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Persistence Without Resistance: An Exploration of First-Generation College Students in a Structured Support Program

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Abstract

First-generation college students make up one-third of the undergraduate population of college students in the United States. It is essential to understand all aspects of a first-generation student, their desire to persist in college, and their experiences while in college. Once they are enrolled in college, first-generation students will need additional help and support to guide them throughout this life-changing experience. This study explored the experiences of 13 students enrolled in a program that is specifically designed for supporting first-generation college students academically and socially.

The study used a narrative qualitative research approach. The participants were interviewed to explore their experiences as first-generation college students from their own perspective and through their own lens. This study was guided by the social capital framework and utilized Tinto's theory of student departure and Astin's theory of student involvement theoretical frameworks. The findings from the study show the effectiveness of providing a structured program to support the students during their onset to the campus and throughout their college experience. The program provided the students with the opportunity to increase their social capital and gather the means to support their persistence by providing the necessary tools and resources.

This study will help faculty and administration to recognize the challenges these students face, and to develop innovative support programs and tools to help them attain educational success compared to non-first-generation students. The study also highlights the need to provide additional funding and support for programs that increase access and persistence for first-generation college students. As the literature review demonstrates, once first-generation students have access, support, and motivation, they can and will continue to bridge educational gaps!

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing tribe! I would like to especially thank my mother Cecilia and my father Bill for instilling and me the principles that I uphold today. You both have taught me to never give up, you taught me to be determined, and you taught to me be confident and to know that I can do anything that I set my mind to. I am so grateful to have two amazing supportive parents that I can always go to share my many ideas. Special thanks to my father for continuously ensuring that I set the foundation for anything that I seek to accomplish. Thank you to my brother Dallis for always challenging me and encouraging me to think outside the box.

Special thank you to my countless friends and family members who have supported me throughout these past years of the completion of my doctoral degree. I could not have accomplished this part of my educational journey without your unwavering love and support. To my sorors of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., thank you for your endless support and sisterhood! I look forward to spending more time with my friends and family.

My dissertation is also dedicated to my amazing godson, Kenzo, who at the age of 1 already has a love for reading books. I can't wait for the day you will be able to read this one!

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First, I would like to thank all of the participants of this study. This work would have not been possible without their willingness to provide their authentic stories and to dedicate their time to participation in this story. There are many people who have contributed to the successful completion of this dissertation.

I am especially thankful for my professor and committee member Dr. Katie Smith who provided me with guidance and the ability to apply a qualitative lens to this research. Thank you to Dr. Christopher Irving for guiding me toward the pursuit of this doctoral degree. I would not be in this program if it were not support for your support and guidance. Thank you to my mentor and committee chair Dr. Rong Chen for always advocating for me. Thank you for consistently providing me with the proper resources, tools, and knowledge needed to complete this dissertation, your unwavering support made this possible!

As a professional in higher education for over 12 years, I would like to thank the countless students whom I have encountered and supported throughout their academic journeys. Your drive and determination encouraged me to pursue this degree by studying the experiences of first-generation college students.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who helped to lay the foundation for my research. I am grateful to all of the scientists and researchers who have contributed to the body of knowledge pertaining to first-generation college students. Their earlier research inspired me to continue my own research and generate development ideas in large part because of it. I hope that this research serves as a guide to supporting first-generation college students, and as a resource for faculty, staff, and policymakers who support first-generation college students.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background—Who Are First-Generation Students?

Higher education's ever-changing features emphasize the growing population of first-generation college students, their characteristics, and what helps them persist in college. As reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 33.5% of undergraduate students had parents whose highest level of education was high school or less in the 2015–2016 school year. Yet, despite increasing research on the differences between first-generation and non-first-generation college students, little is known about what enables first-generation students to persist at a 4-year institution.

The Higher Education Act amendment of 1998 defines a first-generation college student as "(A) An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree, or (B) In the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree" (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, p. 3). The following statistics explain the percentages of undergraduate college students whose parents had a high school diploma or less education during the 2015–2016 school year in terms of race, sex, age, institution types, and income groups, thus providing a comprehensive explanation of who first-generation students are.

Research shows that there is a strong relationship between race/ethnicity, social class, and first-generation status, as African American and Latinx students are more likely to be first-generation students than White, Asian, or multiracial students (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Fischer, 2007; Wist-Mackey et al., 2018). First-generation students represent the following income groups: 31.1% of the lowest 25%, 23.4% of the middle 50%, and 17.5% of the highest 25% (NCES, 2019). Additionally, first-generation students tend to come from lower socioeconomic status and underrepresented racial minority groups (Evans, 2016; Martin Lohfink, & Paulsen,

2005). First-generation students who attended 4-year institutions in 2015–2016 represented the following: 38.5% of Hispanic students, 29.0% of Black African American students, 30.7% of American Indian students, 25.6% of Asian students, 16.7% of White students, 22.1% of Pacific Islander students, and 19.6% of students of two or more races (NCES, 2019). Due to these characteristics, first-generation students are more likely to experience unique barriers to persisting in college, as explained throughout Chapter 2.

Statement of the Problem

First-generation students make up one third of college students at 4-year institutions in the United States (NCES, 2018). First-generation students have different experiences than non-first-generation students. For example, first-generation students tend to have lower grade point averages and lower academic ambitions, and are they are more likely to leave college without a degree than are continuing-generation students (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Harackiewicz et al., 2014; Jury et al., 2017; Stephens et al., 2014). The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) also reported that one third of first-generation students dropped out of college after 3 years, compared to 14% of non-first-generation students whose parents had earned a degree.

Prior research indicates that significant barriers prevent persistence of first-generation students in college. Because their parents did not attend college, first-generation students may have limited access to information about how to prepare personally and academically for the college experience, and how or why to choose a college to attend (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). First-generation students may also have different experiences once enrolled; Pascarella et al. (2003) described first-generation students as being more likely to complete fewer credit hours; study less; take fewer courses in science, math, and the arts/humanities; have lower college grades; and work more hours per week. These factors play a major role in their collegiate experience.

First-generation college students face substantial obstacles to access, retention, and completion of higher education (Bean, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Wyner et al., 2007). Jury et al. (2017) found several perceived psychological barriers faced by first-generation and low-socioeconomic-status students, which prevent them from completing their degree. These potential perceived barriers include 1) emotional experiences (e.g., emotional distress, well-being); 2) identity management (e.g., sense of belonging); 3) self-perception (e.g., self-efficacy, perceived threat); and 4) motivation (e.g., achievement goals, fear of failure) (Jury et al., 2017). First-generation college students are more likely to have academic difficulties, face financial hardships, and encounter emotional challenges compared to the experiences of their non-first-generation peers (Evans et al., 2020). Hence, the need for support.

In light of these many obstacles and barriers, specialized support programs have been initiated and implemented for first-generation students to promote their success. Programs specifically for first-generation students provide an outlet of support where students can gain the skills they need to succeed in their collegiate experience. After many decades of struggle, the federal government created and funded programs that would support first-generation students who identify as low socioeconomic status. To address issues of lack of access to college and educational achievement, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964 (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Congress added an amendment to the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1998, a section that would have targeted cohorts of disadvantaged low-income and first-generation students. The programs include the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), TRIO Programs, and Pell grants.

TRIO programs have a proven track record of supporting low-income and first-generation students by providing them with the additional support and resources they need to

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embark on their unique paths to lifelong success. (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Because these programs provide various support services like counseling and additional academic support, they enable students to remain on the right track to graduation. Quinn et al. (2019) studied first-generation college students' success in a TRIO student support services program; the participants reported that TRIO programs provided them with both formal and informal support that was needed for their growth and development both personally and academically. They also reported that the academic support helped them to manage their course work and provided additional support with tutoring. Simultaneously, personal support enabled them to openly and freely ask questions that they may have been afraid to ask someone else.

Subsequently, TRIO programs led to the development of educational opportunity outreach programs that support first-generation college students and are not federally funded. Institutions began to develop their own pipeline and summer bridge programs with the aim to increase student enrollment and eventual success in higher education (Strayhorn, 2011). Providing such structured programs also increased student retention and academic achievement in college compared to their peers who did participate in a pipeline/summer bridge program (Felder et al., 1995; Fletcher et al., 2001; Garcia, 1991; Moller-Wong & Eide, 1997; Strayhorn, 2011). Undeniably, more research on the experiences of the first-generation college students in pipeline and summer bridge programs needs to be conducted.

Gaps in the Literature

This study explored the experiences of students enrolled in a pipeline program supported by federal TRIO funds. The program also offers a summer bridge component that provides incoming freshman with additional support and preparation for their first year of college (as explained further in Chapter 3). This research will aid in development of data on the experiences of first-generation college students in structured support programs. A limitation of this study was

that it took place at a 4-year university in the northeastern United States; students could have had different experiences if this study had taken place in an urban inner-city university. Consequently, several topics can be explored further to understand first-generation students' experiences as they persist through college. Understanding the gaps in the literature will enable the understanding of phenomena.

Gaps in the literature need to be addressed both for the student experience and for institutions to set the standard for providing support programs. There needs to be more research on the development of programs for first-generation college students and the components that provide support and resources that encourage students to persist. For the students, there needs to be more research on their mental health and perhaps their families to best support them as well. Stebleton et al. (2014) addressed the concern that little research has been done regarding whether first-generation students may experience different levels of stress related to mental due to the transition to the new environment of a college campus and the overall experience. Their study revealed that first-generation college students report lower ratings of belonging, greater levels of depression/stress, and lower use of services compared to their continuing-generation peers (Stebleton et al., 2014). Qualitative research that focuses on student experiences is necessary in order to better understand students' use of structured programs and additional needs such as mental health care.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to understand the experiences of current first-generation college students in order to explore what success factors influence their persistence during their college career. The study specifically explored the experiences of first-generation college students in structured support programs at a private 4-year institution in order to understand the obstacles and challenges that students face, as well as programmatic structures that support first-generation

students' success within the context of one institution. Although many first-generation support programs have been implemented in U.S. colleges and universities, little is known about what has worked and what can be improved upon for this group of students.

Significance of the Study

It is essential to understand all aspects of a first-generation student, their desire to persist in college, and their experiences while in college. Once they are enrolled in college, first-generation students will need additional help and support to guide them throughout this life-changing experience. This study is significant because it aimed to understand aspects of a first-generation student, their desire to persist in college, and their experiences while in college. It examined the experiences of students already in a program that was specifically designed to support first-generation college students both academically and socially. Exploring the students in this program that already exists showed its beneficial factors as well as areas of improvement for future programs to be established. This study will help faculty and administration to recognize the challenges these students face and develop innovative support programs and tools to help them attain educational success comparable to non-first-generation students. As this literature review demonstrates, once first-generation students have access, support, and motivation, they can and will continue to bridge educational gaps.

Theoretical Perspective

Understanding the experience of a first-generation college student can be elucidated by Tinto's departure theory and Astin's student involvement. Simultaneously, understanding why first-generation students go to college is explained by the social capital framework, which demonstrates that networks of relationships can help students manage the college experience if they are provided with relevant information, guidance, and emotional support (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Hence, this framework is essential for examining the experiences of first-

generation students who may have limited access to social networks where college information is available, and who may seek these resources while in college in order to succeed. Moschetti & Hudley (2015) emphasized how first-generation college students need more assistance than their affluent peers in order to make a successful transition to college, yet have difficulty finding assistance and support on campus due to the relative absence of individuals who possess postsecondary knowledge and experience.

Tinto's Model of Student Departure Theory

Tinto (1990) clarified how students who stay involved with established retention programs on campus will be able to establish personal bonds among their student peers, faculty, and administration (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). Hence it is important to acclimate first-generation students into the college environment very early on. Tinto evolved his 1993 model of student departure theory which describes academic integration and societal integration as essential to a student's persistence (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's theory of academic integration explains the correlation between a student's participation in college life academically and socially, as well as connections with other students and whether they are more likely to leave the institution without completing their education (White, 2019). Understanding why a student departs college is important to developing ways to help retain students so that they can persist academically.

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement

To adequately describe the significance of student engagement on campus (for example, in structured support programs), Alexander Astin's theory of student involvement (1993, 1999) highlighted the benefit of student involvement in extracurricular activities outside of the classroom. Astin's theory affirmed that students who get involved in campus life and activities are more likely to stay in college and persist to reach their academic goals (White, 2019). The

basic elements of Astin's theory highlight the significance of student involvement in college based on three areas of students' lives: inputs, environments, and outcomes. In essence, these are needed for students to persist through college. The inputs refer to the student's demographics, the environment refers to the experiences the student has in college, and the outcomes are what they learn and what they take away from their experiences. Astin's student involvement theory, Tinto's departure theory, and the social capital framework guided this study and are explained in Chapter 2.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design to answer the primary research question:

What experiences influence the success of first-generation college students who participate in a structured support program?

Use of a narrative research design allowed for in-depth interviews to identify the experiences of first-generation students as they persist through college. The study consisted of 13 interviews of students who are part of a structured first-generation academic student support program at one private 4-year institution in the northeastern United States.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions are used:

*First-generation***.** The Higher Education Act amendment of 1998 defines a first-generation college student as "(A) An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree, or (B) In the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree."

Higher education. The stage of learning that follows the completion of secondary education (high schools) and takes place at colleges and universities.

Retention. The ability to remain resolutely in one's professional position in spite of opposition or importunity; the behavior to keep going despite obstacles.

Socioeconomic status. An individual's or group's position within a hierarchical social structure. Socioeconomic status depends on a combination of variables including occupation, education, income, wealth, and place of residence.

Underrepresented. Insufficient or inadequate representation.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 offers a multifaceted study review exploring the common obstacle variables faced by first-generation students and the existing research on program support for first-generation students. The theoretical approach to this analysis is explored in detail in Chapter 2. Using a narrative qualitative research approach, Chapter 3 explains the research design and procedure for analysis. The study results are discussed in depth in Chapter 4, and the study findings, practical consequences, and suggestions for future research on first-generation students are explained in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

Although extensive research on first-generation college students has been done, it is essential that we delve into their experiences of the factors that support them to persist throughout their undergraduate experience. This chapter first reviews the research on first-generation students' backgrounds and their motivations to go to college. Next it reviews the literature on barriers to persisting throughout college faced by first-generation students. Finally, the chapter examines the historical background of student success programs and gaps in the literature, and explains the guiding theoretical concepts/frameworks.

First-Generation Students' Persistence

Going to college is viewed as a way to better oneself by gaining the tools and resources needed to develop long-term financial gains and career support. In essence, one's life earnings impact health and mortality, retirement income security, and social mobility, all of which can be obtained by landing in a stable career by means of a college degree (Tsai et al., 2020). When Cooperative Institutional Research Program surveyed incoming college freshmen about why they decided to attend college, the number one answer (85% in 2017) was "to be able to get a better job" (Johnson, 2017). Typically, people desire to go to college, get a good job, and have a decent income once they graduate (Rampell, 2015). Other reasons for students attending college include learning more about things that interest them, training for a specific career, and gaining a general education and appreciation of ideas (Rampell, 2015).

Despite the benefits, many first-generation students experience barriers to attending and persisting through college. For the purpose of this study, a barrier signifies something that prevents movement or access in the college experience. Astin and Oseguera (2004) found that students from a non-first-generation family were three times more likely to enroll at a highly

selective institution than students with educated parents and some college, and five times more likely than a first-generation student whose parents had no college education.

