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Rowan University

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**FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS AND THE CHALLENGES FACED
TOWARDS THEIR SENSE OF COMMUNITY AT A 4-YEAR UNIVERSITY**

by

Jorge L. Gonzalez-Palacios

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Educational Services and Leadership
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Arts in Higher Education
at
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Dedications

This accomplishment is dedicated to my Palacios-Gonzalez-Soto family. You are my inspiration to carry this torch towards our future. Siempre Pa'lante!

Acknowledgments

To my village at Rowan, I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to meet every single one of you. You truly made this experience a moment I will always remember.

To my mother, your sacrifices are the reason why I am, where I am. I owe it all to you, I love you.

To my “baby” sisters, Crystal and Melanie, may this achievement be an example that you are capable of anything you place your heart and mind to. I love you both!

To the faculty at Rowan, thank you for your help in our growth as students and professionals. With Covid-19, this path took an unexpected turn for everyone. Thank you to those who were there albeit the craziness.

To the participants who took the time to help me in this venture, as well as those that may read this along their own journey, thank you, and keep going forward regardless of the obstacles. Remember that you are never alone, you may just have to look a little harder.

Abstract

Jorge L. Gonzalez-Palacios
FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS AND THE CHALLENGES FACED TOWARDS
THEIR SENSE OF COMMUNITY AT A 4-YEAR UNIVERSITY
2021-2022
Drew Tinnin, Ed.D.
Master of Arts in Higher Education

“It takes a village to raise a child.” Such simple words, yet the power it holds behind it is something not to be overlooked. The aspect of community, especially in a college campus setting, is something all students should have the opportunity to cherish. From K-12, we slowly begin to create our very own village, filled by various individuals that pertain to one’s own experience. These individuals guide us and grant us knowledge when needed most, but as we mature, and at some point, leave this village to begin our journey into adulthood, we find ourselves having to begin anew, and this can be a challenge as a First-generation student. The purpose of the following phenomenological qualitative study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the first-year experience of First-generation students and the way their experiences shaped their sense of being a part of the community at Rowan University.

This study will focus specifically on individuals who classify as First-generation and are a student of color. It is important to place focus on these specific populations, not to in attempt to minimize the challenges faced by White First-generation students, but simply to further illustrate the obstacles a student of color, who also is First-generation, will face as they undergo their college career.

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Chapter I

Introduction

In shy of three months, young adults from various backgrounds undergo a tremendous transformation from a high school student to a college student. An exciting steppingstone for future leaders, it is also one that is followed by a shadow of responsibility that can be overwhelming and confusing as well. A brand-new environment, college can easily become something that a student regrets and decides that maybe it's not for them. Turner (1994) conducted a study that looked at the different perceptions of minority students, such as Latino and African American students, regarding the campus community at the college they were attending, labeled as predominantly White institution (PWI). Findings revealed a level of un-comfortability from these students, because they felt as though they were guests in someone else's home, and therefore felt as though they were always being watched and that they had to be on their best behavior.

College is the opportunity for students to develop themselves into spectacular leaders that will go about and create positive impacts throughout their lives, yet how can we expect this to occur when students of color feel as though they do not belong in their community to begin with? It can be said with certainty that the goal of institutions is not to lead some to failure and some to success based off their socioeconomic background or ethnicity/race, yet that is indeed the outcome for some. With further research, the issue can be made clearer, which will assist in its correction.

A First-generation student is someone, within their family, who is the first to have enrolled and completed the necessary requirements to earn a college degree (Pascarella et al., 2004). With a potential 50% income increase by obtaining a college degree (Swail, 2003), it is no shocker that First-generation student enrollment has increased by almost 73% between 1980 and 2011 (Tucker, 2014). What is shocking is that students that make up the First-generation population, such as Latino/a students, continue to obtain lower grade point averages which leads to low retention rates, and are overall less likely to graduate when compared to their White peers (Massey, 2003).

Research shows that when compared to other student groups, academically unprepared students like First-generation students have higher chances of dropping out in college, or simply take longer than the normal timely manner to finish (NCES Blog | Educational attainment differences by students' socioeconomic status, 2015). Due to financial stressors, which lead to an intense workload to keep up, First-generation students are more likely to not register as full-time students at a 4-year institution, further delaying them from graduating on time (Pascarella et al., 2004), and perform significantly lower academically (Weuffen et al., 2018).

