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Success and Persistence of First-Generation Students at Private Colleges and Universities

Matthew Daily

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Success and Persistence of First-Generation Students
at Private Colleges and Universities

by

Matthew Daily

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education
in
Learning and Leading

University of Portland
School of Education

2022

**Success and Persistence of First-Generation Students at
Private Colleges and Universities**

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Matt Daily

This dissertation is completed as a partial requirement for the Doctor of Education (EdD) degree at the University of Portland in Portland, Oregon.

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Abstract

The purpose of this descriptive study utilizing survey research was to understand student perceptions about how private institutions support the persistence of first-generation college students. First-generation college students refer to those students whose parents or guardians have not earned a four-year bachelor's degree but may have some postsecondary college experience (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). Today, 4.1 million students, or 33% of all students, are considered first-generation, yet only 20% earn a four-year college degree within six years (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019). Thus, it is critical to understand the landscape that exists for first-generation college students and what has allowed those that are first-generation to persist successfully at private institutions.

Three conceptual frameworks were used to investigate student perceptions: Dr. Vincent Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model for Persistence; Dr. Laura Rendón's (1994) Theory of Validation; and Dr. Tara Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model, which provided an asset-based framework to examine student experiences.

The study investigated third and fourth-year student perceptions ($n = 541$) at private colleges and universities ($n = 34$) throughout the United States. Results suggest that programs do influence the academic and social experience of first-generation college students. Findings included 82% indicated participation in some type of first-generation program; 95% of students agree that their college or university has supported their efforts to earn a 4-year college degree, whereas 92% of respondents agree that their institution has specific supports and programs for first-generation

college students. The most important conclusions of this study include: a) first-generation students participate in campus programming at high rates; b) campus programs are impactful to first-generation students; c) Campus programs of various types create meaningful connections for first-generation students; and d) there is scope for improvement in program participation, program awareness, and program offerings.

Dedication

To Jenny, Nikolas, and Benjamin – truly because of each of you and your sacrifices,
this is the reason why this study could happen. I love you each of you dearly.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

There are numerous benefits to a college degree. For example, the college journey is one way to enhance social standing for individuals who are pursuing a four-year post-secondary degree, both professionally and financially, thus allowing for greater financial security than non-college-educated peers (Hershbein & Kearney, 2014). In addition, pursuing a college degree enhances one's knowledge and value system, cultivates meaningful experiences with others, and allows for community and cultural engagement (Astin, 1993; Choy, 2001; Giroux, 2003). Further, individuals who earn a four-year college degree raise their self-confidence and concept of self (Seifert et al., 2008).

Current research suggests that there is strong interest from individuals wanting to enroll in college among the American public. For example, fall enrollment at colleges and universities was 8% higher in 2017 (19.8 million students) than in 2007 (18.3 million students), thus offering supportive evidence that the number of students pursuing a college degree continues to rise (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Further, the National Center for Educational Statistics projects that the enrollment for students under age 25 will be 6% higher in 2028 than in 2017, while the enrollment for those 25 and older will be 2% lower (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

In addition to increases in postsecondary enrollment, research suggests that the demographic profile of undergraduate students in the United States has continued to become increasingly diverse, especially in the past 25 years (Pascarella et al., 2004; Reason, 2003; Woodard et al., 2000). In 1996, underrepresented students included

30% of the collective undergraduate student population of the entire country; this number has increased to 45% in 2016 (Espinosa et al., 2019). Higher education institutions must plan accordingly to educate this emerging population, which includes students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, cultures, and financial means.

Despite an increasing and more diverse population of college students today, some students still pause or opt-out of completing their college academic studies. In the United States, the overall dropout rate for undergraduate college students is 40%, with approximately 30% of all first-year college students dropping out before their sophomore year (Bustamante, 2019). Research shows students are more likely to complete their degree successfully if they have a strong, inner connection between personal goals and the goal to complete college with a four-year degree (Tinto, 1993). To serve this increasingly diverse college student population, colleges must seek ways to ensure success for all students, including traditionally underrepresented student populations.

Underrepresented Student Populations

The first-generation college student is one category of students who has overlapping characteristics with these underrepresented groups. This study defines *first-generation college students* as students within the higher education environment where neither parents nor guardians have earned a four-year bachelor's degree but may have some postsecondary college experience (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). Conversely, this study defines *continuing-generation students* as students with at least one parent who has earned a four-year college degree (Somers et al., 2000). Today, of all students entering the higher education setting, 4.1 million

students, or 33% of all students, are considered first-generation (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019). Of these first-generation students, 59% were also the first sibling in their family to pursue a college degree (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019). Finally, only 20% earn a four-year college degree within six years of those first-generation students who enter postsecondary education (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019). Put succinctly, it is critical to understand the landscape that exists for first-generation college students, as this qualifier is an important consideration when researching this population.

Challenges to College Persistence

As they persist toward graduation, first-generation college students face unique barriers during enrollment, as college students, and through their college experience (Thayer, 2000). This study defines *persistence* as the action of one continuing to enroll full-time at the institution of study, and “goes on resolutely or stubbornly despite opposition” to earn a 4-year college degree (Habley et al., 2012). In addition, the present study defines *attrition* as the number of students that do not continue, depart, or leave an institution of study and do not complete a 4-year college degree. As an example, many first-generation students may not consider college as an option until much later in the enrollment process in comparison to their continuing-generation peers. Additionally, unlike their continuing generation counterparts, first-generation students tend to be less familiar with the college enrollment process and are likely to be underprepared academically and socially, thus creating a greater likelihood for attrition (Davis, 2010). Finally, individuals need mentorship, validation from the

institutional community, and a sense of both belonging and mattering among peers for the successful persistence of first-generation college students (Thayer, 2000).

The ability to fully connect with the campus experience is another challenge to first-generation persistence. When compared to their continuing generation college peers, first-generation students are more likely to live and work off-campus, are less inclined to be engaged with extracurricular college activities, and are more likely to complete fewer academic credits (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). These students are also more likely than their peers to have personal and family obligations that pull them away from college life. Many first-generation students feel compelled to maintain a daily connection to family even while they are trying to acclimate to their new college environment (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018; Petty, 2014; Stebleton & Soria, 2012).

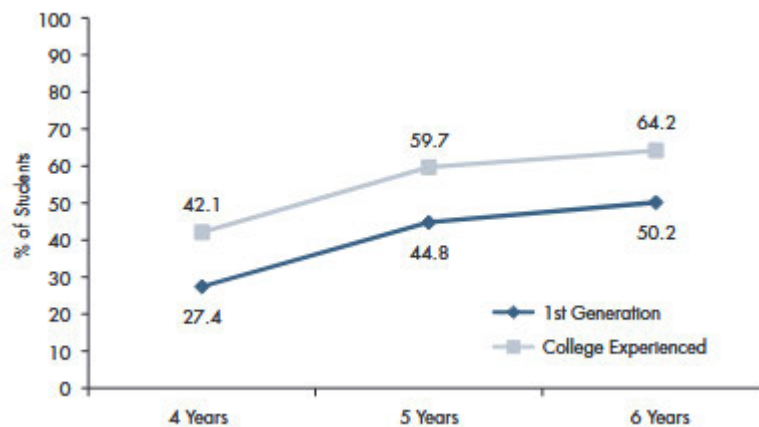
First-generation college students have described feeling decreased support from their higher education institution, which is why they are less likely to experience situations that support and promote learning, performance, and persistence in earning a four-year college degree (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). Pike and Kuh (2005) found that first-generation college students were less engaged overall throughout the college experience and were less motivated to welcome diverse co-curricular opportunities into their college experiences. According to these researchers, first-generation college students might be less engaged with their college experiences simply because they knew less about the importance of their engagement, and, more importantly, how to become engaged.

Nonetheless, the problem remains that, in contrast to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation college students do not remain in college and do not persist to earn a college degree at similar rates. Nationally, recent research (Figure 1) suggests that fewer first-generation college students (27%) earn a degree after four years of study when compared to continuing-generation students with parents who have earned a college degree (42%), a gap of 15% (DeAngelo et al., 2011).

Researchers note that the gap between both first-generation and continuing-generation students remains similar for those students earning a degree in six years, with 50% of first-generation students completing their degrees in six years compared to 64% of their continuing-generation peers, a gap of 14% (DeAngelo et al., 2011).

Figure 1

Weighted Four-, Five, and Six-Year Degree Attainment Rates by Generation in College



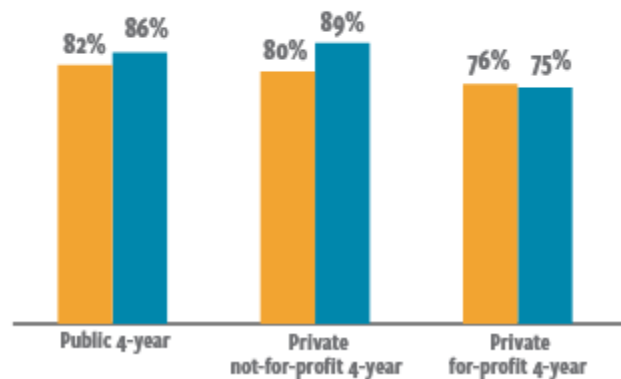
Note. This image depicting the weighted four, five, and six-year degree attainment rates by generation has been adapted from a study conducted by De Angelo et al., (2011, p. 9).

Finally, when examining the percentage of first-generation students who persisted to earn a bachelor's degree at their first institution following their first year (as shown in Figure 2), the findings were interesting: 80% of first-generation students persisted at private, not-for-profit schools, compared to 89% of their continuing generation peers at private schools, denoting a gap of 9% (RTI International, 2019). However, it is necessary to conduct further research to determine how best to support first-generation college students to ensure their retention and persistence in earning a college degree at private, not-for-profit schools.

Figure 2

Percentage of Bachelor Degree Students Persisting at their First Institution

Percentage of Bachelor's Degree Students Who Persisted at Their First Institution After the First Year, by Institution Type



■ First-generation College Graduates ■ Continuing-generation College Graduates

Note. This image has been a fact sheet document graphically illustrating the first-year experience, persistence, and attainment of first-generation college students adapted from Center for First-Generation Student Success (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019, p. 1).

Institutional Role in Student Persistence

In the previous section, statistics seemingly suggested that first-generation students often encounter barriers when trying to persist and earn their 4-year college degree. This population may encounter unique challenges that require innovative solutions to inform any program's mission, goals, and objectives (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Over the last century, the establishment of institutional transition and support programs to help all students succeed has brought more diverse student populations to college campuses, including first-generation college students.

Much of the research, study, and assessment concerning first-generation college students, their aspirations, as well as successful persistence through college has focused on factors that contribute to their college departure. For example, research has included academic challenges (Huerta et al., 2013; Wilkins, 2014), college adjustment (Stephens et al., 2014), college assimilation, (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014), financial challenges (Cabrera et al., 1992; Choy, 2000; Dowd, 2004; Mortenson 2003; 2006), and family support (Alvarez, 2016; Boden, 2011; Korsmo, 2014; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014; Sparkman et al., 2012).

Diverse student populations have also brought additional transitional issues with them into the college experience. Research suggests that it is important for universities to invest efforts in targeted college transition and support programs specific to first-generation college students (Kezar & Kitchen, 2020). Most attrition takes place early in college, and institutions have created institutional transition and support programs over the past two decades to increase retention and persistence

(Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; King, 2009; The Pell Institute, 2008; Perna et al., 2008).

Retention has several definitions and uses. For the purposes of this study, *retention* is defined as the rate or percentage of students who return from enrollment from the first year to the subsequent year of study (Habley et al., 2012). The *retention rate* denotes the percentage at which students return using the applied definition.

TRIO

Universities have implemented a myriad of programs to improve success with underrepresented students (Douglas & Attewell; 2014; Kezar, 2000; The Pell Institute, 2009; Purdie & Rosser, 2011; Sablan, 2014; Swanson et al., 2017; TRIO Programs, 2017). In 1972, the federal government created TRIO programs to provide underrepresented and historically marginalized students with specialized support at both public and private universities (Hallett et al., 2020). TRIO is not an acronym, but refers to the original number (three, now eight) of U.S. federal programs funded under Title IV of the Higher Education Act: Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, and Student Support Services (University of Montevallo, n.d.) TRIO began as a part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and was a direct response by the government to address serious social and cultural barriers to education in America (University of Montevallo, n.d.).

Each program is designed to increase access to higher education for economically disadvantaged students (University of Montevallo, n.d.). Notably, this program was among the first efforts to define and draw attention to the first-generation college experience and has remained one of the most successful first-generation

programs to date. Additionally, many colleges and universities have created versions of a pre-orientation experience specifically to address the transitions that first-generation students may encounter prior to their first year of study (Atherton, 2014; Strayhorn, 2011; Turner et al., 2021). The objective of such programs is to get first-generation students to have an experience on campus before the commencement of class to connect with peers with similar backgrounds and to better acquaint themselves with university systems. Research suggests that the success of pre-orientation programs is attributed to their ability to enhance first-generation student self-efficacy (Strayhorn, 2011; Wachen et al., 2018) and allow all to socialize and learn from one another (Atherton, 2014; Lopez, 2016; Martin, 2015, Strayhorn, 2011). Finally, participants opined that the pre-orientation experience provided valuable lessons to all that impacted how they navigated their college experience both academically and socially (Turner et al., 2021).

Lack of Scholarly Evidence on Models' Success

Despite the importance of providing support to students, there is little evidence of models that support success from the student perspective. In addition, colleges today are seeking to invest in supporting first-generation college students, namely, to ensure degree completion. Much of this investment has resulted in the development of institutionalized support programs designed specifically for first-generation college students.

Unlike their continuing-generation peers, first-generation college students possess unique talents, strengths, and attributes that enhance their ability to be successful college students (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Boden, 2011; Falcon, 2015;

Hudley et al., 2009; Pitre & Pitre, 2009; PrĂspero et al., 2012; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014; Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013; Stephens et al., 2014; Wilkins, 2014).

Examples include factors such as family support, student participation in high school/college preparation programs, the effectiveness of academic/social integration to college, and personal characteristics. When combined, many of these noted attributes enhance the successful persistence of first-generation college students (Falcon, 2015).

Despite the study of these asset-focused characteristics, there is insufficient knowledge of first-generation students' perceptions on what aspects of their college experience have impacted student success. In addition, there is a lack of scholarly insight on this topic in small, private universities, most of whom pride themselves on providing an individualized experience for all students. Further, there is no research involving the students at selected private, four-year institutions, colleges, and universities. Specialized college programming and support programs, targeted engagement, and outreach support specific to first-generation students recognize the need to both support these students while also affirming their achievements and assets. Given the infancy of specialized higher education programs designed specifically with first-generation students in mind, how do first-generation students acknowledge institutionalized support programs as having enhanced their ability to persist and be successful?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research study was to understand student perceptions about how private institutions support the persistence of first-generation college students.

The specific perceptions investigated included: a) how do students experience programs that are designed for their academic success and persistence; and how, if at all, do programs support or promote student success? The sampling criteria of participants considered were undergraduate, first-generation college students enrolled full-time and in their third year or greater year of college, attending classes on campus (or virtually), and ranging in age from 18 to 25 years. Students in their third year or greater were included in this study due to their successful persistence at their institution to date. To reiterate, the goal of this research was to understand first-generation college students and their own successful persistence, and how colleges and universities can design future first-generation supports and interventions based upon student feedback.

Significance

The findings of this study will expand the scope of research within higher education and inform private colleges and universities of best practices to support first-generation college students on their respective college campuses. Research concerning first-generation college students has continued to rise over the past many years and has included a diverse set of topics. Many of these topics have included first-generation student identity (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Garriott et al., 2021; Herrmann et al., 2021; Jehangir et al., 2020), personal characteristics of the student (Helmbrecht, & Ayars, 2021; Holden et al., 2021; Ricks & Warren, 2021), the successful transition to college (Capannola & Johnson, 2020; Roksa et al., 2021), and matriculation and persistence to degree completion (Anderson, 2021; Markle & Stelzriede, 2020; Martin et al., 2020; Reynolds & Cruise, 2020). As pointed out

before, this body of research is a critical component for universities as each seeks to create and design programs targeted for first-generation college students in support of their academic, social, emotional, personal, and professional goals as college students and beyond (Jackson et al., 2020).

College transition and support programs for first-generation college students can enhance students' ability to succeed by implementing programs and services that address the challenges, as well as assets, unique to first-generation college students. It would also be worthwhile to inform college programming decisions around the community and cultural assets that first-generation students impart in congruence with the needs of this demographic. For this study, *college transition and support programs* (CTSP) refer to programs that are designed to help underrepresented populations, including first-generation college students, by improving retention and graduation rates (Pullias Center, 2020). These programs emphasize outcomes such as belonging, mattering, and academic, social, and career self-efficacies (Pullias Center, 2020). CTSP programs include summer and first semester programs, as well as one-year, two-year, and full-college programs for its student populations (Hallett et al., 2020). Collectively, research does inform a great deal about students who are among the first in their families to attend college. A tremendous amount of research on first-generation college students has focused upon factors prior to college, the ability to attend college, enrollment patterns, and financial considerations (Jehangir, 2010). While these are important considerations, the full story rests with the first-generation students themselves and their own narratives. However, a gap exists informing best practices for programs, processes, and procedures to facilitate first-generation student

success on college campuses. Therefore, this study took the unique position of highlighting student voices to suggest optimal practices that have allowed them to be successful and solicited qualitative as well as quantitative data from current first-generation college students about their lived experiences while in college. The findings from this study offers recommendations to inform future best practices for colleges and universities nationwide should each wish to establish, or enhance, current college transition and support programs specific to first-generation college students.

Conceptual Framework

Several studies of college student persistence are used to frame this study. Higher education student persistence theories, models, and frameworks are imperative for fostering an understanding of what has allowed first-generation students to persist and be successful within their own college experience. Current research suggests that no one conceptual framework completely captures first-generation college student persistence and the attributes associated with their own student success. Considering two conceptual frameworks - the Student Integration Model for persistence constructed by Vincent Tinto (1975) and Laura Rendón's Theory of Validation (1994) - allowed for investigation of the complex first-generation college student experience for this study. Since the experience of everyone is diverse and layered in many ways, it was important to consider first-generation college students from a variety of perspectives.

Student Integration Model for Persistence

First, Tinto (1975) published a theoretical framework with a specific focus on higher education student retention, which was a model that contradicted popular

theories about institutional “fit” and its relationship with retention (Andres & Carpenter, 1997). Namely, this prior research on “fit” heavily focused on traditional students and their academic and social integration into higher education, and how both students, as well as universities, were compatible with the other (Andres & Carpenter, 1997). Instead, Tinto’s (1975) framework focused less on the student-institutional fit, which had been the norm, and more on how student interactions impacted their own persistence. In suggesting this alternative framework, Tinto (1975) acknowledged that this was the first conception of this framework, adding that in the future, additional adjustments would be needed as the scope, landscape, and demographics of students changed throughout colleges and universities in the U.S. (Guffrida, 2006; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Torres, 2006).

Theory of Validation

Next, Rendón (1994) suggested that the validation of students is a key consideration for all stakeholders, especially when considering students who potentially might be marginalized within the higher education experience. Rendón’s Theory of Validation (1994) defines validation as a supportive process, both inside and outside of the classroom that cultivates both the academic and personal development of students (Rendón, 1994). In contrast to a focus on the action of the student, Rendón’s (1994) Theory of Validation shifts the responsibility of supporting students’ transition directly to the institution itself, namely its faculty and staff. According to this theory, validation will facilitate student learning and empower individuals to develop a sense of self-worth for students who have been typically

treated as unskilled, namely because of their lack of familiarity with how a system works, or due to lack of social capital or knowledge (Rendón, 1994).

Asset-Based Approach

Over the past several years, several theorists have explored first-generation college students. Initially, much of the research focused on deficits or disadvantages that college-going first-generation students possessed in comparison to their continuing-generation peers attending college (Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; McDonough, 1997; Pascarella et. al, 2004; Thayer, 2000). Specifically, writings and language within early research employed a cultural deficit-based approach and mindset that noted the deficiencies of first-generation students (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Cataldi et al., 2018); Pascarella et al., 2004). In their critical review of empirical research literature, LeBouef and Dworkin (2021) state:

Most the empirical literature on first-generation college students (FGCSs) in the U.S. asserts that because their parents did not attend college, FGCSs are lacking important resources to be successful in college. However, this results in a deficit-based approach to the study of FGCSs that tends to highlight the differences between first-generation and continuing-education students (p. 294).

However, since 2017, research and language have shifted significantly, with a greater focus on an asset-based approach when considering first-generation college students (Coronella, 2018; Kezar & Kitchen, 2020; LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021). Asset-based approaches to the study of first-generation college students are becoming increasingly frequent in the form of books, book chapters, and papers to understand

the problems facing first-generation students and outline ways of resolving them (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021). This shift in approach reflects the growing recognition of the ineptness of past approaches in addressing the concerns of this demographic. In this study, an *asset-based approach* denotes a conceptual framework where deficit stereotypes of first-generation students are discounted and challenged, and first-generation student strengths and abilities are validated and acknowledged (Okolo, 2019). The emphasis is primarily placed on strengths, not weaknesses, and this specific paradigm is leading much of the research to this day.

Summary

When compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation college students may face additional challenges on their path to a college degree, yet they also bring unique assets that allow them to navigate challenges through innovative approaches (or something about their assets!). Being the first in the family to attend college means that students may potentially not be as prepared as their peers, nor have “insider” knowledge of navigating college, thus paving the way to disproportionately higher attrition in this population. Although first-generation college students encounter the same challenges that all students entering college face, they also negotiate unique barriers due to being the “first” college-going student in their family.

While prior studies have attempted to examine the reasons due to which first-generation college students might depart college, it is important to investigate the practices of successful first-generation college students. This study examined third and fourth-year first-generation students’ perceptions at private institutions to gather a more definitive understanding of institutionalized components, as well as the impact

of cultivating first-generation student persistence and academic success. The following chapter will examine the literature characterizing first-generation students along with relevant research on: college student retention and persistence; “who are first-generation college students?”; the college-going process (CGP); starting college, student persistence, institutional programs, and private, not-for-profit institutions. Chapter 3 outlines the planned methodology, data collection, and data analysis for this descriptive research study, whereas Chapter 4 includes data analysis for each of the research questions and describes the findings of this study. Finally, Chapter 5 will discuss implications for institutions and practitioners supporting first-generation college students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this descriptive research study was to explore first-generation student experiences and perceptions regarding persistence to graduation at private universities in the United States. This literature review will include the following topics related to first-generation students: characteristics of first-generation college students; the first-generation college experience; remaining in college; student retention and persistence; and institutional programs. First-generation student characteristics will explore current research denoting common traits, themes, and dispositions reported by this population. Second, the first-generation college experience will include research about applying to, enrolling at, and the successful transition into college by this population. Next, research about first-generation students remaining in college will specifically include student retention and persistence as it impacts first-generation college students. Last, this research on institutional support programs will discuss programs and systems of support designed by colleges to help first-generation college students successfully remain and graduate. Collectively, these topics provide context and perspectives related to the importance of this study.

Who Are First-Generation College Students?

First-generation college students have unique characteristics that distinguish them from other students within the higher education setting. This chapter presents a comprehensive review of relevant literature to offer information about first-generation students' demographics, characteristics, personal qualities and attributes, and

strengths, as each seeks to successfully transition from high school into the college environment.

First-Generation Demographics

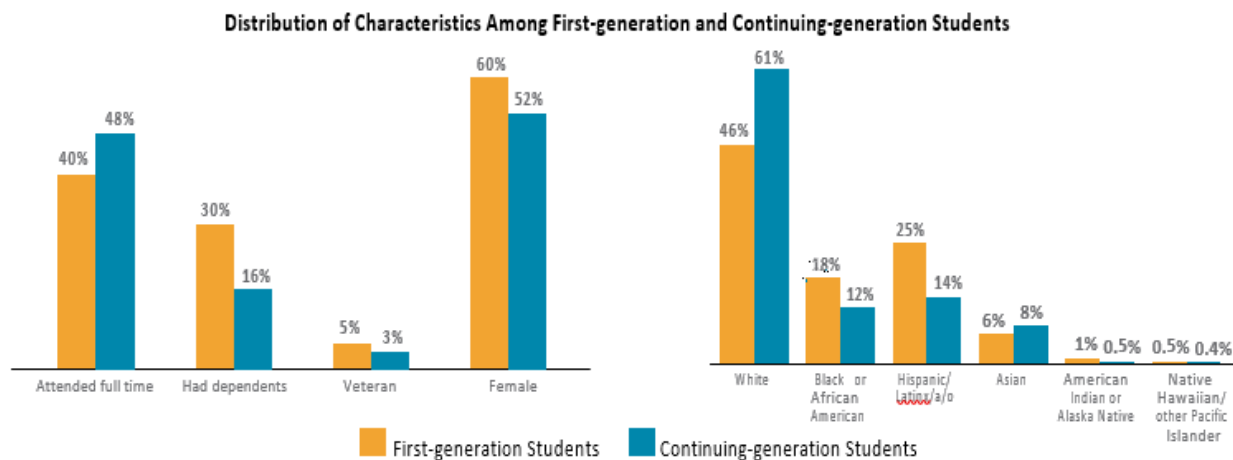
The description of who is included as a *first-generation college student* varies widely across the nation today. While this study has defined its first-generation student population in the previous chapter, students who are considered first-generation college students are defined differently across different colleges, universities, and by researchers (Toutkoushian et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2012). Further, inconsistencies between the many definitions of the first-generation college student have implications for both current and future research, as well as throughout higher education (Ward et al., 2012). It is increasingly challenging to generalize a first-generation college student, and compare information about this population given the number of definitions that exist. For example, Peralta and Klonowski (2017) conducted a research study on the varying ways in which first-generation students are defined in higher education. The researchers' study included a comprehensive review of scholarly, peer-reviewed articles, published from 2005 – 2015, that included first-generation college students as a part of their study. The researchers found that first-generation college student was defined in 12 different ways. The researchers affirmed that the use of the U.S. Department of Education definition is most appropriate, which is the definition used for this study: students within the higher education environment where neither parents nor guardians have earned a four-year bachelor's degree but may have some postsecondary college experience (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). Having a clear definition that can be accepted by all is extremely

important to future research of this population due to the numerous ways in which a first-generation college student can be defined.

First-generation college students are also a diverse population, comprising historically underrepresented student populations, including students of color, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and students from immigrant families (Allison, 2015). Figure 3 offers current context and insights into current first-generation student demographics. Notable statistics include 60% of current first-generation students identify as female, and 30% have dependents in addition to themselves (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019). Further, notable demographics suggest 46% of first-generation students identify as White, 25% as Hispanic/Latinx/a/o, 18% as Black or African American, and 6% as Asian (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019). Low-socioeconomic status (SES) impacts the experience of first-generation college students. Statistically, 27% of first-generation students come from households making \$20,000 or less compared to 6% of their continuing-generation peers. Research suggests that low SES limits access to higher education (Persell, 2010; Seccombe, 2012).

