full or part-time, further complicating their ability to access in-person only administrative and enrollment support. As they emerged from quarantined learning, they all expressed concern with balancing school and work responsibilities, stressing the need for more and ongoing virtual access to the university. They offered suggestions for

ongoing virtual support services and online engagement underscoring the need for the university to resist a "back to normal" strategy. Their stories clearly articulate a need for change and progression toward a new and more inclusive virtual learning environment that connects to the university's campus based infrastructure, resources, and support services. In essence, they want the best of all worlds, campus-based and hybrid instruction, in-person and online engagement with faculty and peers, and virtual academic, administrative, and student support services.

In keeping with their guidance, I offer the following virtual enrichment learning community model that is designed to support all students, especially first-generation college students throughout their transition to college, campus-based or online enrollment, and engagement with the university academic and social community. This virtual enrichment learning community is intended to transform the university's existing recruitment and retention practices expanding access via technology to undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education students.

For the purposes of this study, I am pleased to introduce the Wildcat Enrichment Learning Community (WELC) as a prototype for increasing access, innovation, inclusion, improving learning outcomes, and increasing student satisfaction. While WELC is designed to accommodate all students, I will focus on the needs of first-generation college students and how a virtual enrichment learning community in alignment with campus-based academic resources and support services can better support their educational journey. The academic, social, and community-related experiences of the 10 first-generation college students who graciously participated in my research study

as well as the scholarship explored throughout the literature review section also inform the development of WELC.

The important consideration of other disadvantaged or marginalized student populations who would also benefit from the development of a more progressive academic and student support model warrants additional research and exploration. Recognizing the rich diversity of students including transfer, LGBTQ, African American, Indigenous and people of color, students with physical disabilities and learning differences, and others who self-identity as needing a new way of engaging with the university, I look forward to further inquiry into their unique and shared needs and the opportunity to conduct additional research.

With Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging framework in mind, I recommend that WELC be strategically positioned at the intersection of the students' individual needs and their educational goal of earning a bachelor's degree. Noting the important role that sense of belonging to the university community plays in college students' academic and social experiences, I believe that the development of a virtual learning community is central to meeting the post-pandemic educational needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Per the 10 first-generation college students' accounts, they longed for a virtual community that afforded them the opportunity to visually engage with faculty, staff, and peers. A virtual space to interact, exchange ideas, ask for help, and receive support services. They described a profound loss of community, identity as a college student, and connection to the university as a result of the abrupt shift to emergency remote learning. They also acknowledged the faults of the pre-pandemic completely campus-based

academic and student support service model recommending that the university resist the urge to "return to normal" and incorporate the lessons learned from emergency remote learning.

Mostly, they wanted the university to listen to them, care about them, and provide academic and student support services in the way that makes sense to them. As such, I listened carefully to their stories, wondering how the university could be more progressive, utilize technology better, and create a more accessible and inclusive learning environment. The following proposal serves as my recommendations for traditional, four-year, and campus-based colleges and universities as a result of this qualitative research study and the lessons learned from 10 first-generation college students relegated to emergency remote learning during a global pandemic.

The Wildcat Enrichment Learning Community:

A Strategic Enrollment Management Tool

The following proposed mission statement amplifies WELC's strategic enrollment management purpose as well as its commitment to transforming the academic and social experiences of all students especially those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. If implemented, WELC would serve as a hub and spoke model virtually connecting students to the university's existing academic resources and support services while maximizing access, inclusion, engagement, and connection.

Proposed Mission Statement

The Wildcat Enrichment Learning Community (WELC) is committed to supporting all learners regardless of their geographic proximity to campus and enrollment status through intentionally designed and technologically enabled inclusive programs and

student support services. Welcoming of all students, this virtual learning community recognizes the university's responsibility for increasing access to academic advising, support services, and community resources. Through active virtual engagement with faculty, staff, and peers, students have an opportunity to become members of the university community.

WELC and First-generation College Student Recruitment

As a strategic enrollment management tool featuring a hub and spoke model that connects virtually to existing campus-based academic resources and student support services, WELC is well positioned to expand access to the university providing support to first-generation college students as they navigate unfamiliar application and enrollment processes. In alignment with the Office of Undergraduate Admissions, academic dean's offices, and other enrollment management and administrative units, WELC will provide important information and guidance virtually linking the university's human resources and social capital throughout an often challenging and uncertain transition from home to campus. By design, WELC will collaborate with high school guidance counselors, teachers, and non-profit organizations such as the Boys & Girls Club to identify potential first-generation college students, inviting them to virtually engage with the university through participation in precollege information sessions and workshops pertaining to the Common Application and Federal Financial Aid.