Problem Statement

First-generation students are entering college facing obstacles such as low rankings academically and lack of financial support, which are some examples of what continue the gap between First-generation students and their peers (Atherton, 2014). When compared to their White student counterparts, First-generation Latino students, for example, continue to fall behind when it comes to graduation rates (Douglas & Attewell,

2014). Institutions are pushing to become more accessible and therefore provide more opportunities to enroll for First-generation students (Stewart & May, 2012). This, unfortunately, holds a major issue as higher numbers in access do not equate to higher degree completions.

What many do not understand is that First-generation students do not have a point of reference. First-generation students are subjected to facing countless obstacles without the ability to gain some form of advice on how to traverse the situation. This population of student is not able to gain the essential advice that other college students can obtain from their parents or family members who have gone to college. As a First-generation student, the feeling of being on a brand-new campus alone to face these academic, social, and cultural walls can be difficult to navigate, and then break down the walls or barriers present. (Stewart & May, 2012). This is where creating and strengthening a sense of community can play a vital key for preparing first-year, First-generation students for success, retention, and graduation (Orbe, 2004).

Significance of the Problem

This population of students should have the opportunity to feel as valued members of the community that they are a part of. Students hold a stronger sense of commitment to graduating once they connect with someone, or something, within their community (Kuh et al., 2006). Research shows several gaps First-generation, first-year students face, however most of this data is usually collected through quantitative effort, which leads to my studies focus on getting the students' experiences directly from them, leaving less space for unclarity on the subject of sense of community and its impact within First-generation, first-year students.

Purpose of the Study

Whether for honest or for-profit reasoning, the First-generation, first-year student has become an important variable to which institutions are marketing towards. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to gain a clearer perception of First-generation, first-year students and the way in which their experiences have shaped their sense of being a part of this community at Rowan University, and overall success. Once institutions, such as Rowan University, get students of this dynamic to enroll and step foot on campus, is the price tag getting you what you deserve, and more? Are institutions, specifically PWI's, offering their diverse student population an experience they all deserve, and if not, what can be done differently?

Assumptions and Limitations

It is critical to state that the academic year of 2021-2022 will be a particular year, as first-year students, alongside the rest of the community, are returning to an "in-person" classroom setting after facing a full year and a half of virtual learning due to the coronavirus pandemic. Although First-generation students are already prone to dealing with issues while attending college (Aspelmeier et al., 2012), we are now potentially looking at a new dimension of issues for this student population, as we return to a "normal" on-campus setting. With Covid-19 protocols in place for everyone's safety, such as mask mandates in classrooms/while inside a Rowan University building, or social distancing, there is a potentially negative impact in the ability for students to interact amongst each other and therefore create/enhance the bonds required for a community to be made/strengthened, and more.

Definition of Terms

1. ***First-Generation Student***: A student whose parent(s) have little to no post-secondary experience.
2. ***Predominantly White Institution (PWI)***: An institution of higher education in which the student population is predominantly of White/Caucasian descent.
3. ***Residential Student***: Student(s) who, at the time of this study, reside on campus and therefore do not commute to classes.
4. ***Campus Involvement***: A student's engagement outside of their academics, especially extracurricular activities such as student leader positions, organization membership and overall participation in community centered events.
5. ***Flying First (First-Generation Task Force)***: First-generation support program created at Rowan University to support academic success and sense of belonging on campus.
6. ***Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF)***: Summer bridge/pathway program that provides financial assistance, while providing academic support for low-income, First-generation students.
7. ***Dr. Harley E. Flack Student Mentoring Program***: A mentorship program at Rowan University which offers the opportunity at a personalized mentorship experience in order to achieve student goals and full potential while at Rowan University.
8. ***Rowan Thrive Well-Being***: A Rowan University model which looks at six different aspects of well-being to support and promote a campus community. The

six different aspects of well-being are Physical, Social, Emotional, Community, Purpose and Financial.

9. **Community:** The most important term of this entire study, described as a unified body of individuals.

Research Questions

The following questions will assist in guiding this research study:

1. What programs held by departments at Rowan University, such as Housing (& dining services), Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Division of Student Life, Student Government Association, etc., create and enhance a first-year, First-generation student's on-campus sense of community and welcoming?
2. What resources are accessible and known for first-year, First-generation students when in specific times of need? Need can consist of financial, professional, academic, and social.
3. What is Rowan University doing to give a sense of community to its students, but also their parents? As First-generations students, this is also a brand-new experience for the parents.