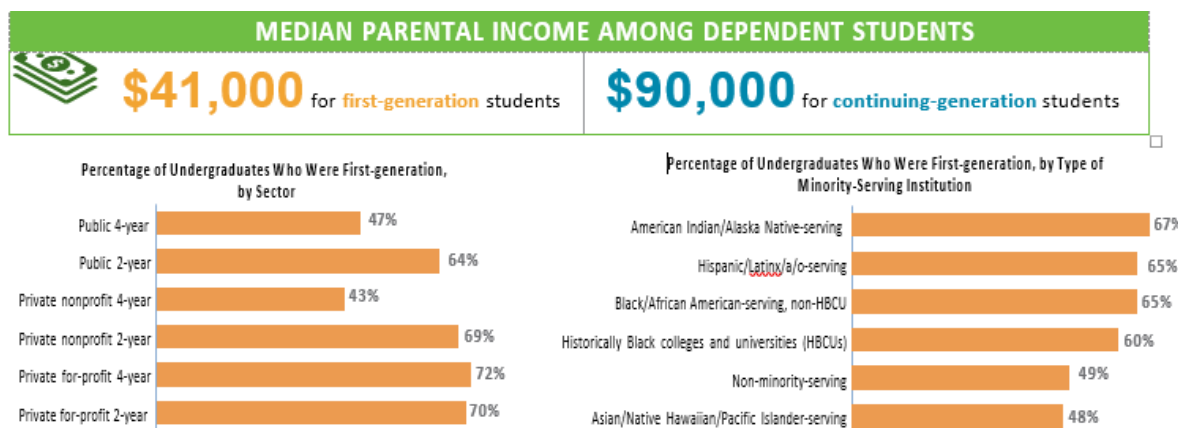
Figure 3

Distribution of Characteristics among First-generation and Continuing-generation Students



Note. This image is a sheet document illustrating the first-year experience, persistence, and attainment of first-generation college students adapted from the Center for First-Generation Student Success (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019, p. 1).

Figure 4 suggests additional demographics concerning first-generation college students. Notably, the median parental income among dependent first-generation students is \$41,000, compared to \$90,000 for their continuing-generation peers (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019). Across the nation, first-generation college students represent 43% of the total student population at private, non-profit colleges, and 72% of the total student population at private, for-profit colleges (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019).

Figure 4*Median Parental Income among Dependent Students*

Note. This image is a fact sheet document illustrating the first-year experience, persistence, and attainment of first-generation college students adapted from the Center for First-Generation Student Success (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019, p. 1).

First-Generation Intersectional Identities

Researchers have discovered common characteristics of first-generation college students that offer foundational knowledge of this population being considered. One shared characteristic is that first-generation students are genuinely unfamiliar with many elements that are crucial to understanding college success due to a lack of access to insider knowledge from those that have participated in the college experience. This lack of understanding may include: the cost-benefit perspective of college, the benefits of college engagement, navigating campus systems and structures, and ways of successfully balancing the academic rigors of college (Kim, 2018). Members of this student population are more likely non-traditional students, enrolled and/or work part-time, come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, have

lower academic grades in comparison to their continuing education peers, have lower degree aspirations, and have had less campus engagement with peers and others throughout the college community (Grayson, 2011; Lim et al., 2016; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Petty, 2014; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Finally, non-academic responsibilities, such as work, personal, and family commitments, are common for first-generation students, thereby impacting their ability to successfully complete college (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018; Petty, 2014; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Given that this population reports working more hours than their continuing-generation peers, it leaves less time and motivation to engage and connect with peers, campus events, activities, or necessary academic work (Mitchell, 1997; Ricks, 2016).

Comparing First-Generation and Continuing-Generation Students

Research suggests that it is possible to cluster many of the differences that exist between first-generation and continuing-generation students into five notable themes for consideration. First, first-generation college students who are motivated to attend a college or university have little to no assistance navigating the nuances of the college-going process, including completing paperwork, applying, and managing deadlines. It is common for first-generation college students to navigate this process without the assistance of their parents or family unit, largely due to a lack of familiarity with what is needed for the college-going process (Choy, 2001; Wimberly & Noeth, 2004). Second, while lacking knowledge of the college-going process, first-generation college students stand to benefit more deeply from college preparation

information when compared to their continuing generation peers (Wimberly & Noeth, 2004). Wimberly and Noeth (2004) suggest that many of these tips that add to first-generation student knowledge include learning the expectations of college life and what is necessary to be successful. Should first-generation students lack this preparation, it presents a notable challenge when compared to their continuing generation peers (Wimberly & Noeth, 2004).

Third, some first-generation students could possibly have less rigorous academic preparation before college because the first-generation family unit might not fully understand the connection between taking challenging high school curricula and coursework, and college impact (Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Warburton et al., 2001). Fourth, research suggests that first-generation college students often see a four-year college degree as means to future economic stability, successful career and employment options, and greater social mobility when compared to their current family structure (Choy, 2001; Horn & Nevill, 2006). Consequently, first-generation students often select higher education institutions that are convenient in proximity to their home and do not pay a lot of attention to the institution itself and the possible academic, social, and financial fit (Choy, 2001; Horn & Nevill, 2006). Fifth, research suggests that first-generation and their continuing generation peers differ drastically when comparing their makeup and disposition, including differences in self-confidence, social acceptance, part-time or non-traditional student status, or the need to live at home and not on campus (Horn & Nevill, 2006; Warburton et al., 2001). These five distinctive characteristics of first-generation college students cast each in a different light when compared to their continuing generation peers whose parents

completed a college degree. First-generation students need individualized support to avoid heightened risks in terms of academic achievement, attrition, and persisting to earn a four-year college degree (Warburton et al., 2001).

Identity and Possible Selves

Markus and Nurius (1986) discuss the framework of *possible selves*, or how an individual in college thinks about their potential and their future. The concept focuses on the ideal concept of who the individual would like to become, and that one is influenced by personal experiences, models within one's life, as well as the surrounding social and cultural factors (Kim, 2018). Collectively, each of these factors contributes to how an individual's *possible self* is perceived, and expectations that one has with how successful one will be in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). According to Bandura (1977), this "provides a framework for interpreting perceptions, influences the way one considers potential and options, and guides course of action and motivate pursuits of selected goals" (p. 25). The framework suggests a way in which the individual experiences the everyday world and their interactions within it, thus influencing the individual's own personal development towards an established model of possible self (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

For the first-generation student, this perception can be either positive or negative, depending upon personal experiences within the higher education setting. If the students lack a strong belief about their future based upon their college experiences, this may impact their decision to remain in college or depart prior to graduation. Put succinctly, a successful student support formula may emerge, if higher education institutions can emphasize Markus and Nurius' (1986) framework.

Student Motivation

In addition to an understanding of their own identities, personal dispositions, such as motivation to succeed, are critical characteristics that impact student success. Motivation is an important consideration, as it impacts student persistence a great deal. Additional issues that may contribute to lack of motivation include minimal support from the home/family unit, a lack of self-confidence, as well as a lack of connection within the campus community (Orbe, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004). Extracurricular activities tend to foster college persistence, so it is concerning if first-generation students are less motivated to become engaged on campus (Petty, 2014). In addition, several first-generation students reported they were behind their peers' cognitive skills in reading, math, and critical thinking skills, and were often less connected with both peers and teachers prior to transitioning into the college setting (Dennis et al., 2005; Zalaquett, 1999). The researchers concluded that personal motivation and support from peers are important predictors of college GPA and adjustment to college for first-generation students (Dennis et al., 2005). Collectively, student motivation impacts the first-generation college experience and is worthy of additional consideration.

Comprehensive Assessment of First-Generation College Students

A discussion of first-generation students' strengths, as opposed to merely their weaknesses, is equally necessary with this population. Specifically, research affirms the multitude of strengths of first-generation college students (Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Inman & Mays, 1999; Kahlenberg, 2004; Whitley et al., 2018). For example, Whitley et al. (2018) conducted a groundbreaking landscape analysis of programs and services at four-year institutions. Phase 1 of the study included a qualitative

component with interviews conducted with 78 administrators, faculty, and leaders at 45 different institutions; 15 thought leaders at 12 student success nonprofits; and 40 first-generation students interviewed via focus groups at eight different institutions (Whitley et al., 2018). Phase 2 of the study included a quantitative component via a nationwide survey of 371 faculty, administrators, and thought leaders across 273 four-year institutions (Whitley et al., 2018). Among the study's findings was a nationwide emphasis by all to affirm the strengths of first-generation students on four-year college campuses. Practitioners today are "actively promoting a counter-narrative by building campus cultures and engaged communities that highlight the strengths of first-generation college students" (Whitley et al., 2018, p. 26). Further, dispositions such as "grit, ambition, a track record of beating the odds, and fresh viewpoints that enhance the broader academic community" have also emerged as successful trends being adopted by practitioners supporting first-generation college students (p. 26). Shifting to an asset-based approach will empower students with a greater sense of pride and confidence, motivate them to seek out support resources without shame or stigma, and heighten their awareness of the valuable tools they possess to navigate academic and social dilemmas while in college (Whitley et al., 2018).

Garrison and Gardner (2012) also conducted an extensive study of first-generation college students to identify the strengths of this student population. The study included three female traditional college students. All the three participants were first-generation, first-time college students and identified themselves as having low-SES status (Garrison & Gardner, 2012). The data that the researchers found offers validation that first-generation college students are a collective asset for any higher

education institution. According to the researchers, first-generation students participating in the study were motivated to initiate action to make their own college experience a reality, and this high motivation at the inception translated to heightened experiences of learning and college persistence to graduation (Garrison & Gardner, 2012). As per the findings, first-generation students were resourceful, and in times of need, solicited guidance from adult stakeholders to successfully navigate academic, social, and personal dilemmas encountered during the college journey (Garrison & Gardner, 2012). In addition, first-generation college students proved the ability to successfully and strategically research and evaluate college information, also considering all details before making effective personal decisions (Garrison & Gardner, 2012). Finally, students possessed a unique personal initiative that proved to be essential when necessary to act and make decisions about their institutional academic requirements (Garrison & Gardner, 2012). Despite the substantial findings of this study, it is important to acknowledge its limited scope due to the involvement of only three participants.

Mission-Driven Approach and Other Traits

First-generation college students employ a unique overlaying perspective of their college experience. Research suggests this population is mission-driven and develops successful short and long-term goals (Ricks, 2016). In this regard, O'Shea (2015) posited that first-generation students demonstrated aspirational capital due to the challenges experienced. These experiences reaffirmed both their goals and hope for future college students. Specifically, first-generation college students could swiftly identify academic and personal challenges as they emerged, and they could also

navigate these successfully in terms of their personal goals for college (Ricks, 2016). First-generation college students demonstrated unique flexibility when compared to others to navigate college life so that they could adjust when required and be open to changes as needed (Garrison & Gardner, 2012). Students tend to rely heavily on family, and despite not having attended college, family members encouraged students to venture outside their comfort zones to explore college and become engaged with the experience (Ricks, 2016). In short, research has suggested that this population has demonstrated unrelenting efforts in reaching their personal academic goals while in college and often had to overcome numerous impediments to be successful (Ricks, 2016).

First-generation college students also embrace positivity and optimism, particularly when it comes to their own academic achievement and success (Lash & Snider, 2017). This optimism is substantial and is a meaningful connector with student academic success while in college. Notably, research has shown that first-generation students are strongly enthusiastic and eager, and draw upon this personal motivation to be academically and personally successful (Ricks, 2016). First-generation college students often demonstrate hope and a strong desire to be independent and self-sufficient, have a successful career, and can provide for their own well-being (Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Juarez, 2020). Finally, research has suggested that first-generation students possess a unique combination of both self-confidence in their abilities and a sense of personal pride in their work, both of which are deeply rooted in a genuine sense of realism and humility (Garrison & Gardner, 2020; Juarez, 2020).

Self-Awareness and Well-being

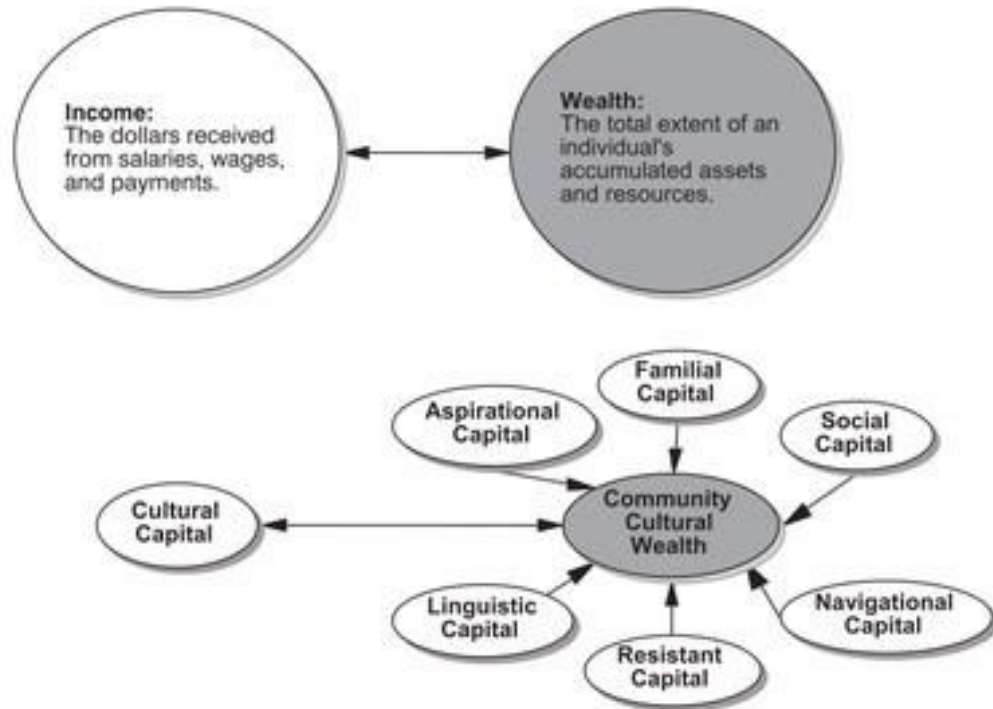
Finally, many first-generation college student strengths derive from a heightened sense of self-awareness, genuine personal reflection, and insight, as well as a substantial sense of well-being (Garrison & Gardner, 2012). According to the findings of research studies, first-generation college students are self-confident and draw upon positive thinking to navigate personal setbacks with practical solutions while in the college setting (Juarez, 2020; Lash & Snider, 2017). Further, first-generation college students tend to be accepting, empathic, and tolerant individuals; these positive strengths prove meaningful and advantageous for many aspects of college life, including academic work done in the group setting as well as navigating diverse campus settings (Garrison & Gardner, 2012). A distinguishing attribute consistently found within first-generation college students is a sincere appreciation for the simple opportunity to attend and participate within the college experience. Importantly, this population does not take the opportunity that they are experiencing for granted (Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Lash & Snider, 2017). Finally, researchers suggest that the *cultural wealth* which they bring with them to college is the best way to consider first-generation college student strengths (Yosso, 2005). Due to their unique backgrounds, this population comes with special experiences, areas of expertise, and problem-solving skills that distinguish them from their peers (Checkoway, 2018; Juarez, 2020).

Community Cultural Wealth

This study seeks to reframe the deficit lens often used for first-generation college students, and conversely draw awareness to student strengths. Scholar and

professor Dr. Tara Yosso (2005) offers the Community Cultural Wealth Model that serves as an alternative approach to the cultural deficit-based approach that was previously applied within research and curriculum development of first-generation college students. Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model challenges common theories in research that portray underrepresented students or racial minorities, as disadvantaged, or coming from a deficit existence. This model challenges these deficit stereotypes, and instead acknowledges and validates existing underrepresented student strengths and abilities derived from their communities of existence (Okolo, 2019; Yosso, 2005). Finally, Yosso (2005) posits that if educators were to view many of these strengths as forms of wealth, they might choose to build upon rather than remediate them.

The application of Yosso's (2005) asset-based framework to examine first-generation college student experiences considers the strengths that each student brings with them from their previous communities into the college setting (Okolo, 2019). Figure 5 represents Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model and notes six aspects of cultural capital that provide an asset-based framework to understand first-generation college students' experiences from an appreciative lens: *aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance*.

Figure 5*A Model of Community Cultural Wealth*

Note. This image has been sourced from Yosso's (2005, p. 78) study illustrating a model of cultural community wealth, which, in turn, referred to the study conducted by Oliver and Shapiro (2005) titled *Black wealth/White wealth: a new perspective on racial inequality*.

While this study will acknowledge the barriers that first-generation college students encounter, it will also seek to use an asset-based approach rooted in the personal gifts, talents, strengths, as well as individualized personal experiences of first-generation college students as they succeed within the college environment. As the purpose of this study is to explore student perspectives on their success, and research internal factors to the campus climate that influence successful persistence and completion of a four-year college degree, these theories, models, and frameworks

will influence the interpretation of potential data received from first-generation college students.

Despite many of the notable barriers that first-generation college students may possess when pursuing a four-year college degree, this student population has been successful at navigating the higher education experience. With enhanced assistance within the college setting, the gap that may exist for first-generation college students can be bridged in a meaningful and successful way. It is crucial to consider the numerous and unique strengths that first-generation college students bring with them as they navigate the college experience.

The First-Generation College Student Experience

The application to and admission to college, as well as the college experience, are important transitions in a young adult's life. For all students, this is the beginning of new chapters. For first-generation college students, this experience can be both nuanced and complex as each is the first generation in their family to navigate college. Examples of complex issues include parental expectations of their students, the student/parent perception of school affordability, and the purpose of college, among other ideals (Alvarez, 2016). Due to these complexities, the enrollment also referred to as *college-going process* (CGP), is unique for this population and warrants further exploration. For the purposes of this study, the *college-going process* (CGP) is defined as the process that a student and their parent/family unit undertakes when seeking to access and enroll at a higher education institution.

As first-generation students matriculate from high school into the college environment for the first time, numerous transitions occur that impact this population

and their perceptions of the college experience. Together, both the CGP and the experience in college combine to inform the first-generation college student experience.

The College-Going Process

The CGP is a much different experience for first-generation college students than for those who are of the continuing generation whose parents have successfully completed college (Alvarez, 2016). During the CGP, first-generation college students encounter barriers that are unique compared to their continuing-generation college peers. One example is that this population does not have parents who have experienced the nuances of college. This factor might offer an additional barrier for first-generation students as they enter and participate in college. Literature suggests that as first-generation students receive limited encouragement from their parents and/or guardians to pursue college, they also frequently apply to less selective higher education institutions due to a lack of insider knowledge of the college matriculation process (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996).

The family unit, including the attitudes of both students and their parents, greatly influences the CGP. Alvarez (2016) conducted research over a 12-month period studying the attitudes that exist within the first-generation college student, their parents/guardians, and families, and how each group impacts and influences the college-going process. Alvarez's (2016) study included 105 personal interviews which took place during first-generation students' senior year of high school. Throughout her study, Alvarez (2016) explored the many complexities and nuances of first-generation college students and their families, as well as the necessary requirements needed to

plan, navigate, and enter college. As Alvarez (2016) discussed the findings of her research, she noted that her study validated the *significant emotional work* required by all during the CGP. It is this familiarity, or lack thereof, with the U.S. higher education system that influences how parents and families dealt with emotions while preparing for college (Alvarez, 2016). Next, Alvarez (2016) suggests that a substantial finding in her study was that the *emotional journey* of students and parents/families leading up to the student departing for college was of paramount importance for all.

The numerous emotions that students and parents felt during the CGP – specifically happiness, frustration, and accomplishment, among others – offer that both parties are highly motivated by the emotions that were felt throughout the process (Alvarez, 2016). According to Alvarez (2016), emotions reflect both parents/families and students' familiarity with the CGP. Her research suggests that the varying expectations individual parents and the family unit experience ultimately influence the students' perspective of the CGP, and these expectations, in turn, directly impact the student's experience and journey to college (Alvarez, 2016). Alvarez (2016) concludes that the expectations of parents for college matriculation are directly based upon the parents' understanding of the purpose of college, the parents' unique journeys, and their knowledge of their own students.

College Selection Factors

Financial considerations are an important factor when first-generation college students select a college of study. Kuh et al. (2007) suggest that first-generation students often select their institution based on the nature and amount of financial aid offered, as well as the perception of academic work demands outside of the classroom.

Tuition and costs associated with college are of the highest concern for first-generation college students (Kuh et. al, 2007). Due to financial gaps within the family structure, and additional means necessary to afford college, many students cannot afford college and choose to not continue (Kuh et al., 2007). Thus, first-generation college students are less likely to graduate within five years, if at all, if financial aid barriers are present (Kuh et al., 2007). Further, if first-generation students encounter barriers as each enters college seeking a better future, yet lack understanding, this information needs to be made available and accessible to this population. In the absence of this knowledge, and without a grasp of these college skills, first-generation college students are left to navigate the nuances of college expectations on their own.

Finally, the first-generation student population does not have access to “insider knowledge” of requisite skills, attitudes, and abilities that are critical to completing college successfully for first-generation students (Horn & Nuñez, 2000). This lack of information is due to each student being unable to benefit from insights and assistance from college-educated parents. Without this assistance, first-generation college students do not receive college tips, insights, advice, and information from parents that would prove to be invaluable as they seek success in college (Horn & Nuñez, 2000). Additional research is needed to consider how higher education institutions can support first-generation college students, personally and academically, on their path toward a college degree.

Starting the College Experience

Currently, most research on the retention of students within higher education has focused on the first-year college experience (Finley, 2012). As Tinto (1993) has

suggested, the first year of a student's college career greatly impacts the future of their college experience. Specifically, the first few weeks of the college experience are an important snapshot in time for first-time college students. This time is critical for students to connect socially and academically, and research suggests that students who decide to leave college typically do so during this time frame (Berger & Milem, 1999; Blanc et al., 1983; Ishitani, 2003; Woosley & Miller, 2009; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Further, Upcraft and Gardner (1989) opine that establishing new peer/friend groups and forming social relationships within the first month of student enrollment were important attributes of student success. Lastly, Woosley and Miller (2009) sought to explore the earliest experiences of first-year students with an emphasis on student social and academic integration to their institution. The researchers found that it was possible to accurately predict the student persistence and four-year degree attainment by measuring both academic and social integration as early as the third week of the semester for those that are new within the college environment (Woosley & Miller, 2009). The researchers, using regression models, could predict subsequent semester GPAs based upon gender, ethnicity, entrance exam score, academic integration, social integration, and commitment by the students to their respective institutions (Woosley & Miller, 2009). In the study, the authors suggested that first-year students that were committed to staying in school and completing their degree in the third week of college, as well as those that were committed to keeping up with classes and coursework at the third week, had higher GPAs than those students not demonstrating these dispositions (Woosley & Miller, 2009).

Academic Transition

For first-generation college students, having a successful academic integration experience impacts their academic success (Finley, 2012). Current literature suggests that the academic transition and integration, student involvement, and consistent engagement impact first-generation student college success and, critically, their successful completion of a four-year college degree (Finley, 2012). As a part of her collective research, Rendón (1994) conducted a multi-institutional qualitative study that researched the degree to which college students were engaged and involved with their college community, and how these outside-of-classroom experiences impacted and influenced student classroom learning and personal academic goals within the college. Interestingly, Rendón (1994) reported that the research allowed her to conclude that first-generation college students are certainly capable of becoming immersed and prominent members of a campus community, but this is dependent upon faculty, staff, and administrators providing validation to students, particularly early on in their college experiences. Further, Rendón (1994) argued that not all first-generation college students will become involved with their learning and the campus in the same way, and that this engagement with learning varies from student to student. In another study, Woosley (2003) explored first-generation students' initial academic experiences at a mid-sized research institution. Further supporting the connection between social integration and academic success, Woosley (2003) found that positive student social adjustments and integration were positively linked to their own academic persistence and graduation, even when the research data accounted for pre-entry characteristics and student commitment to education.

In addition, first-generation students are often academically underprepared for the college experience, and as such do not perform as well as their continuing generation peers throughout the time that they are in college (Atherton, 2014). A study conducted by Elliott (2014) that included 2,358 students (first-generation and continuing-generation) at 25 private institutions across 14 different states found that first-generation college student status was negatively related to college academic achievement and student grade point average. Although the results for both student groups showed an increase in student GPAs with an increase in perceived self-efficacy, the increase was measured as being more substantial for first-generation college students. Elliott (2014) suggested that “first-generation college students who experienced comparable increases in their own academic self-efficacy perceptions throughout their studies during their first year still finished with lower than average final grades than their continuing generation peers” (p. 38). First-generation college students often are surprised when the academic demands and rigor of higher education exceed their expectations. This finding highlights an apparent disconnect for first-generation college students’ understanding of the academic environments in which they enter as college students (Atherton, 2014).

One factor of academic preparedness that is unique to first-generation college students is that they tend to be easily influenced by how well their expectations line up with their lived experiences while in college (Elliott, 2014). Since first-generation college students have less of an understanding of the realities of college compared to their peers, they are more likely to be unprepared and dissatisfied with the realities of their college experience (Kuh et al., 2007). This disparity between expectations and

reality leaves first-generation college students less prepared to overcome barriers as they encounter them, thus suggesting it is more difficult for this student population to persist and succeed academically while in college (Kuh et al., 2007). This lack of understanding causes many first-generation college students to misconstrue their role as college students and not meet faculty expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

Throughout their experiences at colleges and universities, first-generation college students find themselves impacted by the effects of class size (Beattie & Thiele, 2016). In this regard, Beattie and Thiele's (2016) research suggested that first-generation college students in larger classes were found to be more negatively impacted than their continuing generation peers. Despite this negative influence of being in a larger classroom setting, this experience was not a barrier preventing first-generation college students from taking initiative with their professors. Interestingly, despite the negative impacts of being in large-sized classes, students were motivated to approach their faculty to discuss their academic, career, and future goals (Beattie & Thiele, 2016). This research suggests that although first-generation college students potentially could struggle with the academic realities of college, they remain steadfast and committed to achieving their academic goals.

First-Generation College Students and Starting College

While the first year of the college experience is an important milestone for new college students, for first-generation college students this period may be even more critical. As first-generation students enter the foreign land of the college for the first time, many lack the understanding of what is expected of them to function successfully (Attinasi, 1989; Collier & Morgan, 2008). Due to this gap that exists

between first-generation college students and expectations of those stakeholders that will play essential roles in their college experience, feelings of failure and stress are common for first-generation students during their college experience (Jenkins et al., 2013). For example, Johnson et al. (2018) conducted a study of 3,257 new, first-semester freshmen entering a public university between 1998 and 2015. They found that first-generation college students were 66% more likely to be non-returners for their sophomore year of study as compared to their college-going peers. This study confirms an earlier finding by Ishitani (2003), who discovered that the potential for first-generation student departure after the first year was 71% higher than that of their peers. The body of literature suggests that as first-generation students enter college, this student population encounters unique barriers due to their background and experiences of having parents that did not earn a four-year college degree (Terenzini et al., 1996). Family and friends of first-generation college students are unable to understand the college experiences their students will encounter, and therefore, will be able to offer less advice and support specific to the college experiences that will allow their student to benefit (Alvarez, 2016; Smith & Zhang, 2010).