Copying the campus-based admissions' model, WELC will employ virtual student admissions representatives responsible for assisting students throughout the college search process. First-generation students are assigned a virtual student admissions representative early on in the process who stays with them throughout the application,

orientation, and enrollment phases. This continuous engagement with a virtual admissions and enrollment coach acknowledges the often difficult transitional issues that first-generation college students experience.

In addition to WELC providing important early student support services, it could also host year-round credit and non-credit programs designed to introduce precollege and first-generation students to the college search process, academic content, and subject matter experts. The university currently offers a summer academy program for high school students and a summer enrichment program for incoming undergraduates. These programs offer an introduction to the university, academic credit, reduced tuition, scholarships, and other important support services. Due to the pandemic, these programs have transitioned to fully online and are slated to return to a hybrid campus-based and online format. Rather than reverting to the previous hybrid model, WELC could continue to offer these programs fully online with optional campus-based or field-based intensives providing students an enrollment choice. Carefully designed to maximize academic and social interaction with faculty and peers, these online programs with optional campus-based or field-based intensives could increase access, participation, and familiarity with the university for an increasingly diverse and cost-sensitive precollege audience.

Cost of in-person attendance in campus-based programs often comes up as an enrollment barrier for first-generation college students. The use of state funded dual enrollment vouchers, grant funding, and university supported scholarships should be more fully explored and incorporated into the WELC plan. Ideally, WELC could be recognized as a strategic recruitment mechanism and would be underwritten by the university or a combination of philanthropy and foundation support. Such tuition

assistance would provide first-generation students and other vulnerable populations with an opportunity to engage with the university's academic resources and support services. As the university commits to expanding diversity, access, inclusion, and equity, greater attention must be paid to underwriting participation and removing significant enrollment barriers.

Additionally, WELC could provide support to transfer students such as Amy, Shay, and Mary who struggled with transferring from the community college to the university. Amy and Shay felt that they were misdirected to the community college, missing the opportunity to directly matriculate to the university after high school. They felt ill-prepared to navigate the transition and expressed frustration with the lack of guidance throughout the transfer admission process. Ironically as a non-traditional student, Mary described a more traditional enrollment experience with the community college. As a home-schooled student, Mary earned her GED, worked full-time, and enrolled as a part-time student. She quickly gained the confidence to transfer to the university and decided to enroll as a full-time student while continuing to work at a local school. All students voiced concern regarding the lack of guidance throughout the transfer admission process, lack of guidance, and indirect connection between the two local institutions.

If implemented, WELC could provide a bridge between these two institutions and other partnering educational entities offering pathway and co-enrollment programs, transfer admission guidance, and enrollment support services. Establishing virtual pathway and co-enrollment programs would help first-generation college students such as Amy, Shay, and Mary become better informed about their educational opportunities and

more familiar with the university while enrolling in credit bearing courses that count toward both the associate's and bachelor's degree. Students would be assigned a university academic advisor and enrollment coach who would partner with the community college's student services staff to coordinate their enrollment at both institutions. This virtual support team would stay with the students throughout the co-enrollment program, transfer admission process, and undergraduate enrollment ensuring continuity of support.

As the literature suggests, summer pathway and bridge programs provide important information, an introduction to the campus, and a ready-made student community but often end at the point of fall enrollment (Strayhorn, 2012). These short-term bridge programs serve as an important part of the recruitment and transition to college process but often fall short in supporting and retaining first-generation students throughout their undergraduate enrollment. The WELC model would address the diverse academic and social needs of vulnerable precollege and transfer students during the recruitment phase providing continuous and connected educational resources and support services upon admission to and throughout their undergraduate enrollment.

As a strategic recruitment tool designed to support first-generation students, WELC will be well-positioned to increase access to the university, improve learning outcomes, and promote student confidence and satisfaction. Ideally, first-generation precollege, first-time/first-year, and transfer students benefit from participation with WELC, developing a sense of belonging to the university community through consistent interaction with faculty, advisors, and enrollment coaches. The WELC support team will not only be technically capable to provide online instruction and support services but

well-versed in inclusive pedagogy, committed to building a high quality virtual learning environment, and sensitive to the needs of first-generation college students (Aguliera & Nightengale-Lee, 2020; Anderson & Dron, 2011; Guo et al., 2020).