Outline of this Study

Chapter I serves as the introduction to this research on First-generation students.

Chapter II provides the reader with an overview of the literature in relation to the First-generation students and their sense of community at Rowan University.

Chapter III will present, as well as explain, the methodology and procedures that I underwent to gather my data.

I will then report my findings gathered from student interviews in Chapter IV.

Chapter V will hold the discussion of findings, as well as an overall conclusion. If initiatives in place are working, other institutions can learn from Rowan University, while if initiatives are not working, recommendations can be made for practice so that Rowan University can better serve the First-generation student population which they are working diligently to recruit.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Introduction

This chapter reviews literature focused on the First-generation student population who is enrolled at higher education institution and is broken into four parts. To begin with, who makes up the First-generation population, and what are challenges that they come to deal with throughout their undergraduate career. Subsequently, I look at the first-year experience and its importance towards the success of a First-generation student. Third, the potential impact a sense of community can have on a student's overall experience. Finally, I will conclude with a summary.

First-Generation Population

The transition to college can be difficult for First-generation students. When compared to their non-First-generation student peers, the more common characteristics that differ are racial/ethnic demographics, academic and social preparedness, and socioeconomic status (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). First-generation student access to higher education is a topic heavily focused on by many, and with no surprise, being that this student population has grown and continues to grow today. A 73% student enrollment increase can be seen of First-generation students between 1980 and 2011 (Tucker 2014). Therefore, it is safe to say that getting these students to college is not the biggest issue at hand. These students are the first of their family to begin the process of attending a postsecondary institution, which increases the risk of not graduating on time, or being unable to graduate (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). It is well known that First-generation

students face unique hurdles due to their background, however it is truly shocking that up to 25% of First-generation students remain after their first year, and about 11% complete and receive their degree under six years (Whitney et al., 2018).

For First-generation students, entering a brand-new environment can be a scary feat at the time, as they are creating new relationships with faculty as well as other students. First-year, First-generation students who are attending a PWI must, on top of being in a new environment, deal with the sense of cultural shock of not seeing others like themselves, which makes it difficult and stressful to go about their day-to-day activity as they find themselves feeling as strangers (McCoy, 2014; Stebleton et al., 2014).

A factor which is researched less frequently is the impact that a First-generation student's parent can hold on to their success. It is understood that as a First-generation student, this means that their parents did not complete a post-secondary education, yet there are more challenges that arise from this than people are aware. For starters, a study by Geraldine Piorkowski (1983) made a connection with how some First-generation students carry with them a sense of guilt that they are "escaping" the life that those before them had to face. This "survivors' guilt", as put by the study, only further enhances the wedge that colleges place between a first-generation student and their family (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Although the idea of attending college is one that is highlighted by the parents in hopes for a better future for their child, through the idea that those before them do not understand what they are going through, the mentality that they are alone through this is strengthened.

The moment that a First-generation student begins their journey by applying to college, they face a disadvantage of access to less information about the application process and other important items such as financial aid (Houle, 2014). By 2020, it was projected that nearly 65% of jobs throughout the country required, at minimum, a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution to work for them (Carnevale et al., n.d.). Therefore, it is alarming to see a student population that continues to grow, not increase retention/graduation rates as quickly. It is important to note that institutions are reshaping programming revolving around important topics such as financial aid and the registration process, yet a critical component that is overseen is the perspective these students hold on their sense of community within their institutions, and how it impacts their decisions to stay and pursue their education. First-generation students are more likely to not return after their first year (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018), which means institutions have a time frame that is essential to look at that will highlight whether First-generation students will succeed or fail.

First Year Experience

The transition from high school to postsecondary schooling is evidently seen as a critical moment for students as it shapes how they process and go about things (Boroch et al., 2009). A student's first year can be one filled with high expectations and an overwhelming sense of nervousness. A brand-new environment with entirely new individuals, there is a lot of room for mistakes. Some may say that the beauty of college is the countless opportunities for trial and error, yet this can lead to further disadvantages for some who enter college already facing an uphill battle. Matthey (1989) found that the four most helpful areas for first-year students were college visits, college catalogs,

parents, and high school counselors. These are all categories, that when analyzing previously discussed literature, are areas in which First-generation students face issues with.