Academic Barriers

Preparing for college can be a struggle for any college-bound student, but especially so for those whose parents are not familiar with the processes that need to be completed. As first-generation students are more likely to come from low-income homes/neighborhoods (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021), they are more likely to attend poor quality elementary/secondary schools with more limited financial resources, less qualified teachers, and limited academic and support resources (Phillips, 2015). Because of the lack of resources in secondary education, first-generation students are less likely to persist in college. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that the caliber of secondary education academic preparation was strongly related to a student's likelihood to enroll in college; 87% of those who took rigorous academic coursework persisted and only 62% of those who did not attend college (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Additionally, first-generation students are unlikely to have the ability to prepare properly for college by taking the SATs/ACTs and understanding the significance of taking college preparatory coursework due to lack of resources (Vargas, 2004). Atherton (2014) found that the odds of first-generation students scoring above average on the SAT verbal test were 48% higher for students when both parents graduated from college and 32% higher when one parent graduated from college. With these barriers prior to even getting into college, first-generation students also have difficulty with adjustment to college.

First-generation students report less social and academic satisfaction while in college compared to non-first-generation college students (Mehta et al., 2011). Due to the lack of support in high school and lack of college preparation, first-generation students often require developmental coursework, typically in math and English (Falcon, 2015). Thirty-six percent of

first-generation students reported taking a remedial class after high school, compared to 28% of their peers whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree (PNPI, 2021). Nevertheless, there is a strong correlation between students' positive social/academic assimilation, family support, and students' college success (Falcon, 2015). First-generation students need to work to find support services and resources to support them on campus. Academic interactions and engagements with college administrators, advisors, and faculty who are supportive, accessible, and motivational increase first-generation students' connection and transition to college, which also contributes to higher grades and academic success (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Falcon, 2015; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014).

Adjustment to College

Adjusting to college can be difficult for any college student, yet even more of a challenge for first-generation students because they are more likely to be less prepared academically (D'Amico & Dika, 2013; Engle et al., 2006; Evans, 2016; Warburton et al., 2001). With their high levels of stress, vulnerability, and other perceived psychological barriers associated with college adjustment, this process can be extremely overwhelming (Hertel, 2002). Adjustment to college refers to how a student becomes acclimated to the college environment physically, mentally, and socially. Hertel (2002) referred to full-scale college adjustment as: (a) self-efficacy, (b) locus of control, (c) social support from all friends on campus and off, and (d) achievement motivation. For the purpose of this paper, *self-efficacy* refers to the student's belief in their own ability to achieve. Compared to non-first-generation students who receive advice and support about attending college from their parents, first-generation students do not have that same support, which makes it extremely difficult for them to adjust to college. With this in mind, first-generation college students are also less likely to ask for help and seek support services (Wist-Mackey et al., 2018).

Hertel (2002) studied the differences in adjustment to college among first-generation students compared to second-generation students (students whose parents did attend college). The study consisted of a sample size of 130 first-year students at a midwestern public university who were surveyed about their experiences in college. Because of their parents' prior experience with college, second-generation students are less likely to have the same difficulties as first-generation students. Overall, Hertel (2002) found that second-generation students reported significantly greater social adjustment than first-generation students because they have received more social support, have been on a college track in high school, have a greater focus on college activities, and have more financial resources. Hertel (2002) further explained that variables such as a student's culture, parental values, parental income, and friends are important factors in adjustment to college.

Sense of Belonging

As the adjustment period can be a challenge for many first-generation students, it is imperative that they also feel like they belong to the community. A sense of belonging refers to a need or desire to be connected through formal and informal interactions (Tovar et al., 2009). Strayhorn (2018) defined a college student's sense of belonging as:

> students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of
> connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted,
> respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on
> campus such as faculty, staff, and peers.

First-generation students deal with many barriers related to issues involved in being the first in their family to pursue a college degree; these include dealing with cultural, social, and academic transition challenges (Stebleton et al., 2014). With these challenges, first-generation students may feel less like they belong on campus compared to their non-first-generation peers. Tovar et al. (2009) found that there is a strong relationship between a student's sense of

belonging as it affects their academic and social integration into the college setting and their persistence, which impacts their retention and graduation. Overall, the greater the sense of belonging for the student—both academically and socially—the more likely it is that the student will persist toward graduation (Hoffman et al., 2002, 2003; Stebleton et al., 2014).

Strayhorn (2012) emphasized the fact that on-campus administrators and faculty are key elements in students' development of their sense of belonging. He further explained that students want to feel like they matter and that they are important, which will lead to higher levels of engagement in and out of the classroom. Strayhorn's models approach a social cognitive perspective on the importance of a motivational framework that will keep students satisfied by motivating them to want to complete college and to be engaged on campus. Accordingly, this leads for a sense of belonging and their relationship to connecting with the college experience.

Campus Engagement

Mehta et al. (2011) found that first-generation students are less involved in student clubs and organizations on campus, have less social and financial support, and do not show a preference for active coping strategies to support them throughout their collegiate experience. However, since first-generation students are faced with various financial struggles, they are more likely to live off campus and work more hours, which reduces their ability to be a part of on-campus activities (Dennis et al., 2005; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Lundberg et al., 2007; Mehta et al., 2011; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation students are also more likely to be enrolled in college part-time. Forty-eight percent of first-generation students attended college part-time, compared to 38% of students whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree. This aspect could play a role in their lack of engagement because they are not on campus as much as a full-time student (PNPI, 2021).

Campus engagement is important because there are many opportunities outside of the classroom that enable students to grow in a holistic way. A student's level of involvement in their activities includes factors such as having to balance work, academic needs, family, friends, and hobbies, which can be measured by the amount of time they spend on each activity (Mehta et al., 2011). Astin (1984, 1993, 1999) found that success in college is related to the quality and frequency of student involvement in college experiences. This means that the activities or responsibilities in their lives that keep the students away from campus have a negative effect on their learning outside of the classroom because they will ultimately have less time and energy for on-campus involvement (Astin, 1993). For a successful academic and social transition, a student's involvement in the full college experience is needed (Astin, 1984; Inkelas et al., 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993).

Peer Interactions

First-generation students feel like it is hard for them to make friends and fit in because of their background and where they come from. Falcon (2015) described the reasons that first-generation students are more likely to have limited communication and interactions with peers and faculty/staff, including the perception of lack of similar interests, experiences, and resources. These barriers make it extremely difficult for first-generation students to get involved and fully acclimated into the college experience. Hertel (2002) found that first-generation college students are more likely to live off campus, find their friends off campus, belong to fewer college organizations, work more hours per week, and suffer from lack of structural integration (the student's ability to assimilate to the campus experience while also balancing the pressures of off-campus friends and family and on-campus commitments) (Hertel, 2002). These experiences make it a challenge for students to get fully acclimated to the college experience in order to connect with their peers who could possibly support them personally and academically.

Family Support

Family support is a valuable part of a first-generation college student's experience. Although their family members may not have the proper tools to help students navigate the college trajectory, they are still able to provide emotional support for the student. First-generation students are often more likely to perceive their parents as less supportive and less encouraging during the preparation process and throughout the experiences in college (Billson & Terry, 1982; Choy, 2001; Mehta et al., 2011; Rodriguez, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). This is because their parents are less likely to understand these processes and how they affect their children. Typically, first-generation students have a strong sense of familial obligation, and are more likely to pursue their college degree as a means to gain more financial stability and to contribute financially to their families (Falcon, 2015). The financial burden on the students' families makes it hard for students to focus on their academics and college in general. Sandoval-Lucero et al. (2014) found that first-generation students perform better academically and socially when they do not have to worry about supporting their families financially, have fewer household responsibilities, and have moral support and encouragement from their families.

Psychological Barriers

With the amount of stress involved in just preparing for college, first-generation students are more likely to feel the burden throughout their college career based on their prior experiences mentioned above. Jury et al. (2017) found that several perceived psychological barriers prevent first-generation students from being more successful. These include 1) emotional experiences (e.g., emotional distress, well-being); 2) identity management (e.g., sense of belonging); 3) self-perception (e.g., self-efficacy, perceived threat); and 4) motivation (e.g., achievement goals, fear of failure) (Jury et al., 2017). First-generation students generally exhibit higher levels of self-

reported depression and lower levels of self-reported well-being, and are more likely to report having fewer opportunities to talk about their negative experiences while in college (Jury et al., 2017; Padgett et al., 2012). These experiences make them more likely to feel guilty about their educational achievement, which may be subpar compared to their peers (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Jury et al., 2017).

Several aspects of mental health issues relate to first-generation students. As mentioned, first-generation students feel like they don't fit in or relate to the college experience. they may exhibit negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors directly related to feeling as though they are socially devalued, which affects their personal life and their academic satisfaction (Jury et al., 2017; Lott, 2012). As a result of these feelings, the students are less likely to be motivated to succeed mentally and physically. Accordingly, first-generation students do need a lot of support to receive the tools and resources that they need to be successful and to graduate in a timely manner, which is essential to understanding how they adjust to college. Moreover, first-generation students are also less likely than continuing-generation students to have information regarding financial preparation for college. As a result, first-generation students may be more susceptible to financial stress, which can hinder persistence in degree completion (Eitel & Martin, 2009).

Support Programs for First-Generation College Students

Given the social and academic barriers, specialized programs for first-generation students were created to promote their success. Programs specifically for first-generation students provide an outlet of support for students to gain all of the skills that they need to be successful in their college experience.

The Higher Education Act of 1965 authorized the establishment of federal student aid programs that assist students, their families, and postsecondary institutions of higher education

with financing the cost of a postsecondary education and provide federal support to postsecondary institutions of higher education (Pell Institute, 2008). The Higher Education Act's major policy outcome was the implementation of several federal programs that enable access to college.

The Higher Education Act also led to the development of TRIO programs. TRIO began under the first Higher Education Act of 1965; its first initiative, Upward Bound, was soon followed by the initiatives of Talent Search, Student Support, Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, and Educational Opportunity Centers (EOC), all of which were designed to assist students to begin and complete a postsecondary education (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). The TRIO program was the first program to set forth the criteria that students had to be a first-generation college student and reviewed the students' prior poor academic performance for college access (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). These requirements were groundbreaking as they brought more attention to the origin and impact of nonfinancial barriers to access and success in postsecondary education for students who were educationally disadvantaged (McElroy & Armesto, 1998).

Signed into public law by President Bill Clinton under the 1998 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, GEAR UP was an initiative intended to help extend college opportunity to low-income students by providing secondary school systems with a financial incentive to ensure that every child was exposed to a precollege curriculum (Bausmith & France, 2012; Fields, 2001). GEAR UP awards 6-year grants to states and district partnerships to provide services at high-poverty middle schools and high schools (Bausmith & France, 2012).

Currently GEAR UP programs serve more than 1 million students across the United States and have shown positive evidence of improving college readiness outcomes for low-

income and first-generation students (Bausmith & France, 2012; Fields, 2001). A study by Yampolskaya et al. (2006) found that students who participated in the GEAR UP program had problems with academic performance and behavior, and examined the differences between at-risk students whose participation in the program varied by the amount of time they spent in activities as a result of their participation. They found that students who participated in the program were more likely to help the students both academically and behaviorally and contribute to their success in high school, which will enable them to persist in college (Yampolskaya et al., 2006).

The Upward Bound program has shown proven effectiveness with the number of students that have completed the program to matriculate to a higher education setting. The purpose of the Upward Bound (UB) program is to provide high school students with the skills and motivation necessary to enter and complete a program of secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). In a historical longitudinal study, Balz & Esten (1998) reported that the Upward Bound program's effectiveness is explained by the increased numbers of baccalaureate degrees earned among first-generation and low-socioeconomic-status students, providing early intervention and addressing barriers to academic achievement. Balz & Esten (1998) reported that over 30% of TRIO students received their baccalaureate degree within 10 years after high school graduation compared to 13% of the non-TRIO population. Also, 68.4% of TRIO participants enrolled in 4-year colleges and universities rather than 2-year institutions compared to 41.0% of low-income, first-generation college, non-TRIO study participants. Overall, the programs' outcomes are proven by the success of the students who receive higher education.

Overall, the programs under the HEA were (and still are today) highly effective in the enrollment and retention of first-generation and low-socioeconomic-status students. Pitre & Pitre

(2009) further explained, "increasing low-income and underrepresented ethnic/racial background student participation in education beyond high school has been an important national public policy goal" (p. 97), which the TRIO programs have made accessible for those students. In essence, without the programs, many students would never have had access to receive higher education or to be able to afford it. TRIO programs have a proven track record of supporting low-income and first-generation students in access to college and graduation from college. Because these programs provide a variety of support services like counseling and additional academic support, they enable students to remain on the right track to graduation.

Perna (2015) explained that there are many positive effects of TRIO programs on students' college-related success; for example, promoting persistence in college, college credit accrual, and grades. Maynard et al. (2014) found that TRIO and other college access programs increased college enrollment by an average of 12 percentage points. Such programs provide students with the social capital needed to obtain college enrollment as well as additional resources that support students financially and socially. Hence, these programs enable students to develop a passionate attitude and belief about college, resulting in a positive outcome (Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Tym et al., 2004).

Retention Programs for First-Generation College Students

Tym et al. (2004) put forth the idea that some of the main components of successful academic programs are offering personalized attention to each student, adult role models, scholarship assistance, and peer support. Integrating programs within K–12 schools, creating a bridge between school and society, and making long-term investments in the students are also important components (Tym et al., 2004). Because of this, 60% of low-income first-generation students who leave college without attaining a degree do so after the first year (Engle & Tinto, 2008). It is imperative to get these students into structured support programs early to ensure that

they are given the proper guidance, support, and resources they need to succeed throughout their college experience.

Engle & Tinto (2008) explained that implementing strategies such as bridge courses and programs during the summer between high school and college, orientation, courses before and during the freshman year, and first-year learning communities are proven to ease the transition to college, and will assist students in their adjustment into the social and academic aspects of the institutions (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Lotkowski et al., 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Smith et al., 2004; Tinto, 2003; Upcraft et al., 2004). These structured support programs are an excellent resource for students because they provide the extra support needed from the very beginning to improve their satisfaction and retention while in college. Effective retention programs aid students to ensure that they can integrate into the academic community and feel supported for their efforts in order to build their sense of belonging in college (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). Consequently, it is imperative to recognize the barriers and to know that a number of topics can be explored further to best understand the experiences of first-generation students as they persist through college.

Gaps in Prior Research

So far, this chapter reviewed first-generation students' experiences while exploring various barriers they face, including lack of preparation for college, lack of social support from family and peers, and mental health issues. More importantly, the chapter also included a review of empirical studies regarding how student support programs have affected first-generation students' persistence in college.

There are several gaps in prior studies of first-generation students that could be explored in future studies. More research on these topics will reveal different experiences that could be used to better understand different groups of first-generation students. Understanding first-

generation students has been a topic of growing interest for many educators and resources. One of the limitations of this study was that while college student persistence and the effects of student support programs on first-generation students have been studied, there is limited research about how student support programs are effective in promoting student success in college, especially first-generation students' persistence. Also, among the few studies that looked at first-generation students' persistence, it is unclear how student support programs work for them academically and what areas could be improved, as were reviewed in this study.