The process of starting college is important not only for first-generation college students but also for those higher education institutions where these students are attending. According to Rendón (1994), the first three weeks are a critical time for each institution to focus upon validating its student population. Rendón (1994) suggests that it is the institution's responsibility to take the lead in fostering and cultivating these validating experiences for its students.

Academic Barriers

Academic barriers assume significance when considering the first-generation college student experience, as understanding barriers help all stakeholders know how to serve this population effectively. For instance, research has demonstrated that this population possessed a limited concept of the college-student role and the higher education environment when compared to their continuing education peers (Ricks, 2016). In addition, they report lower engagement with academic work and studying and statistically received lower grade point averages during their first year of study (Ricks, 2016). In 2005, Chen and Carroll explored the course-taking experiences of first-generation college students, seeking to better understand study habits, success with coursework, and any differences in coursework between first-generation students and that of their peers (Chen & Carroll, 2005). The study used the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 to focus on first-generation academic transcripts between 1992 and 2000. Findings of this study revealed that first-generation college students were less likely than peers to major in academic fields such as mathematics, science, humanities, and social science, and more likely to have no major or major in a vocational/technical field (Chen & Carroll, 2005).

This study also suggested that first-generation students completed fewer academic credits, had less academic coursework, and were behind peers in academic support. In this study, first-generation students did not perform as well academically as their continuing-generation peers, having lower first-year GPAs (2.5 vs. 2.8). As first-generation students had an average overall GPA of 2.6, compared to an average GPA of 2.9 for their continuing-generation peers, this trend of lower GPAs for first-

generation students continued throughout their academic enrollment (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Researchers found that first-generation students that earned more credits and higher grades were strongly related to the student persisting and earning a bachelor's degree (Chen & Carroll, 2005). These findings suggest that first-generation students encounter barriers in coursework and academic performance at rates greater than their peers, putting them at greater risk of leaving college prior to graduation (Chen & Carroll, 2005).

Finally, first-generation college students encounter challenges “when it comes to college or university access – a (hurdle) that persists even after accounting for other factors such as educational expectations, academic preparation, and support from parents/schools in the planning and preparation for college” (Choy, 2001, p. 4). Moreover, many of these barriers stem from experiences derived from first-generation students' primary and secondary school journeys (Ricks, 2016). When compared to their continuing generation peers, this population encounters unique barriers despite their successful transition into college.

Institutional Barriers

In addition to academic barriers, first-generation college students encounter institutional barriers that impact their academic experience upon starting college. While higher education stakeholders, including college administration, faculty, and staff, might acknowledge that first-generation students are pursuing college degrees in greater numbers than in years past, many of these stakeholders may not understand the complex challenges and the numerous assets that this population of students encounters (Vaughan et al., 2014).

Current literature suggests that the first-generation students' understanding of the *hidden curriculum* is a common barrier that this population encounters. The hidden curriculum includes all things that are implicitly taught at higher education institutions that allow the individual to master the college student role (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Many of these norms are unknown or unlearned by first-generation college students, and could impact their successful transition into college (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Not fully understanding the hidden curriculum can impact this population's adjustment to college because "they do not yet have a mental library of cultural knowledge associated with the hidden curriculum at their specific university" (Gable, 2021, p. x). Gable (2021) suggests that all institutional stakeholders – administrators, faculty, and staff – need to identify hidden curricula on their respective campuses and educate first-generation college students to better meet all their expectations (Gable, 2021). Additional institutional barriers, such as the use of college-specific language, or "jargon," also create a culture of insider knowledge that impacts students' access and success (Ardoin, 2018). Jehangir (2010) suggests that what struck her were the challenges related to "classroom issues, relationships (or lack thereof) with professors, financial aid, and campus resources" first-generation students encountered (p. 3). However, these challenges are not only due to academic preparation but also involved simple life roles and the juggling of multiple identities (Jehangir, 2010).

First-generation college students are at a greater risk for *intellectual poverty*, a term that elucidates the shortfall experienced through limited access to college role models, an absence of understanding about significant college processes, and reduced access and engagement to the campus community and its activities (Saenz et al., 2007;

York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). First-generation students questioned if they belonged on campus or if they were “uninvited guests here in college for a short time until being discovered as imposters” (Jehangir, 2010, p. 3). As institutions seek to support first-generation students, it is important for all stakeholders to develop a concrete understanding of their background and collective college experiences.

Personal Barriers

Like academic and institutional barriers, first-generation college students often encounter personal barriers that impact their college experience. Previous research suggests that first-generation students, when compared to their continuing generation peers, begin college with less academic preparation, are at a heightened risk for departing during their college experience, and are less likely to obtain a four-year college degree (Vaughan et al., 2014). Others are personal, such as often having to work part or full-time to subsidize the costs of college. Pursuing a college degree can be overwhelming, daunting, and a lonely process. Characteristics specific to first-generation students impact their academic work and student ability to persist to graduation (Kim et al., 2021).

Social Transition

While the academic transition is important for first-generation college students, their successful social transition is equally important. Integration into the social systems is an additional layer that must be considered (Terenzini et al., 1994). According to Tinto (1993), students’ decision to leave college prior to graduation due to lack of social adjustment is a more important factor than academic progress. First-generation college students frequently report receiving more encouragement to pursue

college from their high school teachers than their parents and family structure (Terenzini, 1996). In turn, this lack of encouragement to remain enrolled in college continued, as first-generation students report less encouragement from friends and family members to remain enrolled when compared to their college peers (Terenzini, 1996).

Social integration typically has an indirect effect upon a college student remaining or departing the college environment (Hui, 2017). At the same time, social integration impacts one's connection to their own higher education institution and the student satisfaction with their experiences while in college (Hausmann et al., 2007). Research suggests that this commitment and satisfaction embraced by students will factor into whether a student decides to stay or leave (Hausmann et al., 2007). Tinto (1975) contended that if a student's social integration is low, but their academic integration is high, students will most likely elect to depart their higher education institution. For the student, being socially integrated within their college setting can, in turn, bolster student academic integration and help both aspects of the student transition in college (Tinto, 1975).

Fitting In

Rendón (1994) suggests that students need to receive validation that they fit in. Many first-generation college students share feelings of isolation, of feeling alone, and of having a different college experience than their peers (Hui, 2017). As students who are the first in their families to pursue a four-year college degree, many can feel ostracized and unable to connect with and relate to their continuing generation peers (Hui, 2017). These feelings of isolation are exacerbated when first-generation college

students return home for the first time after starting college, frequently commenting that they feel that their college experiences have changed them, thus making them feel more distant from both their families as well as their hometown communities (Jehangir et al., 2015). For example, Jehangir et al.'s (2015) study of first-generation college students noted that many within this student population struggled to reconcile their parents/family members' pride that students were attending college with the new feelings of isolation and separation from their hometown communities. Participants in the study understood that several of these sentiments would continue to emerge and grow, potentially creating a larger gap between the student and their family as their college experience "pushed them upwards in terms of social mobility but also away from their families, reaffirming the conflict between the microsystems of college and the home environment" (Jehangir et al., 2015, p. 22). While many first-generation college students do often have the enthusiastic support of their parents and families, this support also can contribute to feelings of substantial pressure (Hui, 2017). Often, in being among the first-generation to pursue college, these students describe feeling like the "chosen ones" of their family despite a complex experience; they frequently felt that this experience was a "survivor's guilt" (Piorkowski, 1983; Tate et al., 2010).

This struggle and stress for first-generation college students to "fit in" to their college experience might ultimately push them to become less engaged with their own college community and experience (Hui, 2017). Pike and Kuh (2005) suggested that one of the great contrasts between first-generation college students and their peers was that first-generation college students were less engaged and integrated within diverse college experiences that were accessible to them. In addition, first-generation college

students were not only less engaged; their lack of engagement equated to perceiving college less favorably when compared to their peers (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Campus activities that foster student engagement such as studies abroad, community engagement, clubs, and student activities have been shown to increase the likelihood that students will be successful and graduate, as activities foster an additional connection to peers and the institution (Hui, 2017). If first-generation college students fail to opt-in for these engagement opportunities, in turn, this hinders opportunities for each to “fit in” and will negatively impact student college success.

Connectedness

While it is important to consider how first-generation college students “fit in” with their college community, it is equally important to explore their sense of connection within the higher education setting. Pittman and Richmond (2007) have suggested that first-generation college students feel less connected to the college experience than their continuing generation peers. Pittman and Richmond (2007) claim that the higher the level of a parent’s postsecondary education, the more their students feel connected and as if they belong with their college experience and community. Interestingly, researchers suggested that while continuing generation college students had a heightened sense of belonging on college campuses, their first-generation college peers had a deeper sense of connection with their high school experience.

Research from the last several decades validates that the more college students connect with friends and participate in activities outside of the academic setting, the more likely it is for these students to remain in college (Spady, 1970). As students

connect with others and form meaningful relationships on campus, they become more socially integrated into the higher educational setting (Spady, 1970). Relationships formed by student motivation can help these students interact with faculty and peers and engage with extracurricular activities, thus reaffirming the importance of the college experience (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993). Continuing generation students not only report a greater connectedness, but also a greater sense of belonging and suggest that they are more socially adjusted to the college experience (Hertel, 1992). College students must connect and find who they perceive to be “their people,” or their community, specifically connections that are deemed genuine with peers, faculty, and staff (Irlbeck et al., 2014).

Research suggests that first-year students, and specifically first-generation college students, are less apt to reach out for assistance or reciprocate overtures for help if they do not feel a sense of connection with the institution (Winograd & Rust, 2014). Winograd and Rust (2014) in their study surveyed first-year students at the end of their first semester of college. Within this surveyed group, students identified as both continuing generation and first-generation college students. The focus of the study was on the stigma that first-time college students experience when seeking assistance and asking for help. As per the findings of this study, when students felt more connected, and that their institution cared for them, the stigma that the students felt upon seeking help was reduced (Winograd & Rust, 2014). As implied, when those students surveyed experienced more of a stigma about having to reach out for help, each was less inclined to do so (Winograd & Rust, 2014).

Sense of Belonging and Mattering. There is a vast body of research about the students' sense of belonging on college campuses (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nunn, 2021; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). In the current research study, *sense of belonging* refers to the extent to which a college student feels connected to a group, accepted by their peers, and that they are an integral part of the campus community (Pullias Center for Higher Education, n.d.). There is a paucity of scholarly studies regarding the concept of mattering for college students at their institutions. In the present study, *mattering* refers to the extent to which a college student perceives themselves to be valued as an individual, and that others care about their personal wellbeing and success (Pullias Center for Higher Education, n.d.).

In 1954, Maslow first suggested that belonging was a basic human need. College students' belonging has elicited a growing amount of attention and discussion over the past many years (Cole et al., 2019). Researchers have established common traits linked with one's sense of belonging as a college student. Common traits include: 1) the transition to college (Johnson et al., 2007); 2) campus climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997); 3) first-year student experiences (Hurtado & Carter, 1997); and 4) college persistence (Cole et al, 2019; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). As noted, much of the research regarding college student persistence is framed by Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) Student Integration Model, and this study will draw upon his theoretical framework in subsequent chapters for analysis.

Nunn (2021) conducted recent research on college belonging and first-generation college students. She noted that "belonging is positive; it provides a sense

of security, which engenders emotional well-being” (Nunn, 2021, p. 2). She makes the distinction that prior research has conceptualized a sense of belonging, but it is important to lend weight to the students’ voice, and to “allow students themselves to define what belonging means to them, and to describe their personal experiences in college” (Nunn, 2021, p. 2). Within her research, she suggests participants describe belonging as “Feeling accepted and valued within the larger community...it brings a kind of confidence, the liberty to let their guard down, to not feel self-conscious or worry about being judged...feeling comfortable and at home” (Nunn, 2021, p. 2).

A 2019 study by Cole et al. (2019) examined both the sense of belonging and mattering on college campuses for historically underrepresented and first-generation college students, and the impact of institutional programs of support upon their academic success. Cole et al. (2019) suggested that although a sense of belonging provides an understanding of college student environmental perceptions, involvement, and relationships (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016), a sense of belonging fails to consider the concepts of personal recognition and attention, specifically during the first year of college. Mattering accounts for these additional concerns and specifically emphasizes how college students perceive that they matter to an individual, group, or community (Schieferecke & Card, 2013).

Schlossberg (1989) developed a construct for marginality and mattering for students within higher education. Within his construct, he suggested that all college students experience the transition into college with some degree of feeling marginalized (Cole et al., 2019). Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) are more specific in their claim, as they posit that “mattering is a motive: the feeling that others depend

on us, are interested in us and are concerned for our fate” (p. 165). Schlossberg (2019) sought to apply his construct to college students from diverse backgrounds, yet little research had been done before Cole et al.’s (2019) study specifically focusing on students of color, low-income, and first-generation college students and their experience of both marginality and mattering in college.

The findings of Cole et al.’s (2019) study offer important insights concerning both students’ sense of belonging and mattering on college campuses. They suggest that “peer interactions that are social, where discussions of political opinions, religious beliefs, diversity, and personal values are shared” are associated with an increased sense of belonging by the student (p. 293). In addition, “peer interactions that are academic, where peers share class concerns, academic issues, discuss group projects, and study with one another” are associated with an increased sense of mattering on campus (p. 293). The authors suggest that when others are interested in student accomplishments, failures, exams, or projects, students perceive that they matter (Cole et al, 2019). Similarly, when students engage with peers discussing personal beliefs, values, and opinions, they are more likely to connect with peers, cultivate friendships, feel validated, and not out of place (Cole et. al, 2019). Finally, while the study’s findings are consistent with prior research about student sense of belonging (Johnson et al. 2007; Museus & Maramba, 2011), it offers additional context and understanding to first-generation student success. Importantly, the authors found a correlation between students’ experiences within institutional support programs and mattering, as well as aspects of institutional support programs that are most influential in impacting student sense of belonging and mattering (Cole et al., 2019).

Rendón's Theory of Student Validation

For all stakeholders to counteract academic, institutional, or personal barriers for first-generation students, Rendón's (1994) Theory of Validation serves to counter these barriers and is an essential lens for this study. Rendón posited that validation occurs when institutional stakeholders, specifically faculty, staff, and potentially peers, take the lead to empower students as successful learners, essential members of the learning environment, and holders of knowledge (Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Rendón, 1994). Institutional stakeholders also cultivate social growth and adjustment for students. Rendón's Theory of Validation is two-fold: academic and interpersonal. Academic validation refers to all that institutional stakeholders do to facilitate academic growth, development, and success (Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Rendón, 1994). Interpersonal validation includes all that facilitates students' social transition and adjustment to the college environment (Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Rendón, 1994). Collectively, Rendón's (1994) Theory of Validation offers the researcher additional perspectives on the first-generation college student experience, and will greatly influence the context of this study.

Institutional Support Programs for Student Retention and Persistence

Tinto (1993) suggested that successful programs supporting student retention are student-focused, and prioritize the needs of the student over those of the institution. Retention programs must be committed to the academic and social development of students and consider the student as an entire individual (Tinto, 1993). If institutional programs supporting retention only focus on academic issues and do not account for the social needs of students, such programs are less likely to be

effective in helping to retain students (Tinto, 1993). McCracken (2009) added that effective institutional support programs note the a) importance of a coordinated programmatic approach to student learning and support and b) that comprehensive support must be accessible to both new and returning students. Finally, Burkholder et al. (2013) opined that institutions have strengthened programs and services supporting student persistence, as well as specialized support for underrepresented student populations. Despite increased institutional support for student persistence, data shows that retention and persistence continue to be challenges for most colleges (Burkholder et al., 2013).

A significant body of research has investigated the best practices to promote student persistence and retention at colleges and universities across the United States. For example, Hanover Research (2014) conducted a research study analyzing effective institutional persistence and retention practices at various higher education institutions. The research included several key findings. First, it noted that institutions often share concern over student retention and persistence, yet only a few of them allocate the necessary resources to affect change at their respective institution (Hanover Research, 2014). Next, of all institutional programs investigated, seven constructs were established that influence student retention: academic advising, social connectedness, student involvement, faculty and staff approachability, business procedures, learning experiences, and student support services (Hanover Research, 2014). Effective student support services can have a measurable, important, and positive impact on student retention and persistence across the institution (Hanover Research, 2014). Finally, pre-orientation and regular orientation programs, optional

learning and study skills courses, and peer-mentoring/coaching programs can all positively impact student retention and persistence (Hanover Research, 2014).

Despite having fewer first-generation college students, private institutions offer institutional support programs designed to support the retention and persistence of their students. For example, several private institutions offer pre-orientation, or summer bridge programs, designed to offer support to underrepresented students including first-generation college students. As early as 1999-2000, bridge programs specific to first-generation college students were created by colleges and universities (National Center for Postsecondary Education, 2010). Bridge programs vary depending upon each institution both in their length and structure but typically take place the summer before student enrollment (National Center for Postsecondary Research, 2012). Many of these interventions are designed in scope to extend beyond the summer, and extend through the first semester and beyond (Weinstein, 2014). Finally, according to Ward et al. (2012), bridge programs are “targeted orientation programs for first-generation students” that emphasize student success, learning outcomes, and consider the academic and social transitions into college (p. 108). Private institutions that have implemented a summer bridge or pre-orientation program for first-generation students include the University of San Francisco, St. Olaf College, Westminster College, St. Mary’s College of California, Loyola Marymount University, University of Portland, and Santa Clara University, among others.

Institutional Support Programs at Private Schools

Private colleges differ from public universities in several ways. While much research has been conducted on the first-generation student experiences at public

institutions, little data exists informing students' perceptions at multiple private colleges. Combining a study of both attributes will add to the current literature involving first-generation student support.

While research is limited in its scope specific to first-generation program effectiveness at private institutions (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Havlik et al., 2020), Wibrowski et al. (2017) investigated a first-generation college student summer bridge program at a 2-year institution involving 137 participants and 739 non-participants. Researchers subsequently found higher levels of both motivation and academic achievement in participants than non-participants during the first year of study. Next, Kallison and Stadler (2012) explored the importance of summer bridge programs at eight institutions. Researchers found that bridge programs better prepare first-generation students for enrollment and build a strong connection between participants and faculty, staff, and peers. Of the institutions investigated, 80% of first-generation students felt the bridge program helped better prepare them for college, and 89% felt increased motivation to graduate due to participation in the bridge experience (Kallison & Stadler, 2012). Research showed that 96% of students in the bridge programs were retained from the first to the second term compared to 87% that did not participate in the programs (Kallison & Stadler, 2012).

In addition to bridge programs, several other programs at private schools support first-generation student retention and persistence. Successful programs include TRIO programs, Upward Bound Programs, Talent Search Programs, GEAR-UP Programs, and other intervention programs specializing in supporting underrepresented students such as first-generation students (Palmer, 2017). While

private institutions have a different funding structure than public universities, each qualifies to apply for federal funds that subsidize the noted programs. For example, TRIO, which was created in 1976 by the federal government, targets specific student populations such as first-generation students to ensure college access, success, and persistence (Palmer, 2017). TRIO's main purpose is to mitigate the gap between high school and college while being accessible and established on college campuses (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Many studies show that TRIO assists students in navigating the CGP and the college experience despite being the first to pursue a college degree (Kezar & Kitchen, 2020; Perna, 2015; Scanlon, 2020; White, 2021).

First-Generation Student Program Experiences at Private Schools

While some research supports programs supporting retention and persistence efforts, and to a certain extent, at private institutions, there is scant information available on the experiences of first-generation students at private schools or about perceptions of institutional support programs at private schools. In their report, Saenz et al. (2007) suggested that while public institutions have had higher numbers of first-generation college students compared to private schools, this difference has narrowed since 1971. The most recent data available suggests that 76% of first-generation college students enrolled in public institutions, 9% at private institutions, and 16% at for-profit institutions (Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

In addition, this report suggests that compared to their first-generation peers at public higher education institutions, first-generation college students attending private institutions are more likely to have families with annual incomes over \$40,000; are more likely to have attended a private (either religious or non-denominational) high

school; and are more likely to have earned an “A” or better while in high school (Saenz et al., 2007). This report suggests that first-generation college students often opt for private colleges and universities due to the size of the institution as well as financial assistance offered to the individual (Saenz et. al, 2007). Finally, first-generation college students at private colleges are more likely to live on campus than their peers at public universities, which the authors suggest impacts first-generation student engagement and retention at private institutions (Saenz et al., 2007).

As an example, Havlik et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative research study examining first-generation students persisting at a mid-sized, private, religiously-affiliated institution. The study consisted of 18 students that participated in focus groups (Havlik et al., 2020). Two themes resulted from the researchers’ study. First, students reported regular experiences of “otherness” within the university environment, primarily due to their own first-generation as well as other, intersecting identities (Havlik et al., 2020). In addition, participants reported feelings of not belonging, feeling like an outsider, being viewed as different or less than, being misunderstood, excluded, invalidated, or being disadvantaged compared to the majority (Havlik et al., 2020). Continuing-generation peers, faculty, and staff, participants reported, were the main populations that contributed to these participants’ feelings (Havlik et. al, 2020). Finally, participants acknowledged barriers caused by their first-generation student status. Many felt that their need for additional resources contributed to the feelings of *otherness* and being an outsider. As stated by one participant: “Up until really I started college, I never really even thought about the concept of being a first-generation college student . . . I just hadn’t thought about what

accompanied that” (Havlik et al., 2020, p. 126). Summing up, being an outsider, first-generation students felt a sense of otherness and alienation at private schools. On account of their first-generation status, they felt being misunderstood, alienated, and excluded within the environment of private universities.

The second theme that emerged from participants in the study was one of motivation and strengths (Havlik et al., 2020). When asked what contributed to their persistence despite barriers, participants offered a wide range of responses. The most common were internal contributors, such as a commitment to “The Greater Good and perceived strengths of Character, Identity, and Relational skills” (Havlik et al., 2020, pp. 129-130). Findings included that a substantial reason for students wanting to persist was “the perception that they were achieving something bigger than themselves—largely they felt they were changing generational patterns within families or whole communities by obtaining a college degree” (Havlik et al., 2020, p. 130). Strength of character, or an internal drive to succeed, emerged as an important factor to persistence, with participants using qualifiers such as “resilient,” “persistent,” “a fighter,” “passionate,” and “determined” (Havlik et al., 2020, p. 131). Finally, relationships were a key factor noted by participants and the researchers that impacted persistence. Participants spoke of seeking out and forming supportive relationships and described by the researchers as “extroversion and viewed as a tool for survival.” For example, one study participant said: “You have to actively look for it [peer support] . . . you have to be more outgoing” and, “I had to be extroverted in order to meet and network with the right people and not be afraid about going out there” (Havlik et al., 2020, p. 132). Thus, despite the aforementioned barriers, first-

generation students were motivated to succeed by higher ideals of character, identity, meaningful relationships, and achieving a Greater Good by altering generational patterns in families and even communities for the better.

Based upon the results of the study, the authors' findings appear to be like previous first-generation participant research at public institutions (Havlik et al., 2020). However, this study focused upon the experiences of participants at one private institution. While these findings appear to be similar, no research has been found that has studied students' perceptions at multiple private institutions with diverse sizes and from multiple geographic locations in the United States. This gap confirms the need for further study and investigation of multiple private institutions located throughout the U.S., as well as to better understand student perceptions and experiences.

Summary

As suggested, the opportunity to pursue a college degree has become more accessible now to diverse student populations than in prior generations. Fall enrollment at colleges and universities was 8% higher in 2017 (19.8 million students) than in 2007 (18.3 million students), thereby offering supportive evidence that pursuing a college degree is both easy and accessible (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). However, the demographic profile of undergraduate students in the United States continues to become increasingly diverse. (Terenzini et al., 1996; Reason, 2003; Woodard et al., 2000).

First-generation college students are an important consideration for all stakeholders within the higher education setting. As suggested, 56% of undergraduate college students in the United States identify as first-generation college students,

approximately 6.9 million students, (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; RTI International, 2019). Of those first-generation students who enter postsecondary education, only 20% earn a 4-year college degree within 6 years (RTI International, 2019), meaning first-generation college students, on average, are starting but not persisting to degree completion.

College transition and support programs (CTSP) for first-generation college students can enhance their ability to succeed. Much of the research on first-generation college students have focused on factors before college, the ability to attend college, enrollment patterns, and financial considerations (Jehangir, 2010). While important, first-generation students must share their distinct narratives. A gap exists of students informing stakeholders of best practices for programs, processes, and procedures to develop optimal programming to facilitate first-generation student success on college campuses nationwide.

First-generation students face many obstacles when it comes to the college-going process, as well as persistence to degree. Nonetheless, all stakeholders must consider the research and literature that captures first-generation student success. Taking a critical look at this body of research helps inform current and future strategies used to serve this unique student population. A sincere commitment to supporting the academic achievement of first-generation students, as well as the integration into the campus community, which contributes to student persistence should be the goal for all stakeholders within the higher education system. Chapter 3 outlines the planned methodology, data collection, and data analysis for this descriptive research study, whereas Chapter 4 includes data analysis for each of the

research questions and describes the findings of this study. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses implications for institutions and practitioners supporting first-generation college students.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The following chapter discusses the methodology used to conduct this descriptive research study that investigated the perceptions of first-generation college students regarding their persistence at private universities. The chapter reviews the identified research question, as well as provides a description of and rationale for utilizing the selected research methodology for this study. It also identifies the participants for this study, designates the procedures, provides an explanation of the sampling techniques that will be utilized, highlights the data collection, and describes the procedures of the data analysis.

Research Question

The purpose of this descriptive research study was to explore first-generation student experiences and perceptions regarding persistence to graduation at private universities in the United States. Students in their third year or greater were included due to their successful persistence at their institution. While there is scant research when it comes to examining retention and persistence after the first year of study, Nora et al. (2005) suggested that student attrition is least prevalent during years three and four of the college experience. Therefore, including students who are in at least their third year of college is appropriate because they are less likely to leave the institution without graduating (Nora et al., 2005). The researcher believes this population will inform the research outcomes, as each will have persisted at the institution for three or more years of study.

The purpose of this study was to understand student perceptions about how private institutions support the persistence of first-generation college students. Data

collected through a variety of survey types were analyzed. The specific perceptions investigated included how do students experience programs that are designed for their academic success and persistence; and how, if at all, do programs support or promote student success? Only first-generation college students, who were in their third year of study or greater, who attended a private college or university in the United States were considered for this study.

Rationale for Methodology

As stated, the purpose of this descriptive study was to explore first-generation student experiences and perceptions on persistence to graduation at targeted private universities in the United States. Specifically, this study described the extent to which students were participating in programs and deem the programs as impactful.