The first year of college is a confusing time for many. Some are battling which major they will pick, while others are faced with the challenge of searching for opportunities, such as clubs and sports, to become involved with. Unfortunately, for First-generation students, they usually find themselves having to tackle their academics while also managing full or part time employment positions due to financial constraints, which further limits them from the ability to have a first-year experience like their non-First-generation student colleagues (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Sense of Belonging Within Community

College students are more likely to not complete their degree if they base their decision on having a connection with their college/university, the quality of interactions within their college/university, and the failure to integrate themselves (Tinto, 1987). Strayhorn (2012) stated that a sense of belonging is a fundamental human need, which holds impacts on a student's behavior and overall college success. One of the biggest issues a college student can face is the debate on feeling as though they are connected to the community at their institution. When you feel as though you belong to the community around you, and view yourself as a piece to the puzzle, that connection can lead to self-efficiency (Freeman et al., 2007) and positively impact well-being (Painter, 2013) in academia. Freeman et al. (2007) argued that without the opportunity to create interpersonal connections through university belonging and social acceptance, that

students could face several issues such as anxiety, depression and weakening in academics. Through having a greater sense of community, studies have shown that students can experience stress or depression less frequently (Stebbleton et al., 2014).

So, what exactly are some methods in which institutions can and have fostered a better sense of community for their new students? Faculty, for starters, are potentially one of the most critical factors in enhancing a student's sense of belonging (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). When students feel that they have a connection with their instructor/faculty, they are potentially more motivated, which leads to positive results. On the other hand, if that connection is lacking, students are far less likely to feel integrated and therefore less motivated (Freeman et al., 2007). Learning communities is another method institutions have added focus on within their programming with the goal to promote a better sense of community for students. Throughout their first year, students are more likely to spend a majority of their time within their residential building, which grants institutions a tremendous opportunity to support their students through goal centered programming (Johnson et al., 2007). Through a positive interaction between a student and their residential and campus environment, students can lessen the stress found through the college transition and improve their connection with the university (Spanierman et al., 2013). Mentorship programs or summer bridge programs, known as pre-college programs, are other methods in which focus is placed on strengthening a student in various categories, such as academics and social integration (Pascarella et al., 2004).

The proper strengthening of both social and academic skills can play a vital part in promoting a healthy sense of belonging for a student (Hausmann et al., 2009). Based

off Hausmann and colleagues (2007), students with a better academic integration hold a higher level of belongingness.

Summary

As college enrollment numbers continue to rise for First-generation students, institutions must be aware and prepared to provide support for these students. The literature reviewed not only clearly shows that First-generation students face multiple hurdles getting to, and completing, college in the four-year time frame, but that creating a strong sense of community for these students can successfully impact them in a manner which will assist them. Being a first-year, First-generation student can be challenging, but it is not impossible to complete this journey, with the appropriate resources. The issues that these students face are unique to every single one of them, yet through multiple sources of positive reinforcement, such as strong faculty relationships, proper programming and learning communities, these students can be given the assistance needed in a manner which they can independently discover themselves, without being too dependent on a solution to be always given (Peralta & Klonoswki, 2017, Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Institutions of higher education may not have started as a place of knowledge for all at first, but they have evolved to include students from all backgrounds. With further research, a deeper understanding can be made on what effects campus climates regarding providing a community that welcomes all.

Chapter III

Methodology

Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to explore if having a positive sense of community can impact a First-generation Rowan student(s) first year experience in a positive manner. The following research questions were used to navigate the study.

1. What programs held by departments at Rowan University, such as Housing (& dining services), Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Division of Student Life, Student Government Association, etc., create and enhance a first-year, First-generation students on-campus sense of community and welcoming?
2. What resources are accessible and known for first-year, First-generation students when in specific times of need? Need can consist of financial, professional, academic, and social.
3. What is Rowan University doing to give a sense of community to its students, but also their parents? As First-generations students, this is also a brand-new experience for the parents.

Context of Study

This study was created and conducted throughout the 2021-2022 academic year, with participation from first-year, First-generation students, at Rowan University.

Glassboro Normal School began in 1923 as the answer for New Jersey's issue at hand, which was the lack of proper education for its future teachers (Rowan, 2021). From Glassboro Normal School to its current glory as Rowan University, this institution has continued to evolve its curriculum, enrollment, and infrastructure (Rowan, 2021).