This study of first-generation college students in structured academic support programs explored what students perceive as having supported their persistence in the programs, and which areas of support they perceive could be improved. The research will be used a learning tool for college-bound students, their families, and administrators as means to provide resources that will best support student success and student retention.

Theoretical Framework

To answer the above research question, three theories comprised this study's framework: social capital, Tinto's theory of student departure, and Astin's theory of student involvement.

Social Capital

In general, capital refers to an individual's skills, knowledge, and assets (Bourdieu, 1986; Weber, 2016; Yosso, 2005). Bourdieu et al.'s definition of social capital suggests a variety of approaches that create the status quo in higher education and in society. The social capital framework explains that networks of relationships can help college students to manage the college experience if they are provided with relevant information, guidance, and emotional support (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Bourdieu (1985) defined social capital as the collective of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a robust network of more institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 248).

This framework is essential for examining the experiences of first-generation students of low socioeconomic status who enroll in college to create the social network needed to succeed in society. Moschetti & Hudley (2015) emphasized how first-generation college students need more assistance than their affluent peers in order to make a successful transition to college, yet they have difficulty finding assistance and support on campus due to their lack of social capital (including individuals who hold postsecondary knowledge and experience).

Ultimately, one's resources and networks prior to the collegiate experience make it possible for one to enroll in college (Rowan-Kenyon, 2016). The primary aspects of social capital that relate to a student's higher education are measured by parental involvement, financial aid resources, and support in high school. Due to their lack of those primary means, low-socioeconomic-status students are less likely than high-socioeconomic-status students to attend college immediately after high school (Mishra, 2020; Rowan-Kenyon, 2016; St. John, 2003). Of the various primary means of social capital, researchers have found that parent involvement is strongly correlated to increased likelihood of a student's aspiration to enroll in and attend college (Horn, 1998; Hossler et al., 1989, 1999; Perna, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005). Parent involvement includes interaction with their child about schoolwork/homework, college prep, and interaction with the school/teachers.

Tinto's Theory of Student Departure

Social capital is essential to understanding students' experiences, but it is not specific to student retention and departure. Tinto's theory of student departure dives into the exploration of what may cause a student to depart from their post-secondary education. Regardless of school type, gender, and race, it is essential for college students to stay engaged with all aspects of their campus community and for them to feel connected and want to stay at that institution. Tinto (1990) stated:

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> Students are more likely to stay in schools that involve them as valued members of the institution. The frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff and other students have repeatedly been shown to be independent predictors of student persistence. (p. 5)

Tinto (1990) clarified that students who stay involved with retention programs on campus will be able to establish personal bonds among their student peers, faculty, and administration (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). Hence it is important to acclimate first-generation students into the college environment very early on. Tinto's 1993 model of student departure theory describes academic integration and societal integration as essential to a student's persistence (Tinto, 1993). His version of academic integration refers to student participation in college life both academically and socially, and points out that students must connect with other students; otherwise, they are more likely to leave the institution and fail to complete their education (White, 2019). Understanding why a student departs college is important in developing ways to help retain students so that they can persist academically.

Tinto's theory revolves around three obstacles that cause students to leave school: academic difficulties, inability to reach academic and occupational goals, and failure to connect and stay connected with the institution. Thus, due to a deficit educational experience at the secondary level, first-generation students are likely to need more academic support in college, which makes it hard for them to keep up with the caliber of academic coursework. They face the obstacle of trying to balance their personal and academic obligations while staying connected with the campus community to develop meaningful experiences. White (2019) described how meaningful experiences for students to stay connected outside the classroom can include joining a club, organization, or study group; utilizing support services; or spending more time on campus overall.

Although this theory is well respected in higher education, Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice (2008) tested Tinto's theory and found that not every first-generation college student is able to participate in experiences outside the classroom that are crucial for the successful retention of students. Yet, Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice (2008) suggested that institutions should provide additional support for first-generation college students (for example, providing them with additional academic support from their professors and providing the opportunity for mentorship); hence the need for effective retention programs for first-generation college students. Effective retention programs provide students with the additional resources and support they need to help them graduate.

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement

To adequately describe the significance of student engagement on campus, Alexander Astin's theory of student involvement (1993, 1999) highlighted students' need to be involved with extracurricular activities outside of the classroom. Astin's theory affirmed that students who get involved in campus life and activities are more likely to stay in college and persist in reaching their academic goals (White, 2019). The fundamental element of Astin's theory highlights the significance of student involvement in college based on three aspects of students' lives: inputs, environments, and outcomes. He described the inputs as demographic characteristics, the environment as experiences in college, and the outputs as student learning outcomes (Astin, 1991; Strayhorn, 2008). Astin's involvement theory and I-E-O model hypothesized that outcomes of the college experience are a result of the student's investment of their time and energy into their college experience.

However, first-generation college students are less likely to be involved outside of the classroom compared to their non-first-generation peers (Lundberg et al., 2007). According to Lundberg et al. (2007), first-generation college students are solely interested in pursuing a

degree, are more likely to commute to campus, and are more invested in how they spend their time off campus to support themselves and their families. With their major family commitments, first generation college students are employed more hours, have lower incomes, and have more financial dependents than their continuing-generation counterparts, leaving them with little time for involvement in college experiences outside of the classroom (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Lundberg et al., 2007). Therefore, additional support is needed for first-generation college students outside of the classroom.

First-generation college students are also more likely to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and do not have the same luxuries as their continuing-generation counterparts. Many extracurricular college activities are linked to social class, race, and ethnicity, therefore students of color and first-generation students face challenges pertaining to involvement in their college experience (Lundberg et al., 2007). Therefore, Astin's (1984) theory is critiqued for its "assimilation/acculturation framework" that underestimates the cost of involvement for minority students (Lundberg et al., 2007; Rendón et al., 2000). Conversely, Tinto's (1994) student departure theory has also been criticized for its lack of focus on minority students as a collective (Lundberg et al., 2007; Tierney, 1992). Despite the criticism of the theories, they promote understanding of aspects of the college student experience.

To summarize, understanding first-generation students' connection with the collegiate experience and retention can be understood using social capital, Tinto's departure theory, and Astin's student involvement theory. These approaches relate to one another by explaining the first-generation college student's experiences and what they need to persist in college.

Conclusion

First-generation students make up one third of college students in the United States. It is essential to understand all aspects of a first-generation student, their desire to persist in college,

and their experiences while in college. Once they are enrolled in college, they will need additional help and support to best guide them throughout this life-changing experience.

It is vital that faculty and administration recognize the challenges these students face and develop innovative support programs and tools that will help them to attain educational success comparable to that of non-first-generation students. As this literature review demonstrated, first-generation college students who overcome the barriers they face are more likely to be successful post-graduation. When first-generation students have access, support, and motivation, they can and will continue to bridge educational gaps.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This study explored the experiences of first-generation students who persist through college and are enrolled in a structured support program. The study also analyzed the success factors that influence first-generation students' persistence during their college career, what obstacles and challenges exist for first-generation students, and what higher education institutions do to support and help first-generation students. Finally, the study also explored the experiences of first-generation college students in structured support programs at 4-year institutions.

The guiding research question in this study was: What are the experiences of first-generation college students in a structured support program?

Research Design

The results of this study are presented using a narrative qualitative research design, an effective way to describe the lives of a single person as told through their own eyes and worldviews by getting to know the person's perspective. The narrative approach for this study collected stories from the students regarding how they see and gain a greater understanding of their lived experiences (Patton, 2002; Stuhlmiller, 2001).

This design also allowed for in-depth questioning of the students to discern what their experiences are as they persist through college. With the narrative design, I gained access to substantial data from the students about the situations, feelings, perceptions, and experiences that have taken place throughout their lives (Stuhlmiller, 2001). This research was needed to provide evidence of how students' resources can best support first-generation students' enrollment and retention in college.

Although there are other types of qualitative research designs such as ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, and case study, the narrative design was the best fit for this study. A narrative inquiry allows for the stories themselves to become the raw data by collecting narratives of human experience or inquiry that produces the data in narrative form (Butina, 2015). Narrative researchers utilize a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space comprised of interaction, continuity, and situation to explain the participants' stories (Caine et al., 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As a narrative researcher, the researcher becomes a part of the participants' lives by describing and presenting their experiences (Caine et al., 2013). Clandinin & Connelly (2000)) explained how imagination plays a role as it influences our lives and stories; to live is how we understand and construct a narrative account. This style of inquiry provides a way to highlight the importance of each participant's story through their open-ended conversation as they share their experiences. The goal of this study was to gain insight into the experiences of first-generation college students in a structured support program; the collection of their experiences provided an understanding of the program's impact on their persistence through college. Therefore narrative methods were a good fit for this study.

Undoubtedly, quantitative data such as surveys are already collected to explain the experiences and perspectives of first-generation college students (Toutkoushian et al., 2018), but leave the voices of this population unheard. Therefore, it was essential to provide a narrative account of first-generation college students' experiences in higher education. With this approach I was able to explore how the participants' families, resources, networks, and the first-generation program provided by their institution played a role in their college experiences. Policymakers and higher education leaders need to better understand first-generation college students' lived

experiences and how a program specifically designed for first-generation college students can enhance their persistence.

Research Site

This study focuses on the experiences of 13 students from a midsize 4-year private university located in the northeastern United States. The institution was a Catholic university, home to over 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students and offering more than 90 rigorous majors. The undergraduate enrollment consists of 6,000 students; 80% of first-year students live on campus; the diversity rate is 48%, 53% female, and 47% male. Students came from all over the world and represented 47 U.S. states. One in every four freshmen is a first-generation college student at this institution, a Predominantly White University (PWI) that is now considered a first-generation serving institution. First-generation serving institutions are discussed in Chapter 5.

Due to the demand to support first-generation college students, the institution created a department to focus on first-year initiatives that began to develop bridge programs to support a first-generation college student's transition to college. The institution currently offers two programs to support current first-generation college students. The first program is a federally funded program that requires students to reside in the state where the university is located and also mandates that students come from educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The second of the two programs was selected for this study—the Raise program developed and run by the university.

The Program

The institution was selected based on the availability of a first-generation students' support program. According to the institution, a first-generation college student has no parent or guardian who holds a bachelor's degree or higher. This institution's first-generation student program aims to ensure that the first-generation students at the university have a clear sense of

belonging and understand the skills needed for college-level work. In this study, the pseudonym used for the program was the "Raise program." The Raise program emphasizes a plan to provide academic, professional, and social support that includes tutoring and coaching; personal, financial, mentoring, and career counseling; and planning for first-generation college students. To participate in the Raise program the student must be enrolled at the university or accepted for enrollment in the next academic term. The program encourages faculty, staff, administrators, and community members to refer outstanding students who meet the criteria. Current students can apply to the Raise program directly on the program's webpage.

Participants must meet at least one of the following criteria to be eligible for the Raise program:

- Meet the low-income criteria established by the U.S. Department of Education: "Low-income refers to an individual whose family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount" (U.S. Department of Education, 2021)

- Have a need for academic support to successfully pursue a postsecondary educational program as determined by the program

- Have a documented disability (and/or)

- Be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident.

The program staff consists of one director, one assistant director, one program coordinator, and one graduate assistant. To participate in the program a student must receive an invitation indicating that they met the criteria to apply. The student then applies and, if selected, has an interview with the office staff, finally receiving an email to let them know if they were

accepted to the program. Every academic year approximately 30 students are admitted into the program.

The Raise program provides free resources to help each student realize their full potential during their collegiate experience. The services provided by the program include academic services (academic advising, tutoring, study groups); enrichment and resources (workshops, coaching, peer mentor); career development and graduate school preparation (career exploration, resume/cover letter writing); financial and economic literacy (assistance with FAFSA, scholarship advisement, financial and budget management skills); and social and cultural events (cultural and leadership enrichment including local field trips, events, and programming, and program retreats). Students in the Raise program utilize these services to help them persist in college.

Participants

To collect the names and email addresses of prospective participants, I sent an email to the Vice President of Student Success to request access to the information. The vice president received a copy of the IRB approval and application, then connected me with the current director of the program. The director gave me an Excel document with 132 students' names and email addresses; no other student data was provided. Emails were sent to all students twice; 14 students responded and 13 participated in the study.

The 13 participants completed the interview process of the study (Table 1). According to the interview protocol, participants had to be sophomores in order to investigate how their support program encouraged them to return for their second year. Initially my goal was to recruit only second-semester sophomores in order to discover which program support areas encouraged them come back for their second year, and their plans to return for their junior year. Some students' second year in college involves a "sophomore identity crisis" that affects their social,

academic, and personal self, and in turn their college satisfaction and retention (Margolis, 1976; Vuong et al., 2010). However, two first-year students replied to the email and asked to be part of the study. I did not know the students were freshman until the interview was conducted, and when I consulted my advisor to determine the best way forward we decided to keep the freshmen in the study. These two students offered a different perspective from the rest of the sample, not having experienced multiple years of college like the rest of the students.

The email to the participants explained that participation in the study was open to students who:

a. are part of the Raise program

b. attend the site institution

c. are sophomores, juniors, or seniors

The participants represented a wide range of academic majors including psychology, social work, business administration, diplomacy, and biology. Four of the participants were working on double majors and one had two majors and one minor. The participants ranged from first-year students to seniors. Table 1 presents demographic information about the student participants.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Pseudonyn	Race	Gender	Year	Major
Abigail	Black	Female	Senior	Biology and Social Behavioral Science
Angela	Black	Female	Junior	Diplomacy
Emma	Latinx	Female	Freshman	Journalism
Hallie	Black	Female	Senior	Social Behavioral Sciences and Criminal Justice, Minor in Psychology
Jennifer	White	Female	Freshman	Psychology
Jessica	Latinx	Nonbinary	Senior	Social Work
Jordan	Black	Male	Senior	Business Administration
Mary	Black	Female	Senior	Journalism, Minor in Diplomacy
Shawn	White	Male	Sophomore	Political Science
Shelly	Asian	Female	Senior	Biology
Simone	Latinx	Female	Sophomore	Political Science
Thomas	Asian	Male	Sophomore	Biochemistry
Whitney	Latinx	Female	Sophomore	Criminal Justice and English

Students' Recruitment to the Raise Program

The students were recruited to the program differently based on their academic year. In spring 2020, students in their sophomore, junior, and senior year received an email letting them know that they met the criteria for the Raise program. The participants reported receiving an email stating that they met the requirements to be a part of an upcoming program for first-generation college students. Shawn explained:

I got this email, and in the newsletter, I read to see like what's coming up, is there anything interesting going on; and I just said hey there's this new program planned for first generation who are low income and that sort of demographic; and this is like probably right up my alley to get acclimated to college, so I was like I will check it out because it's not like it's gonna hurt you.

For the two freshman students, their recruitment to the program was different as they were notified after they were accepted to the university. This allowed them to participate in a summer bridge program where they could acquire college credits, attend workshops to prepare them for college life, and have an opportunity to make friends and get to know the campus prior to the start of the semester. Emma explained:

I was accepted over the summer. First, I was accepted to the University. And I was accepted to the Raise program after I applied to it, the interview and everything and then it was I think, maybe around June or May that happened. And then we did the Summer Institute program for three weeks in July around there. It was to help us get started, you know, getting a little bit of a kind of like a grip on the college experience in the work because they gave us two classes to take in those three weeks. It was like as a preparation of what to expect.