The dynamics of the student undergraduate experience are often complex and unique to the individual (Crozier et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2006; Wong & Chiu, 2021). When considering first-generation college students and their unique college-going experience, the possibility of additional dynamics and complexities cannot be ruled out (Adams & McBrayer, 2020; Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Davis, 2010; Hands, 2020; Jehangir et al., 2015; Jordan, 2021; Whitley et al., 2018). Therefore, this study was designed to capture the unique perspectives of its participants to gather additional understandings for all.

This investigation included a descriptive study utilizing survey research and entailed the researcher collecting, analyzing, and integrating a variety of survey types to collect data, including rating scale items, ranking items, and open-ended items within the research process for gaining increased understanding of the research

problem (Ivankova et al., 2006). Research design is a strategy or plan created to answer a research question and to control for variance (Kerlinger, 1998). Survey research is a method of collecting standardized research from many respondents (Muijs, 2012). When conducting survey research, Muijs (2012) suggests that “if the sampling framework is appropriate, it allows [the researcher] to collect data that we can *generalize* (sic) to a population” (p. 140). In addition, a survey research design is “highly flexible in that it allows for the possibility to study a wide range of research questions” (Muijs, 2012, p. 141).

This study captured participants’ perceptions of their individualized first-generation college student experience and the nature of their persistence. It was necessary to collect data using various survey types for the researcher to investigate participants and personal perceptions at diverse, private institutions. These survey types included rating scale items, ranking items, and open-ended items. This process allowed for clarification of initial data received, as well as provided further explorations of participant insights to develop deeper understandings. This descriptive study also allowed the researcher to develop a general understanding of the research problem, along with student perceptions on their own opinions, attitudes, relationships between variables, and perceived variables (Muijs, 2012).

Descriptive Study Design Utilizing Survey Research

This investigation was a descriptive study design utilizing survey research exploring first-generation student experiences and perceptions on persistence. The strength of survey research design is that it allows the researcher to collect data from a sample of the population but generalize results to the whole (Dillman, 2014). With this

design, the researcher collected and analyzed online survey responses collected from participants (Dillman, 2014). This online survey process facilitated data being easily stored in a secure database, facilitating simple data analyses (Dillman, 2014).

The survey research design used a variety of methods to collect participant data, including rating scale items, ranking items, and open-ended items. First, the Likert-type survey data were collected and analyzed to gather a better understanding of the data collected. Data were recoded to an ordinal scale and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics summarize, or quantitatively describe, variables in a dataset (Sarka, 2021). In addition, descriptive statistics are appropriate when describing the sample of concern, to get a feel for the data, and to perform statistical tests (Gaten, 2000). Further, descriptive statistics are useful to provide participant information about variables in a dataset and to highlight potential relationships between variables (Bhandari, 2020). The research survey comprised several qualitative, short answer/open-ended survey questions, thus allowing participants to elaborate on their previous Likert-type responses to allow greater depth of understanding. Open-ended survey items record respondents' perceptions and ideas without "influencing or restraining them with closed-ended response options" (Dillman et al., 2014, p. 132). In addition, open-ended responses provide a more concrete view into the respondents' thinking and attitudes that were likely present before the question was asked (RePass, 1971; Roberts et al., 2014). This descriptive study that utilized survey research allowed the researcher to fully explore first-generation students' perceptions on successful persistence using a variety of survey methods. This design accounted for individual differences as first-generation students'

experiences are unique to the individual. Data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and results are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

A descriptive study utilizing a survey research design allows for several advantages when collecting and analyzing the data set. First, this design is practical in that it allows the researcher to identify a targeted population and gather specific information while gathering swift results (Gaille, 2020). Second, survey research design provides an opportunity for scalability, or the researcher the ability to gather data from different population sizes (Gaille, 2020). Third, survey design allows for data to come from multiple sources at once, and to allow the researcher to compare and contrast results. This design also enables survey respondents to remain anonymous during the data collection process (Gaille, 2020).

Finally, the collection of Likert-type survey data, open-ended/short-answer qualitative data, and review of the current literature allowed for *triangulation*, or the collection and analysis of different data from varied sources (Mills & Gay, 2019). Triangulation enhances a study's richness, increases its validity, and uses multiple sources to explore a phenomenon (Yin, 2017).

Context

Important aspects of this study included investigating student perceptions within private colleges and universities. There are several differences between private and public institutions. In addition, institutions that receive *First-gen Forward* recognition are denoted for their institutional commitment to best practices supporting first-generation college students. Both aspects are discussed in greater detail to offer additional context for this descriptive study design.

Context: Private Colleges and Universities

There are substantial differences between public and private universities that may impact the student experience. These differences include funding, size of enrollment, and a variety of degrees or majors offered (Castañeda, 2021; College Monk, 2020; Patel, 2019). For example, while public institutions receive federal funding, private institutions must rely on student tuition and donors and therefore, are more expensive to attend (Castañeda, 2021; College Monk, 2020; Patel, 2019; Sawyer, 2021). Private schools are typically smaller than public institutions, and the size of their classes are small, thus typically enabling a more personalized experience (Castañeda, 2021; College Monk, 2020; Sawyer, 2021). Finally, private schools frequently offer few majors for study and degree programs compared to larger institutions due to both size and resources (Castañeda, 2021; College Monk, 2020; Sawyer, 2021).

Much research exists regarding first-generation students and their college experience at public institutions (i.e., seminal studies). As examples, first-generation college students are more inclined to attend regional public universities instead of inclusive and selective institutions; come from families with annual income less than those first-generation counterparts at private schools; are more likely to have achieved a lower high school GPA than their counterparts; are more apt to attend institutions closer to home regardless of selectivity and prestige; and prioritize safety, practicality, proximity, support, and affordability rather than a private institution with potentially more prestige and higher tuition (Dickler, 2020; Haney, 2020, Schackmuth, 2012). First-generation college students at public schools are less likely to attend religious

services and perform volunteer work than those at private, faith-based institutions (Schackmuth, 2012). However, not much is known about the experience of first-generation students at private colleges and universities. Private institutions are frequently smaller than public universities, with tight-knit communities and chances to connect with others (Farhat, 2020). Further, private institutions allow students to be more involved with their classes, professors, and extracurricular activities (Farhat, 2020). Therefore, it is important to investigate the experiences and perceptions of first-generation students at private institutions and ascertain whether private institutions and their notable differences, impact this population's persistence and success.

Context: First-Gen Forward and Center for First-Generation Student Success

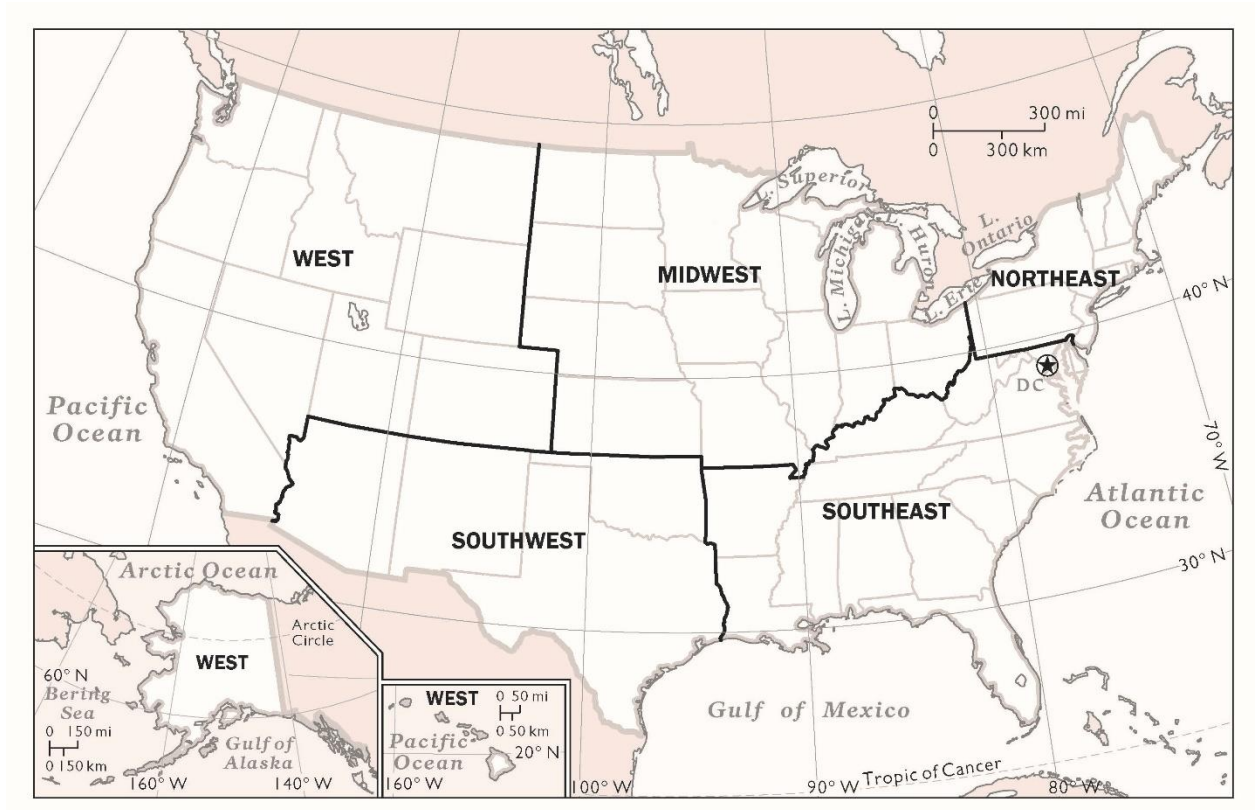
Institutions that are a part of the First-gen Forward designation from the National Center for First-Generation Student Success-NASPA have been considered for this study, as these institutions have been vetted and recognized for providing optimal support for first-generation student success. The establishment of an organization to align all work conducted by colleges and universities across the country on this population's behalf was central to the idea of supporting first-generation student success. In June 2017, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) established the Center for First-Generation Student Success as a means of "driving higher education innovation and advocacy for first-generation student success" (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2022, para. 1). Upon its inception, the Center's purpose was to serve as a leader for university stakeholders via scholarly discussion, information sharing, networking, and program development (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2022). To pursue

its mission, the Center launched First-gen Forward, which is a select cohort of two and four-year colleges and universities across the nation that are considered optimal for their commitment and practices for successful support of first-generation college students (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2022).

For an institution to be considered for this designation, it must complete a formal and in-depth application process and provide institutional data, detail campus-wide efforts to support first-generation students, and demonstrate student support by senior leadership demonstrates that first-generation student support is a priority campus-wide (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2022). If selected, institutions receive a designation that they support first-generation student success in such a manner that each is a model of success for its peers (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2022). This study seeks to investigate private, not-for-profit First-gen Forward institutions, as this distinction implies current systems of success benefitting first-generation college students. Selecting institutions with this designation is an important qualifier to this study. The focus of this study was to investigate how do students *experience programs* that are designed for their *academic success* and *persistence*; and how, if at all, do *programs* support or promote *student success*? To confirm and identify successes from the student perspective, the researcher is choosing institutions noted for successful practices, support, and practices campus-wide in supporting first-generation college students. Figure 6 below represents how each institution studied will be identified by one of five regions of the United States, and Table 1 offers additional details by the number of private institutions studied, by region.

Figure 6

Division of Participating Private, First-gen Forward Institutions: By Region



Note. This image is a document illustrating the United States regions and is adapted from the National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C. (O'Connor, S., 2012).

Table 1*Identification of Participating Private, First-gen Forward Institutions by Region*

Region	Number of Participating Institutions
Midwest	18% (n = 6)
Northeast	41% (n = 14)
Southeast	15% (n = 5)
Southwest	3% (n = 1)
West	24% (n = 8)

Note: n = 34.

Participants

Little research has been conducted focusing upon first-generation perceptions at private institutions. Further, little research exists from the student perspective, and how support programs designed for their success are effective, or not effective, in their design and implementation. Therefore, this study will investigate participants that identify as first-generation college students at private colleges and universities throughout the country.

Participant Sampling

First, in July 2021, the researcher sent an email to the Center seeking the primary contact information of those directing first-generation student efforts at current private, four-year First-gen Forward institutions. Second, in September 2021, the researcher conducted outreach via email to all individuals currently directing efforts at 80 private, four-year First-gen Forward institutions. This email included an introduction and summary of the study, Institutional Review Board (IRB)

documentation and approval, and, finally, a link to the research survey. Third, consenting directors of 34 institutions were asked to identify first-generation student participants that were in their third or fourth year of study at their college that met the criteria for this study. Fourth, participants were contacted internally by email by each institutional director, and the details of the study were explained. Participants will be given a link to the research survey. An invitation to participate in a semi-structured interview was included in the survey. However, this aspect was postponed due to the study's timeline.

The researcher's sampling involved undergraduate first-generation college students ($n = 541$) at private four-year institutions ($n = 34$) in the United States. All participants were enrolled in full-time coursework, in their third or greater, and range in age from 18 to 25. These attributes were confirmed by participants before they participated in a survey research study. Should any participant have acknowledged that they did not fit the criterion, the survey was constructed to allow the participant to opt-out. Therefore, this process ensured that appropriate first-generation students were surveyed.

Survey Participants

Purposive criterion sampling was used to identify participants for this study. The purposive criterion method allows for sampling that is representative of a group population given the researcher's knowledge and experience (Mills & Gay, 2019). Nora et al. (2005) suggest that third- and fourth-year students are most likely to persist and graduate. Participants who fit this criterion were selected only from First-gen Forward institutions due to optimal institutional supports and practices. Finally,

participants were considered only from private institutions, as this subset of schools lacks current research and study. Table 2 offers further demographic items of participants such as gender, race/ethnicity, and current enrollment status at the participants' selected institution. The top responses were included for each category.

Table 2

Demographic Information of Survey Research Participants

	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male/Man	109	21
Female/Woman	395	74
Genderqueer/Gender non-conforming	12	2
Other	17	3
Race/Ethnicity		
White	193	37
Hispanic/Latino(a)	131	25
Asian	79	15
Black/African American	44	8
Other	83	15
Age of Participant		
18-20 years old	247	46
21-25 years old	292	54
Over 25 years old	2	1
Year of Enrollment		
Third Year	261	48
Fourth Year of Greater	280	52

Note: Please see the appendix for the full list of "other" categories included in the research survey.

Instrument

The use of the survey provided the researcher an opportunity to triangulate data and further validate the results of the study. The researcher designed the survey research instrument to offer a general understanding of the research problem.

Survey

The purpose of the survey was to investigate institutional attributes that have facilitated individual student persistence. An electronic survey was created using

Qualtrics, an online survey platform utilized to collect participants' demographic information and self-reported perceptions of first-generation college students and what has allowed them to be successful towards earning a four-year college degree.

Additional aspects of the survey were designed using aspects of the University of Southern California's (USC) Promoting At-Promise Student Success Project (PASS) survey instrument, which is discussed below. The survey included a consent form, seven demographic questions, and 25 survey items. The survey items included questions grouped by theme as determined by the descriptive study and research design. Questions used a variety of survey types to collect data, including rating scale items, ranking items, and open-ended items.

USC PASS. The survey was designed using aspects of the University of Southern California's (USC) Promoting At-Promise Student Success Project (PASS) survey instrument. Members of USC's research team designed its own qualitative instrument to better understand traditional outcomes of lower-income and first-generation students such as GPA and retention, but also psychosocial outcomes such as academic, social, and career self-efficacy, resiliency, validation, mattering, and sense of belonging (Pullias Center for Higher Education, n.d.). USC used this original instrument for a cohort of first-generation/low-income students at three University of Nebraska campuses. In this study, aspects of 13 survey questions that are relevant to the research question were used, as well as demographic questions. Questions have been modified slightly (e.g. "community" has been made more explicit to include "first-generation community"). Students reported their perceptions through Likert-type scale questions and a ranking of institutional programs and their effectiveness. Survey

questions from the USC research team were originally constructed and derived from existing scales, with slight modifications made to certain items (G. Rivera, personal communication, June 22, 2021). Finally, the researcher developed open-ended response questions seeking more detailed qualitative feedback from participants. This section detailed participant program engagement, faculty/staff interactions, academic support resources, first-generation community experiences, and overall institutional experiences. The researcher constructed these questions based upon current literature and the study's research question. Open-ended questions are preferable when the researcher wants to collect detailed information from respondents and is curious about topics where little information is known ahead of time (Dillman et. al, 2014).

To establish content validity, researchers from USC developed survey scales for their survey instrument based upon site visits to a *comprehensive college transition program* (CCTP), as well as from items drawn from relevant literature and existing survey scales (Cole et al., 2019). The pilot survey was administered to a sample of CCTP students ($n = 350$) recruited from a total population of 972 students (Cole et al., 2019). The psychometric pilot test analysis was guided by researchers using two theories: a) classical test theory, and b) item response theory (IRT) (Cole et al., 2019). Classical test theory includes Cronbach's alpha as a measure of internal consistency and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess construct validity (Cole et. al, 2019). In addition, IRT provides a measure of item discrimination for the researchers within latent constructs (Cole et al., 2019). The researchers made decisions regarding eliminating or retaining items from its survey scales based upon information gathered from the participant pilot.

Finally, while participant constructs are not directly measurable, the researchers sought to construct survey items that generated estimates of an individual's score relative to a construct (Cole et al, 2020). For the survey instrument to produce reliable estimates of participant scores, the survey was designed to include scales of varying levels of difficulty, where some items were easy to answer, some were more difficult, and some in between (Cole et al., 2020). Rasch measurement models were used by the researchers to “transform ordinal responses (e.g. “strongly disagree”) into interval scale measures, and to evaluate the psychometric functioning of the scales” (Cole et al, 2020, p 3). The researcher used these survey items as a foundational basis for further understanding of first-generation student perceptions regarding their own successes. Table 3 provides examples of sample items from the USC PASS Instrument.

Table 3

Sample Items from the USC PASS Instrument

Construct	USC PASS Items	Sample Item 1	Sample Item 2
Classroom Interactions	2	The researcher developed a close, personal relationship with at least one first-generation staff member whose job it is to support first-generation students.	First-generation staff members have high expectations of me.

First-generation Peers	7	There are first-generation peers in my community who seem happy about my accomplishments.	Other first-generation peers in my community are happy for me when I do well on exams or projects.
First-generation Community	8	I feel like an outsider in the first-generation community.	I feel like I belong in the first-generation community.

Open-Ended Questions

In addition to the questions constructed, the researcher constructed 8 open-ended questions for participants to expand upon their previous responses in each section of the survey. Some open-ended questions were linked to specific scaled responses, such as asking participants to elaborate on their choice to not participate in first-generation programs if noted previously. Open-ended questions were selected to be included in this survey, as they provide the respondent with an amount of flexibility in the answer that can be provided (Dillman et al., 2014). Additionally, the open-ended questions were content-specific and seek deeper meaning and understanding depending upon the construct. The survey was constructed to discourage invalid participant answers and will offer appropriate answer space for the type of response desired (Dillman et al., 2014). The following open-ended prompts were asked in the survey instrument. Some questions are solely dependent on Likert-type scale item selection.

1. Please share a bit more about your answer to the previous question. If you have not participated in first-generation programs offered by your college or

- university, why so? How could your college or university rethink its first-generation programs for the future to encourage better student participation?
2. What programs do you wish your college or university offered specifically to first-generation students? Please explain why you believe these programs would be important in supporting first-generation student success and persistence.
 3. What was it about these programs above that made them the most impactful for you?
 4. Of your interactions with first-generation staff, which, if any, have been the most meaningful to your success? (Please be sure to describe this person's role or title).
 5. What academic support resources on campus (examples: first-generation office or supports, library, financial aid, tutoring, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Office(s), academic support, etc.) have had the biggest impact on your academic success as a first-generation student?
 6. Please describe the first-generation community at your college or university. How has connecting with other first-generation students impacted your experience?
 7. How, if at all, has your college or university increased your sense of belonging at your institution? Has this impacted your progress toward a 4-year degree?
 8. Finally, as a first-generation student, what advice would you give to colleges and universities trying to help first-generation college students be successful in obtaining a 4-year degree?

Design and Procedure

The descriptive design of this study will allow the researcher to collect participant data utilizing survey research. Designing an effective participant survey, identification of participants that meet the study's criteria, and distribution of the survey instrument will encompass survey participant sampling. First, in July 2021, the researcher conducted email outreach to all individuals currently directing efforts at 80 private, four-year First-gen Forward institutions. This outreach introduced the study, defined the intended participants, explained the rationale for the study, provided a timeline for participation, and invited each institution to participate. Second, in September 2021, 34 participating institutions were contacted via email to re-confirm interest, were provided IRB documentation, and were offered a link to the research survey. The researcher asked directors at participating institutions to identify a subset of students that meet the study's criteria. Directors at each institution distributed the survey electronically to its student subset. The researcher offered additional assistance to each institution, including an email introduction to student participants explaining the survey, offering its purpose and details, and inviting students to participate. Participants were given approximately four weeks to complete the survey. Participation was purely voluntary and optional for all. Table 4 describes the timeline for the procedures for this study.

Table 4*Timeline of Procedures*

Dates	Procedures
July 2021	Email outreach to 80 private, First-gen Forward institutions describing study and invitation for institution to participate
Early- Mid Sept., 2021	Proposal defense, permission secured for instrument use and adaptation, IRB approval completed
Mid Sept. 2021	Conduct outreach to subset of institutions that had expressed interest in participating in survey study. Ask institutions to identify up to participants from institution to participate.
Late Sept. 2021 – Oct. 2021	Outreach to participants with invitation to participate in study. Administer surveys over 3-4-weeks, including reminders to participants and assistance from primary contacts at institutions.
Nov. 2021 – Dec. 2021	Code and analyze data from survey research responses
Dec. 2021 – Feb. 2022	Complete data analysis; write Chapters 4 & 5

Ethical Considerations

Data collection began upon approval of this study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Portland, which occurred on September 20, 2021. All participants were offered informed consent before participating in the study. The entire data that was collected and stored using a university-owned, password-protected network drive is only available to the researcher's account. No other students or staff had access to this data. Finally, the researcher took additional steps to

ensure the confidentiality of participants, and that responses were safely guarded and protected. Survey participants remained anonymous.

Participants were informed when invited to participate that their responses would be kept confidential and that their responses would not be shared with other faculty or staff at their respective institutions. Participants were notified that their participation was strictly voluntary and that each could withdraw from the study at any time.

Data Analysis

For the researcher to gather a comprehensive understanding of the research problem and questions, all data collected was analyzed in a variety of ways.

Rating and Ranking Scale Analysis

Data collected from rating and ranking scale items were analyzed using SPSS and Excel. Descriptive statistics were used to identify patterns within the data collected. A spearman rho test was used to compare frequencies occurring among different student experiences such as belonging, sense of community, and feelings of value and mattering, possessing strengths as a first-generation student, and having friends at the institution of study. These tests offered a further exploration of student perceptions of how overall student experiences at their private institution have contributed to their success.

Open-Ended Response Analysis

Open-ended data received from all open-ended responses were reviewed verbatim, coded, and analyzed using a two-cycle coding process as described by Saldaña (2015). Further, throughout the data analysis process, the researcher used

bracketing and analytic memos to identify and reduce researcher bias (Cutcliffe, 2003). First cycle coding included the process of assigning codes to the first set of data and included one or two coding methods to best capture the research question being investigated. For this study, first cycle coding included both In Vivo and Descriptive codes to best capture the authentic voice of participants. In Vivo codes are known as “literal” codes. These are captured from the data set to maintain the original language of participants (Saldaña, 2015, p. 91) In Vivo codes also capture “behaviors which will explain to the analyst how the basic problem of the actors is resolved and processed” (Strauss, 1987, p. 33). With In Vivo coding, the researcher draws upon the language and terminology that is used by the participants (Saldaña, 2015). This coding method is consistent with the purpose of this study, which is to capture participants’ voices and perceptions during the analysis phase. Descriptive codes, or “topic codes,” are useful in transforming raw data into “basic vocabulary” for additional analysis (Saldaña, 2015, p. 88). By using this method, emphasis includes understanding the participants and their own stories, the meaning of their stories, and the ideas behind them (Saldaña, 2015). The first cycle coding process began with In Vivo coding, and included reviewing the open-ended responses sentence by sentence and extracting key phrases or words that represented the participant’s voice. Next, Descriptive coding was conducted, and included reviewing open-ended participant reflections and assigning descriptive terms to content. This process allowed for two sets of first-cycle codes for analysis.

According to Saldaña (2021), while the “first cycle coding is *analysis*, or taking things apart, the second coding cycle is a *synthesis* or putting things together

into new assemblages of meaning” (p. 6). In this second cycle, the first cycle code set was organized into distinct categories. Saldaña’s (2015) method of *pattern coding* was used to complete the second cycle coding process. Pattern coding entailed the researcher combining similar codes into categories that represent the essence of these codes and seeking to organize data to represent relationships between categories.

Role of the Researcher/Positionality

This study design, its research questions, data collection, and analysis were influenced by the role and position of the current researcher. The researcher has worked in higher education for 23 years, spending the last 6 years directing first-generation student efforts as a professional at a private, First-gen Forward institution. Given the professional role, the researcher has studied a variety of trends surrounding the first-generation student experience. While the researcher does not identify as a first-generation college graduate, significant professional and personal efforts have been devoted to developing an understanding of the student experience. Their familiarity and experience working directly with first-generation students made them vulnerable to bias during the data collection and data analysis phases of the study. The researcher mitigated these biases by considering the following mechanisms.

Trustworthiness

The researcher considered the quality of this study through the study’s design, collection of data, and analysis of data. In a study, validation is demonstrated using methods of trustworthiness or credibility (Creswell, 2014). It attempts to “assess the accuracy of the findings as best described by the researcher, the participants, and the readers” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 259). Researchers are suggested to use at least

two validation strategies to establish trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study applied several strategies to ensure trustworthiness.

The use of triangulation allows the researcher to collect data using multiple sources and corroborating evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In doing so, the researcher attempts to illuminate themes or perspectives from different sources and offer validity of their findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, data were collected using Likert-type survey data, open-ended/short answer qualitative data, and a review of the current literature, which established triangulation by which to review data.

A pilot study refers to the process of when a proposed questionnaire is tested on members of the survey population to identify problems (Dillman et al. 2014). A pilot study “can provide valuable information about how individual survey items in the questionnaire are performing and how the overall construction of the questionnaire is working” (Dillman et al., 2014, p. 251). Further, a pilot study constitutes a final test of the exact questionnaire and can offer guidance for needed adjustments (Dillman et al., 2014). This research study was piloted using current first-generation students that were in their second year of study. Nine doctoral graduate students, faculty, and external partners also participated in the pilot study to offer feedback on optimal survey construction. This procedure allowed for appropriate edits to be implemented before the launch of the research study instrument.

Clarifying and disclosing researcher bias is an important consideration for establishing trustworthiness for a study. The researcher suggested their distinct understandings about biases, values, and experiences that they brought to the study so

that the reader was clear of the researcher's position (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher identified potential bias previously in this chapter and continued to be aware of emerging biases throughout the study. Finally, the researcher documented decisions that were made regarding study scope, framework, participants, codes, and themes via a detailed audit trail to maintain integrity and consistency throughout the process.