Rowan University now serves an undergraduate population of 15,963 students, a graduate population of 2,466 students, and a professional/medical population of 1,249 students, totaling to a tremendous number of 19,678 students (Rowan, 2021). In regard to academic programs, Rowan has a selection which includes 90 bachelor's programs to choose from. For continuing students, there is the choice to choose from 48 master's programs and eight doctoral programs (Rowan, 2021).

Methodological Approach

For this study, a phenomenological qualitative research methodology was used to gain a better understanding of the first-year, First-generation experience, and its connection with a sense of community towards their institution. A phenomenological study grants us the ability to gain deeper and better understanding of the lived experiences of participants, which is further enhanced through the various experiences with shared similarities (McMillan, 2016). Using this approach will permit me to gauge similarities and differences within the participants' experiences, which will come directly from the applicants through their individual interviews.

Data Collection

With the aid of Flying First, which is a Rowan task force program initiative, we were given access to a small pool of 45 student emails. Out of this sample, 15 students were randomly selected and reached out to regarding being interviewed (Appendix A). Out of the 15 students, only 8 were successfully interviewed. Students who volunteered were read a consent form, which educated them on the purpose of this study as well as what their options are regarding participating in this study. As this study had in-person interviews, recording the audio was essential for deeper analyzation of data. Students who volunteered were only recorded if consent was given (Appendix B). Data was collected through a 45-minute, face-to-face interview, which was led by eight open-ended questions (Appendix C).

Population

The target population for this study was made up of participants who were classified as First-generation and first-year students at Rowan University's Glassboro Campus. For this study, it does not matter if the student is full-time or part-time, or if they reside on campus or off. Fifteen students were purposely selected, who are classified as "First-generation" by Flying First.

Sampling Criteria

For this study, it was best to proceed with purposeful sampling to recruit participants who best meet the criteria outlined for this study. In order to gain "information rich data", purposeful sampling permitted me with doing so by working

with carefully and intentionally selected students (McMillan, 2016, p. 125). Students in this study had to strictly be First-generation and currently in their first year at Rowan University's Glassboro campus. The goal for sampling was 15 students.

Profile of Sample Participants

As data was gathered and referenced from the interviews, the participants have been listed. Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality:

- Helen is a First-Year, First-Generation student.
- Stephanie is a First-Year, First-Generation student.
- Michael is a First-Year, First-Generation student.
- Melody is a First-Year, First-Generation student.
- Laurel is a First-Year, First-Generation student.
- Gregory is a First-Year, First-Generation student.
- Kevin is a First-Year, First-Generation student.
- Jennifer is a First-Year, First-Generation student.

Procedures

Once IRB approval was gained, recruitment followed as an item of urgency. Forty-five emails were collected and given by Flying First, and fifteen students were randomly selected from this pool. The recruitment email was sent out to students who met the ideal sample requirements for this study (Appendix A). Once students confirmed interest in participating in this study, they were provided with an informed consent form

(Appendix B) that reiterates that this is voluntarily and confidential. Participants were also informed about the purpose of this study.

Data Analysis

Once interviews were concluded, the data attained was carefully transcribed. As interviews will took approximately thirty to forty-five minutes, it is critical to have recordings to ensure critical details are not missed during the interview. Once transcribing was completed, they were carefully analyzed to observe if there were patterns that can be picked up on. These patterns were coded and placed into thematic categories which resulted in confirming if there was a common theme (Gibbs, 2007; McMillan, 2016).

Chapter IV

Findings

The purpose of this study was to gain a clearer understanding of First-generation students and how their sense of belonging is impacted throughout their first-year college experience at Rowan University. Findings will be presented through subsections which reflect common themes found while interviewing the participants. The goal aimed for in participants was 15, however I was only able to reach eight with time constraints.

Placing a “First-Generation Student” in a Box

As institutions expand their knowledge on the different types of students they provide services for, it is important to acknowledge the limitations placed when analyzing a student population through a term. Although data confirms a correlation between being a First-generation student and variables that further challenge them, such as coming from a low-income home, one student’s story and background is more than likely to be completely different to another. By attempting to see the challenges and barriers faced by an array of students through one lens, we lessen the potential to pick up on and therefore create possible solutions to additional barriers at play. There is an importance between gathering behind a term, like a “First-generation student”, but as stated before, we must be able to navigate through the assumptions we may create when working with this student population.