WELC and Undergraduate Retention

As a comprehensive virtual learning community, WELC will be committed to supporting first-generation students throughout the recruitment, enrollment, and degree completion phases. Colleges and universities have a long history of compartmentalizing the students' educational journey promoting a bifurcated approach to recruitment and retention. The recruitment phase is most often owned by the Office of Undergraduate Admissions and Financial Aid focusing on the intake of first-time/first-year and transfer students with the educational experiences and retention of undergraduate students relegated to academic dean's offices and student affairs professionals. This linear hand-off of students from one side of the university to the other may make administrative sense and appear orderly but it often fails to acknowledge the students' need for more comprehensive, coordinated, and continuous support. This lack of coordination and continuity may negatively affect first-generation college student retention, persistence, and overall satisfaction.

While all 10 first-generation college students addressed the challenges associated with disconnected admission, orientation, and enrollment phases, five students credited intentionally designed pathway programs, residential learning communities, and cohort-based academic programs as helping them develop an early sense of belonging to the campus community, identify as a "real college student," and remain enrolled. Zoe, Grace, Danielle, Harry, and Kristen emphasized the importance of a supported transition

to college. By design, these community and campus-based initiatives welcomed these first-generation college students, affording them the opportunity to make a smoother transition to the university. That said, these transition programs and support services are designed to meet the academic and social needs of traditional aged first-time/first-year students who matriculate into the university directly upon graduation from high school, enroll as full-time students, and live on-campus.

So what happens to the other students who do not participate in supportive transition programs, are not welcomed into ready-made residential learning programs, and do not enroll in cohort-based academic programs? How does the university acknowledge their need for ongoing support regardless of their enrollment status as residential or commuting? How might WELC better support marginalized students such as Jade, Shay, Mary, Amy, and Lily who clearly articulated a poorly supported transition to campus, initial lack of sense of belonging to the university community, and difficulty identifying as a "real college student."

Recognizing the significant challenges associated with their unsupported transition to college, WELC will serve as a virtual enrichment learning community designed to welcome first-generation college students at the point of admission intake, transition to campus, and throughout their enrollment. Additionally, WELC will provide an important virtual space for faculty, student services professionals, commuting and residential students alike to interact, exchange ideas, offer and accept guidance, and support one another. Through virtual programming, workshops, orientation, advising and mentoring sessions, connection to campus-based resources and support services, these first-generation students are shepherded by well-trained faculty, staff, and peer mentors

to become members of the university community. Membership matters and the virtual enrichment learning community addresses the importance of access, equity, inclusion, and belonging.

While there are many important components to the WELC retention model, I would now like to emphasize the importance of a series of virtual first-year seminars that would welcome first-time/first-year residential, commuting, and transfer students alike. These virtual seminars would differ from the current residential learning community first-year seminars as they will be designed to attract and support more than just full-time and residentially enrolled first-time/first-year students. These seminars will be instructionally designed and technology-enabled to promote academic engagement, social interaction, and community development.

In addition to the virtual seminars, WELC will offer complimentary academic preparation, time management, study skills workshops, and subject area remediation such as algebra and writing to students throughout their undergraduate enrollment, recognizing the need for ongoing support. As students move through their undergraduate degree programs, their academic and support needs change. WELC would acknowledge their diverse and evolving needs, developing programs and support services pertaining to internship placements, career and pre-graduate/pre-professional school guidance, and field research. Maximizing campus-based academic, career, and other important support services, WELC will provide a virtual connection to existing resources via Microsoft Teams. This coordinated approach intends to increase access and improve learning outcomes for marginalized students without duplicating current university efforts.

All 10 students encouraged the university to adopt a new approach to supporting post-quarantined enrollment. Committed to in-person and hybrid instruction, these students appreciated the opportunity to connect via Microsoft Teams with their faculty advisor, dean's office, and financial aid counselor, etc. Many of the students noted greater interaction with these essential academic and administrative resources, fewer conflicts with work schedules, and feeling more empowered to ask for help. Ongoing access to virtual academic resources and support services resonated with all 10 participants, especially Jade, Shay, Amy, Lily, and Zoe who expressed feelings of frustration, intimidation, and judgement due to their lack of social capital as first-generation college students, low socio-economic standing, and race and ethnicity. Their narrative accounts describe often painful interactions with university administrative staff and student affairs professions who "judged them" and misunderstood their unique circumstance.