These two experiences relate to how the students were recruited to the program. However, each student came from a different background with experiences that shaped who they are today and how the Raise program played a role in their lives. The following summaries provide background information on each participant ,and explain their journey to college and how the Raise program supports them in college.

Data Collection

The primary method used for the research was narrative interviews. Qualitative interviewing to collect data enables the researcher to access the world and perspectives of first-generation college students (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). Interviews are the best form of research for gathering in-depth information. They allow for conversational exchange and are a rich source for evaluation and understanding the findings from the conversation (Stuhlmiller, 2001). The first step of the data collection involved conducting a pilot interview to establish the protocol that

was used for this study. Pilot interviews were conducted with two students who were juniors at a different university and part of a federally funded program for low-income first-generation college students. The pilot interviews aided in streamlining the interview protocol.

The student's sense of comfort, especially when discussing potentially sensitive and/or embarrassing experiences, was a consideration in electing to conduct virtual interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). The interviews took place virtually via Zoom. Participants chose to conduct the interviews in their bedrooms or a "safe" place on campus such as the library. In these comfortable locations the participants could talk freely about their personal experiences. The comfort of the setting was important, as students might have discussed a difficult time in their lives. Benefits of virtual interviews included cost savings associated with not having to commute to the interview, as well as the accessibility of virtual logistics and the ability to record the interview and quickly transcribe the data (Clary, 2021). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual interviews provided a means to keep both participants and the researcher safe from contracting the virus. The data collected from the interviews developed viable results for a robust study.

The interviews took place 3 weeks into the start of the semester that began on August 29, although some of the students began the semester earlier due to the Raise program summer institute. The recruitment email provided background information and asked the student to reply "I'm Interested" if they wanted to participate. Those who replied received a follow-up email with a Calendly link to select a time for their Zoom interview. Time slots were available between 9 a.m. and 10 p.m. every day of the week for the following two weeks. It was important to consider weekend dates and late hours to accommodate the students' schedules.

Semistructured interviews were conducted using multiple open-ended questions. The interviews were structured to allow the participant to narrate his or her experience for the

narrative research design. Semistructured interviews allowed me to adjust as needed throughout the interview (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The interview protocol was established to help guide each interview (see Appendix).

The interview questions delved into the student's personal background and upbringing, their current status as college students, and how the Raise program plays a role in the collegiate experience. The questions begin by asking the student how they learned about how to apply and prepare for college and what made them want to go to college, followed by questions about their family and family support for them in college. The next set of questions revolved around their college experience, specifically the Raise program, and what resources they utilized in college. Finally, the questions wrapped up with a dialogue about advice for first-generation college students and higher education institutions. These questions consisted of a series of primary questions followed by probing questions that allowed for more profound responses to primary questions (Berry, 1999).

I must also note that one interview was not enough for me to gather all the information I needed for this study. After the interviews I followed up with the students via email to clarify additional information such as demographics. This also allowed for clarification of the responses given during the interviews.

Lastly, to ensure confidentiality, this study was IRB approved and followed all regulations to ensure participant confidentiality and data privacy. The data was securely stored on a USB drive and backed up on a password-protected Microsoft OneDrive account. This protocol applied to all Zoom recordings, transcriptions, and notes. All data will be permanently deleted and/or destroyed in 5 years.

Data Analysis Plan and Coding Scheme

While conducting the analysis, I made meaning of the data and explained the findings through the theoretical approach used in this study. To analyze this research, I used a mix of both deductive and inductive coding. The deductive codes used were 1) understanding the student's background (e.g., their family support for applying to college and the college preparation experience), 2) understanding their experiences on campus, and 3) understanding their experiences off campus. In the deductive process, empirical studies in the literature review on first-generation college students were used to create the list of codes.

Other codes were generated from this research, for which I used an inductive analysis. An inductive analysis approach includes condensing the raw data and finding the connections between the data and the literature review (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021; Thomas, 2006). Bingham & Witkowsky (2021) explained that an inductive approach allows for themes and new findings to emerge from the data based on the topics discussed during the interview. These codes were developed from the responses received during the interviews. Accordingly, with inductive analysis I established the codes as I reviewed the transcripts. Some of the inductive codes included social support, mental health, academic support, family pressure, awareness of self-efficacy, and COVID -19. Multiple rounds of coding took place and began with describing excerpts for the transcripts, followed by another round of coding that utilized my own interpretive lens to condense and categorize the codes. Further rounds of coding were necessary in order to be as descriptive as possible. This assisted with development of the narrative stories presented in Chapter 4.

Validity

The information received from the interviews must be correct and valid so that this study can be used as a tool for those who work with first-generation college students. Despite any

limitations, I used the following strategies to ensure reliability and validity. First I conducted

member checking with the participants after the data was coded to ensure that the data was valid

and to triangulate the data with my observations and interpretations. Member checking allows

the researcher to follow up with participants to check their credibility; it involves establishing the

truth of the research study's findings to ensure their accuracy and honesty. This was done by

building rapport with the interviewees before, during, and after the interviews to obtain honest

and open responses. It was essential to follow up with every participant by sharing the findings

to allow them to check for validity by reviewing and analyzing the results. An email was sent to

each participant asking them to confirm their demographics and review the information about

them that would be shared in the study. Additional information was collected from the students

to fill in any gaps in the study, including their gender, pronouns, race, and ethnicity. They were

also asked if anything was missing that they would like added to their narrative. I emphasized the

participants' own words throughout the findings, which helped to share their narratives. Through

these methods, trustworthiness was accounted for by ensuring that the data collected was precise

and consistent, and exemplified credibility.

Role of the Researcher

This study was inspired by my role as a higher education professional. My experiences in

student life and academic support programs enabled me to work closely with college students.

Specifically, I have experience working with first-generation college students from low

socioeconomic and disadvantaged backgrounds. By means of many professional development

and educational courses, I learned how to converse with college students in a supportive manner

by getting to the students personally. These experiences from my professional background

prepared me for my interviews and helped me to connect with the participants on a deeper level.

I believe my role as a higher education professional influenced the flow of the conversation. I

found ways to connect with the students that encouraged them to share things with me, as I used a gentle approach to ensure that they felt comfortable sharing a variety of experiences with me during the interview.

Limitations

Despite advance preparation of the interview questions, demographic questions were not included in the interview protocol. This constituted a major limitation because the participants' proper pronouns were not collected during the initial interview. A follow-up email was sent to ask the students for their race, age, gender, and pronouns. Since this was not collected during the initial interview, some demographic information is missing due to lack of student response. Another limitation was that although the original research design requested students in their sophomore, junior, and senior year, two freshmen were part of the study. This changed the scope of the results, as explained in Chapter 5.

Another limitation of the study was the small sample size. From the 136 students who were contacted I hoped to be able to capture the experiences of more students. This presents a unique limitation, as the study captured the experiences of a small sample group. Time constraints could also be seen as a limitation because my personal goal was to complete my data collection and analyze the results in one semester.

Additionally, the Raise program was a new program at the site in this study. Prior to the Raise program, the institution developed a department called First Gen that provided similar resources for students. This program's beginning during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic presented a limitation to the program. As a result, the program had to quickly transition their resources to virtual and attempt to have the same impact on the students as if they were in person. Also, because the program was relatively new, not all students went through the summer bridge program. The summer bridge program provided a unique experience for the participants

who attended because they had 3 weeks of preparation for their college experience. During this 3-week experience they earned college credits, prepared for their first year of college, made friends prior to arrival on campus, and got to know the campus better before the rest of the students arrived. It would have been beneficial for all participants to have this same experience.

Because the Raise program was a new program at the university, the results that were collected reflected the fact that the students did not have many years of experience with the program. I assume if the data was collected 2 years from now, the results would show how the program helps students to get to their senior year and eventually graduate at the end of the year.

Another study limitation was that the Raise program required all participants to be U.S citizens or permanent residents. This prohibits students who are not citizens from being part of the program and benefiting from it if they were first-generation college students. Also, this population of students is not represented in this study based on having to meet this criterion.

COVID-19

In March 2020, the world as we knew it changed forever. Businesses and schools were forced to shut down to help stop the spread of a coronavirus—COVID-19. COVID-19 had a major impact on the role of higher education in people's lives. College students were forced to leave their campuses and K–12 students were forced to stay home and attend virtual classes. These experiences played a significant role in students' mental health, especially for college students. Batra et al. (2021) reported that the mental health of college students is a leading public health concern. The results from their sample found that students are experiencing anxiety (39.4%), stress (26.0%), posttraumatic stress disorder (29.8%), and impaired sleep quality (50.5%). As a result of these mental health attributions, the students may experience a decline in their academic performance, adopt maladaptive behaviors, and struggle with cognitive

impairment and real-world functioning (Batra et al., 2021). Thus, for the purpose of this study's research design, the students' collegiate experiences may have been altered by aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Zoom interviews may have limited my interactions with the participants. Although the participants may have been in a place that was comfortable for them, the presence of others nearby could have prevented them from sharing the things they needed to share with me. For example, some participants mentioned living in a dormitory with a suitemate who could have been listening, causing them to cut off or alter the way they responded questions.

Despite these limitations I was able to gather concrete data with which to answer the research question. Furthermore, I was prepared to resolve any issues that arose with consultation and mentorship from my advisors. In addition to my extensive research on understanding first-generation college students, I have a wealth of experience working with students to make them feel comfortable responding to interview questions, and was able to gather robust data from their responses during the interviews.

Conclusion

The data collected from the research answers the research question of this study. I ensured that the data was collected in a secure and structured manner, and the study was IRB approved by the selected site institution to ensure that appropriate steps were taken to protect the rights and welfare of individuals participating in this study. Chapter 4 explains the research findings.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the study findings and is organized as follows: each student participant is introduced with context and background information to best understand the findings of this study. The main themes that emerged from the results of the study are explained at the end of the chapter. These themes are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Student Profiles

This section serves as a preface to the study results presented in the next section. It provides a brief introduction for each of the student participants who took part in this study.

Participant Profile Summaries

Abigail. Abigail is a commuter student with a double major in biology and social behavioral science. She is a Black/Caribbean American. After her sophomore year she transferred to the university and was accepted into the Raise program in her junior year. Abigail is currently a senior. At the university she quickly learned that she could ask for personal help in class when needed, or just ask how to get around campus. As a first-generation college student, she makes sure that her family understands her academic commitments. Family responsibilities make balancing school, work, and family commitments challenging for Abigail; as the eldest sibling she is responsible for taking care of the younger siblings. Yet she understands the power of asking for help and let her professors know about her family situation early in the semester. Abigail is highly involved in clubs and organizations on campus and values the importance of her involvement and her social networks. The Raise program has provided her with scholarship opportunities, interactive workshops, and resources such as tutoring, the writing center, and additional advisement. Furthermore, the Raise program currently employs Abigail as a peer mentor.

Angela. Angela's introduction to the Raise program was a bit different from the other participants' as she sought to be a part of another program at the university but found out that it was for in-state residents only. Because she is an out-of-state student she could not participate in that program, but while she was in the same building, she was introduced to the Raise program and shown how to apply for the program. Angela was accepted to the program her sophomore year, and was connected with an advisor right away. She felt like "they were much more helpful than any advisor I've had since the past 3 years" as they were able to assist her academically, socially, and financially. Angela reports that the support in the program is unmatched, and she appreciates their guidance because they are always there when she needs them. The program not only taught her about resources available on campus, but also how to access them and how to utilize them. Some of the resources she has used include the Academic Resource Center, Counseling and Psychological Services, tutoring, and scholarship applications.

Emma. As a freshman Emma attended the summer institute for first-generation college students at the university. Emma's high school experience was different from the rest of the participants' as she was homeschooled and attended one year of public high school that was conducted virtually. During her last year of high school, she connected with a guidance counselor who supported her efforts to apply and prepare for college. Emma learned early during her freshman experience that she had many people whom she could go to if she needed help with anything—her peer mentors, the program's staff, and her peers in the program. The summer institute helped her with classes and workshops that she attended before the semester and for which she received college credits, which put her ahead of non-first-generation college students. She is grateful that the Raise program has helped her with time management during her freshman

year. Although she described her experience as a first-generation college student as "a bit overwhelming," with the support of her family she feels like she "can do anything!"

Hallie. Hallie is an out-of-state student who attended her local community college for 2 years before transferring to the university. She is now a senior and was accepted into the Raise program in her junior year. Hallie is driven by a desire to make wise financial decisions and to save money; she explained that choosing not to attend a major university all 4 years saved her a lot of money. She knew that attending a community college would be the best way for her to afford a 4-year college by getting the first 2 years free at her community college. Growing up in a major inner city with two parents who did not attend college, Hallie knew that she wanted to make the best decision in order to support her family in the future. Unlike the rest of the participants, she has not attended as many of the workshops offered by the program, but she plans to attend more in the future. Although Hallie had many financial concerns about attending college, she wants other first-generation college students to know that going to college is "doable—it's definitely something you should do; you shouldn't be discouraged from it just because you don't have money to pay for it."

Jessica. Jessica was involved in middle and high school programs that helped them prepare for college academically and socially. They described their high school experience as follows: "I took every AP class, every honors class that I could possibly take … I spent all my time studying, and I joined as many clubs as I could." Jessica kept that same energy and went to college right after high school, but realized that they wanted to change their major after their first semester and became very unsure of what they wanted to do once they graduated college. So, while balancing personal obligations, Jessica decided to take a year off from college and then transfer to the university.

As a first-generation college student and a second-generation American, Jessica strived to make their family proud while also balancing the demands of supporting their family. Throughout their collegiate experience, they have held several off-campus jobs to help them pay for college, books, and their car. In addition, Jessica ensures that they make time to study, play musical instruments, and have a social life even while working 20 hours a week in an off-campus job. Now that Jessica is at the university, they decided to change their major (for the third time) to social work, and has additional support from the Raise program. Jessica is currently a senior and was accepted into the program in their junior year. They describe their college experience as "way easier to figure out." Since being in the program, Jessica has had an advisor who pushes and motivates them to continue in college even when they think they cannot.

Jordan. Jordan is an out-of-state student majoring in business administration, and reported that his family was very supportive about his preparation for college. He stated, "my mom was able to get me into this SAT test prep program around my senior year of high school," which helped prepare him for the college application process. Jordan mentioned that although his family didn't know much about the college process, they still did their best to support him in his endeavors to pursue a college degree. He is driven by his motivation to make his family proud. Jordan was accepted into the Raise program in his junior year, and has found it to be very helpful. Now in his senior year, he described his most significant resources in the program as the academic and financial support, "helping us find scholarships and … teaching us about how to manage our money, and … teaching us about things like credit, and stuff like that I didn't know about." Jordan also observed that his academic support was helpful because he received an additional advisor to assist him with registration and ensure that he is doing well in his classes.

He wished the Raise program had been available earlier in his college experience because it has helped him in many aspects of his life.