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest having a peer review of the data and research process to serve as an external check. Specifically, this individual should be "someone who is familiar with the research or the phenomenon explored" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). This process further enhances the reliability of the data and its findings, and the peer reviewer can serve as a "devil's advocate" that keeps the researcher honest, asks hard questions if needed, and keeps the researcher honest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Due to the familiarity of institutions and established processes, the researcher invited an administrator from the Center for First-Generation Student Success to serve in this peer reviewer role as a part of the designed study. This peer reviewer demonstrated expertise with the subject matter being studied and offered insights and counsel as suggested. The researcher also invited an education faculty member from a large, public institution to serve as a peer reviewer to offer expertise and perspective to the study.

Summary

This chapter has reviewed the methodology for this descriptive study designed to address research questions about first-generation student perceptions about successful persistence. Strategies for conducting outreach to institutions and

identifying participants were reviewed. The strategies of this descriptive design utilizing survey research were discussed, and the details of the researcher's timeline were described in detail. The research study included a variety of survey types to collect data, including rating scale items, ranking items, and open-ended items. The survey instrument was emailed to directors of first-generation efforts at private, First-gen Forward institutions. Directors identified appropriate participants within their institution and facilitated research survey distribution. Data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Open-ended/short answer survey responses were analyzed and coded using Saldaña's (2015) two-cycle coding techniques. The data were analyzed and examined to clarify and explain the results of the survey research. Chapter 4 will further elaborate on the data collected from this study and analyze its findings, and Chapter 5 will offer a discussion of this study's key findings as well as implications for future practice.

Chapter 4: Data & Analysis

The purpose of this descriptive study was to understand student perceptions about how private institutions support the persistence of first-generation college students. Survey research data were collected and analyzed.

Each section of this chapter includes an analysis of participant data. This group of student participants included third or fourth-year students ($n = 541$) attending one of 34 different private colleges or universities in the United States. Response choices on the survey included a 5-point Likert-type scale, with possible responses including the following: not applicable, strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. Blank responses and those indicating not applicable were discarded. The remaining responses were recoded using an ordinal scale.

The survey of participants contained different sections organized by themes that relate to the research questions stated above. Each theme represented a different component, which further helps answer the stated research question. Therefore, this chapter is organized into six thematic sections: *Student Program Participation and Support*; *Faculty and Staff Support*; *Academic Support Resources*; *First-Generation Community Experiences*; *Overall Student Experiences at Institution*; and *Advice from First-Generation Students*. These themes are the same as those used in the survey research instrument and will be discussed further below.

Student Program Participation and Support

The first theme focuses upon first-generation college students' experiences with programs and supports. Overall, first-generation college students felt supported by their institutions; 95% of students agreed that their college or university had

supported their efforts to earn a 4-year college degree while 92% of students agreed that their college or university has specific supports and programs for its first-generation college students (see Table 5).

Table 5

First-Generation Experiences of Institutional Support and Support Programs

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Median	Disagree	Agree
My college or university has supported my efforts to earn a 4-year college degree.	3.29	.61	3	5%	95%
My college or university has specific supports and programs for its first-generation college students.	3.33	.67	3	8%	92%

Note. $n = 537$ for Item #1; $n = 533$ for Item #2. Scores of 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 2 (Disagree) were combined into the “Disagree” category and scores of 3 (Agree) and 4 (Strongly Agree) were combined into the “Agree” category.

Second, student participants were asked to consider all programs that are designed to support first-generation college students at colleges and universities. Participants were asked to indicate which support programs they had participated in at their current institution. The survey allowed for participants to check all programs in which they had participated throughout their college experience. Programs were listed on the survey based upon current literature, as well as from the advice of national first-generation experts and practitioners. Of the total number of survey participants, 82% of the respondents indicated that they had participated in some type of first-generation program. Specifically, 16% of respondents participated in one type of program; 17% participated in two different programs; and 49% participated in three or more different programs designed specifically to support first-generation success. The top three

participant responses included: in-person or virtual social events (69% participated in), mentorship (65%), and in-person or virtual informational workshops (55%). Table 6 displays the program selections, the number of students indicating specific program(s) and participation, and the percentage of respondents that participated in each program.

Each college or university had first-generation programs that were unique to each institution. In addition to listed programs, the survey was designed to allow respondents to write in programs not listed to capture additional program participation data. In the *Other* portion, survey respondents indicated program participation not listed as choices in the original survey, including McNair Scholars; first-generation programs specific to the institution; student-designed first-generation clubs (not facilitated by institutional staff); first-generation scholarship programs; first-generation societies; FGLI (first-generation programs also including low-income students); programs specific for first-generation student-athletes; and communication systems for members of the community.

Finally, student participants were asked to consider their previous response(s) regarding their own first-generation program participation, and indicate the following: *Of those items checked, please rank order all the programs, if any, from most supportive to least supportive, that have been impactful in supporting you to persist toward graduation. Rank the programs with the most impactful being your first choice, second choice, etc.* Table 6 illustrates the program selections and the percentage of respondents that ranked each program according to their impact on their own persistence toward earning a 4-year college degree.

Table 6*First-Generation College Student Programs: Participation and Impact*

Program	Student Participation Percentage	Percent Ranking Most Impactful Program	Percent Ranking Top-3 Most Impactful Program
In-person or virtual social events for first-generation students	69% <i>n</i> = 295	16% <i>n</i> = 27	68% <i>n</i> = 114
Mentorship: peer, faculty, alumni, etc.	65% <i>n</i> = 288	36% <i>n</i> = 56	88% <i>n</i> = 137
In-person or virtual informational workshops for first-generation students	55% <i>n</i> = 243	10% <i>n</i> = 16	55% <i>n</i> = 86
Pre-Orientation or summer/bridge program specific to first-generation students	37% <i>n</i> = 165	39% <i>n</i> = 39	78% <i>n</i> = 78
Academic class or seminar specific to first-generation students	27% <i>n</i> = 121	13% <i>n</i> = 10	52% <i>n</i> = 40
Leadership or job position specific to first-generation students	24% <i>n</i> = 106	19% <i>n</i> = 14	49% <i>n</i> = 36
Living and learning community	23% <i>n</i> = 103	23% <i>n</i> = 14	57% <i>n</i> = 35
TRIO Student Support Services (SSS)	19% <i>n</i> = 84	51% <i>n</i> = 18	96% <i>n</i> = 34
Other (not listed/write in)	8% <i>n</i> = 36	62% <i>n</i> = 13	86% <i>n</i> = 19

Note. *n* = 441. Participants can choose one of more programs of participation; percentages will be greater than 100%.

In addition to the Likert-type scale responses, program participation, and the rank-order of each program and its impact on success, student participants were asked to further discuss their experiences with programs and resources designed to support their academic persistence. Specifically, participants were asked the following prompt: *Of the programs discussed, what was it about these programs above that made them the most impactful for you?* Of the completed survey responses (541), 304 participants

(56%) offered an open-ended response to the prompt. Responses were coded using Saldaña's two-cycle coding method, using descriptive, in vivo, and pattern coding methods to organize data to represent relationships between categories. The data coding process revealed items that will be discussed in greater detail: *connections and relationships with people; a sense of community, belonging, and validation; and resources and navigation; and other important themes.*

Connections and Relationships with People

The qualitative data in response to the question, “*Of the programs discussed, what was it about these programs above that made them the most impactful for you?*” indicate many findings for consideration. Analysis of participant data shows that it may not be the program itself that is important, but rather the community and connections with people that it facilitates. For example, after examining the open-ended responses ($n = 304$), 47% described important connections with people as being the most impactful result of their program participation. Several respondents shared the benefit of “being around people that shared the same experiences,” the ability to “offer connections and familiar faces on campus so that I don’t feel so alone,” how important it was to simply “socialize in-person with other people who have similar backgrounds as me,” and to “start building friendships and a meaningful support system.”

Participants suggested how impactful it was to visually see familiar faces and recognize individuals (peers, faculty, staff) at programs and events. This visual recognition helped to create a sense of community within the programs themselves. It appears these connections that take place within the community are meaningful, and

they allow all to “hear people’s stories and feel empowered and motivated” by collective experiences together.

Positive community interactions at programs and events also appear to allow for additional connection within the academic experience. Many respondents said that seeing the same professors that teach their classes at first-generation events was meaningful. It seems that programs allow for deeper connections by all, which can enhance the student experience.

One notable connection that respondents reported was the impact of mentorship on their first-generation experience. For example, an assessment of the open-ended responses ($n = 304$) discussing “*what was it about these programs that made them most impactful for you*” showed that 28% noted the importance of being involved with some type of mentorship program, whether it be peer to peer, faculty/staff, or a first-generation alumni/graduate. Common themes such as having a safe space to ask questions, the ability to “talk to someone going through the same thing,” and gaining information were discussed. Additional common themes included getting “advice on college life and making friends.” However, participants noted an implied void and gap that was experienced, as their “parents did not have the wisdom or experience to help in these areas,” which several agree made peer mentorship a valuable, necessary, and essential programmatic experience.

Finally, one participant spoke about the importance of having a mentor during their first semester as they struggled with the transition into the college environment:

I found it very helpful to have someone that could provide their own insights, answer my questions, and overall guide me through my first semester,

especially given the context that I knew my mentor would have a much better understanding of what I was going through compared to someone who was not first-generation. As I struggled to find my footing on campus, my mentor provided a stable and comforting space for me to ask questions or just talk about my experience, which I will always appreciate.

Another participant spoke of the tremendous value of having a mentor that was a designated staff member to support first-generation college students at their institution:

The most helpful [program experience] is my [staff mentor]. She offers a lot of insight into what it means to be a first-generation student and is always there when I'm in need. Being first-generation is very stressful and anxiety-inducing, and having someone there to ease the frustration has been vital to my college experience.

In summary, the respondents said that mentorship experiences were impactful throughout their college experience. Many found it comforting to be around those who had faced a similar situation and could candidly discuss their concerns and fears with mentors who genuinely listened and cared for them. Finally, mentorship appears to impact the student experience dynamically so that students do not feel like they are alone in their college journey.

Sense of Community, Belonging, and Validation

The qualitative data in response to the question, “*Of the programs discussed, what was it about these programs above that made them the most impactful for you?*” suggested the importance of a sense of community. Examining the open-ended

responses ($n = 304$), 29% revealed the importance of first-generation programs in cultivating their sense of community and belonging at their own institution. Students shared common themes such as having a supportive group of people early on in their experience, and how important this was to connect in person with peers going through a similar experience of being first-generation. Being in the community allowed students to be themselves and feel as if they were at their second home.

One student attested to the importance of his interactions with first-generation peers:

Working with and forming a community with other first-generation students at [my institution], my peers have helped me overcome the social isolation of the transition to college created as a first-gen student.

In short, these findings provide evidence to support how institutions that create spaces and opportunities for connections among first-generation breed a genuine sense of community for all.

Sense of Belonging and Validation. Equally important to the sense of community that programs provided was the sense of both validation and belonging for students. For instance, one student said that first-generation programs “allowed me to get over my shame of being first-generation,” while another offered that these programs “helped me feel comfortable in a foreign environment.” For some participants, “fitting in” was important to their own sense of validation and belonging. One student said: “Having a space where I feel like I fit in [made these programs important].” Another student at a different institution discussed the impact of first-generation programs for them:

[These programs let me] know that I was not alone. There was a strong sense of imposter syndrome, and validating how I felt, with people who also were going through what I was feeling was supportive, and knowing there were faculty who ensured our success in being well known of our background makes the college journey more bearable.

A different participant at another institution confirmed the successful approach of Yosso's (2005) Cultural Wealth Framework and viewed first-generation college students as having inherent strengths. At the same time, Rendón's Theory of Validation impacted this student's experience within targeted first-generation programs:

These programs reaffirmed my position and importance in the college community and validated my experience as someone who is figuring it all out without legacy-based help. These programs made me aware of unique opportunities that were open to me as a first-generation student.

In summary, data received from respondents reaffirms the important themes including student sense of community, belonging, and validation as being extremely impactful throughout their college experience. Respondents said that having their feelings validated by those who were also going through what they were in the absence of legacy-based help made them feel valued and sense of belonging, and recognize opportunities that they could uniquely avail of.

Resources and Navigation

According to an analysis of the open-ended responses ($n = 304$), 30% of respondents reported that first-generation programs helped them navigate the

unfamiliar, difficult aspects of the college experience, noted in previous research as the hidden curriculum (Margolis, 2001; Sambell & McDowell, 1998). Many were grateful that these programs helped them better understand what college life entailed, which was important in the absence of parental guidance. One participant said, “being first-generation can be difficult in that we [first-generation students] have a hard time with filling out paperwork...there's no one to ask in our family. Informational workshops have been a godsend.”

Students cited many of these programs as helpful, including resources for topics such as choosing a major, working on campus, choosing to live on or off-campus, choosing meal plans, and even connecting with helpful mental health resources such as counselors at their institution’s health and counseling center. A student at a different institution opined that the in-person workshops helped them get in touch with first-generation faculty and alumni, thus, playing a key role in cultivating their leadership skills both during and after college.

The data offers further evidence that programs specifically designed for first-generation students are helpful in more ways than one since they allow students to navigate their path in an unfamiliar situation in the absence of parental guidance without experiencing too many problems. At the same time, they can interact with alumni and faculty who are also first-generation students, thus gaining access to key resources for leadership and other traits that augur well for their future.

Additional Important Responses

Finally, respondents noted additional reasons that first-generation programs had been impactful to their own experiences. Students spoke of programs having a

direct impact on their academics, whether it be discovering their own major, opportunities for graduate study, or “sparking a research interest.” One student said:

Having an academic class specific to first-generation students was the most helpful because I met other students who were also first-generation, and I didn't feel alone when I first arrived at college. I saw inspirational videos and stories that helped remind me of my purpose for going to college.

Others were swift to point to the theme of support, and how programs gave them networking opportunities that help them survive and thrive. For example, one student at a different university said:

These events [at my institution] were impactful for me because they showed me that the university had a support system in place for students like me. These events helped me put faces to the names of people who had been reaching out.

Students spoke at length of their own institution's first-generation programs, and how these had been essential to their own success. They added that these programs went a long way in helping them feel included and prepared. Students also underscored the importance of pre-orientation or summer bridge programs, as previously discussed; the importance of career and alumni efforts specific for first-generation college students; TRIO/SSS programs; faculty efforts; and leadership or job opportunities specific to the first-generation college student.

A small number ($n = 13$) of respondents (3%) suggested having had negative experiences with first-generation programs, or the experience not being applicable to them. Common reasons for negative experiences included not needing the assistance as it was presented, events not being designed with students' interests in mind, and

staff offering a deficit instead of an asset-based approach when considering the first-generation student experience. However, in general, gaining access to first-generation students-specific programs had been valuable in developing the students' confidence, competence, and academic success, especially by providing them with critical networking opportunities and sharing resources that helped them sustain their motivation levels.

Lack of Participation in First-Generation Programs

While participants were asked to share feelings about program impacts, respondents that did not participate in first-generation programs at their institution were asked to discuss their experience. Of the 541 total survey participants, 108 students (19%) said that they had not participated in first-generation programs offered at their institution. Many participants (19%; $n = 21$) cited their own schedules and being too busy to attend. Others (17%; $n = 18$) shared felt confident with the successes or college experience they were having and did not feel the need for additional assistance. Other reasons students cited for not attending programs were lack of awareness of when programs or events took place; the timing of when events took place or how they conflicted with other campus activities; general lack of connection with the first-generation community; negative experiences within programs that motivated them not to return; the subject matter of events of workshops not being relevant or applicable; other personal involvement with campus activities; and personal hardships, often associated to the COVID pandemic.

Lack of Programs at Participant Institutions

A collection of the survey participants was unable to discuss the impact of first-generation programs on their experience because their institution did not have any offerings or programs. Of the 541 total survey participants, 43 students (8%) noted that no first-generation programs were offered specifically targeting first-generation college students despite their institution being a First-gen Forward institution. In response, participants were asked the following question: *What programs do you wish your college or university offered specifically to first-generation students? Please explain why you believe these programs would be important in supporting first-generation student success and persistence.*

Some respondents ($n = 15$) said they wished their institution offered direct programming for first-generation students and emphasized that programming should take place beyond the first year of study. Others noted the importance of financial aid and having programs to discuss the financial implication of attending a private school. As an example, one participant suggested:

I wish my university provided more support to help first-generation students with the financial aid process. Since my parents did not attend college, they were just as confused about FAFSA and financial aid as I was. Every year we must go through the confusing process again and every year it is equally as stressful.

Participants also requested programs that offered additional insights on career development. Ideas suggested were seminars about jobs and internships and funding for research opportunities that could help facilitate post-college opportunities. For

instance, one student shared that having their institution facilitate meaningful connections between first-generation students, and first-generation alumni, would help. Other suggestions included programs offering academic support, connections with peers, mentorship, orientation or pre-orientation programs, and studies abroad programs specific for first-generation college students. One student said that having any programs of support at their institution would make just a small difference. Another said: “I just wish I had more guidance and help [at my institution]. I feel defeated.” Overall, themes of funding opportunities, opportunities for internships/jobs, and interacting opportunities between first-generation alumni were deemed prominent.

Faculty and Staff Support

The second theme focuses on how first-generation college students have received support from faculty or staff. It appears that first-generation college students largely have developed close, personal relationships with faculty or staff; specifically, 79% ($n = 515$) of students agreed that at least one faculty/staff member had increased their ability to be successful (see Table 7).

Table 7

Impact of Faculty/Staff Relationships on Student Success

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Median	Disagree	Agree
I have developed a close, personal relationship with at least one faculty or staff member that has increased my ability to be successful.	4.11	.88	4	21%	79%

Note. $n = 515$. Scores of 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 2 (Disagree) were combined into the “Disagree” category and scores of 3 (Agree) and 4 (Strongly Agree) were combined into the “Agree” category.

In addition to the Likert-type scale responses, student participants were asked to further discuss their experiences with faculty and staff. The qualitative data in response to the question: “*Of your interactions with faculty or staff, which, if any, have been the most meaningful to your success (at their institution)?*” indicate many findings for consideration. Further, participants were asked to describe the person’s role or title at their institution. Upon examining open-ended responses ($n = 416$), 58% of respondents noted meaningful interactions with a member of their institution’s faculty, and 42% noted meaningful interactions with a member of their institution’s staff.

The data provide many examples of how faculty and staff have had a direct impact on the persistence of first-generation college students in obtaining their 4-year college degree. Participants consistently noted how both faculty and staff demonstrated a personal interest in their experiences and their lives, and have offered helpful support, advice, and navigation to the academic and social rigors of college. Chapter 5 elucidates the implications of these findings for first-generation students. Participants spoke of meaningful connections, many of which were outside of the classroom setting. They also reflected upon these experiences with genuine excitement and offered appreciation for the opportunity to reflect upon the role faculty and staff had played in their successful persistence. Several themes emerged offering details as to how faculty and staff are aiding in students’ success. Participant data, when analyzed, revealed the following subjects for discussion: *Going Above and Beyond; Academic Support; Sense of Belonging, Validation and Persistence; and Additional Responses of Interest.*

Going Above and Beyond

Of the many themes from open-ended responses, 48 participants (12%) reported numerous faculty and staff going *above and beyond* professional and personal responsibilities to ensure student success throughout the college experience. Additionally, participants described the emergence of impactful relationships and notable common personal characteristics that these college professionals embraced. Examples of frequent descriptors included higher education faculty and staff “always being there,” being “willing to help,” being “kind-hearted,” serving as a mentor, and even showing care for their own well-being, both academic and personal. Moreover, meaningful relationships were formed due to doors being “always open” should an academic or personal difficulty arise.

Next, experiences where faculty and staff invested personal time to show support for a participant were meaningful and impactful to first-generation students. One participant described how her Dean invites them to go on frequent walks around campus, and “values my opinions” when I share them. Others describe faculty or staff that have invited them to share in meals, such as an example of another participant at a different institution: “She provided lots of support for me and my peers and invited us over to eat from time to time.” Adds a participant from a different institution:

I have multiple faculty or staff members I developed a closer relationship with, from deans to program directors. Most of our interactions are me coming to them for guidance with issues that I'm facing, but I have been to dinners with them and gotten lots of help with my living situation and all.

Students at other institutions confirmed these experiences of receiving support where faculty or staff, either early in their experience or beyond, made efforts to connect with the participant, seemingly going *above and beyond* to ensure success. A participant at one institution said that her freshman advisor left no stone unturned in helping with things despite not being very familiar with them, thus offering immense moral support. Adds another participant from a different private institution who draws emphasis to the personal connection they experienced:

My scholarship advisor has treated me more like a peer or her own child; providing support as a student but also caring for me on a more personal level, which has helped me navigate my challenges at the university outside of academics.

Finally, another participant from a different private institution shared an experience with similar themes:

One of the most meaningful interactions I have had was with my chemistry professor who I had my first semester for General Chemistry 1. She emailed me at the end of the semester saying how she knows how hard I worked and she saw me improve greatly over the course of the semester, even though I was not particularly proud of my grade in the course.

In summary, faculty/staff going *above and beyond* explained the impactful nature of all throughout their college experience. This often-included faculty/staff taking it upon themselves to invest personal time or create personal relationships, thus adding greater meaning to the college experience. In this context, the willingness on the part of faculty to offer proactive help despite not being familiar with the nuances of the first-

generation students made them feel comforted, valued, and optimistic about their future.

Academic Support

Participant data acknowledged faculty/staff assistance helping student academic success. Countless participants offered reflections on how an individual at their private institution had offered advice, shared information or a form of encouragement, or simply helped the participant navigate the unfamiliar academic territory of their higher education institution. One participant spoke of a professor offering them encouragement on their performance in class, and how that motivated them to continue to seek success. Another participant said the following about receiving academic support from their professors at their institution:

[I value most] the interactions with my professors that allow for banter during class and for them to intertwine their personalities with their teaching styles. I have succeeded the most when I establish a certain level of comfort with my professor, where they feel comfortable breaking from the rigid guidelines of teaching, and have a healthy and productive conversation.

One participant noted how their academic advisor, who had also been their professor multiple times, has had “a direct hand in me being able to complete a double major in my four years at [my institution].” Another participant pointed out that the advisor “held me accountable, and pushed me to believe in myself when I had so much doubt in myself.” Similarly, some respondents explained how a staff member ensured that they had access to all the resources they need to grow both academically and professionally. In this context, one respondent said:

The third person I would like to mention is my academic advisor [the one for my major]. Despite the bumps I've encountered [and anything else after] they were always encouraging me to stay motivated and follow my passions. There was a point through my academic career when I knew I didn't want to study Mechanical Engineering. Instead of thinking about Mechanical Engineering as "dreadful," viewing Mechanical Engineering as the key to my door of passion-Biomedical Engineering.

Other participants made similar observations about how a faculty member helped them make better choices in terms of college majors. Many participants spoke of the impact faculty and staff had on their career and professional development, including offering research opportunities, advice for pursuing graduate school, and general encouragement and clarity regarding the college academic experience and future professional opportunities. As an example, one participant spoke of being a Teaching Assistant, and in this role of "speaking to the professor regarding matters like grading and scheduling," they grew closer to the professor, so much so that "he gave me some career advice that I am really grateful for." Others noted how professors "helped open my eyes to a world of possibilities, and inspired me to start setting up for my future," while another helped simply with career and navigation of the future:

Finally, many respondents spoke of how the deep impact that research, and conducting research with faculty and professors, has impacted their academic experience. Many shared how research, both the learning process and the connection through learning, held deep meaning and connection for the student. Students suggested that research experiences with faculty opened new opportunities, fostered

additional academic connections between the student and faculty at their institution, and gave them newfound empowerment, confidence, and resources, to learn. Through this connection through collaborative research, students shared how much it motivated them to do better and succeed.

My research professor who I met my first year has been truly instrumental to my success at [institution]. Not only did he open me to so many opportunities but he believed in me, he connected me with others, and he gave me resources to turn to. Seeing and meeting someone so committed to my success was something so motivational for me.

Thus, students value the learning spaces created through the research experience and the lasting impact that it offers each as a part of their college experience. More specifically, the confidence expressed by faculty members within these first-generation students, the insights shared about college major choices and future options, and the willingness to share resources and ideas to solve key problems were found to be invaluable.

Sense of Belonging, Validation, and Persistence

The qualitative data in response to the question: “*Of your interactions with faculty or staff, which, if any, have been the most meaningful to your success (at their institution)?*” offer additional findings for consideration. Upon examining open-ended responses ($n = 416$), 52% of respondents noted the connection between faculty/staff and positive sense of belonging; 10% noted connections to their own validation; and 8% noted a direct connection to their own persistence efforts. The following sections will further explore each subject in detail.

Sense of Belonging. Several students discussed faculty/staff interactions and the accompanying impact on their positive sense of belonging at their institution. One participant said that interacting with their School of Engineering's Head of Equity and Inclusion "did a lot for making me feel like I belonged and it made me feel wanted at my university." Another participant at a different institution shared a similar experience with a Diversity and Inclusion staff member. A different participant at another institution noted that two first-generation staff members made them feel welcome and as if they belonged within the first-generation community and, importantly, at the institution:

I have been working with them since I started at [institution]. The program is huge. One thing that impacted me the most and showed that I matter on campus is the fact that they know everyone they meet. They greet you by name, and I didn't think they would remember me from 2 weeks ago. They make the effort to get to know you and remember you. They even taught that later to us [in the Program's leadership training for upperclassmen].

Similarly, one participant at a different private institution noted the importance of the institution's Director of TRIO/SSS:

My advisor [Director of SSS] has always created a strong relationship with his students. He has created a space in his office to allow us to vent or cry and helped me through very tough mental health struggles. He also recognizes how many of his students suffer from inter-generational trauma, and tried his best to support us all individually.

A participant at a different institution shared a similar experience about the Director of their institution's first-generation program:

The director of the first-generation program [at my school] is also a learning assistant coach. My interactions with him have been meaningful because it makes me feel that there's at least one person on campus who truly believes I am special and have what it takes to succeed. He always listens to me and pushes me to be better and try out new things. His presence certainly makes me feel less lonely at times.

Another participant at a different institution shared how much they "loved their first-year advisor," namely because she "listened and offered support when needed. She was amazing, and really made me feel *seen*." A first-generation music student at a different institution spoke of their connection with their music professor who has played an important role in helping him navigate school, make friends, and talk about life outside the classroom. A participant attending a different institution had a similar experience, also with their music professor:

My saxophone/Jazz Dept. Head/advisor, has been an amazing help to me. Not only does he increase my playing ability, but he also makes my day-to-day confidence grow and overall personality develop stronger. He's helped me every year decide what I want to do and where I want to go with life.