Other residential and campus-based participants such as Harry, Danielle, and Kristen also supported the need for ongoing virtual support services and online connection to enrollment and administrative departments. Due to off-campus housing, rigorous academic schedules, and full or part-time employment, they emphasized the need to have more options to engage with academic and administrative resources, including campus-based and virtual access. While choice was an important factor for these students who had lived on-campus and relied upon the campus infrastructure and community prior to the pandemic, they strongly encouraged the university to incorporate their experiences as emergency remote learners into more flexible and accessible virtual learning community that connects to campus-based resources and services.

WELC and Faculty, Knowledge Navigators, and Enrollment Coaches

Assigned during the recruitment phase, faculty advisors, enrollment coaches, and knowledge navigators play an important retention role staying with students throughout their undergraduate enrollment. As dedicated human resources, this dynamic and well-trained team provides continuous academic and social support to participants regardless of their in-person or online enrollment status. The WELC team will also serve as key liaisons to academic advisors, dean's offices, enrollment management and administrative units, and other student affairs departments.

As the literature indicates, faculty are central to the learning outcomes, persistence, and educational experiences of first-generation college students (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). Due to competing off-campus demands, work and family responsibilities, and fewer interactions with campus-based extra-curricular activities, first-generation college students often rely upon faculty and classroom connections to develop a sense of belonging to the university community and sustain their enrollment (Kim et al., 2020). This dynamic challenges faculty to not only recognize this populations' need for more instructional-based interaction, support, and engagement but also address them through innovative instructional design, inclusive pedagogy, assignments, and syllabi, peer engagement, and virtual office hours (Gillis & Krull, 2020). What had traditionally been the realm of dean's office staff, advisors, student affairs professionals, and residential life assistants left many faculty ill-prepared to acknowledge, address, and meet the needs of vulnerable student populations such as first-generation college students throughout emergency remote learning and beyond.

More typically, in the pre-pandemic era, faculty referred students with extracurricular needs to the university's non-academic supporting cast. This bifurcated approach to managing students is replicated throughout the university's recruitment, enrollment, and retention policies and practices with faculty squarely positioned within the classroom, laboratory, and research sectors and supports services surrounding the academic infrastructure. As previously mentioned, this bifurcated model left many of them on the periphery without access to support services. The pandemic and university's abrupt transition to remote learning accentuated an already fragmented learning environment. The participants' narrative accounts serve as testimony to an already tenuous educational environment in need of change. The profound impact emergency remote learning had on their academic and social experience as first-generation college students was clearly articulated throughout each interview. For many of the participants, the pandemic served as a tipping point exacerbating an often fragile connection to the campus community and fledgling college student identity. With their connection to the university suddenly dependent upon technology and access to reliable internet services, they all stressed the need for faculty to acknowledge and accept more responsibility and help them navigate an unprecedented and uncertain remote learning environment. They needed faculty to serve as primary liaisons to university resources and support services and fill the void created by a dismantled educational environment rooted in isolation, dark screens, and spotty internet connections. Most importantly, the 10 research participants stressed the need for faculty to care about them and their learning outcomes.

Mindful of this urgent educational circumstance and borrowing best practices from the university's residential learning communities, the WELC proposal relies upon

well-trained, technology-savvy, and innovative faculty who are sensitive to the needs of vulnerable populations such as first-generation college students. WELC faculty will instruct the first-year seminar and continue to advise the group throughout their undergraduate enrollment. This cohort-based approach will provide a virtual community regardless of the students' commuting, residential, or online enrollment status. Recognizing this important retention responsibility, WELC faculty will receive instructional design, technology, and inclusive pedagogy training and either additional compensation or course release. They will work directly with campus-based and online instructors, administrators, and WELC's professional advising team, enrollment coaches, and knowledge navigators to provide a comprehensive approach to meeting the academic and social needs of at-risk students.