Mary. Mary is a senior who was accepted into the Raise program in her junior year. She received support from both her family and her high school during the college application process. Mary was in a program called RAPID, a nationwide program that prepares high school students for college by providing tutoring services and access to college visits. She describes herself as an extremely busy student, involved with and holding numerous leadership positions in more than five clubs and organizations. She also holds several jobs both on and off campus throughout the school year, balancing work with her social life—she describes herself as a "social butterfly on and off campus." Mary became a member of another first-generation student program at the university before it was restructured as the Raise program, for which she then had to apply. As a member of the Raise program, she is grateful that the program has provided her with resume workshops, preparation for transitioning to a professional space, and financial support workshops. Attending these workshops assists Mary as she prepares to graduate at the end of the academic year.

Shawn. Shawn had a distinctive high school experience: his school required all students to apply to college in order to graduate. Although he had a very supportive experience in high school while preparing for college, Shawn's main influence for going to college was his family's encouragement. He explained that he has always had a "vested interest in educating myself and … continuously learning more," which is how he came to attend a university that is more than 8 hours' travel from home.

COVID-19 played a role in all of the participants' lives, but especially Shawn's. As an out-of-state student, he did not attend his first year of college in person but instead did his entire

first year virtually. Despite the distance he still managed to be very much involved with campus life, joining clubs and being accepted into the Raise program during the second semester of his freshman year. Remarkably, one of the clubs gave Shawn the opportunity to be vice president of his organization, and he drove many hours to meet with club members a few times during his first year of college, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now that the semester is operating fully in person, Shawn has excelled in college with the support of the Raise program. He has a paid job through the program as a peer mentor, supporting other students in the program. The Raise program has also provided him with additional support; he appreciates "always having someone to check up" on him and having access to a 24/7 online tutoring service that is available for all students in the program. Shawn thinks that every institution should offer a program like the Raise program. He was grateful that it provided him with an extensive summer institute that included taking college credits, attending workshops, personal advisement, and an opportunity to make friends on campus with students from similar backgrounds and life experiences.

Shelly. Shelly was born in another country and came to the United States at a young age. Her family has always valued the importance higher education; she reported that her father came to the United States because "he wanted to give me a better educational option than what he had." Since the age of 10 Shelly has always valued the importance of education, and knew that she would go to college and become a physical therapist. As a first-generation college student, Shelly is very grateful for how the Raise program has provided her with more support in college. Shelly is now a senior at the university; she has been part of the first-generation college student program since she was accepted to the university and a member of the Raise program since her junior year. Although the programs have made many changes since she was first accepted, they all have been very helpful with academic and social endeavors. Shelly described the importance

of the program in her life thus: "One of the main things that I took away from it was I was able to … build connections with other people, which is … very important to me." Shelly is very grateful for her advisor, the workshops, and the countless connections she has made through the first-generation college student programs at the university. She reported that "one of the biggest resources that the Raise program has opened me up to is tutoring." Extra tutoring provides the students with a chance to improve their grades and have additional support in their classes. Shelly further clarified, "if I didn't have that first-gen experience, this whole college experience would be completely different." The Raise program has helped her to excel socially and academically at the university.

Simone. "I'm proud of myself" is how Simone explained her feelings about being one of the first in her family to go to college. With her first year having taken place virtually, balancing college with major health issues, and commuting to campus, Simone reported that it was difficult to get the whole "college experience." Her health issues required her to take some time off from school during her sophomore year, yet her Raise program advisor supported her effort to move forward academically during her time away from school. Her advisor also helped her to choose her classes to make sure that she stays on track to graduate in 4 years. Since her freshman year Simone has used the Writing Center and the Center for Counseling and Phycological Services. With these services she has strengthened her writing skills and been supported during rather challenging times in her life. In sum, Simone described her college experience thus: "I feel different from … my friends who aren't first-generation college students. But I feel … that this feeling that I have is … special … I feel like I'm doing something good for my family."

Thomas. As an out-of-state student amid a global pandemic, Thomas was eager to connect with campus life during his freshman year. Fortunately Thomas was accepted into the

Raise program, which helped to fill that void during the second semester of his freshman year. Since being a part of the program, Thomas has participated in many of the virtual and in-person workshops offered and has received support from his advisor that helped him both socially and academically. He appreciates his advisor and peer mentor, reporting that "they are really good resources because most of the time they're available, and they will answer your questions, … small questions, and they always make sure to … get back to you. And that's really, really helpful!"

Rachael. Rachael is currently a freshman at the university and has had to balance several challenges during her first year of college. These challenges include her health, friendships, and access to campus. She described her first year thus: "it's been kind of rough." Yet she attended the Raise program's summer institute that helped teach her about the available resources on campus that she can access. Rachael explained that during the summer she "learned more about the university, what other resources the school has, where everything is located, where to go if we need help with something. So that was good to have … going into it because when I got on campus, I kind of felt like I already knew how to get around, which is helpful." In addition, she appreciates that she was paired with a peer mentor whom she could go to whenever she had a question.

Whitney. Not only is Whitney a first-generation college student, but she is also a first-generation American. She explained that this presented itself as a unique challenge in terms of connecting with her family to gain a high degree of support for her college experience. As a first-generation American and first-generation college student, Whitney belongs to a very supportive family who came to America for a better life for Whitney and her siblings. They want nothing better than to support Whitney in her endeavor to pursue a college degree. When she first got to

campus she immediately explored scholarship opportunities, especially those available to out-of-state students, which is how she found out about the Raise program through the financial office. She is currently a sophomore and was accepted into the program in her freshman year. Since Whitney began in the program, she was afforded the opportunity to receive more scholarships to help her pay for college.

Besides the Raise program Whitney was also able to connect with a local church where she teaches Sunday school, which helps her to stay connected to her religion and passions. On campus Whitney has utilized several campus resources with the advice of her advisor from the Raise program; these include the writing center (which she uses at least three or four times a semester) and the tutoring center as needed. As a first-generation college student, Whitney would like other colleges and universities to offer first-generation college students more resources; for example, an opportunity to buy their books at a lower price, more support for those attending college out of state, and more support for preparing for the financial aspects of college.

Findings

This section presents the study findings. The study examined the primary research question: *What experiences influence the success of first-generation college students who participate in a structured support program?*

Each student shared their own unique experiences related to why they decided to go to college as well as the experiences that help them persist. Every student's journey is entirely unique, but each of them has made it to college and has similar support from the structured program provided by their institution. This study aimed to explore the success factors that influence first-generation students' persistence during their college career, what obstacles and challenges exist for first-generation students, and what institutions of higher education do to support and help first-generation students in a specific structured support program.

Themes from the Research Question

This section provides an overview of the participants involved, briefly discusses them, and presents a thorough discussion of the emergent themes. The themes included are gratitude, family influence, gratitude for the additional support and resources provided by the Raise program, and understanding the participants' recommendations for supporting first-generation college students. In addition, transcripts from the interviews, debriefing notes, and researcher notes were used to analyze the findings of this study. This section presents the results and findings by themes; each theme is then broken down into several subthemes.

Gratitude. Gratitude is a feeling of thankfulness and appreciation. As first-generation college students, the participants were extremely grateful for many aspects of their collegiate experience. When asked how he felt about being a first-generation college student, Thomas described it in one word: "grateful." He further explained that he is grateful for the opportunity to attend college when other members of his family never had that opportunity. According to Thomas:

> I've been put in a position where I get to choose to go to school. I have a choice—just the fact I have a choice! My parents did not have a choice. And my family did not have a choice, … after the Vietnam War, … stuff was really bad. So … I just feel so grateful!

Similarly, when asked why she decided to go to college, Emma described wanting to show her family her gratitude:

> My parents came to this country when they were young. And then, they started off a little rocky here, but now … we're all settled. And I'm just so grateful for everything my parents have done for me, and I just want to show them my gratitude. And decided to go to college for them.

Indeed, participants' gratitude for the college experience and for the Raise program's support is extremely high. Their gratitude is a meaningful theme because it sets a precedent for explaining the participants' experiences as first-generation college students in a support program

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designed specifically just for students of similar background. Nevertheless, many of the participants' experiences with the program were also driven by their motivation. The following section explains the students' motivation as centered around their family.

Family influence and motivation. Motivation is defined by the factors that enable an individual to keep going to achieve their goal. Each of the participants had their own reasons that provided them with the strength to keep going. The role of family was a motivator for the participants. Because none of their family members including their siblings had finished college, the participants were highly motivated to complete their degree and create a better life for themselves and their families. While family was a significant motivator for the participants, their internal drive and motivation kept them persistent through college each year.

Internal motivation was a quality all 13 participants exhibited. When they discussed their experiences related to why they decided to go to college, their internal motivation was prominent. They wanted to pursue a degree for themselves, and did most of the research necessary to get into college and apply for college by themselves. Additionally, to get into the Raise program all participants had to apply, which also shows their internal motivation for wanting to succeed and seeking the additional support necessary for their success in college, which is provided by the Raise program. For most participants, family was a strong influence on guiding their internal motivation. Simone explained:

> I feel different from my friends who aren't first-generation college students. But I feel that this feeling that I have is special. So, I feel like I'm doing something good for my family!

Furthermore, Simone's internal motivation to go to college and graduate is driven by her family, as she declared: "I want to support my family only because they immigrated from a poor country. And I wanted to be one of the first to go to college in order to support them."

Simone's experiences related to understanding the factors that influence the success of first-generation college students who participate in a structured academic support program. For the participants, making it to college and having an opportunity to participate in this study could not have happened without their internal motivation, which is propelled by their family's motivation.

There is a strong relationship between the participants' motivation from their families and their own internal motivation. In addition to their internal motivation, the participants were also driven to go to college and complete their degrees because of their family obligations. As Jessica described:

> Aside from being first generation, … in college, I'm a second-generation American. So, there was a lot of expectation on me. So, it was kind of … a thing, no one else in my family has gone to college before me, my grandmother came to this country with the intent of giving us a better life. So, it's kind of like I … just have to apply to college.

They further explained that they knew they needed to "appease my family was to apply to college." They did not mentioned if their family expected this of them yet, their drive to complete their degree and make their parents proud. Jessica's motivation from their family inspired them to be passionate about pursuing a degree that would support the mental health field, which is a goal that they knew that they would accomplish.

Nicole also had a similar experience to Jessica as they described that her family was what helped her prepare the most for college.

> They were very supportive of me, and they encouraged me to, like, go to college … because they wanted me to have that education that they couldn't have.

First-generation college students are the first in their families to pave a new path for their family's educational attainment and income levels. Therefore, as first-generation college students

the participants are working hard to succeed in college to make their families proud.

Comparably, Jordan explained:

> I've just been preparing to go to college because I just saw that that's how I could make better for myself in my life. And I was just pushed by my mother also, to go. Because something that both of my parents, they didn't have a college education. And so that was something they're trying to push for me, especially my mom. Because I thought it would help me to have a better life with a college degree. And for myself, personally, I wanted to expand my knowledge and expertise.

Like many of the other participants, Jordan described his motivation from his mother to expand his knowledge by obtaining his college degree.

Coming from various backgrounds where neither parent went to college and being from a low-income family presented a barrier for the students in terms of receiving the best services needed to prepare for college. Lack of available college resources led the participants' drive to attend and succeed in college to be at an all-time high. Abigail described her family dynamics as follows:

> I don't come from a lot of money,… my family always struggled. My mom, at one point, she was working as a single mother, supporting … five kids. So, it was kind of hard for me. I had to always take care of my younger brothers; I have three younger brothers.

Abigail's family experiences inspired and motivated her to go to college because she tries to be an "anchor" for her family to support them in the future. She said:

> I wanted to kind of be like an anchor for my family … I just knew that in order to get to that next step, and be in a position to support them, I needed some sort of degree, I needed a career. And what I was passionate about is medicine. Still, to this day, I'm very passionate about medicine and helping others. So that's why I take the first step in applying to college after high school. In high school, I was always a great student, focused on studies, joined clubs, but also maintained a great GPA.

These dynamics drove Abigail's motivation to thrive in college, and she knows that she needs additional support (such as that offered by the Raise program) to help guide her collegiate pathway. These experiences in her life also motivate her to do well and succeed while in college.

I discovered that many of the participants went to college to make their families proud. Jennifer explained why she decided to apply to go to college:

> I've always known that I've wanted to go into psychology. And my parents were very supportive. They were proud of me. And I feel like I'm doing it mostly for myself, but [it] also helps that I'm making them proud.

Pleasing their families by going to college and making sure their families were proud of them was a goal for these participants. Their families were extremely supportive despite lack of resources and knowledge about the college experience. Understanding their family background plays a role in understanding the experiences of a first-generation college student in the structured support program. These experiences demonstrate their level of commitment to attend college and to succeed with the additional support of the Raise program.

Level of family support. During the study I learned that the level of family support looks different for each participant. Although the majority of families were very supportive and helpful throughout the process, due to various family dynamics the level of support sometimes differed depending on circumstances. Each participant was asked to rate their family's level of support for them to attend college on a scale of 1 to 10, and the average answer was 7.

Emma rated her family level support as a 10 because "every time I speak to my grandparents, they would always express how proud they are of me and just knowing that you got this and they're always like encouraging me that I can do it." Yet at times she feels overwhelmed by making them proud of her decision to attend college. Emma explained, "there's a bit of pressure because my family expects me to graduate, so it can get a bit overwhelming, but with their support I feel like I can do anything."

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On the other hand, Angela rated her family's level of support as a 2. Her family did not want her to go to college, especially not in another state, due to their religion. As Angela said, "they don't encourage going to college, unless it's absolutely necessary." Because her family did not want her to attend college for religious reasons, Angela has now been exiled from family communication since she decided to attend college. Although she is no longer in communication with her family, she wishes to pursue her educational journey and nonetheless strives to be successful. Angela can attribute her support in college to the Raise program and various other resources on campus.

All in all, family plays a major role in the lives of first-generation college students. In the participants' experiences, their families are a major motivating factor for them to attend college and their desire to succeed while in college. The desire to succeed is enabled and supported by the Raise program. In the Raise program the participants are able to work with their advisor to develop plans for balancing their schoolwork and the demands of family life. The following section explores the participants' experiences in their structured support program.

Raise Program Participation

Gratitude towards the Raise program. As explained in Chapter 3, every student at the university who met the criteria for the Raise program received an email from the university inviting them to apply for the program. All participants were grateful that they "actually" read the email to find out about this opportunity to apply and were accepted. The program has provided the students with educational workshops, advising support, and academic support.

Shelly described her experience with the onset of the Raise program as "really wonderful," explaining:

> So, I was going through the emails, and I ran across that email, and I was … oh, I want to look into this and I thought it was a great opportunity. And, I had an interview with the assistant director, it was just so lovely. And they were so

welcoming. And I was just … this is … a moment, another moment where I should get involved. And it was really, really wonderful.

Jessica described their onset in the program as follows:

When I first got the email about the Raise program, I thought this could be really helpful with the scholarships, financial aid. Also, the career workshops with helping me find internships is exactly what I need. Because I don't have anyone else guiding me with what I needed. So I applied and I interviewed with my advisor and I got it and I was … oh, this is amazing. It's been very, very, very helpful, … extremely sincere!

The Raise program was the additional support that Jessica knew they needed to succeed.

Angela also expressed her gratitude toward the Raise program, which has given her more confidence to succeed in her new role as a peer mentor. This role is important to her because it has helped to mold her into a leader for other first-generation college students. Angela described her gratitude for the Raise program as follows:

I feel like with Raise, they are more personal, not just … this tenured professor that's been here for … 30 years and wants to uphold the status of the school.… I feel like they care about me as a person. And they're always available. Whenever I try to meet with any advisor.