Participants who are first-generation student-athletes spoke of the impact that athletic department coaches and staff had on their own success. One participant shared that their coaches "have been an important part of their success, pushing them to be the best of their ability in both their sport and the classroom." Another student added:

“My [assistant coach] helps me perfect my skills, but also cares about the whole person and being there for all her athletes.” Finally, a student-athlete spoke of the impact that the athletic department’s academic staff had on them feeling as if they belong on their campus by listening to his concerns, offering support, and making him feel safe:

Validation. In addition to faculty and staff making participants feel that they belong, respondents also shared how professionals validated them as individuals. One participant spoke of her experience with her Academic Success Coach:

The person who's helped me the most was once an academic success coach. She was always bubbly and ready to help. I went to her whenever I needed advice and she always gave me valid input. Her thoughts weren't just subjective. She got to the point and she also valued how I felt about the topic.

A different participant from another institution spoke of their Academic Advisor that used to be their professor, and how she “played a big role in where I am heading to in life.” They added that the Academic Advisor “listened to my story and seemed to care deeply about me and what I want to do in life.”

Others spoke of the connection between feeling validated and their own motivation to succeed. Data showed that professors often validate student experiences, are “relatable and give support,” but also “push me [the student] to do well,” and thus “motivated me to reach success.” Echoes another participant about their experience at a different institution:

I've had a personal relationship with my advisors that increased my ability to be successful. My education and history advisors have always been the most

candid about their thoughts, as well as validating my struggles and fears about college, while also knowing when to offer me advice, and when to listen to me.

Persistence. Other participants noted the importance of faculty and staff, and their direct impact on participants' own persistence and earning a 4-year college degree. Consistent themes within the data included meaningful guidance and assistance, confidence and belief in participant abilities, and simply forging positive student/faculty/staff connections throughout the college experience. For example, one participant said that her "Korean professor's presence in my undergraduate career has been impactful to my commitment to [the institution]" and, importantly, gave her "the confidence to carry on." Another spoke of a counselor at their institution's Health and Counseling Centers, sharing that "because of lack of support and mental health issues, I was very close to having to drop out." They added that having these bi-monthly meetings "allowed us to get to know each other" and to remain in school, thus underscoring the importance of a support system that helps students persist with the schools.

One participant spoke of how an advisor got them connected to a scholarship program that made it possible for the student to continue the program:

I have a contact in [my institution's] Financial Aid Office, who has been an amazing support for all things financial aid-related as well as general support. She is part of my [institution's] first-generation network, meaning she also identifies as a first-generation student and joined the group specifically to help first-gen's on campus! She truly has altered the course of my college experience, for the better.

Two students at different institutions had meaningful experiences with staff within Accessible Education Services (AES) that impacted their own successful persistence. The first student noted their Academic Coach within AES, and how “he helped me with processing my medical leave and financial aid appeal.” The participant added that “I wouldn’t have succeeded as a student while the COVID-19 pandemic was at its peak without his guidance.” The second student spoke highly about the advisor contacted via the Disability Services Office who provided professional, personal, and psychological support, which was especially critical during the pandemic. The respondent said: “My advisor always believed in me and never told me I couldn't do things. Without her guidance and advocacy, I doubt I would be graduating.”

Finally, one participant shares a reflection about a faculty member at her institution that not only aided in their successful persistence but also offered hope and stability during one of the “darkest times in their life.”

[Professor’ name] was my Legal Studies professor during my freshman year...I was going through extreme family emergencies in addition to my disorienting high school to college transition, and as a Legal Studies in Business major—I was more than grateful to escape my business prerequisites and actually have a law class to pour all of my stress and attention into. [Professor] genuinely guided me not only down the right path toward law school and eased all my worries in that department...but he also became a trusted advisor of my personal strife and genuinely saved my life during probably the darkest time in

my entire life...simply by being there for me to ask for advice from him. He didn't fix my problems, but he helped me figure out a way to myself.

Summing up, first-generation college students acknowledged the support provided by faculty and staff. This included ensuring a sense of belonging, sharing helpful resources, validating students as individuals, motivating them to persist till the completion of their 4-year degrees, going above and beyond to make the students feeling comfortable within campuses, and taking proactive steps to help them attain their academic goals, among others.

Academic Support Resources

The third theme focuses on how first-generation college students utilize and experience academic support resources. It appears that first-generation college students largely felt that academic support resources enhanced their success; 96% of students ($n = 537$) agreed that they have access to academic support resources if needed; 78% of students ($n = 514$) concurred that academic resources have helped support their persistence; while, interestingly, 67% of students ($n = 532$) agreed that they regularly access available academic support resources (see Table 8).

Table 8*First-Generation Experiences of Academic Support Resources*

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Median	Disagree	Agree
I have access to academic support resources if I need them.	3.38	.58	3	4%	96%
I regularly access academic resources that are available to me.	2.78	.78	3	33%	67%
Academic resources have helped support my persistence to earn a 4-year college degree.	2.99	.80	3	22%	78%

Note. $n = 537$ for Item #1; $n = 532$ for Item #2; $n = 514$ for Item #3. Scores of 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 2 (Disagree) were combined into the “Disagree” category and scores of 3 (Agree) and 4 (Strongly Agree) were combined into the “Agree” category

In addition, student participants were asked to further discuss their experiences with academic support resources. Specifically, participants were asked the following prompt: “*What student support resources have had the biggest impact on your academic success as a first-generation student at your institution?*” Upon examining open-ended responses ($n = 435$) common items emerged that will be discussed further: *financial aid; tutoring; general academic support; direct first-generation student support; and additional academic support resources.*

Financial Aid

According to survey respondents, financial aid and scholarships, as well as staff specialists with institutional knowledge of the financial aid process, are key components of successful student persistence. As noted in the previous chapter, the cost of attending a private college or university is often greater than the cost of public institutions, and students often rely on financial aid to offset costs to attend college.

Due to lack of public funding, most private institutions rely heavily on tuition dollars to operate, and tuition is often greater at private institutions. Examining open-ended responses ($n = 435$), 36% noted the substantial impact of financial aid in supporting their academic success. Many respondents shared that receiving financial aid from their private institution had made the “biggest impact on their academic experience,” with several respondents offering gratitude and deep humility for the opportunity financial aid had offered to them to attend their college or university. Having this financial support from their university has lessened worries and decreased stress, allowing many students to put more focus and energy into their academic experience. A respondent shared: “Financial aid has been the biggest impact as a first-generation student. Financial aid from the college gave me the avenue to pursue a life-long goal of mine, and to be able to have that support is really life-changing.” Added a student from a different university.

Financial aid is one of the only reasons I can be here, otherwise, I would not be able to afford to attend such a prestigious college, especially with the degree that I anticipate earning. There are not many scholarships offered for people pursuing degrees in anthropology or art history.

Along with acknowledging the financial aid that had been offered to support their academic journey, many respondents also noted the importance of the Financial Aid Office on their respective campuses. For countless students, the Financial Aid Office, and its professional staff, were acknowledged as having deeply impacted their academic experience. As students explained, “the Financial Aid Office team has had the biggest impact on my time at [institution]. Whenever I need financial help, they

always find ways to support me.” One student added: “The Financial Aid Office, with a specific person who works with first-generation/low-income students, has definitely helped,” namely to help explain and unlock the confusion regarding financial aid and financial aid packages for both students and families alike. As another student at a different institution explained:

The Financial Aid Office has really helped me. My parents are busy, and therefore kind of write me off so I must figure a lot of stuff out on my own.

Dealing with their separation and then divorce and all the paper work that goes with that was hard. They [the staff] made it easy and laid out exactly what it was that I had to submit to them.

Along with the acknowledgment of the Financial Aid Office and its team, students noted some innovative ways that their current institutions are supporting them financially. As an example, students at one institution expressed thanks for “\$100 gift cards” from a “student aid society” designed by the institution to help with offsetting expenses for textbooks. Another student from the same institution expressed gratitude for the student aid society’s ability to give first-generation students emergency grants, Amazon gift cards for textbooks, and the society’s clothes closet for free clothes for those in need. The student shared that this financial resource “has been so important to my friends and I; we are very grateful.” In summary, from data received from respondents, many participants point toward financial aid, and those staff supporting these efforts, as being impactful throughout their college experience. They spoke highly about the role of the academic support resources such as the Financial Aid Office within their campuses.

Tutoring

In addition to articulating the importance of financial aid and assistance, examination of open-ended responses ($n = 435$), 29% noted the great impact of subject-matter academic tutoring in supporting their own academic success. Students suggested that these interactions, namely with trained peers in specific subject matters, had helped them grow and be successful as first-generation college students. “The Tutoring Center,” offered a student, “has helped me the most. They go through the course material and understand concepts in a different way.” Many students appreciated the variety of tutors available, and their accessibility when needed. One respondent said: “The program with the biggest impact on my academic success has been the network of tutoring available. I am able to access a tutor for any subject, access a speaking tutor, and access a writing tutor whenever I need to.” The peer and communal nature in which learning occurred for students was also a point of emphasis. Students expressed satisfaction in learning in this fashion.

A student noted:

I really enjoy the group tutoring sessions at my college. They are available for lower-level classes and have given me a safe space to talk to other students about the class material without being in a class with both a professor and other students who find the material easy.

Finally, tutoring had a greater effect for some as it boosted their academic confidence and belief that they could be successful, as evidenced by this quote from a student.

Tutoring has been the most helpful. I did not take advantage of this in the beginning because I did not realize its importance. I utilize tutoring on a daily [basis] now and appreciate the difference I saw in my learning. It also helped me boost my confidence.

Thus, it seems that tutoring has impacted many of the respondents in a meaningful way.

General Academic Support

While tutoring was observed for its positive impact by student respondents, examination of open-ended responses ($n = 435$), 25% noted the importance of generalized academic support in supporting their own academic success. This support came in a variety of forms, depending upon the institution. Students noted the importance of Academic Advisors and Advising Offices, Academic Resource Centers, and Accessible Education Services (documented learning accommodations), among several academic offices described. As one student described:

I think the advising offices have been the most helpful to me. Since I am a first-generation student, I'm not fully aware of what college is supposed to be like and I don't have the same help as my peers. I am constantly learning to go through the process and figure out what's right and what's wrong on my own. I am happy to know there is a team available to help answer any questions I might have.

A student at a different institution noted that “academic advising” helps them “stay on track and is a good way to hold students accountable for signing up for the necessary credits.” With the current pandemic, one student suggested that their

advisor's advice was critical when it came to the transition during the semester of study. The respondents appreciated advisors for their honesty when needed, as another student appreciated their advisor's "academic support because they [the advisor] pointed out my shortfalls, and helped me continue my education in a different field." Finally, one respondent noted that his academic advisor had had the biggest impact on their academic success. "He [my advisor] has guided me in the process and has supported me with the academic decisions I have made. He helped me learn to believe in myself when I experience difficulties."

Therefore, the respondents were grateful for the support provided by Academic Advisors and Advising Offices, Academic Resource Centers, and Accessible Education Services in helping them navigate their way forward in their institutions and enabling them to achieve academic success.

Direct First-Generation Student Support

Several students commended their institutions for providing communities, programs, and single offices directly dedicated to first-generation student success. Examination of open-ended responses ($n = 435$), 23%, or nearly a third, noted the great impact of first-generation offices or programs in supporting their academic success. For example, some private colleges and universities offer federal TRIO/Student Support Services (SSS) programs, which offer a vast network of support to the students served. One student shared that the TRIO office had impacted their academic success:

The TRIO/SSS space and events working with other students of color [has been impactful]. Being with other students I can relate to makes me feel like

I'm not alone. They motivate me because we are in this together with endless help from TRIO staff.

Meanwhile, many campuses have designated staff and offices whose main purpose is to support first-generation college student success. A participant explained:

The First-Generation Office has been the biggest support of my academic career. They not only understand what it's like being a first-year student on campus, but also a first-generation student. It's a connection that runs deeper than the average one, and [the staff] being there to smooth out the extra wrinkles you have coming in really makes all the difference when completing your degree.

Many of these offices offer both general student support as well as supportive means such as free printing services, used textbooks, individualized tutoring, and resume-building workshops. One student shared: "Having tutors available at the First-Generation Office was helpful to me. This allowed me to ask questions about the homework and connect with other students who were in my same classes." Another First-Generation Office at an institution offers textbook support and books that students may need for their classes that semester. Similarly, another student noted that previous first-generation students donate books so that their first-generation peers may use them free of charge.

Many students note that having a designated first-generation office or program on campus has created a stronger impact as compared to any other resource. Finally, for one student, having a first-generation office has made the difference in them persisting to graduate instead of potentially leaving school:

[The] First-Generation Office and advisors are the main reason I could transfer into the business school of my university and avoid potentially failing out of college. The care and dedication that those [Office] staff members demonstrated to me allowed for my faith in the academic system of the university to be restored.

Put succinctly, the data appears to confirm that for those institutions that have specific first-generation programs, offices, and spaces of support, students connected with these efforts have had meaningful experiences. They commended their institutions for providing communities, programs, and single offices directly dedicated to first-generation student success and extolled the virtues of TRIO/Student Support Services (SSS) programs in this context.

Additional Academic Support Resources

In addition to the resources discussed, examining the open-ended responses ($n = 435$), 30% discussed a variety of other academic support resources as being vital to their academic success. A good portion of students complemented their faculty for the role each played in helping to support their academic persistence. A student at a different institution singled out their Assistant Dean in their College of Engineering.

The Assistant Dean had a major impact on my academic success. She helped me find resources to get more financial support, as I am paying for college all on my own. Because of her, I can focus on my academics and worry less about my finances.

Students also appreciated those faculty that themselves were first-generation graduates, and spoke to them about their own college experiences. A different student

noted that “just talking to first-generation faculty who host events, provide so much information, and let us know about a lot of resources has been super helpful.”

Faculty office hours, noted several, were helpful in helping students prepare for their exams and maintain their grades. In this manner, students could be supported academically and seek help outside of class when needed. Another student described their gratitude for working with a faculty member during office hours over time.

A part of it [my experience] was trying to understand the reason behind my silence in class and trying to unlearn it. Of course, being unconsciously conditioned to ‘always figuring it out on my own,’ this was difficult, and to ask for help when I needed it.

In addition to faculty, students named Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) offices, the Intercultural Center, their Career Education Center, Health and Counseling Center, Registrar’s Office, Campus Ministry, Student Activities, Centers for Community Engagement (service), as well as their own peers as being critical to their academic success as a first-generation college student.

Additional Responses

Finally, a handful of respondents noted either no use of academic support resources or reported negative experiences in using such resources. Specifically, 7% indicated that no academic support resources at their institution had supported their individual success as a first-generation college student. Common themes were due to student independence, lack of time, resources geared toward only first and second-year students, or simply using peers as a means of support. One student observed: “I haven't really used many academic resources on campus as it's difficult to do this since

I commute to school and had to learn remotely due to the pandemic.” Another student shared that while they are independent, in reflection they question whether not using resources was the best option:

Honestly, I have grown up to be completely self-reliant (detrimentally so) and have foregone any attempts at seeking academic support simply due to my hubris and forgetfulness. I wish that I didn't make such a huge mistake during my time here though, as it genuinely would have helped me through so many difficult academic situations.

Additional responses also indicated that a collection of 18 students (4%) had a negative experience when seeking academic support. This included previously mentioned offices such as Financial Aid, Tutoring, Academic Support, or the institution lacking a cohesive First-Generation Office of support.

First-Generation Community Experiences

The fourth theme focuses on first-generation students' community experiences at their respective private institutions. Although 56% reported developing a sense of community with other first-generation college students at their private institution, and 59% reported that the first-generation community had helped support their persistence in earning a 4-year college degree, 76% of participants reported that having a community of support for first-generation students at their college or university was important to them (see Table 9).

Table 9*First-Generation Community Experiences at Private Colleges and Universities*

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Median	Disagree	Agree
I have developed a sense of community with other first-generation college students.	2.57	.97	3	44%	56%
Having a community of support for first-generation students at my college or university is important to me.	3.02	.88	3	24%	76%
The first-generation community has helped support my persistence to earn a 4-year college degree.	2.65	.98	3	41%	59%

Note. $n = 510$ for Item #1; $n = 509$ for Item #2; $n = 476$ for Item #3. Scores of 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 2 (Disagree) were combined into the “Disagree” category and scores of 3 (Agree) and 4 (Strongly Agree) were combined into the “Agree” category

In addition to the Likert-type scale responses, student participants were asked to further discuss their first-generation community experiences: Specifically, participants were asked the following prompt: “*Please describe the first-generation community at your college or university. How has connecting with other first-generation students impacted your experience?*” Upon examining open-ended responses ($n = 390$), common items emerged that will be discussed further: *positive first-generation community and peer experiences; mixed experiences with first-generation peers and community; and no connection with peers or the first-generation community.*

Positive First-Generation Community and Peer Experiences

Many respondents reported having positive experiences within their institution's first-generation community and with first-generation peers. However, just as each first-generation college student exhibited unique qualities, each first-generation community, and the experience of connecting with first-generation peers, is unique to each institution and to the student's experience at their college or university.

Upon examining open-ended responses ($n = 390$), 55% of participants noted the positive impact of their first-generation community experience or having positive connections with first-generation peers. Students spoke openly in their responses about the overwhelming impact of their institution's first-generation student community of support. Numerous individuals noted how many of their closest friendships, and peer relationships, had been formed in these communities of support. Participants also noted how these communities made them feel like they belonged at their institution, and that they were not alone in their experience navigating college. Others noted the importance of connecting with peers from "common backgrounds" that were going through "similar struggles" unique to being a first-generation college student.

As an example, one participant shared that their first-generation community has "brought me my closest friends," and their "most deep/meaningful relationships compared to others which have been very superficial." One student poignantly shared about their experience of living in a first-generation community their first year at a different institution:

In my first year, I chose to live in a first-generation community. This allowed me to connect with other people with similar experiences. This program helped

me be comfortable asking questions that I otherwise was worried about. This year [my third year] I am a mentor in our First-Gen Student Mentorship program. I am also a member of the First-Generation Student Association.

In addition to cultivating meaningful friendships via their first-generation community, many respondents spoke of the “comfort” of having a first-generation community of support.

It is comforting to connect with other first-generation students who are as lost in college as you are. There are questions I am too afraid to ask for fear of looking stupid. Sometimes I don't even know where to start looking, or that an opportunity exists until I am able to talk to the first-generation community.

Another participant at a different institution had a similar experience within their first-generation community:

Having my first-generation student mentor and first-year group, really allowed me to feel comfortable at my school and gave me the confidence to get involved in school. It really impacted me in helping me seize the moment early, and do everything that I have wanted to accomplish such as start a club, get internships, and get involved with student government.

Additional respondents noted in an interesting way how the first-generation community made them more comfortable in the academic setting, offering further evidence of the connection between positive first-generation community experiences and academic success. Respondents discussed how their first-generation community experiences impacted the way they feel in classes, remain confident, and be reassured that they are not alone in their journey. These strong bonds that students suggest,

partly attributed to their first-generation community, appear to transcend beyond the social sphere. In fact, one student went on to add how establishing meaningful friendships allowed them to focus better within the classroom.

In addition to students reporting increased comfort due to first-generation community experiences, several participants expressed how welcoming the community made them feel. One participant said how the first-generation community at their institution “is inclusive and serves as a great resource for those who want it. [Students] are very open and welcome students with open arms.” Another participant had a similar experience at their own institution:

There's a connection to working with the first-generation community that can't be matched by much else. It's different than your room or dorm friends, people you share classes with, or even the same major. It's made me feel welcomed in places I never thought I would find faces in crowds I might have never been in, and even form connections down the line I never thought I would have.

Different respondents shared how the first-generation community at their own institution lessened their sense of feeling like “an imposter.” They found the community to be a safe space where they could reach out with questions without feeling bullied, which helped ameliorate their imposter syndrome. One respondent said:

It [my first-generation community] made me get rid of the imposter syndrome I had at the beginning. When I couldn't relate to my roommate or hall mates or classmates, it was extremely isolating during the first few months of my freshman year. Meeting other first-generation students was so validating and

made me realize my worth at this college and my identity as a first-generation student.

Another student at a different institution said: “The first-generation community is relatively small at [my institution] in comparison to the overall student body. But a lot of first-generation students also happen to be the people I am closer to and consider friends.”

Finally, several students confirmed that having a first-generation community at their institution, and a collection of supportive peers, has increased their own sense of belonging, feeling valued, and feeling validated at their institution. One respondent offered that it’s “nice to connect with other students who are in the same boat as you; it gives a sense of community and belonging because it pertains to us and only us.”

Similarly, another participant belonging to a different institution said:

Connecting with other first-generation students has impacted my experience because I do not feel left out. I was constantly struggling, but it was nice that I had a group of people that offered their support. We were all figuring it out and that made an impact because we didn't know what to do or who to ask but we had each other.

The evidence suggests that the first-generation community and the bonds formed within them are for several are of paramount importance. Moreover, these communities seemingly contribute to students perceiving being first-generation as something to be proud of. Others suggest that having a first-generation organization makes them proud, not ashamed, to be recognized as being first-generation students by their peers. For example, one student noted:

One of my closest friends at school is a first-generation student, and we can talk freely about our shared experiences, which makes me feel relieved and seen. I value this friendship a lot because I can express any frustration or gratitude related to my experiences as a first-generation student.

In summary, the data received from the respondents suggest that many point toward mentorship experiences as help them feel safe, secure, valued, validated, and hopeful about the future. Moreover, they found that they could no longer have to keep their frustrations to themselves and open up to those who could appreciate their inner turmoil and offer actionable solutions to help them maximize their time and resources at the institutions.

A Combination of Positive and Negative Experiences with First-Generation Peers and Community

In addition to the positive connections reported relating to first-generation communities and peers, some respondents shared they had experienced inconsistent, or mixed experiences, both within the greater first-generation community or with peers. Of the total number of respondents, 11% of participants noted having positive experiences at one time during their college experience, but also some challenges.

A consistent theme many students shared was that their institution's efforts were mainly focused on first-year students, and lacked any support beyond first-year students by which students could remain connected to peers and the greater community. One student suggested: "I remember [first-generation peers] that I had the program with when I was a freshman, so I talk to them occasionally, but I wish there was another program for students once they are a senior." Another participant added:

“It [the first-generation community] was impactful my first year of college but after that, the community started to die down...mainly because nobody attends events put in place.” Other participants shared they had an initial transformative experience within their first-generation community, either during pre-orientation or the first year, but the experiences and student connections did not endure.

Meanwhile, others opined that they had enjoyed participating within their institution’s first-generation community. However, one respondent shared that they “had not connected too much with (peers in) the first-generation community directly, but when meeting other students who are also first-generation, I feel a part of a bigger group than myself.” Nevertheless, a participant from a different institution shared a similar experience:

While I have enjoyed interacting with my first-generation community, I would not say that I have developed a deep connection with members of the group outside of club activities. However, interacting with the first-generation community during these events has improved my outlook on my academic success and given me a space to discuss the first-generation experience. I don't think I'm integrated into the first-generation community at all.

Finally, while a different participant shared a lack of connection with members of their first-generation community, the community interactions did have a positive impact on their academic success and experience:

While I have enjoyed interacting with my first-gen community, I would not say that I have developed a deep connection with members of the group outside of club activities. However, interacting with the first-gen community during these

events has improved my outlook on my academic success and given me a space to discuss the first-gen experience.

In short, some data received from participants confirmed that not all participants have had positive experiences regarding interactions within their first-generation community. Some opined that they were unable to effortlessly integrate into the first-generation community despite conceding that events facilitating pertinent interactions did enhance their outlook on academic success and allowed them to explicate their first-generation experiences.

No Connection with Peers or the First-Generation Community

Finally, some respondents shared they had experienced no connection with peers, or within their community of first-generation peers. Examining open-ended responses ($n = 390$), 22% noted having no connection with either peers or a community during their college experience. Many shared that they had found meaningful connections within other campus communities, the first-generation community at their institution was “hidden, small, unclear, inaccessible, or not marketed well;” and some cited small attendance numbers at events that were facilitated by their university. They identified communication barriers as a major impediment hindering first-generation peer connections. One student said:

I hear about the organization my university has about a couple of times here and there, but I don't really get any direct contact from them in person. This may be partially my fault since they usually reach out to first-generation students through email newsletters, but I don't necessarily go through all of them.

Another student added:

They [the first-generation program/community] only really reached out to me once freshman year...and being a first-generation student I really didn't understand who they were and what they were...so I didn't try to join them but I wish they would have contacted me again!

The biggest barrier that a different group of respondents shared for their lack of connection with first-generation peers was simply not knowing which of their peers identified as first-generation. Students noted that their institution(s) had not made this clear, or even that they themselves did not realize that they were first-generation until midway through their college experience. Others claimed that they were not aware of any first-generation community existing on their campus, that they were busy with other tasks, or that they simply did not see the benefit of connecting with first-generation peers or within a community of first-generation peers.

Finally, a small percentage (4%) of all open-ended respondents ($n = 390$) noted having negative experiences, either with first-generation peers or with their institution's first-generation community. Common themes for negative experiences were not feeling welcome or feeling alienated, lack of follow-up with communication, lack of engagement beyond the first year of study, and not feeling a sense of connection based upon their first-generation student status.

Overall Student Experiences at Institution

The fifth theme focuses on generation community experiences at their respective private institutions. It appears that first-generation college students largely have had positive experiences at their private college and universities; this is

evidenced by the fact that 79% agreed they felt they belonged at their institution; 79% of students agreed that they felt a sense of community at their institution; 73% of students agreed that they felt valued at their institution; 70% of students agreed that they mattered as an individual at their institution; 73% of students agreed that being a first-generation student gives them unique strengths; and 91% of students agreed that they had friends at their college or university (see Table 10).

Table 10

Overall First-Generation Student Experiences at Private Institutions

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Median	Disagree	Agree
I feel like I belong at my college or university.	3.00	.75	3	21%	79%
I feel a sense of community at my college or university.	3.00	.78	3	21%	79%
I feel valued at my college or university.	2.86	.79	3	27%	73%
I feel that I matter as an individual at my college or university.	2.82	.82	3	30%	70%
Being a first-generation student gives me unique strengths compared to my non-first-generation peers.	3.02	.96	3	27%	73%
I feel I have friends at my college or university.	3.35	.73	3	9%	91%

Note. $n = 534$ for Item #1; $n = 534$ for Item #2; $n = 528$ for Item #3; $n = 531$ for Item #4; $n = 528$ for Item #5; $n = 539$ for Item #6. Scores of 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 2 (Disagree) were combined into the “Disagree” category and scores of 3 (Agree) and 4 (Strongly Agree) were combined into the “Agree” category

Table 11 displays the Spearman rho correlation coefficients for the six screening tools used for this research survey with first-generation college students.