Knowledge navigators serve as technology capable, student-centric, and virtually positioned versions of the classroom-based teaching assistant. Trained alongside WELC faculty, knowledge navigators will be well versed in technology and online instruction as well as inclusive instructional practices and the diverse academic and social needs of first-generation college students. They will be trained to provide academic support services, tutoring, and appropriate remediation. Central to WELC's goal of welcoming and supporting vulnerable students, knowledge navigators will be assigned to each seminar working directly with faculty and students to maximize the virtual learning experience providing technology support, promoting engagement, facilitating communication, and coordinating access to academic resources and support services. In collaboration with the WELC faculty, knowledge navigators will host review sessions, take comprehensive notes to be shared with students, offer time management and study

skills workshops, monitor online discussion boards and group projects, and help guide students through their transition to college. This virtual study assisted approach is designed to help at-risk students transition to the university, develop a sense of community, and instill strong academic and social skills that are applicable to all courses.

In addition to faculty and knowledge navigators, enrollment coaches will play an important role in supporting first-generation college students. Per this proposal, each student will be assigned an enrollment coach at the point of entering the admissions process. Like the faculty advisor, the enrollment coach will stay with the student throughout their undergraduate enrollment providing support pertaining to financial aid, billing, registration, transfer of credits, housing, and other important administrative needs. As a centralized support service, the enrollment coach will be well positioned to triage and interpret the students' need coordinating access to the appropriate academic and administrative offices. Lily, Shay, and Jade talked about their lack of language and difficulty navigating a profoundly different culture and environment. They developed significant mistrust of the university and adopted a "go it alone strategy" which further isolated them from the campus community, academic resources, and student support services. Positioned on the periphery, these students described a profound sense of otherness which was exacerbated by university's abrupt transition to emergency remote learning (Aguilera & Nightengale-Lee, 2020). They wanted the university to reach out to them, to care about their diminished academic and social experience due to the pandemic, and to foster a virtual connection via technology; thus the Wildcat Enrichment Learning Community proposal.

WELC and an Ethic of Care and Community

Central to the success and viability of this virtual learning community as a strategic recruitment and retention mechanism is its ability to promote a sense of belongingness among vulnerable student populations such as first-generation college students.

> Over time and through various experiences, students' sense of belonging, of personal acceptance, or having a rightful, valued place in a particular social context tends to stabilize and consistently influence one's commitments and behaviors. However, sense of belonging is 'still largely malleable and susceptible to influence in both positive and negative directions' (Goodenow, 1993b, p. 81). Disruption of one's need to belong can have negative consequences and individuals must engage again in activities and interactions that foster belongingness to regain a sense of acceptance and inclusion. Deprivation of belongingness needs often leads to diminished interest in life activities, loneliness, self-hatred, disengagement from life (often through suicide) or, in the context of education, disengagement from college through attrition. (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 23)

In keeping with Strayhorn's model, WELC will be intentionally positioned between these students' individual needs and their educational goals providing personal, financial, academic, and social support. Through investment in WELC, the university will manifest its commitment to supporting these students throughout their transition to college and undergraduate enrollment. WELC would be specifically designed to help at-risk residential, commuting, and transfer students such as Lily, Zoe, Jade, Danielle, Harry, Mary, Kristen, Grace, Amy, and Shay develop and maintain a sense of belonging to the university community and achieve their ultimate goal of earning a bachelor's degree.

Throughout the research interviews, these students clearly articulated the need for the university to do a better job of providing coordinated and comprehensive support. This was especially true of their emergency remote learning and post-quarantined educational phases but it also resonated with their precollege and transitional to college

experiences. While the pandemic and university's abrupt transition to emergency remote learning served as the perfect storm for these at-risk students, their narrative accounts described a profoundly tenuous and often challenging educational circumstance. They clearly called upon the university to listen carefully to their pre-pandemic, emergency remote learning, and post-quarantined experiences. They quite simply asked the university to care about them and help them complete their undergraduate degree programs.

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APPENDIX A

Research Participant Invitation

Date:

Dear XXX:

My name is Beth Taylor-Nolan. I am a doctoral student in the UVM Leadership and Policy Studies Program and I am conducting a qualitative research study. My research study is focused on the academic, social, and community experiences of first-generation college students who shifted to remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

You have been identified as a potential participant and I would like to invite you to participate in my research project. Participation will include one interview with optional follow up email, telephone, and/or technology enabled conversations via Microsoft Teams to clarify information, trends, and recommendations. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes and will be conducted via Microsoft Teams due to pandemic constraints. With your permission, interviews will be recorded for review and verification purposes. Interviews will be stored in Microsoft Teams in accordance with university data security protocols.