Angela explained that the first thing she was most grateful for that program provided her with is companionship. She explained, "I genuinely feel like they [the Raise program] do care about wanting to see the students succeed." The participants reported that the Raise program has consistently stayed in contact with them via Microsoft Teams channels/chats and frequent emails. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic most of the resources were available for the students in a virtual format. However, the Raise program staff were still on campus and able to meet with students in person if needed. The program sends out notices about services provided by the institution that keep students informed and updated with what all students should know. Angela further explained:

I feel like they let you know things that the University doesn't unless you absolutely … scraped through every member of faculty to get … I feel like "they"

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say in college … they're not going to baby you, but you're also paying … to get these resources … you shouldn't have to be the ones sitting around and waiting for you to approach them [the resources], they should be coming to you [the students].

Angela described how it is crucial to help explain and break down the important things they need to know while in college compared to their continuing-generation peers who may have that instructional knowledge. Accordingly, as a first-generation college student, having the support and communication of the Raise program is something that they are grateful for and which is important for understanding their experiences.

Raise workshops. In addition to gratitude for the program's support, the participants expounded upon their gratitude for the knowledge they acquired from the workshops provided by the Raise program. Workshops are held on a consistent basis, and attendance is highly recommended for students. The participants reported that they found out about the workshops via daily emails or via a Microsoft Teams channel (the software used to stay in communication with the students and the Raise program). Because this program began at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and and because we are still in the midst of it at this writing, the workshops have been taking place virtually. Yet this enables participants to attend the workshops regardless of whether or not they are on campus.

Abigail spoke of workshop topics including financial literacy, networking, and the imposter syndrome. She explained, "having those programs and those workshops helped me … learn a little bit more … about what I was feeling is not just … me," and that other students are experiencing some of her same challenges.

Emma also explained:

The Raise program helps teach us about time management, which helps a lot! Because college is overwhelming at first, but [when] you know how to [manage] time it's a lot easier.

As a graduating senior, Mary described how her favorite workshops were career-related:

They [the Raise program] did a lot of resume workshops. I learned about a thing—my resume—which is something I needed to do desperately. So that was nice. They did a lot of workshops on … how to talk to people in professional spaces that you've never met before, or talk to … through email or anything like etiquette during business meetings. What it is that these people are looking for, you know, how to make yourself stand out as a candidate amongst very successful and acclimated people who have similar interests, you know, just a lot of things that are very helpful in the business-oriented world.

Mary further explained, "and financially, they [the Raise program] do a lot of finance workshops. That's something I have down, but they do that too."

Thomas described how much the workshops and resources provided by the program have supported him in life both in and outside the classroom. He is most grateful that he had an opportunity to attend a workshop on credit card responsibility. During this workshop he learned how credit cards work and how to use credit lines properly; over the summer he applied for his first credit and now he knows how to use it responsibly. He asked, "Isn't that amazing?" Participants are grateful for the opportunity to learn about topics such as credit cards that may seem taboo in some communities. With proper education, these opportunities play a major role in the participant's lives outside of the classroom. The workshop on building credit was a topic that some of the participants had not learned about prior to the workshop. They were grateful for the opportunity to attend such a dynamic workshop that supported them in their personal lives outside of the classroom.

Peer mentors. Participants credited the support services and resources on campus available to them as being reasons for their persistence. They were connected to university services via the program designed specifically for first-generation college students. Among the services most noted were the tutoring services, academic resource center, counseling services center, disability support services, and scholarship opportunities. Jordan explained:

It [the Raise program] has helped me a lot, because I have access to something new or different support programs on campus now that I didn't have before, if the whole pandemic happened before I joined the program. My own personal tutors and study rooms and mentors.

Mentorship is a key component of the Raise program. The program mentors are students who apply for the position and then mentor other students in the program as their peers. A mentor provides additional support for the students to help clarify personal, academic, and career goals throughout the academic year.

Abigail is a leader at home with her family and also has the desire to be a leader on campus. She described how the Raise program has motivated her to become a peer mentor to other students in the program:

[The Raise program provided] a motivation aspect, and my abilities—because I've always felt like maybe I wouldn't qualify as a mentor … I know how my strengths are, and I know what works for me as a student, but I don't know how to … communicate that to other students; maybe it won't be best in their interests. So that's one thing I was really nervous about. But since becoming a peer mentor for the Raise program, … I've learned that a lot of my students, they kind of connect with me on a more personal level. And their journeys seem a little similar to my journey. Like when I was a freshman. Now it's been kind of … an easy selling. I've enjoyed it.

The connections to campus resources and support services are strengthened by the student peer mentors. Peer mentorship has benefits for both students: the mentor is able to acquire more leadership experience and the mentee gains insight and knowledge from their peer. The purpose of peer mentorship is to enhance near knowledge and support on campus while sharing knowledge and building community within the program. Yet, understanding the role of connecting to campus resources and support services is part of understanding the experiences of first-generation college students in an structured support program.

Tutoring. Tutoring is a service provided by the Raise program for all of the participants. It was available for the students via an online service called tutor.com and via in-person tutoring

that could be done in the Raise office on campus or via virtual sessions. Shawn explained the tutoring support as follows:

> [The Raise program] has a benefit [for students to utilize], a website called tutor.com that they always got us to use the subscription for and that will help with essay writing, proofreading things, just send it into the website, they send you back comments in … a couple of hours.

Abigail discussed how she utilized the services provided by the Raise program:

> On campus I use the Writing Center. But now since connecting with Raise we have tutor.com, and we also have our own personal tutors. One thing I like about tutor.com especially is it doesn't matter what hour of day it is; you go forward your paper and you'll have a live agent ready to help you out. You have live agents 24/7, even if it's for chemistry, biology, whatever.

Shelly described the Raise resources as follows:

> One of the biggest resources that the Raise program has opened me up to is tutoring. I am aware very much I can learn on my own and I'll figure it out. Even if I can't I'll … to try to find a way, but they [the Raise program] have their own tutoring program which is … phenomenal and that is … a really big help to know that okay, I can go to this if I can't go to … the normal tutoring sessions because they are a little hard to … manage with timing aspects … just to know okay, I have this!

In addition to the tutoring the sessions, the office provides a safe place for the students to study. Angela explained,

> They have … well, what I have used is they have … a special study room for the Raise students, which I think is really helpful because [at the university students typically study in empty an classroom]. You go in one classroom and then another person walks in and yeah, so that's really helpful [not to have that distraction].

Personal tutoring sessions are also available in the Raise office. Angela observed:

> They [the tutors] actually come to you so they have … the tutors to work there [in the Raise office], and then they can meet you in the Raise office, which I feel like is better than meeting. You know, like a random classroom.

Jennifer noted:

> The greatest resource they [the Raise program] have given us is that we have free tutoring. And also they have workshops that they would … talk about topics like financial aid and managing time organization, all of that stuff!

Tutoring is a great asset for the participants in the Raise program. The program offers a variety of ways for students to seek tutoring either virtually, in person, or even in the program office. This access to tutoring is a highlight for the participants. Tutoring is an important experience that plays a role in supporting the success of first-generation college students who participate in a structured academic support program.

Advisor support. The participants mentioned that they enjoyed working with their advisors in the Raise program. They each meet consistently with their advisor to support them if they have any questions, help them register for classes, and make sure that they stay on track to graduate on time. Each student in the Raise program is given one advisor with whom they meet regularly in a formal format; however, students can also meet with their advisor informally, dropping by their office if necessary. The participants explained the role of their advisor and how their advisor motivates them to persist while in college.

Jessica expressed their appreciation for having strong advisors at the university. Although their first academic advisor (who was not associated with the Raise program) left the university, their advisor made sure that they knew about the Raise program and how to apply for a new advisor. They explained that both advisors provided them with the guidance, support, and confidence that they need to persist through college. At times when they began to feel overwhelmed, their advisor reminded them, "you don't have to overload yourself, classes, balance what you can't … we'll make a plan for the rest of the years that you're in school and figure out how you're going to get into your master's program next." This was the best advice they received while in the Raise program; they have constant support and guidance from a higher education professional who specializes in working with first-generation college students.

Whitney utilized her Raise advisor to support her with class selection and to adjust her schedule when needed. She and her advisor held monthly meetings, at which time she was able to discuss matters taking place in her life. As a result of the relationship with her advisor, she developed a "feeling of community and a feeling of safety" on campus which she had not felt prior to participating in the Raise program. Comparably, Jordan reported that one of the biggest resources that the program provided him with was with an advisor who supported him academically.

> They make sure that we're on the right path for getting registered for classes … are successful in our classes, and they make sure we're on the right path towards graduation. That's their ultimate goal.

Having that support from the program is unique compared to other first-generation college students. In addition, personal and regular advisement assisted the students to gather techniques and advice to succeed in their transition to college.

Shelly explained,

> One thing I take away from the Raise program is to be able to … build connections with other people, which is very important to me because I was able to build a connection with my advisor, which was wonderful. She was amazing and I was able to go to her whenever I needed it and [say] "hey, this is happening in my class. What should I do? What should my next step be?"

She further explained,

> It is the wonderful … connection aspect that is one of my biggest takeaways; through the Raise program I was able to connect with several people. And they would send me emails regarding my major and how to get the new opportunities that related to my major, which is so wonderful. That is … one of the biggest parts … wow!

Thomas explained how his advisor provided him with "moral support" whenever he had problems he was facing:

> For example, whenever I felt … overwhelmed, I wouldn't know what to do. And I would let her know and ask her "What would you do if you were overwhelmed" and things like that, and she gave me a useful tip, but … I still use today. I'm so

glad. The tip was to make a to-do list … But to make things that are … really simple and to set the bar … really low, build momentum. Wow. So yeah, whether that's getting out of bed, and then brushing your teeth, or doing laundry, or just putting on clothes or … things of that nature, right? It really helped.

Having an advisor from the Raise program provides the participants with an advisor who understands first-generation college students and their experiences. The advisors support the participants' academic growth and professional development by listening and providing guidance. This is pertinent to students' experience in college because the advisors set a level of comfort and understanding that enables the students to talk to them about their experiences and get advice on how they should proceed.

Financial support. Additional support in terms of understanding the financial aspects of college was needed by the participants. The participants noted that the Raise program communicates constantly about scholarship or grant opportunities that they can apply for to help them pay for college. The participants reported that the Raise program aided them with supporting their financial needs and knowledge. This is an important component of the program. Shawn explained that he wishes knew more about the financial component of college:

> I wish I kind of knew what I was getting into, going into college … I knew it's a big time investment, a big money investment … I wish I knew what it was beyond … the stereotypes of … "oh everybody their parties you know … don't take it too seriously" because I personally take school very seriously since you're putting money into it, and so you're like make the most of … what I'm paying. So I wish … at least in culture there was a bigger emphasis on … education is you taking time out of your life because you spent 4 years; shouldn't be … focused on party and should be focused on learning … and … taking a step back and … developing yourself.

Hallie described the steps that she took to learn about the financial aspects of college:

> Just by asking around and then just Google, … "Okay, how do people actually pay for this, two people actually pay out of pocket?" Which, no, you don't have $60,000 to pay out of pocket … So yeah, just that and then looking around Google to see what are the best loans or loan services and companies for … college students? And also, just … asking around to family, friends who have kids that have been through college already, and … talking to them to get advice.

Jordan described how he learned about the financial process:

> I'm really just kind of being thrown into it, having to figure out how I was going to get done. Having to just do research and reach out to the school bursar to see how it's done.

Now in college, the Raise program has expanded the students' knowledge about scholarships and how to pay for college.

Angela described her awareness of financial support through applying for scholarships:

> They [the Raise program] showed me this scholarship … sheet that the school has and … how to access it, and … you really have to like dig for this, you really have to! They showed the person in the financial aid office that is in charge of dispersing grants and … extra funds and what to say an email to inquire about that. And … every time there's a scholarship available, they [the Raise program] email you … about that.

Jessica described their experiences in college and understanding the financial aid process as follows:

> Now that I'm in the Raise program [the financial aid process] is way easier to figure out. They [the Raise program] send me scholarships regularly, so I got … more scholarships added and I don't have to pay anything out of pocket this semester, which is great!

Abigail agreed that the Raise program has supported her financially:

> The Raise program has supported me [financially], and they have connected me to more scholarships that I was aware of.

The financial component of the student experiences is complex. Yet the Raise program assists the students with understanding their finances and provides them with opportunities to seek additional funding as it becomes available. Financial support is needed by the participants in terms of gathering knowledge about the financial aspects of college as well as acquiring additional funds to pay for college. These aspects affect the experiences of first-generation college students who are part of a structured support program—having access to this additional service provided by the Raise program

Counseling services. Counseling services are provided by the institution and as a service that any student at the university can use. They provide group therapy, one-on-one therapy sessions, and interactive workshops that support a student's mental health. Mental health was valued by all the participants. The Raise program strongly encourages the participants to take advantage of counseling services available to them on campus.

Twelve out of the 13 participants have utilized the counseling services department during their time at the university. They described both past and current traumas in their lives that they were working on with the counseling services. Whitney stated that the program "made me aware of the counseling services that I could use at my disposal." She found this important—to be able to have free therapy. Jessica elaborated on how the counseling services department also provides group therapy for anxiety, eating disorders, depression, and stress management, which is helpful for all college students. Jessica further described the counseling services as follows:

> I regularly use the counseling services center. My advisor for a club on campus is
> a therapist and in the counseling services center they have a lot of group therapy
> for anxiety, eating disorders, depression, and stress management. So that's
> something that I utilize … regularly, on top of … my own therapy off campus.

The services were beneficial for all of the students who utilize their resources. Angela noted that because her family isn't as supportive of her college experience, "I'd say a lot of my support would come from [counseling services] because I go probably … twice a week."

Abigail was referred to the counseling services center by one of her professors who knew about her family demands and told her "I know you're a strong person, but you have to speak to someone. I know that having all this bundled up, and just keeping it to yourself." He suggested to me that I start going to the counseling services center. He said, "It's free, it's part of your tuition, take advantage of it. Someone, even if it doesn't work out the first time around, there'll be

another therapist that meets your needs." With this connection through the counseling center Abigail has additional support, and knows that she has someone whom she can talk to regularly.

The counseling services center was identified as an essential part of the participants' experiences. The Raise program and the campus community at the university encourage the students to utilize their services on campus. This subtheme provides an understanding of the need for mental health support for first-generation college students in a structured support program.

Participant Recommendations

Although the institution developed the Raise program to support first-generation college students there is still a disconnect within the campus community. Participants were asked to give advice to institutions of higher education and their suggestions were organized into two categories: suggestions for institutions and suggestions for faculty.

Suggestions for Institutions

Whitney suggested more financial support:

I would recommend more financial support for students. I would say if a student is coming in from a background which they're not only a minority but also low income, offering them some sort of scholarship that isn't just given out to everyone else would be extremely helpful.

Jennifer and Shelly recommended the continuation of programs such as Raise:

Institutions should have programs for them [first-generation college students] like the Raise program. I think it's very helpful to be with people that are … in the same boat as you are.