Table 11

Correlation Coefficients for Overall First-Generation Student Experiences at Private

Institutions

Survey Items	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. I feel like I belong at my college or university	-				
2. I feel a sense of community at my college or university.	0.81*	-			
3. I feel valued at my college or university.	0.71*	0.68*	-		
4. I feel that I matter as an individual at my college or university.	0.69*	0.67*	0.89*	-	
5. Being a first-generation student gives me unique strengths compared to my non-first-generation peers.	-.060	.072	.040	0.14*	-
6. I feel I have friends at my college or university.	0.17*	0.19	-0.11	-0.12	0.57*

Note. Sample sizes ranged from $n = 528$ to $n = 539$; $*p < .01$

In addition to the Likert-type scale responses, student participants were asked to further discuss their overall college or university experiences. Specifically, participants were asked the following prompt: “*How, if at all, has your college or university increased your sense of belonging at your institution? Has this impacted your progress toward a 4-year degree?*” Upon examining open-ended responses ($n = 359$), common items emerged that will be discussed further: *Positive Institutional Impact on Student Sense of Belonging; Positive Impact of People on Student Sense of Belonging; and Students Not Currently Experiencing a Sense of Belonging.*

Positive Institutional Impact on Student Sense of Belonging

Participants were asked to contemplate whether this belonging had impacted their degree of persistence. Of the open-ended respondents ($n = 359$), 71% noted an overall positive sense of belonging. Further, participants suggested this positive sense

of belonging was due to efforts directly facilitated by the institution, as well as efforts related to relationships and connections with people.

Upon further examination of all open-ended respondents ($n = 359$) to the prompt, 37% suggested that their increased sense of belonging was due to efforts directly associated with their college or university. Students spoke openly in their responses about their institutions offering supportive academic and social communities. One participant noted that: “(their institution) makes it a point to make you a part of the family...it (the institution) has kept me pushing for a degree.” A participant at a different institution stated that “(my institution) encourages student involvement, and tries to give us events that make students mingle with others. Although I have not found a friend group I really fit into, it helps to be in communities with like-minded students.”

Numerous respondents noted the positive impact of clubs, activities, and events available to them, and, specifically, the positive efforts by their institutions to offer these ways to connect with peers. For example, one participant shared: “I felt like I belonged at my University once I joined student organizations where I made a lot of friends. This helped me balance my academic and social life, which helped me avoid burn-out in pursuing my degree.” Another student at a different institution shared that “there are so many opportunities to get involved at [my institution]; having the community that I have built through different clubs and events has made the pressures of my academics more manageable.”

Another student shared that their own sense of belonging and community came directly from clubs and activities facilitated by their institution:

The number of clubs and activities there really allows us to have a sense of community and belonging. I think that it has impacted my progress in a positive manner; I would not be doing as well if I were unhappy and felt as if I didn't belong here.

One student at a different institution noted both the academic, as well as personal, the importance of being involved with clubs and activities on their campus:

[The institution] offers many opportunities to be involved on campus. I was always worried about these opportunities because I was worried people would judge what I think. I have realized this is not true. I have begun to participate in many activities that the school offers, and I am building connections, feeling more involved, and welcome. I feel like I belong here and matter here. These programs have helped me switch majors and still stay on track.

In addition to participants noting the importance of clubs, activities, and events to their own belonging, additional respondents discussed the impact of their institution's first-generation programs and communities on their own sense of belonging and successful persistence. As an example, students reported an "increased sense of belonging" due to their first-generation program, which "aids in my academic progress." Another student noted how the first-generation program at their institution helped with both their own transition, connection with others, and sense of belonging:

When I first entered the university, most of my peers had a sense of what they were going into. But since none of my parents went to college, I was venturing into the unknown. With support from the first-generation group on campus, I slowly realized many students like me were going through the same situation,

and I made some very good friends there who have supported me in my progress toward a 4-year degree.

Another student shared that due to the first-generation program at their institution “I saw who was first-generation...and we stuck together to figure things out. [The community] gave me confidence that I hadn't experienced before...because of that I am staying for 5 years to complete two degrees instead of one.” A student at a different college shared that their institution “has truly emphasized the importance of first-generation students...and is ready to help whenever I may need it...this has pushed me to work harder.” Finally, another respondent from a different institution stated that “if I didn't have the first-generation community at my University I would have transferred immediately, and never felt a sense of belonging on campus.” In summary, the qualitative data indicate that many participants noted the importance of their institution as having increased their own sense of belonging, confidence, and mental wellbeing through a combination of factors such as clubs, activities, and events. More importantly, such approaches facilitated the students' progress in a positive manner.

Positive Impact of People on Student Sense of Belonging

In addition to the institution's role impacting a positive sense of belonging, participants suggested belonging was directly related to relationships and connections they had cultivated with other people on campus. Of the open-ended respondents ($n = 359$) to the prompt, 31%, or about a third, suggested that their increased sense of belonging was due to connections made with other people. These connections included peers and friends, but also faculty and staff. One student spoke of their

“degree-specific cohort,” and how this academic group had “increased their community at their institution, and impacted their ability to succeed.” Others spoke of clubs and activities, but different than before noted how the relationships forged in these environments increased their positive sense of belonging. Another respondent shared that their institution “has given me spaces and resources to find and connect to those who share similar experiences to me.” The student added: “this has allowed me to feel more grounded and rooted to the community, making me feel secure in this environment.” Another student at a different institution added:

I think the friends I've made are the most impacting on my feeling of being at home here at my school. A lot of the events that go on around campus with large gatherings of people increase my sense of comfort and pride in my school. Something about having all the [institution's] students at one place for a concert or event, all united, brings a sense of joy and community for me.

One respondent at a different institution talked about the value of having friends at a private school, where class differences were evident:

Having friends and feeling like I'm accepted help. I feel like I'm incredibly supported and I will do whatever I need to ensure I'm successful here. I call my University home because it really feels like a home. Despite it being a private school and feeling the financial differences between friends sometimes, I generally don't feel like an outlier at all.

One respondent concurred that meeting people that they could relate to made them feel as if they belonged at their institution, adding that like-minded students are making great strides in their academic and professional journeys. The result is that

they feel more secure and believe that nothing is impossible for them. Finally, one participant from a different institution offered a sentiment that was consistent with many of their peers:

Who wants to be somewhere they don't belong? Personally, if I felt that [my institution] didn't have a community, and I felt lonely, I probably wouldn't have made it this far. I probably wouldn't be a Junior at [my institution] right now if I didn't feel I belonged. The community here, and how everyone is friendly, has kept me going. When I first went to school at [my institution] the campus stood out. However, I was iffy about the students. Over time I made close friends, and begin to value my time at [my institution] thanks to the constant support I receive from others.

The qualitative data indicate that participants' connections with people increased their own sense of belonging, and in this regard, adding that validation from like-minded students is helping them take great strides in their academic and professional journeys. Equally, the role of community-building, togetherness, and pooling of resources/facilities has been important in cultivating these opinions.

Students Not Experiencing a Sense of Belonging

The examination of all open-ended responses ($n = 359$) to the prompt suggested some students (29%) do not experience a sense of belonging at their institution. Many respondents suggested that they felt a lack of belonging due to being independent, not being able to relate or connect with their peers, feeling isolated or lonely, difficulties associated with the COVID pandemic, and difficulties with their institution. Shared one student:

Sometimes, it got lonely, especially during peak COVID times. Everything was online, understandably, everything was very distanced. But it also felt very lonely and isolating in a way that was challenging. Though I feel, now, it is getting better with more events and involvement.

Students affirmed that with the COVID pandemic, it was not easy to feel a sense of community on campus, and the university did not care if the student stayed or left even during the pandemic, which exacerbated the problems for them. Another student from a different institution said:

I've struggled with my sense of belonging at my university. I'm in the fourth year of my degree, and in my first year all my closest friends transferred away, and I began the process of transferring as well. In my second year, I began to build a close-knit group of friends, but then the COVID-19 pandemic sent us all home for the remainder of the year, and what I had built up was lost. In my third year, I chose to learn remotely, so without the physical community of campus, I felt very isolated and like I did not belong to the university community.

Advice from First-Generation College Students

Also within the research survey, student participants were asked to offer advice to colleges or universities, either their own or others, that might be helpful as institutions seek to support first-generation college students. Specifically, participants were asked the following prompt: *Finally, as a first-generation student, what advice would you give to colleges and universities trying to help first-generation college students be successful in obtaining a 4-year degree?* Upon examining open-ended

responses ($n = 444$), 82% offered an open-ended response to the prompt. Of these responses ($n = 444$), 70% of the respondents offered advice directly for institutions; however, 30% of respondents interestingly offered direct advice to first-generation peers that might offer support. Both sets of data are reported.

Advice for Colleges and Universities

First and foremost, students wanted to reiterate that they value being listened to, seen, and heard, and being stakeholders when it comes to designing programs, safe spaces, and communities meant for their own success. Suggested one participant: “Listen to the students and make sure to understand what students don't know and what they need to succeed.” Added a different student:

LISTEN TO STUDENTS [caps placed by the respondent for emphasis]. We are not robots. We cannot work 24/7 and academically excel if we're under a lot of stress and pressure. Accommodations are a must for students who haven't had this rigorous college experience before.

A student at a different institution echoed similar sentiments:

Listen to them and what they need. Put an emphasis on helping the financial burdens as well as not penalizing students for economic-related issues. I think caring about their mental wellbeing is extremely important too.

Students want to thrive and do well. Another participant said that institutions can assist with this:

Give these students the opportunity to thrive by helping them feel prepared and connected. Offering events or workshops, having the staff there for supper, and

really listening to your students and their concerns is key. Take some of the fear out of the transition, and you'll see them bloom from the start.

Another student made the excellent point that asking students what is needed is important, but first-generation students also don't always know what is available. Having a list of choices, or options, might be important when institutions and students are engaged in a dialog:

I would say that asking students what they need is a good idea, but they may benefit from a list of options. I didn't even know what I needed in the beginning, so an open-ended question would only confuse me. I also think that while resources are very valuable, there should certainly be forgiveness and flexibility with attendance at events, as most first-generation students juggle a schedule that few others could even imagine with work, activities, family, and other commitments. I also think that all offices on a campus should be required to work with first-generation programs to put together guides on how to navigate their services.

In addition, students want institutions to continue to prioritize efforts to support first-generation students on their private campuses. Students want their institutions to put actions behind words and to prioritize first-generation faculty and staff. One student noted:

Prioritize the staff members that are actively supporting [and directing] the first-generation student community. A difficult thing that we have faced is the frequent turnover for staff members in the [first-generation program] we have at [institution]. Because of this turnover, a lot of first-generation students lost

people they could trust on campus. If universities cared for their first-generation students, they should put some effort into keeping the staff that works with the students directly.

This caring, however, might involve being persistent with students, creating spaces for engagement, and allowing for organic interactions for members of the community:

Force them [first-generation students] to interact with each other...Some students don't quite know how to accept and establish a sense of community, as they often don't even understand the significance of it. They can just as easily ignore everyone and every program as they go through the motions hyper-focused on their degrees...But that is no way to live, especially not for those that don't know any better, and already lack any real guidance from home. Force them to interact through housing them together and grouping them together...Be so persistent and unwavering in this mission, and I can promise you that is what will make them happy and appreciative.

Summary

In summary, the results of this study show that first-generation students at private institutions note the importance of programs that are designed for their academic success and persistence. This study suggests that programs support and promote student success in a variety of ways at diverse private institutions across the United States.

First, 95% of students agree that their college or university has supported their efforts to earn a 4-year college degree, and 92% of respondents agree that their

institution has specific supports and programs for first-generation college students. Data appears to support evidence that programs designed for the successful persistence of first-generation college students at private schools are impactful in a variety of ways, and these programs are influencing the academic and social experience of first-generation college students.

Second, faculty and staff relationships are assisting with the ability of first-generation college students to be successful at their institutions. Of those students surveyed, 79% shared that they have developed a close, personal relationship with a faculty or staff member that has increased their ability to be successful. Faculty and staff were cited for regularly going *above and beyond* their role to ensure student success, for offering critical academic support for respondents, and for enhancing student feelings of *belonging, validation, and persistence*.

Third, the data appears to support evidence that *academic support resources* at institutions are specifically enhancing student success and persistence at private institutions. Interestingly, results showed that while 96% of first-generation students have access to academic support resources, and 78% share these resources have helped support their persistence, only 66% of students regularly access academic support resources that are available to them. *Financial aid* appears to play a critical role for first-generation students attending private institutions. Additional resources that are impacting successful student persistence are *academic tutoring, generalized academic support, and direct first-generation student support*.

Fourth, this study sought to examine if first-generation community experiences have impacted the persistence of students at private institutions. The data seemingly

supports evidence that while 76% of students agree that having a first-generation community of support is important, only 59% share that a first-generation community has supported their successful persistence, and 56% of respondents share that they have developed a sense of community with first-generation peers. Data also suggested that many of the student experiences were either positive, negative, or a combination of two. Some suggested they lacked a connection with peers namely due to it being unclear who else is first-generation at their institution.

Fifth, this study explored general themes around the overall student experiences of first-generation college students at their private institutions. The data appears to show that overall, first-generation student experiences at their private institutions are positive. Of those student respondents, 91% report having friends at their institution; 79% feel a sense of community; 79% feel a sense of belonging; 73% feel valued by their college or university; and 70% feel that they matter as an individual at their college or university. Collectively, 73% feel that being a first-generation college student gives them unique strengths compared to their continuing-generation peers. Additional data support the positive institutional impact on students' sense of belonging, as well as the positive impact that people, and relationships, played in establishing students' sense of belonging at their college or university.

Finally, student respondents offered advice to both institutions, as well as first-generation college students. Students had several pieces of advice for the private institutions seeking to both serve and support them. The data appears to support that students want to be listened to and to have their voices heard. Students want institutions to invest in efforts to support first-generation college students at their

institutions, namely the individuals that lead these efforts. At the same time, students urged their first-generation peers that being a first-generation student is an asset, not a deficit. Validation of the first-generation student experience enhances the ability of the individual, and the collective group, to successfully persist. Students emphasized the need for peers, no matter how difficult, to ask for help and use the resources available to them on their campus. Students validated their peers, confirmed their importance and asked them to keep going and not give up on persisting to earn their 4-year college degree no matter how difficult. A discussion of these results, as well as further implications for future research and practice, are discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to present a summary of the findings from Chapter 4 and discuss connections to current research. This chapter presents a discussion of the research results, implications for practice and further research, limitations of the study, and a conclusion. Four key findings of this study will be used to organize the discussion. In addition, it elucidates the implications for supporting first-generation students at 34 private, 4-year colleges and universities involving a total of 541 respondents. Thereafter, chapter 5 provides recommendations for future research. In particular, the chapter included these perceptions: How do students *experience programs* that are designed for their *academic success* and *persistence*; and how, if at all, do *programs* support or promote *student success*?

This study offers an understanding of first-generation student experiences at private colleges and universities and the impact of programs designed for student success on student persistence. Each institution included in this study had earned First-gen Forward designation, which offers a standard of excellence as institutions that explicitly support first-generation college students. The Center for First-Generation Student Success-NASPA awards the recognition. Only students who attend private institutions that are a part of the First-gen Forward designation from the National Center for First-Generation Student Success-NASPA were considered for this study.

Third and fourth-year student perceptions were gathered from 34 private institutions nationally. Institutions studied were in each geographic region of the United States, were both religious and secular, and included undergraduate enrollment ranging from less than 1,000 – to almost 20,000 students. Data collection for this

study included a research survey that consisted of several qualitative, short answer/open-ended survey questions, thus allowing participants to elaborate on their previous Likert-type responses. The survey collected student perceptions based upon five themes impacting student persistence: student program participation and support; academic support resources; first-generation community experiences; and overall student experiences at the institution.

Discussion of Findings

The importance of this study can be gauged from the fact that it is the first of its kind that seeks to capture both quantitative as well as qualitative first-generation student perspectives from multiple private institutions across the United States, which has not been explored in previous studies, especially in the context of first-generation students. While prior research included multiple first-generation student perspectives at one private institution (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Havlik et al., 2020; Martinez et al., 2012), three private institutions (Adsitt, 2017), and 16 private, liberal arts institutions (Dong, 2019), this study fills a current gap of researching over 500 different first-generation student perceptions at multiple private institutions within each geographic region of the United States. This study of 541 students nationwide across 34 institutions found that in general:

- a. First-generation students participate in campus programming at high rates.
- b. Campus programs are impactful to first-generation students.
- c. Campus programs of various types create meaningful connections.
- d. Improvement is needed with program participation, program awareness, and program offerings.

Each of these key findings will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter.

Finding #1: High Participation Rates in Campus Programming

The first key finding emerging from this data was that first-generation college students participate in campus programs at high rates. A remarkable 82% of survey participants indicated that they regularly participate in this population-specific programming. Students, as a whole, are participating in a variety of ways. Specifically, 16% of respondents participated in one type of program; 17% participated in two different programs; and 49% participated in three or more different programs designed specifically to support first-generation success. The programs that participants reported engaging with most frequently were in-person/virtual social events for first-generation students (67%); peer, faculty/staff, or alumni mentorship for first-generation students (66%), and in-person/virtual informational workshops for first-generation students (55%). This finding is in line with existing literature, which indicates that successful programs that support student retention are student-focused and prioritize the needs of the student over those of the institution (Tinto, 1993). It was also important for them to attend such social events because all students, and not just first-generation students, felt a distinct sense of isolation owing to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students seem to understand that programming and events designed for their success are important. Universities also appear to be enhancing and diversifying their programmatic offerings to better serve the diversifying needs of the first-generation student population.

These findings further support literature that first-generation program participation engagement supports success (Bradley, 2019; Cole et al., 2019; Garcia, 2010; Haney, 2020; Jehangir, 2010). Findings also support previous literature that institutions have strengthened programs and services supporting student persistence, as well as specialized support for underrepresented student populations (Burkholder et al., 2013). First-generation students find value in these programs that are designed to enhance success and feel confident in their ability to enhance college persistence. This finding supports the literature that college transition and support programs (CTSP) for first-generation college students can enhance their ability to succeed. A large part of the research on first-generation college students has focused on factors before college, the ability to attend college, enrollment patterns, and financial considerations (Jehangir, 2010). A gap exists of students informing stakeholders, both those at public and private institutions, of best practices for programs, processes, and procedures to develop optimal programming to facilitate first-generation student success on college campuses nationwide.

Finding #2: Campus Programs Largely Impact First-Generation Students in a Positive Way

The second key finding that emerged from these data was that programs appear to largely impact the first-generation students they serve in a positive way. First, first-generation college students seemingly have positive experiences at their private institutions. Notably, 79% of respondents agreed that they felt that they belonged at their institution; 79% of students felt a sense of community at their institution; 73% of students felt valued at their institution; 70% of students agreed that they mattered as an

individual at their institution; 73% of students agreed that being a first-generation student gives them unique strengths; and 91% of students agreed that they had friends at their college or university.

Next, students overwhelmingly reported (95%) that their institutions are doing their part to support first-generation student persistence to graduation. According to the findings, 92% of respondents thought that their institutions offered support specifically designated for first-generation students. Analysis of participant data shows that programs designed for first-generation students are successful in that they are promoting student persistence at private institutions.

Mentorship is the most impactful program. Survey participants were asked to discuss the most impactful program in which they participated. This survey component was an open coding technique in which respondents explicitly ranked, in order, each program in which they participated. Of those respondents, 19% shared that mentorship was the most impactful program experience; it is noteworthy that this percentage of agreement was important given the myriad of campus program engagement opportunities for first-generation students. These findings are consistent with the previous findings of both Thayer (2000) and Hanover Research (2014) sharing that mentorship positively impacts student retention and persistence, and that for successful persistence of first-generation college students, mentorship must occur. As noted by one respondent, “mentorship has been most important [to me due to the frequent] 1-on-1 conversation and interactions.” Others noted this opportunity with mentorship to have intimate conversations about topics unique to the experience, and to ask questions without fear of being judged or perceived negatively.

These interactions within mentors also ascertain the importance of Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model. Yosso (2005) theorized that when considered from an asset-based framework, students possess at least one, but often multiple, forms of cultural capital. The data suggest that students report mentorship interactions experienced in their programs, specifically 1-on-1 mentorship, draws upon important attributes of cultural capital within Yosso's Model (2005): a) aspirational, meaning student hopes and dreams; b) social, meaning it is significant when others provide support, and c) navigational, the ability to maneuver institutional structures. One participant suggested: "Talking to my mentor, I could feel my growth in the things I said, and she pointed it out too. It's hard to notice these types of things by yourself." The data suggests that mentorship, coupled with the frequent trust and intimacy that occurs through these relationships is most impactful by enhancing the first-generation students' overall experience.

The importance of mentorship highlighted by participants confirms previous research of Wimberly and Noeth (2004). In their previous study, the authors suggested that despite lacking knowledge of the college-going process, first-generation college students stand to benefit more deeply from college preparation information that is offered when compared to their continuing generation peers (Wimberly & Noeth, 2004). Wimberly and Noeth (2004) suggested that many of these tips that add to first-generation student knowledge include learning the expectations of college life and what is necessary to be successful. However, the findings of this study suggest that anecdotes about the college experience, when presented from first-generation peer to peer, share a connection in the common lived experience of being first-generation.

Data suggests that this “personal connection,” that the peer has “already undergone the process of navigating the university,” having someone as a “guide through first-generation college experiences,” and “someone to look up to who has been in my shoes” appears to make mentorship for first-generation students most impactful.

Finding #3: Campus Programs of Various Types Create Meaningful Connections

The third key finding to have emerged from this data was that campus programs of various types create meaningful connections for a variety of first-generation students. Programs supporting first-generation students are impactful for many students and cultivate and enhance authentic campus connections with others. The forming of authentic relationships, including those with faculty/staff and peers, enhances first-generation student success, and their ability to persist. This will be discussed in greater detail below.

Interestingly, the programs themselves do not seem to be necessarily important to students; instead, it is the community and connections with people that first-generation programs facilitate that assume greater significance. For example, the survey used an open-coding technique where students were asked about their program experiences. Without being asked, 26% of survey respondents explicitly described important connections with people as being the most impactful result of their program participation. Students spoke about the importance of seeing “familiar faces at events,” “hearing and talking to first-generation students,” and “relating to their experience” as to not feel alone. These findings are consistent with the previous research of Johnson et al. (2007) and Museus & Maramba (2011) who found a correlation between students’ experiences within institutional support programs and the concept of

matter, as well as aspects of the institutional support programs that impact student success (Cole et al., 2019). Data from this study also support the views of Cole et al. (2019), and the claim that when students engage with peers in discussion about personal values, beliefs, and opinions, they are more likely to make connections that lead to meaningful friendships.

Faculty and staff relationships. Faculty and staff played a large role in forming authentic relationships with students. Of those survey respondents, 79% noted that they had developed a close, personal relationship with a faculty or staff member at their private institution that had enhanced their ability to be successful. Many of these relationships included faculty and staff going above and beyond their role to help the student navigate college successfully. Students reported “meaningful interactions” with faculty and staff and individuals that are “very kind, understanding, and work all hours of the day to help students like me.” Finally, they noted moments where faculty/staff sensed student “difficulties and responded compassionately.” This second finding is in line with the findings of Havlik et al. (2020), where the authors note that relationships were a key factor for students in their successful college persistence. These findings are also consistent with the findings of Tinto (1975; 1993), who noted that authentic and meaningful relationships are formed by students motivated to interact with faculty that can reaffirm the importance of the college experience. This theme reaffirms previous literature that college students need to connect and find who they perceive to be “their people,” or their community, specifically connections that are deemed genuine with peers, faculty, or staff (Irlbeck et al., 2014).

Peer to Peer Authentic Relationships. In addition to the importance of faculty/staff relationships, first-generation students tend to value programs for the information provided and the connections these programs create with others. Specifically, most survey participants reported the strong impact of building authentic relationships with peers. Many of these relationships were developed by programs designed for first-generation students, supporting the key finding that campus programs help first-generation students create connections. The findings showed that 56% of first-generation college students had developed a sense of community with their first-generation peers. Additionally, 59% of participants indicated that their first-generation community had helped support their persistence in earning a 4-year college degree. These findings suggest that peer-to-peer support enhances first-generation persistence at private institutions. Respondents share of having “tight-knit communities of first-generation peers” where they “spend time with one another,” often “live with one another,” and it appears each trust one another as peers and friends. Having this support system of peers suggests that first-generation students feel “understood,” that peers can be “alongside me if needed,” and that, importantly, students thought they were “not alone in their struggles,” could “bond with one another,” and help push one another to do well.

These findings echo themes from previous research and literature that establishing supportive peer/friend groups, and forming meaningful and authentic relationships is an important element of student success and persistence (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Havlik et al. (2020) revealed that first-generation students spoke of seeking out and forming supportive relationships, which researchers characterized as

“extroversion and viewed as a tool for survival.” For example, one participant in the study shared: “you must actively look for it [peer support] . . . you must be more outgoing” and, “I had to be extroverted to meet and network with the right people and not be afraid about going out there.” (Havlik et al., 2020, p. 132). While it appears that some survey data supports what students note as the importance of self-advocacy and this learned skill, data appears to not support the notion of supportive networks as a tool for college survival. Instead, data showed that peers enhanced the first-generation college experience via enhancing a sense of community, belonging, and mattering at their private institution.

Finding #4: Improvement is Needed with Program Participation, Program Awareness, and Program Offerings

The fourth key finding was while students appear to be participating in high numbers in programs, there is scope for further improvement in terms of program participation, program awareness, and program awareness. Thus, institutional program improvement is both needed and necessary. A portion of students (19%) opted not to participate in programs, 7% are unclear about programs, and 8% attend institutions where programs specifically targeting first-generation students do not exist. Finally, respondents point out that the financial aspect of private school attendance is an important one and warrants consideration for institutions seeking to establish, enhance, or rethink current program offerings. Considering the importance of the affordability, chapter 5 will further explain this issue.

Students’ lack of participation. Despite the number of first-generation participants who said they participated in programs, the findings show that nearly 22%

opted not to participate. Respondents offered a variety of reasons for not participating including schedule conflicts, being too busy, or not feeling the need for any additional assistance that programs might provide. Participants suggested that they “could not find the time,” that “they have a lot on their plate,” or often had competing interests with on or off-campus jobs, or family commitments. This supports the literature that non-academic responsibilities, such as work, personal, and family commitments, are common for first-generation students (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018; Petty, 2014; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Further, these findings support literature that first-generation students have less time to engage and connect with peers, campus events, and activities (Mitchell, 1997; Ricks, 2016). However, previous literature does not appear to connect lack of participation in first-generation programs directly to non-academic responsibilities. Petty (2014) noted that extracurricular activities foster college persistence, adding that it is a cause of concern if first-generation students are less motivated to become engaged on their college campuses.

Lack of program awareness. Additionally, 7% of participants were not aware of programs at their institution. Respondents stated that they wish that programs were “more noticeable on campus,” “better advertised,” and that “they were not aware that first-generation specific programs were offered” so they never joined. As data suggested, the first-generation community at their institution was “hidden, small, unclear, inaccessible, or not marketed well;” some cited small attendance numbers at events that were facilitated by their university. They identified communication barriers as a major impediment hindering event awareness and deeper connection via programs and events.