I plan to conduct these interviews during the months of February and March 2021. Optional interview follow-up will be conducted by end of the spring 2021 semester.

Participant identity and information will be confidential and I will work with you to ensure confidentiality throughout the process. There is no compensation for participation in this research project and you may withdraw from the study at any time and/or elect not to answer questions that you do not wish to answer.

I appreciate your consideration of becoming a research participant. Your academic, social, and community experiences as a remote student during this unprecedented and uncertain time are very important. Information gained throughout this study is intended to inform and improve the development and delivery of remote academic programming and support services.

Please let me know if you are willing to participate by January 30, 2021. I can also be reached at 802 343 1641 or via email Beth.Taylor-Nolan@uvm.edu. You may also reach out to my dissertation advisor, Dr. Deborah Hunter at dhunter@uvm.edu if you have additional questions.

Sincerely,

Beth Taylor-Nolan

Participant Confirmation

I agree to participate in this qualitative research study and per the invitation, I understand the nature, duration, and requirements associated with my participation.

I have also read and agree to the following *Confidentiality Statement*:

Confidentiality Statement

As a volunteer participant in this qualitative research study, keeping your identity, interview documents, and information confidential is of the utmost importance. I plan to provide you with an alternative name and way of identifying you as a research participant. All interview recordings, notes and associated documents will be maintained in accordance with the university's data security guidelines with any physical notes stored in my locked home office. At any point in time, you may request access to this information or request a change in identification. Your active participation and

verification of information collected throughout the interview process is essential and appreciated. You may also elect to stop participating in the research process at any time and for any reason.

I now request your verbal acknowledgement of this statement and agreement to participate.

APPENDIX B

Research Questions

I would like to explore your transition to college, pre-pandemic educational experience, transition to remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and what your experience was like throughout. Thanks for sharing your experience.

*In order to better understand your experience as a remote student throughout the pandemic, I would invite you to talk about your transition to college. Please describe your transition to college and what it was like for you as a first-generation college student?

*Let's shift gears a bit. Please describe your academic and social experience as a residential or commuting student prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and March 2020 transition to remote learning? What was college life like for you? Can you talk about your connection to the campus community?

*Describe your sense of connection to faculty, student support staff and peers throughout your transition to college and first year and a half (prior to the pandemic).

-Tell me about your involvement in academics, residential life, extracurricular activities, off-campus activities, employment, volunteer/community service, etc?

-Can you talk about who you interacted with on/off-campus and how they supported you as a student and/or community member?

*Ok let's focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, the March 2020 campus abrupt transition to remote learning? What was it like for you to leave campus and continue your coursework remotely? Can you describe your academic and social experience as a remote learner?

-How did you feel about having to leave campus?

-Assuming you moved back home or off-campus, what was/is it like to go back?

-Talk about your concerns, fears, and/or hopes for the future?

-What is your academic experience like? Has your interaction with your instructors, TAs, academic support staff changed?

- What challenges have you faced – technology, internet access, instructional connections, etc?

-What is your personal experience like? How have your interactions with peers, friends, campus community members changed? Talk about how your relationships and personal connections. Have they changed or remained the same?

*Now let's consider your connection to the campus-community – prior to the pandemic and throughout remote learning. I'd like to read a passage from a book by Terrell Strayhorn (2012) that I am relying upon throughout my research. Strayhorn addresses the importance of feeling connected to your educational experience and environment. Wondering/how this notion of belonging and connection resonates with you?

-"Sense of belonging generally refers to a feeling of connectedness, that one is important or matters to others, a feeling of fitting in. Sense of belonging is a feeling that members of the community matter to one another and to the group (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3)".

*What do you make of this notion of sense of belonging? Is being a member of a community either on campus or remote important to your student experience? Talk about

your community connection prior to the pandemic and now. Does community engagement and membership matter?

*So the university opted to allow students to make a choice regarding the 2020/2021 academic year – to return to in-person instruction or remain remote. What did you decide to do? Can you talk about this decision?

-Talk about your return to in-person or ongoing remote academic experience.

What was it like to make another transition? What was it like to remain online?

*Finally, let's talk about the future. What are you looking forward to? What recommendations do you have for the university? How might the university better support students? What lessons learned from the pandemic do you think higher education should pay attention to?