Shelly commented,

I would love for how I had that first … 3-week experience—I would love if every college … took the time to … pick up kids who would love to like be part of that experience to have that because honestly, if I didn't have that first-gen experience, this whole college experience would be completely different. Because of that program I had such a fantastic … first year and … a completely different outlook.

Hallie suggested better outreach and support for the adjustment to college life:

Better program outreach such as just checking in to see how you're [first-generation college students] … adjusting because I am a first-gen halfway across the country … that came during a pandemic, so I did not meet a lot of people

Suggestions for Faculty

Each of the participants were asked to give advice to faculty who work with first

generation college students. Some of their suggestions include:

Whitney –

I would say that understanding cultural differences would be really, really good. Because I know there's not a lot of professors who come from cultural backgrounds; most professors are White. And I would say understanding that the cultural difference between students of color … and White students would be really important because when I speak up in class, if I'm being loud, I don't want you to classify me as angry, or as violent, or as … moody or sassy. Because I'm not, I just have a lot louder, stronger voice. And I would say, understanding those cultural differences.

Emma pointed out,

They should understand that first-generation college students do have pressure on them … because they're expected … to graduate and … have a future, good future with their peers and … get stressed over that and normal to feel stressed. And they should understand that it's normal, but they should be willing to help them … relieve that stress so that they can succeed.

Mary observed,

Making it known, their syllabus, … if you have any … abilities that are outside of … the disability program.… I wouldn't say being a first-generation college student is a disability. So that's unfair to say, but what I mean is that if you have … ailments that come with being … in that kind of position to create, or create other boundaries or issues for you, then that is something that your professors should be lenient towards, and understand, because they don't realize that that whole mantra of us … having to work harder to get where we are, or any other sort makes us feel like we have to be doing more than what other people are doing when we don't.

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Summary

Major Themes Drawn from the Findings

Each of the participants in this study has exemplified the importance of the Raise program during their collegiate experience. With the support of the Raise program all the participants will graduate from the university, representing a level of success not commonly seen within the first-generation college student population in the United States. Here are the major themes based on the data presented in this chapter:

1. Gratitude to have the opportunity to attend college as a first-generation college student

2. Value placed on the role of family amongst first-generation college students

3. Gratitude for the additional support and resources

4. A disconnect between first-generation college students and the institution that programs like Raise help to address.

The participants indicated the importance of their structured support program in assisting them to persist through each year of college. The following chapter presents the findings from this study. In conclusion the implications of these findings for university administrators and policy makers seeking to support first-generation college student support programs are addressed.

Chapter 5: Discussions, Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of current first-generation college students who persist through college, and to explore what success factors influence first-generation students' persistence during their college career, what obstacles and challenges exist for first-generation students, and what institutions of higher education do to support and help first-generation students. In addition, this study explored the experiences of first-generation college students in structured academic support programs at a 4-year institution.

Using a narrative qualitative methodology approach, this study sought to understand the experiences of first-generation college students who are persisting through college in a structured support program at a midsized 4-year institution in the northeastern United States. Thirteen students participated and were interviewed individually to learn more about their college experiences. Fostering a better understanding of first-generation college students will help college leaders to establish future support services that will improve recruitment and retention efforts to continue the growth of structured programs designed specifically for first-generation college students. The findings in Chapter 4 presented the major themes observed in the student's experiences within the Raise program and included gratitude for the program, the workshops provided by the program, peer mentorship and connection to campus resources, tutoring, advisor support, financial support, and counseling services. However, gratitude for being in college and their families' influence and motivation played a major role in understanding the participants' experiences as they persist through college. The following section summarizes the main themes.

Family Influence and Motivation

The findings revealed that an individual's family plays a role in persuading first-generation college students to pursue their dreams of attending college. Positive contacts and

encouragement were not always the source of their drive, but it played a big role in their aspirations. Some participants' families were extremely supportive, and encouraged them to go above and beyond what their family had previously accomplished. Twelve of the 13 participants identified family members (mainly their parents and grandparents) as their greatest "motivators." On the other hand, one of the 13 participants did not have positive family support, yet their lack of support and belief in themselves encouraged them to attend college. Participants' family experiences differed depending on the family background.

First-generation college students are more likely to perceive their parents as less supportive and less encouraging during the preparation process and throughout their experiences in college (Billson & Terry, 1982; Choy, 2001; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Mehta et al., 2011; Rodriguez, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). This is because their parents are less likely to understand these processes and how they affect their children. First-generation college students are also more likely to worry about failing classes and about having adequate finances (Bui, 2002; Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007). Hence, first-generation college students are typically less prepared to make important decisions about institutions and involvement that could maximize their educational development and benefits (Irlbeck et al., 2014; Pascarella et al., 2004). This makes the transition to college more difficult than it is for continuing-generation peers.

Despite the difficulty of transitioning to college, families are important and supportive for first-generation college students. When discussing their families, participants spoke primarily of their parents or grandparents as their main supporters. For example, Emma rated the support she receives from her family as a 10 because she knew that her college experience made her grandparents proud that she had the opportunity to attend college and persist through college.

Yet at times she feels quite overwhelmed about making them proud of her decision to go to college. She explained, "there's a bit of pressure because my family expects me to graduate, so it can get a bit overwhelming, but with their support I feel like I can do anything." Students who maintain positive family relationships are more likely to excel within their institutions and seek out the additional necessary resources to support their persistence (Capannola & Johnson, 2020; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Rondini, 2018). According to Capannola & Johnson (2020), family research pertaining to first-generation college students tends to focus on parent-child relationships, which makes generational relationships a key element in the identity of first-generation college students. As a result, the role of the family was an important factor in this study.

Another noteworthy discovery was that all participants were the first in their families to attend and possibly graduate from a college in the United States. Eleven of the 13 participants had siblings, and those 11 were the first to attend college in their family unit.

First-generation college students are not a homogeneous group; they come from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and religions. This diverse and complex group demonstrates the correlation between the diversity of first-generation college students and its intersection with their immigrant identities. It is important to note that 50% of participants were from immigrant families, and a strong correlation exists between the diversity of first-generation college students and their intersection with their immigrant identities. These complex identities show how important it is for this program to support the students during their onset at the university and throughout their experiences in order to help them proceed through college. Examining the intersection of their identities, it is necessary to compile a complex program to support their desire to succeed in college and to provide the resources that are necessary for them to persist.

Although the participants had family members or close family friends who attended college, these individuals were unable to assist the participants as they embarked on their own adventure.

The Raise program began their outreach to students at the onset of their coming to the university by offering a summer bridge program to help address any deficit from their family background early on and to also provide support and programming for the students throughout the academic year. The structure of the program supported the students throughout their experiences in college.

Gratitude for the Raise Program

Chapter 4 mentioned that the Raise program provided the students with a number of resources to support them throughout their collegiate experience, for which they expressed gratitude. These resources included tutoring, an academic advisor, a peer mentor, and dynamic workshops on various topics such as understanding finances. The Raise program also provided the students with connections to other resources available on campus that they may not have used prior to their experience with the Raise program. For example, some students took advantage of the on-campus counseling services offered. Mental health support was seen as imperative by the study participants.

According to Jury et al. (2017), several perceived psychological barriers prevent first-generation college students with a low socioeconomic status (SES) from succeeding in college compared to continuing-generation students with a high SES. The potential perceived barriers include 1) emotional experiences (e.g., emotional distress, well-being); 2) identity management (e.g., sense of belonging); 3) self-perception (e.g., self-efficacy, perceived threat); and 4) motivation (e.g., achievement goals, fear of failure) (Jury et al., 2017). The Raise program provided the students with workshops designed to overcome some of these psychological barriers by preparing them with techniques to persist. The program also has a strong relationship

with the counseling services center in order to ensure that the students get the best support needed to cope with psychological barriers and support their mental health.

Jury et al. (2017) argued that first-generation college students report having fewer opportunities to speak about their negative experiences in life and feeling guilty about their academic achievement. As a result, students of low SES demonstrate higher levels of physiological stress markers than do students of high SES (Jury et al., 2017). Understanding the psychological barriers of first-generation college students and low-SES students explains why they may not persist in college; therefore is it imperative to provide them with additional mental health and social support to help them achieve success in college.

The following sections describe how the key findings connect to the accumulating body of research and theories pertaining to first-generation college students. Finally, I discuss recommendations for future research and the implications of these recommendations.

Connection to the Theory

It is imperative to understand all aspects of first-generation college students in a structured support program, their desire to persist in college, and their experiences in college. In addition, once they are enrolled in college, first-generation students will need extra help and support to guide them throughout this life-changing experience. The theories that were used in the study's theoretical framework were social capital, Tinto's I-E-O, and Astin's theory of student departure. The following section outlines how these theories relate to this body of research.

Social capital. As discussed in Chapter 2, first-generation college students may need more assistance than their continuing-generation peers to transition successfully to attending college. Yet they may have difficulty finding assistance and support on campus due to their comparative lack of connection to individuals who hold postsecondary knowledge and

experience, defined as social capital in the present study (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). The guiding conceptual framework of social capital suggests various approaches that create the status quo in higher education and society. Social capital is attained by building networks and connections in society. For first-generation college students, social capital is the value of the relationships that provide support and assistance in a given social situation, such as in college (Moschetti & Hudley, 2008). An example of this would be the participants' relationships with their advisors and the resulting advice about how to navigate the college campus. Jordan reported that he was provided with an advisor whom he could meet with before meeting with any other advisor on campus just to make sure that they were on the right track to graduating.

As Jordan indicated, these relationships are essential to the participants' development to make sure that they are on "the right path to graduation." Not every first-generation college student has the opportunity to take advantage of a service like this, yet these participants do. Furthermore, they have an opportunity to increase their social capital through the meaningful relationships that they are developing throughout their collegiate experience.

The participants desired to go to college in order to acquire social connections and information to give access to their desired career and the ability to support their families. The findings demonstrate that the students' gratitude for the program played a major role in their participation in it and their desire to seek help, which made them grateful for the resulting experiences.

Gratitude. As mentioned in the previous chapters, all students who participated in this study were members of an institutional program that supports first-generation college students. To be a member of the program, the students at the selected university who met the program's criteria received an email from the dean of students asking them to apply for the program. The

next step was an interview with the program's staff. After the interview they were admitted to the program, and were then able to receive the resources provided by the program.

The students were grateful for the opportunity to be part of the Raise program and to be provided with all of the resources that the program offered. They showed perseverance as they had to apply to the program, interview for the program, and attend the workshops and meetings provided by the program. Self-efficacy refers to a personal belief in one's capability to organize and execute the actions required to produce specific performance attainments; for example, the students' belief in their own ability to achieve (Artino, 2012). It is important to note the participants' self-efficacy because non-first-generation college students tend to have higher self-efficacy than first-generation college students at the start and end of the first year of college (Ramos-Sánchez, 2007). First-generation students may not exhibit the same characteristics as traditional students; for example, being well-prepared, possessing the self-esteem and self-confidence to succeed, having strong supportive families, and having the resources to devote themselves full-time to persist to graduate (Irlbeck et al., 2014). Therefore, the self-efficacy of the students in this program led to their desire and gratitude for the program that helped them succeed; they knew they needed the additional support that non-first-generation college students already have.

Compared to non-first-generation students who receive advice and support from their parents about attending college, first-generation students may not have such guidance, making it extremely difficult for them to adjust to college and hindering their development of self-efficacy. As a result, first-generation college students are also less likely to ask for help and seek support services (Wist-Mackey et al., 2018). Shelly explained, "the connections [with the Raise program] really has helped me to break that boundary of … I need assistance … or just … a basic question

like should I take this class or the other class … which should … take priority?" Like many of the participants, Shelly is grateful for the Raise program opportunities outside of the classroom that enabled them to grow personally and to feel more comfortable about being in college. Furthermore, the students' increased self-efficacy affects the outcome of their persistence in college.

Preparing for college can be a struggle for any college-bound student, but more so for those whose parents are not familiar with the processes involved. First-generation students lack information regarding financial preparation for college. The participants reported that they prepared for college by "figuring it out" on their own. For example, Jordan described how he learned about the financial process of college by "just kind of being thrown into it, having to figure out how I was going to get done. Having to just do research and reach out to the school bursar. See how it's done."

First-generation college students may be susceptible to financial stress and unable to manage their scarce resources, which can hinder persistence toward degree completion (Eitel & Martin, 2009). Hence support and assistance in a structured format are needed for first-generation college students.

College preparation looked different for each participant, although "figuring it out" was a common theme amongst all of them. They described Google as one of their greatest resources, which demonstrates the need to increase social capital by going to college in order to gain access to knowledge about how to pursue a college education. Participants reported Googling "how to apply for college," "best colleges to go to," and "how to pay for college." Moreover, college prep information came from a variety of sources in high school including programs and extracurricular activities, counselors, and teachers. Two of the participants received support from

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the nationwide program known as RAPID (a pseudonym), a nonprofit organization committed to bridging the opportunity and achievement gaps in education by partnering with high schools all over the country to prepare students for college and their careers. This program provided the two students with the information and direct assistance they needed to apply to college. Interestingly, only one participant reported that their charter high school required all students to apply to college. Overall, the participants noted that their counselors and teachers assisted them with college support; for example, by providing recommendation letters. One participant in particular mentioned that their teacher allowed them to come to school early and use the computer to apply for college because they did not have access to a computer at home. Henceforward, the participants had unique experiences that provided them with preparation for college by aiding them to increase their social capital in the long run, thereby increasing the educated population and reducing poverty.

Tinto's Model of Student Departure Theory

Tinto (1990) demonstrated how students who stay involved with retention programs on campus will be able to establish personal bonds among their student peers, faculty, and administration (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). Therefore, acclimating first-generation students into the college environment very early on is important. The Raise program's summer bridge program students become acclimated to the campus prior to the start of the academic year (when the rest of their continuing-generation peers would be starting their semester). In addition, Tinto's 1993 model of student departure theory described academic integration and societal integration as essential to a student's persistence (Tinto, 1993). His version of academic integration refers to student participation in college life academically and socially, and pointed out that students must connect with other students; otherwise, they are more likely to leave the institution and fail to complete their education (White, 2019). Therefore it is

important to understand the experiences of first-generation college students in a support program that is specific to their needs.

The Raise program involves students with activities outside of the classroom, which lessens the possibility that they would depart from college. Persistence in college was prevalent in the findings in terms of the participants' shared experiences in gaining additional support and guidance from the Raise program. The activities offered by the Raise program included countless workshops, development of leadership skills through the peer mentorship program, and opportunities to strengthen their academic skills. Constant availability and access to online tutoring via tutor.com and peer tutoring (in person or virtual) were the means to improve academic skills. Additionally, the students were able to attend workshops that helped them prepare for life outside of college and for career planning once they graduate. The workshops provided critical information that helped them navigated college systems needed for persistence. Lastly, the program offers an opportunity for the students to make friends and connect with peers who may come from similar backgrounds.

The financial burden of paying for the college experience is one that all participants were not expecting. At the site institution, the average cost of tuition is about $45,000 a year and an additional $15,000 for room and board, equating to approximately $60,000 per year and $240,00 for 4 years of college. However, approximately 98% of students receive financial aid and scholarships from the university and the government. Tuition increases have created more obstacles for students, particularly those such as first-generation college students who must pay for their own education.