Financial aid and costs impacting student experience. Financial aid and costs associated with a private institution greatly impact the first-generation student experience. The findings suggest that finances play a major role for first-generation college students at private institutions. As per the data to have emerged from this study, the cost of higher education and availability of financial aid have a great impact on the first-generation student experience at private institutions. Examining data from open-ended responses, 36% noted the substantial impact of financial aid in supporting their academic success. Many respondents shared that receiving financial aid from their private institution was most impactful on their academic experience. While the financial aspect of attending private institutions was not directly questioned in this study, a reoccurring theme from respondents was “worrying about the expense of college,” “financial aid lessening stress,” and “stress being relieved” due to having institutional scholarships, not loans. Data provided by respondents suggested that aid directly given by institutions heavily influenced their success at private institutions. Previous research supports that while public institutions receive federal funding, private institutions must rely on student tuition and donors, and therefore are more expensive to attend (Castañeda, 2021; College Monk, 2020; Patel, 2019; Sawyer, 2021).

First-generation students are extremely grateful for the financial aid offered to them by their institutions. In many circumstances, this financial assistance has made private education possible. One respondent suggested that “financial aid, especially grant programs...have had the biggest impact on my academic success.” The same respondent added that “having my financial needs met by my institution has helped

make the playing field closer to even.” Data confirm previous research that tuition and costs associated with college are of the highest concern for first-generation college students (Kuh et. al, 2007). Due to financial gaps within the family structure and the additional means necessary to afford college, many students cannot afford college and choose to not continue (Kuh et al., 2007). This finding suggests that private colleges and universities are prioritizing financial support for first-generation college students to support their college experiences.

However, 36% of the respondents suggested that financial aid directly impacted their successful persistence, there is a great deal of anxiety reported by first-generation students regarding financing a private education. As noted before, the study appears to show increased anxiety due to the higher costs of private schools.

Compared to public institutions that often have cheaper tuition costs, first-generation students report tuition and financial concerns that appear to be as great, if not greater, than those reported by their peers attending public institutions. Respondents spoke of “the expense of a private school,” how support from the institution helps “take off the huge financial burden,” and sharing how many had “financial worries” throughout their college experience. Respondents shared that financial support often decreased strong anxieties associated with private education, allowing respondents to focus “entirely on school and academic work.” Another participant said that they believe being first-generation “often ties into being low income,” and having financial support “has altered my education, for the better, and allows me to focus on other things, like my education. First-generation college graduate and author Tara Westover, who attended Brigham Young University (BYU), a private, religious institution, also

confirmed this finding. She described the day she received a Pell Grant check while at BYU (Westover, 2022):

[It was] the day I became a student...It's the day the current of my thoughts shifted from obsessively tracking the balance of my bank account, down to the dime, to obsessively tracking my coursework...What did I enjoy doing, or thinking about? What was I good at? I started seeking out and studying books outside the required reading; I took courses that were not required, for the simple reason I was interested in them, and I had the time.

This finding might suggest that private college and university tuition and supplemental costs weigh heavily on first-generation students, namely because these costs are greater than public institutions. If private institutions wish to see their first-generation students persist, financial aid and scholarships can decrease financial anxieties, increase student focus on academics, and help each have a better opportunity to persist.

Lack of program availability. Finally, 8% of respondents shared that their institution lacks targeted first-generation student programming despite holding First-gen Forward distinction. One student shared that it “would be nice if my school offered programs specific for first-gen students...even a specific area/office space solely dedicated to first-gen students.” Students suggested that their institutions not offering programs could offer programs for all four years of study, as well as having a “mentor throughout college,” not like what was common at other schools focusing upon the first year. Further discussion and recommendations are offered for

institutions to increase program awareness in the *Implications for Practice* portion of this chapter.

Implications for Practice

The implications for practice include the need for 4-year private colleges and universities to offer first-generation student support. Many themes and findings of this study were consistent for each private institution considered. Also, it is acknowledged that recommendations offered for institutions supporting first-generation student success and persistence are not easy to facilitate. Private institutions committed to supporting first-generation students successfully must commit to the process of sustained implementation of these recommendations over time. This study offers the following recommendations to private institutions that can impact their ability to serve first-generation students successfully:

1. Design first-generation programs carefully, systematically, and comprehensively;
2. Consider implementing high impact programs that cultivate student connections with supportive campus allies;
3. Consider reinforcing asset-based approaches to first-generation students campus-wide;
4. Consider offering incentives for students to attend programs;
5. Empower campus allies to enhance student moments of community, belonging, validation, and mattering.

Each of these recommendations will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Recommendation #1: Design First-Generation Programs Carefully, Systematically, and Comprehensively

The first recommendation is for private institutions to consider designing first-generation programs to be clear and comprehensive for all. Students appear to misunderstand the importance of why programs are important for them, and the motivations to attend them. Not all first-generation programs are structured the same way, and sessions or events designed for first-generation students are not purely informational. Some events are rooted solely in serving for peer-to-peer connections and offer students moments to connect with peers. If institutions could reframe their language and marketing strategies to include both academic and social benefits of programs offered, students might see benefits in both. One respondent said that he would attend programs “but there is no real requirement, and no other first-generation students attend.” He further suggested that institutions could “make programs more appealing by making them required, so students have that extra push to seek these programs...show how they can help...and keep [us] in touch with other first-gen students.”

Additionally, private institutions offering comprehensive programs of support targeting students within each year of study must reduce their focus on supporting solely first-year, first-generation students, with retention as a motivator. It is recommended private institutions offer programs designed specifically for freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, and their needs specific to their place within the college journey. In advising private institutions, respondents asked for institutions to “be more useful to non-freshman, as we are left to figure things out on our

own...always ask for students' feedback, and [engage them] all 4 years." Private institutions need to be persistent with their engagement of first-generation students, and as one student suggested "keep talking to those first-generation students all four years and push them to succeed since it can get hard sometimes. We just need the support and encouragement from our university/college to be able to do great things and succeed."

Recommendation #2: Consider Implementing High Impact Programs that Cultivate Student Connections with Supportive Campus Allies

The second recommendation is for private institutions to consider implementing high-impact programs that cultivate student connections with supportive campus allies. Program design and its outcomes necessitate being structured, authentic, and clear to all campus stakeholders – students, faculty, staff, and administration. This responsibility commences with each institution. In contrast to a focus on the action of the student, Rendón's (1994) Theory of Validation shifts the responsibility of supporting students' transition directly with the institution itself. Much of this study's findings confirmed that first-generation college students benefit from institutions that take a proactive lead in supporting this population's success. As suggested by Rendón (1994), it is the responsibility of the institution, at the very least, to create systems, programs, or spaces of support that allow first-generation students to connect with peers in meaningful ways. Further, as institutions seek to establish a sustainable approach to their first-generation population, establishing a clear plan, with a strong foundation, is key. It is important to construct this approach while considering student perspectives and depend on national best practices designed to

support first-generation students. Recent research suggested that only 50% of all institutions have identified a first-generation “point person,” or single main point of contact on campus for students (Whitley et al., 2018). Private institutions must identify and make clear this individual, with their purpose being one of advocacy for first-generation college students on campus (Whitley et al., 2018). Further, this individual must earn trust, be a skilled relational builder, and demonstrate competence in first-generation student support. This study agrees with previous findings that this noted individual must be responsible for coordinating all first-generation efforts on campus, and must keep each private institution focused upon both first-generation advocacy, national first-generation trends and best practices, and successful persistence (Whitley et al., 2018). As one veteran administrator noted: “It is critical to have senior administrators for the institution empower folks doing first-generation work to be [involved with] larger conversations.” These discussions, like previous findings, must be deeply rooted in collaborative, authentic, cross-campus conversations that are authentic in nature.

Recommendation #3: Consider Reinforcing Asset-Based Approaches to First-Generation Students Campus Wide

The third recommendation is for institutions to consider reinforcing an asset-based approach to first-generation students campus-wide. This shift could create additional opportunities where students can receive essential validation from campus allies, create additional moments of community building on campus, and reinforce to students why they belong and matter within the college experience. Yosso (2005) suggests that first-generation students possess cultural wealth and strengths different

than their continuing generation peers. First-generation students are unfairly characterized as being deficient, lacking, or underprepared due to their status. Current first-generation students in this study confirmed this view, as 27% of respondents did not feel that they possessed unique strengths compared to their peers. Current institutions, specifically private institutions, can shift away from this deficit perspective. Instead, institutions can promote a culture that celebrates the first-generation student, promotes an asset-based approach, and encourages first-generation students to embrace their experience with a sense of pride. As suggested, institutions “can celebrate the unique strengths of first-generation students,” and encourage those that are first-generation “to use their talents to enhance the college experience” for all (Whitley et al., 2018, p. 7).

Recommendation #4: Consider Offering Incentives for Students to Attend Programs

The fourth recommendation is that private institutions should consider offering incentives for students to attend programs and events that support their persistence. One respondent suggested that institutions need to find “more incentives for students to come to events, such as a personal email to attend events or the respondent’s own idea: have advisors, during mandatory advisor meetings, mention or suggest events to first-generation students...the 1-on-1 nature of advisor meetings would make me much more likely to get involved in first-generation events and communities.”

Having a financial incentive can also act as a motivator for student participation in events. One private institution studied gives a scholarship of \$500 to its students that attend a pre-determined number of first-generation workshops during the school year. The scholarship is awarded at the beginning of the students’ next

academic year, which further incentivizes them to return to the institution (Whitley et al., 2018). The institution offers first-generation student programming for all four years of study and allows students to renew their scholarship annually if they successfully meet the attendance criteria (Whitley et al., 2018). Students from the institution suggest the model is successful. One participant from the institution notes: “Additionally, I think many would benefit from everything I have experience from the program at [the institution]. I truly think that this program is exemplary compared to what I have heard about on other campuses.”

Finally, other incentive ideas to motivate engagement and program participation could include priority registration, or even designated space of lockers for commuter students (Whitley et al., 2018). If private institutions have a first-generation-specific program or office, recommendations include a designated first-generation space to spend time, couches or desks to do homework, or even a microwave to warm food, or a food pantry for a nutritious meal (Whitley et al., 2018). Finally, one institution offered books previously used and donated by first-generation students, which could incentivize further student engagement in programs.

Recommendation #5: Empower Campus Allies to Enhance Student Moments of Community, Belonging, Validation, and Mattering

Data from this study suggests that campus allies help students create moments of validation and a sense of belonging. The findings suggest that first-generation student experiences of community, belonging, validation, and mattering enhances their ability to persist and be successful in college. Notably, the forming of authentic relationships and notions of community, belonging, validation, and mattering are

intertwined and interconnected. These two themes appear to support one another and seemingly work symbiotically.

The data from this study underscores the importance of Rendón's (1994) Theory of Validation, and its importance in the success of students, namely first-generation college students. Specifically, the key finding is that strong validation of first-generation students exists at private institutions. Rendón's research suggests that "validation is an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (p. 44). As one respondent pointed out, during their first year, they were a "complete mess, didn't know how to study, and how to balance school." They added they initially "suffered alone and didn't share their struggles" until a faculty member reached out to offer "support and validation." Data from this study confirmed much of Rendón's (1994) theory, specifically that when successful and present, validation makes students stronger, enhances their ability to learn, sense of self-worth, and increases their motivation to succeed. Data from this study further confirmed that validation is likely a prerequisite for student development (Rendón, 1994). When students are validated consistently, they are more likely to feel confident about themselves and their ability to learn (Rendón, 1994). Participants suggest that their support networks have been "beyond valuable," and "have validated my experience as a first-generation student." Importantly, data shows that students are informed how to navigate the college playing field while still making informed decisions on their own.

Private institutions must ideally value, and pay close attention to, campus allies that can help students create moments of community, belonging, validation, and

matter. Data supports that this campus support network of individuals, whether formal or informal, often makes the difference in first-generation student retention, persistence, and success.

Limitations

Mills and Gay (2019) suggest that a study's limitation is "an aspect of the study that the researcher knows may negatively affect the results or generalizability of the results but over which the researcher has no control" (p. 666). As expected, this study is not impervious to limitations, which include the established timeline of this study, the survey design, the self-reporting instrument, the biases of the researcher, and the current pandemic.

The first limitation in the study was the established timeline of the resulting data received. The original design of this study comprised a second phase, which was to include 6-10 participant semi-structured interviews. This design would have allowed for different triangulation between the current literature, survey data, and interviews. However, only survey data were considered for this study due to the unexpected large nature of the student sample size ($n = 541$). For a future project, the researcher will interview respondents that expressed interest and seek additional data for further study and analysis, allowing for this type of triangulation.

The next limitation was that only third and fourth-year students from 34 private institutions were included. Private institutions (and their students) outside of the First-gen Forward designation were not included in this study, which could be significant because other institutions may be offering critical supports or best practices that should be researched.

Another limitation was due to sampling issues when collecting data in relation to the design of the survey for this study. Participants could discontinue and “opt-out” of the survey at any time if desired. In addition, respondents could skip questions they deemed uncomfortable. As a result, not all 541 respondents answered each Likert scale question, and not all participants offered open-ended responses. Having different sample sizes for each section may have impacted the results because students could selectively determine the questions that each wanted to answer.

Another limitation was attributed to the survey design. Having a forced response for the survey design would have allowed for consistent response data. In addition, several participants did not rank their programs from most to least impactful during the first portion of the survey, potentially due to the Qualtrics survey software used, which impacted the data set. Respondents may have been unclear of this question, or may not have been aware of how to *grab and hold* each program to rank successfully. The researcher discovered this during the data analysis; it may have impacted both the research survey data’s reliability and validity, thus affecting overall results. However, several efforts were made to pilot test the survey before being released to student subjects, including peer review, faculty, and external experts on the first-generation student experience.

Another limitation of the study was that the survey was a self-reporting instrument. The findings and data resulting from the survey are meaningful only to the degree to which respondents were truthful when sharing their attitudes and beliefs on their first-generation student experiences. As is true with any self-reporting survey instrument, there is the possibility of a commonly occurring response set as

participants select the responses and offer opinions that they believe are the most socially acceptable, despite not being truthful from the participant's perspective (Mills & Gay, 2019). Having participants respond to the survey anonymously did help to offset this; however, the researcher was not able to offer participant interviews due to time constraints.

Another limitation is the potential bias of the researcher due to the researcher's familiarity with first-generation programs, specifically those at private institutions, and those programs being studied. In addition, the researcher acknowledges that some respondents would have a familiarity with their work due to their close association with one of the private institution's first-generation programs. Before and during qualitative research, the researcher needs to acknowledge their own beliefs and biases (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this study, the researcher's work with a first-generation program at a private institution, coupled with the previous knowledge of programs being considered, may have impacted how this study was designed, considered, or interpreted participant data. However, multiple steps were taken to reduce bias during the analysis process outlined previously in Chapter 3.

Finally, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, an outbreak of *coronavirus* (or COVID-19) impacted individuals throughout the world and impacted the health of countless individuals. In March 2020, many higher education institutions closed in-person operations and shifted educational experiences to virtual or online learning. This abrupt shift and consequential interruptions during the fall of 2021 when this study was conducted impacted the experiences of students, including first-generation college students. In reviewing the respondents' qualitative

responses, their experiences appeared to be similarly impacted by COVID-19. For the quantitative portions of the survey, it is unclear, to what degree, participant responses were impacted by COVID-19. However, it is suggested that COVID-19 be considered when interpreting this study's findings.

Although this study may include the above limitations, specific steps were taken to reduce the limitations, which are detailed in Chapter 3. These steps include the use of analytic memoing and a research journal to set aside researcher bias during the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Yin, 2017) the use of an external audit to verify that raw and interpreted data was accurately recorded and understood, and, a peer debriefing that included a review of the data and research process by a practitioner familiar with the research being explored (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013). These items helped to counteract all stated limitations and produce a study that was both valid and trustworthy.

Implications for Further Research

The goal of this study was to gather a greater understanding of first-generation college students. Specifically, the goal was to investigate the experiences of third and fourth-year students at private schools and determine the factors that allowed each to be successful in their persistence toward earning a 4-year college degree. Of the conclusions identified in this study, the most important include:

- a. First-generation students participate in campus programming at high rates.
- b. Campus programs are impactful to first-generation students.
- c. Campus programs of various types create meaningful connections for first-generation students

d. Improvement is needed with program participation, program awareness, and program offerings.

First, a similar study needs to be considered solely of public institutions, and possibly public, First-gen Forward institutions, both 2 and 4-year, or private institutions not having First-gen Forward distinction, to confirm or contradict this study's findings. Specifically, it will be helpful to the following question: are authentic relationships established as easily, and with the same frequency, at larger public institutions, and do they have the same impact on first-generation student persistence? Similarly, future research is needed to examine all the 34 private institutions studied as its own case study. This research could include further investigation and exploration of students within each institution, and exploring sentiments associated with students by institution. Similarly, a cohort-based study could follow a sample of first-generation students at a private (or public) institution, to understand how successful persistence is impacted by their institution's successful (or not successful) effort to support first-generation college students. Finally, future research could include the study of an individual institution, or multiple institutions, both public or private, and examine the participation rate of first-generation students in the events, programs, or support efforts offered by the institution, the impact of the relationships formed due to these programs offered by a first-generation community, and comparing first-generation student program participation to the institution's first-generation retention and graduation rates. Namely, does higher and more frequent program participation, by a cohort of first-generation students at one institution, impact the cohort's retention and

graduation rate compared to non-participating first-generation (or continuing-generation) peers?

Conclusion

Given the findings of this study, it appears that first-generation students at private institutions generally feel supported in their goal of persisting to earn a 4-year college degree. Respondents that were included in this study confirm that authentic relationships, above all else, can powerfully impact the student experience. As one respondent suggested, the person most impactful for them in college was their Sociology professor. Private institutions need to highly consider the voice, opinions, and perspectives of first-generation students themselves when seeking to design or implement successful first-generation student support. In turn, student perspective can assist with the design, or roadmap, of each institution's consideration of its first-generation community of support.

Many respondents suggested that "getting feedback from students on the services provided" is critical. This would help improve, or maintain, consistent resources and services that would be valuable for all. In addition, when asking first-generation students what they need to help their own successful persistence, give students a list of choices, and be clear of how each choice might impact them. Institutions ought to avoid using acronyms, "jargon words," or brief explanations of supports that may cause confusion when asking students what they might need. Lewis & Clark College President-elect, Dr. Robin Holmes-Sullivan (2019), noted the uniqueness of the private college or university experience. She shared: "...there's a hands-on, very responsive approach to students and their concerns [at private

institutions]. Large public universities don't have the bandwidth to offer personalized attention" that is common at private schools. "This [level of] care really does stand out." If first-generation students can have their institution "meet them where they are at," and empower everyone to be a creator and stakeholder of their first-generation community, success will occur.

Research suggests that high school graduates seeking college enrollment will increase before it peaks and that the population attending college will be much more diverse in the next 5 – 10 years (Seltzer, 2020). High school graduates are diversifying at a fast pace (Seltzer, 2020). Student groups, particularly Hispanic students and students of two or more races, are making up a growing share of high school graduating classes (Seltzer, 2020). Now is the time for colleges to make a successful commitment to supporting their first-generation students. This call comes with an informed, specific plan of action that includes buy-in by multiple campus stakeholders and partners. Institutions pledging additional scholarship dollars, while an important part of the equation, does not single-handedly solve the issue. First-generation students need to be immersed in programs that research shows successfully support them. The hope is that this study can be of use to institutions, both public and private, that are seeking to begin or refine their programs or institutional efforts to support their first-generation population. Together, it is possible to continue this push to highlight first-generation college students, note their positive assets within our college communities, and seek to offer first-generation college students continued support in the years ahead.

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Appendix A

Participant Survey

Help us learn more about first-generation student persistence and success at private colleges and universities! Those that complete the survey can enter the 3-week first-generation "September Student Sweepstakes" which is a multi-week drawing for \$25 Amazon gift card!

The purpose of this survey is to explore third and fourth-year first-generation students, and their insights on what has allowed them to be successful, towards earning a four-year college degree.

Current research suggests that different experiences have contributed to first-generation student success, including students' own validation, sense of belonging, mattering, self-efficacy, and community support are examples. Since the research suggests these factors are beneficial, I am interested in learning how programs at your institution have successfully (or not) integrated these themes, or helped with your success.

For the purposes of this study, *first-generation staff* includes any institutional employee (professors/instructors, administrators, counselors, advisors, etc.) whose job it is to support first-generation students. *First-generation peers* are other students that also identify as first-generation at your institution.

The first set of questions will ask you about your experiences at your institution, with some opportunities to expand your personal thoughts. Last, you will be asked questions about you as a student. All responses will remain confidential.

In agreeing to taking this study, I acknowledge that:

- I fit the definition of a ***first-generation college student***: neither of my parents/guardians have earned a four-year college degree.
- I am enrolled full-time and at least in my third-year (or greater) year of study at my institution
- I am at least 18 years old

- I did not transfer into my current institution, and have been enrolled at this same institution since I started college.

(check here) I acknowledge that the above information is correct, and I volunteer and give permission to participate in this survey. I understand I may opt out of taking this survey at any time.

(check here) I acknowledge that I do not meet the criteria above for this survey, or wish to opt out of taking this survey at this time.

Demographic Information:

1. I fit the definition of a first-generation college student: neither of my parents/guardians have earned a four-year college degree that I am aware of.

- I am first-generation, according to the definition above
- I am not first-generation, according to the definition above

2. Please share your current full-time enrollment status at your institution:

- I am currently in my second year or less
- I am currently in my third year
- I am currently in my fourth year or greater year

3. Please identify your current age:

- Under 18 years
- 18-20 years
- 21-25 years
- Over 25 years

4. I did not transfer into my current institution, and have been enrolled at the same institution since I started college:

- Correct, I have not transferred into my current college or university
- Incorrect, I did transfer into my current college or university

5. Please choose your current college/university of study (drop-down menu): (force response)

First, this portion of the survey will ask you about your experiences as a first-generation college student, programs you may have participated in at your college or university, and how they have impacted your success. Please choose the response that best describes your point of view.

The response options for each item in this scale are:

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Not applicable

6. My college or university has supported my efforts to earn a 4-year college degree.
7. My college or university has specific supports and programs for its first-generation college students.

Item
[8] Please consider all programs designed to support first-generation students at your institution. Please indicate which programs you have participated in (check all that apply)
TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) - federally-funded program of support.
Pre-Orientation or summer/bridge program specific to first-generation students.
Mentorship: peer, faculty, alumni, etc.
Living and Learning community. This is a residential program where students live together and participate in shared courses, special events and projects as a group.
Academic class or seminar specific to first-generation students.
Leadership or job position specific to first-generation students.

In-person or virtual social events for first-generation students.
In-person or virtual informational workshops for first-generation students.
Other #1 (not listed above) (write-in)
Other #2 (not listed above) (write-in)
Other #3 (not listed above) (write-in)

9. This question above does not apply to me because:

- My college or university does not offer any programs specific to first-generation college students.
- I have chosen not to participate in any first-generation programs offered by my college or university

--open-ended--

(if choice #1 from Q9 selected):

9a. What programs do you wish your college or university offered specific to first-generation students? Please explain why you believe these programs would be important supporting first-generation student success and persistence.

(if choice #2 from Q9 selected):

9b. Please share a bit more about your answer to the previous question. If you have not participated in first-generation programs offered by your college or university, why so? How could your college or university rethink its first-gen programs for the future to encourage better student participation?

10. (if items are checked from matrix) Of those items checked above, please rank the programs, from most supportive to least supportive, that have been most impactful in helping you to persist towards graduation (if any (Rank order question Qualtrics)

--open-ended--

11. What was it about these programs that made them the most impactful?

Next, please consider these questions about your experiences as a first-generation college student. Scaled questions will ask for your opinions, and open-ended questions will ask for additional thoughts.

Directions: Please consider the following questions about support you have received from faculty or staff at your college or university. Choose the answer that best expresses your point of view.

The response options for each item in this scale are:

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Not applicable

12. I have developed a close, personal relationship with at least one faculty or staff member that has increased my ability to be successful.

--open-ended--

13. Of your interactions with faculty or staff, which, if any, have been the most meaningful to your success? (Please make sure to describe this person's role or title)

Directions: Please consider the following questions about academic support resources at your college or university. For the following questions, *academic resources* are defined as tutoring, advising, learning assistance, library research assistance, etc. as examples. Choose the answer that best expresses your point of view.

The response options for each item in this scale are:

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Not applicable

14. I have access to academic resources if I need it.

15. I regularly access academic resources that are available to me

16. Academic resources have helped support my persistence to earn a 4-year college degree.

--open-ended--

17. What campus support resources (examples: first gen office or supports, library, financial aid, tutoring, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Office(s), academic support, etc.) have had the biggest impact on your academic success for you as a first-generation student?

Directions: Please consider the following questions about your first-generation community experiences at your college or university. For the following questions, *community experiences* are academic or social activities you have done as a direct part of your college or university experience. Choose the answer that best expresses your point of view.

The response options for each item in this scale are:

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Not applicable

18. I have developed a sense of community with other first-generation college students

19. Having a community of support for first-generation students at my college or university is important to me

20. The first-generation community has helped support my persistence to earn a 4-year college degree.

--open-ended--

21. Please describe the first-generation community at your college or university. How has connecting with other first-generation students impacted your experience?

Directions: Please consider the following questions about your overall experiences at your college or university. Choose the answer that best expresses your point of view.

The response options for each item in this scale are:

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Not applicable

22. I feel like I belong at my college or university.

23. I feel a sense of community at my college or university.

24. I feel valued at my college or university.

25. I feel like I matter as an individual at my college or university.

26. Being a first-generation college student gives me unique strengths compared to my non-first-generation peers.

27. I feel I have friends at my college or university.

--open-ended--

28. How, if at all, has your college or university increased your sense of belonging at your institution? Has this impacted your progress toward a 4-year degree?

29. Finally, as a first-generation student, what advice would you give to colleges and universities trying to help first-generation college students be successful in obtaining a 4-year degree?

Directions: Last, please answer some demographic questions so that we can learn a bit more about you!

Please identify your gender:

- a. Male/Man
- b. Female/Woman
- c. TransMale/Trans/Man
- d. TransFemale/Trans/Woman

- e. Genderqueer/Gender non-conforming
- f. Prefer not to answer
- g. Prefer to self-identify_____
- h. Other_____

Race/Ethnicity

Please identify your Race/Ethnicity. If you identify as more than one racial/ethnic identity, please select all that apply.

- a. Asian
- b. Black or African American
- c. Hispanic or Latino(a)
- d. International
- e. Multiracial
- f. Native American or Alaskan Native
- g. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- h. Other
- i. Prefer not to answer
- j. White
- k. Unknown

This research study includes an interview phase to learn more about first-generation students. If you are interested in participating in a 45 – 60-minute interview, please include your contact information below. (participant name; participant email in open-ended text box). All participants will receive a \$10 Amazon Gift Card for participating.

Yes! I would be interested in entering the first-gen **September Student Sweepstakes drawing** for three \$25 Amazon Gift Cards. Below is my first/last name, and email address.