With this financial burden in mind, the participants noted that the Raise program communicates constantly about scholarship or grant opportunities that they can apply for to help

them pay for college. Although Tinto's theory does not mention finances, they are important because first-generation college students are much more likely to persist in college if they receive financial aid. However, high loan debt makes them much more likely to drop out of college (Irlbeck et al., 2014; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Somers et al., 2004). Abigail described how the program "has supported me and they have connected me to more scholarships that I was not aware of." As a result of the program, the students become improved their financial literacy and learned how to pay for college through scholarships and grants. It is imperative for freshman and recent college students to gather information on financial literacy; for example, understanding loans, grants, and the overall sticker price of paying for their collegiate experience. The College Survey of Student Engagement (2006) reported that more than 50% of first-generation college students identified the lack of finances as either likely or very likely to influence them to withdraw from class or college (Eitel & Martin, 2009). Eitel and Martin (2009) further explained that the lack of financial support from family can force decisions related financial debt that compromise the student's best intentions of persistence and degree completion. Hallie described how going to college "is [an] extremely expensive investment … I feel like I don't have room for error," which drives her to succeed and persist through college. Overall, the Raise program provided the students with an opportunity to gain financial literacy as well as to seek additional funding to pay for college and the expenses associated with going to college (books, etc.). In sum, the financial implications of college for first-generation college students are imperative to understanding their need for structured support in order to persist in college. The Raise program provided first-generation college students with additional resources such as tutoring, additional advisement, peer mentorship, and workshops to support and uplift their success as they persist through college. Although Tinto's theory is highly regarded as a

means to understanding student departure, it is also important to examine the additional factors that support student persistence (for example, gratitude) and understand the financial scope of an individual's collegiate experience.

Astin's Student Involvement Theory

Astin's theory affirms that students who get involved in campus life and activities are more likely to stay in college and persist in reaching their academic goals (White, 2019). The fundamental element of Astin's theory highlights the significance of student involvement in college based on three areas of students' lives: inputs, environments, and outcomes. Students in the Raise program were introduced to a number of opportunities on their campus that allowed them to develop a sense of involvement on campus. Astin's theory described inputs as demographic characteristics, environment as experiences in college, and outputs as student learning outcomes (Astin, 1991; Strayhorn, 2008). For the participants of this study their inputs are their backgrounds as low-income first-generation college students; their environment consists of being in the Raise program and the resources provided and supported by the program; their outputs are their learning outcomes, their satisfaction with the college experience and their persistence in college.

The students' backgrounds as inputs included the role of their family members and their influence on the students' persistence in pursuing a college degree. Ninety percent of participants found their family members to be extremely supportive, wanting their student to be the first in the family to graduate. The students strove to ensure that they graduated in order to make their parents and grandparents proud. Their environment includes the aspects of the Raise program that are supporting them to persist: the advisement, tutoring, and meaningful workshops. Students' inputs and environment play a role in their retention at the university.

Current research seeking to understand the link between first-generation students' college experiences and retention can be understood using Tinto's and Astin's theories. These approaches are connected by understanding the life experiences of first-generation college students and their need to persist in college. Yet Astin's (1984) theory is critiqued for its "assimilation/acculturation framework" that underestimates the cost of involvement for minority students (Lundberg et al., 2007; Rendón et al., 2000). Conversely, Tinto's (1994) student departure theory has also been criticized for its lack of focus on minority students as a collective (Lundberg et al., 2007; Tierney, 1992). These theories need to be updated to include a minority perspective and experiences, as 95% of the participants were minorities. Despite criticism, the theories help to explain aspects of the college student experience. This should expand upon the concepts of understanding the importance of gratitude and the financial burden/lack of financial literacy that confront first-generation college students.

Recommendations for Practice

Retention Programs for First-Generation College Students

Tym et al. (2004) identified the main components of successful academic programs as providing personalized attention to each student, adult role models, scholarship assistance, and peer support. Engle & Tinto (2008) explained that implementing strategies such as bridge courses and programs during the summer between high school and college, orientation, courses before and during the freshman year, and first-year learning communities are proven to ease the transition to college and will assist students in their adjustment to the social and academic aspects of the institutions (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Lotkowski et al., 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Smith et al., 2004; Tinto, 2003; Upcraft et al., 2005). The Raise program met all of the needs of successful academic programs as described by Tym et al. (2004) by providing peer support, professional advising, and scholarship assistance.

First-generation students feel like it is hard for them to make friends and fit in because of their background and where they come from. According to Falcon (2015), the reasons that first-generation students are more likely to have limited communication and interactions with peers and faculty/staff include the perceived lack of similar interests, experiences, and resources. The Raise program allows the students to be in a "safe" space with students who come from similar backgrounds and staff who are trained to understand their experiences. The university developed the Raise program with one goal of involving participants in activities that enrich the student experience. The participants were able to make new friends and have a peer mentor to help them propel themselves throughout their college experience. Accordingly, research shows that peer interaction is necessary for students to acclimate and integrate into the collegiate experience; hence the importance of the Raise program in providing this opportunity for the students in a structured format.

Quinn et al. (2019) studied first-generation college students' success in a TRIO student support services program. The student participants reported that TRIO programs provided them with both formal and informal support that was needed for their growth and development personally and academically. Structured support programs are an excellent resource for students because they provide the extra support needed from the very beginning to improve their satisfaction and retention while in college. Effective retention programs aid students to ensure that they can integrate into the academic community and feel supported for their efforts to build their sense of belonging in college (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). The goals of the Raise program consisted of:

- Development of personal connection to and enhanced understanding of the university's offices, resources, and services

- Enhancement of knowledge, skills, and strategies aimed to improve academic performance

- Knowledge of financial literacy and increased confidence in the usage of financial tools and resources

- An individualized plan for professional and career development

- Development of personal/professional networks

- Opportunities for activities that enrich the student experience through social, cultural, and service-based initiatives

- Tools for success from year to year and after graduation

The structure of the program played a role in the experiences of first-generation college students by providing additional support and resources. These services enabled increased persistence and graduation rates. The following section provides recommendations for practice before the development and support of first-generation college student programs.

Recommendations for Practice

As a leader in higher education myself, I can attest that research results are pertinent to establishing changes among campus administrators and policymakers. Research with a small population of first-generation university students at a midsize 4-year private university in a single program cannot be generalized. Yet these results can continue to be used to improve the experience and results of traditional methods for first-generation college students. The following section provides recommendations for higher education institutions and for policymakers.

Recommendations for Institutions

This study reveals that there is still more to learn about first-generation college students. For example, we can learn more about the role of family in the student's persistence, the role of their peers, and the importance of financial literacy for first-generation college students. As a

result, higher education institutions need to understand the complexities of the first-generation college student. The process begins by providing more training for faculty and staff to understand current research on the experiences of first-generation college students and how they can best serve them at their institution.

Institutions should strive to be like the site university, an institution that is currently a first-generation college student serving institution. The first-generation college student serving institution designation was begun in 2017 by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), with the mission of being a leading resource for evidence-based practices, professional development, and knowledge creation to improve the success of first-generation students in higher education (NASPA, 2022). The Center launched First-gen Forward, which is the nation's first recognition program that acknowledges higher education institutions' commitment to first-generation student success. Currently there are 215 designated First-gen Forward institutions across the 2019–20, 2020–21, and 2021–22 cohorts in the United States. These institutions and professionals generate knowledge and work to advance the success of first-generation college students. Institutions should meet the requirements and apply to receive this designation. I also recommend that more institutions complete the requirements to become a first-generation college student serving institution. The requirements to apply include:

- Be an active, accredited, 2-year or 4-year institution of higher education, and located within the United States;
- Be a NASPA institutional member with the primary institutional contact a professional member;
- Secure senior leadership support and commitment to participation;

- Designate a minimum of two currently employed faculty and/or staff to serve as the institutional representatives to the program (additional faculty/staff are welcome to participate in programming); (NASPA, 2022).

If more institutions secure this designation and include the opportunity to engage with a cohort of peer institutions to provide support, share resources and evidence-based practices, and offer professional development that strengthens the campus knowledge base (NASPA, 2022), from the findings we are able to see the importance of the role of the Raise program in students' lives. Gratitude for the program pertained to the resources provided by the program; for example, staff who were trained to communicate with and assist students with their trials and tribulations in their academic and personal lives. Participants' gratitude also pertained to the resources that they were now afforded due to their participation in this program. For example, Angela's response when describing her gratitude towards the Raise program was "I genuinely feel like they do care about wanting to see the students succeed." She further described the importance of always having someone who was available to support her whenever she needed it. These resources were so important throughout the experiences of first-generation college students, and may not have been possible without the structured support program of which they are a part.

Institutions can create policies to develop programs for first-generation college students to make sure that they are supported throughout their collegiate experience. This also includes beginning the support at the time of admission and providing opportunities for first-generation college students to participate in programs regardless of their income or abilities. The financial aid office should set aside additional funding for first-generation college students to provide scholarships and grants that the students can apply for if needed. They should also provide

training sessions on how to apply for these funding opportunities and how funds are repaid if necessary.

Recommendations for First-Generation College Student Programs

The program provided the students with support and guidance to persist through college. Based on the analysis of this research, the aspects that best supported the students were the interpersonal connections built through the program. Interpersonal relationships are strong acquaintances or associations between two individuals. Similar programs can use the Raise program as a model to develop initiatives that support and guide first-generation college students. They can build interpersonal connections with the students by providing extensive advising and also ensuring that the advising staff is trained to facilitate difficult conversations (for example, discussing family troubles or choosing the best class to take). Interpersonal relationships were important for the students' comfort in having such dialogues with their advisor. Additionally, the development of peer mentors in the program helps the students to form relationships with peers who are leaders and can guide them through their academic journey. Kitchening (2019) found that first-generation college students who have increased interactions with other first-generation students experience greater success during their time in college. Hence, the success factors of the Raise programs.

Dynamic workshops prepared the students to be successful both in and outside the classroom. Suggested workshops include time management, study tips, how to study, how to apply for scholarships, and how to repay college loans. Raise program workshops were well attended by the participants and are an excellent suggestion for other first-generation college student programs.

Implications for Policymakers

Policymakers should work to support federally funded academic and financial support programs for first-generation students and low-income students. Unfortunately, these programs are typically the first to suffer significant budget cuts, which affects both students and institutions. For example, in March 2019 President Trump called for a $7.1 billion cut in funding for the Department of Education, reducing the level of funding for programs such as Gear Up (Kreighbaum, 2019). Budgetary cuts will strongly influence what types of support services and programs are offered for the students and paid for by federal funding. Therefore, it is imperative to continue researching first-generation college students in order to continue supporting them in their academic endeavors.

Many states offer opportunity funding programs that are needs-based and prohibit a number of students from participating due to their income. However, the opportunity to participate in a support program regardless of income is necessary, and opens the door for more first-generation college students to persist through education.

Implications for Future Research

This study took place at a single university. Suggestions for future research include expanding to include other institutions of higher education with programs like the Raise program developed specifically for first-generation college students. The Raise program was supported by federal grant money that required strict limitations on which students were eligible for the program. Future research should explore programs that do not limit eligibility to students who are United States citizens or have low income or disability status to participate.

The participants in this study were considered low-income because they met the low-income criteria as determined by federal guidelines for family unit size according to the U.S. Department of Education. The term *low-income individual* refers to an individual whose family's

taxable income for the previous year did not surpass 150% of the federal poverty level (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). However, many first-generation college students do not come from low-income and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds but cannot take advantage of the resources provided by the Raise program. Institutions should consider developing additional support programs that do not have an income level requirement.

Future studies should explore the different experiences of students based on their gender. Chapter 1 pointed out that the percentage of female first-generation college students is slightly larger than that of their male counterparts. Therefore a study that compares the experiences of first-generation college students by gender would be a helpful addition to the research and perhaps a means to share ways in which we can work to support more males throughout their collegiate experience.

McCarron & Inkelas (2006) reported that the level of a student's aspiration attained depends on a variety of elements including race, gender, and environmental variables. Therefore it would be helpful to explore whether a correlation exists between the majors of first-generation college students and their persistence. Another noteworthy observation from this study is that some of the majors that were not represented among the participants included business and nursing. Perhaps the subject of major selection by first-generation college students needs to be further explored. Trenor (2009) found that although first-generation college students experience a high level of emotional support from their families, their families are unable to connect them to institutional resources and support to assist them in choosing their college major, which makes them more likely to just "fall into" their major. According to Trenor (2009), the process of major selection among first-generation college students is an overlooked demographic. Hence, future studies could explore gender and majors of first-generation college students.

Additionally, I would recommend quantitative studies to analyze the data across institutions throughout the United States. Such an analysis would allow for a larger data sample by which to grasp the concept of understanding first-generation college students and an academic support program. One potential data sample that can be used is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The NSSE survey collects data about first-year and senior students' learning and personal development through their participation in programs and activities (Center for Postsecondary Research, 2022). Another survey that analyzes the experiences of first-generation college students is the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) consortium survey at top-tier research-intensive universities. Speaking as one who is passionate about qualitative research and sharing the narratives of the participants, it would be gratifying to see a mixed-methods study that uses the statistical data and the narratives of first-generation college students to expand and strengthen the research on this topic.

Because the goal of getting first-generation students into college is so they can graduate eventually, it would be worthy to follow first-generation college students in a longitudinal study. If first-generation college students were followed for a longer period of time, we might get a better idea of the point at which they need the most support and how additional support plays a role in their persistence. It might also be helpful to explore the experiences of first-generation college students who are not in structured support programs. Longitudinal studies and studying two cohorts of first-generation college students are important to further research on first-generation college students.

Conclusion

The effort to understand the experiences of first-generation college students is an ever-expanding topic that deserves further research. First-generation college students may lack the knowledge required to prepare for college, the necessary support and understanding from their

family members, and the resources to prepare and succeed throughout their collegiate experience. This in turn makes it challenging for institutions to best serve first-generation college students. Therefore, it is imperative that we provide training and resources that enable higher education institutions to support first-generation college students and prepare them to persist. Although their families may not understand the complexities of the college experience, they are still very loving and supportive of students' trajectory to gain social capital, yet it is imperative for students to acquire that same support through structured programs during their college years. Highlights of the Raise program are providing students with academic advising, tutoring, workshops, peer mentorships, and participation in the summer bridge program, all of which play a role in the persistence of first-generation college students. If more institutions begin to implement such programs, we will begin to see an increase in persistence levels among first-generation college students.

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07/26/2021

Naima Ricks
Seton Hall University

Re: 2021-240

Dear Naima,

The Research Ethics Committee of the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved your research proposal entitled, "Experiences of First-Generation Students at a Student Support Program as They Persist Through College" as resubmitted. This memo serves as official notice of the aforementioned study's approval as exempt. If your study has a consent form or letter of solicitation, they are included in this mailing for your use.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol, informed consent form or study team must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

You will receive a communication from the Institutional Review Board at least 1 month prior to your expiration date requesting that you submit an Annual Progress Report to keep the study active, or a Final Review of Human Subjects Research form to close the study. In all future correspondence with the Institutional Review Board, please reference the ID# listed above.

Sincerely,

Mara C. Podvey, PhD, OTR
Associate Professor
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board

Phyllis Hansell, EdD, RN, DNAP, FAAN
Professor
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board