While working with First-generation students, a professional or students may be quick to assume that the student in front of them may come from a low-income home, or

that they face serious academic challenges. However, we must move away from strictly focusing on what barriers are being faced, and instead place a focus on how the barriers are currently being broken by these students. Once we attempt to stick a student within a “box” through a term, we risk being unable to acknowledge others as well. For example, during Michael’s interview, he shared how he felt as a “White” First-generation student. Michael stated:

My first couple weeks at Rowan were exciting and confusing in many ways. I was excited to be starting this new adventure, but when trying to make friends I felt out of place in places I would think I would be comfortable in. I remember going to a Flying First event and talking to some other students and being asked if I was “really” First-generation and that kinda bothered me. As I looked around the room, it was clear that there were fewer White students around, and I wasn’t comfortable to really continue the conversation other than a quick confirming nod in response. I totally get it but, it felt awful that it was assumed I did not belong, regardless of my actual experiences getting to where I am now.

Through this dialogue, Michael speaks upon a fundamental moment in his first few weeks at Rowan University, and while searching for others to connect and relate with, he is instead made to face off against doubt and more walls amongst his peers. The resources provided to students are there for those who need it, yet through labels, some students may further question the validity of them being in a space, or search for aid. Although it is understood that these types of programs are created to enhance the

experience of specific students, it should not come at the cost of others who come from not so similar backgrounds, as they can benefit from the additional support just as much.

Areas of Institutional Support

When navigating the conversations around what support First-generation students at Rowan University currently need and what support is currently provided, three common areas were spoken about by the participants. These three areas of skills supported and needed by students at Rowan are academic, social, and professional. Whether it be one, or all of them, it appears that Rowan does a good job at providing opportunities of growth for First-generation students within their first year as a student.

Academic Support

A college student's first year is a very vulnerable time. Adapting to a brand-new environment, while attempting to connect with others can become challenging and students may find themselves struggling to balance priorities. Without building a strong foundation within their first year, college students can essentially set themselves up for a harder undergraduate career if their academics suffer at a very early point. Through various answers, majority of the participants referenced some manner of searching and finding academic support either within or outside of the classroom setting at Rowan. Helen, for example, spoke about her experience in her first-year seminar (Rowan 101), and how although she did not like having to involuntarily take this course, that she could see how it "better prepared" her for the upcoming years at Rowan. Kevin on the other hand, described how he searched for additional support outside of the classroom by using

office hours, as well as the tutoring center. Through the usage of these resources provided to him, he states the following:

Pursuing a career in medicine is not an easy path... When I first arrived at Rowan, I had no idea the difficulty I would face when it came to understanding the material we would go over in my classes. I appreciate that my professors were reachable through their office hours, even though I was scared at first from reading bad reviews of some online, and I usually found myself going to the tutoring center every week. Some of my friends crack jokes about me using the tutoring center all the time, but I figured if I'm paying for these services I might as well use them.

Social Support

College is a time for growth in several aspects of a student's identity. Just as students, institutions of higher education may sometimes struggle balancing supporting programming or initiatives that assist their students on a social level while helping them academically. This does not seem to be the case at Rowan given the answers provided by the participants. Stephanie reflected on how her admission into the Pre-College Institute (P.C.I.) and ASCEND helped make her transition to Rowan easy by bringing her to the college setting earlier than most, during the summer. During the interview, Stephanie stated:

I was very shy and nervous when I got to campus during the summer. I was sad that my summer had been cut short at first, but I had a great time once I got to

P.C.I. I got to make friends from all over Jersey and got acquainted with the campus before we started in the fall semester too.

Like Stephanie, Laurel talked about how she was able to “step out of my comfort zone” by joining the United Latino Association (U.L.A.), which she was informed about through her counselor. Stephanie also shared that she plans on running for a student leadership position for the club and had applied to become a resident assistant on campus as well.

Professional Career Support

Unlike the overall condition many college students enter college in, such as struggling throughout their initial transition to college, they should be graduating prepared to face their next challenge. Just like the previous two subcategories, support focusing on building their professional skills was discussed by most, if not all, participants during their interviews. This was truly a positive surprise, as many students are not focused on professional growth until later in their undergraduate careers, and here are first-year, First-generation students describing professional goals as well as skills they have gained throughout their first year. Gregory, for example, is interested in becoming a physical trainer, and shared how he is looking to pursue a job with the recreational center here at Rowan.

It is important to note that some opportunities may not be suitable for everyone, and therefore it is essential that institutions look carefully at positions of student leadership which may require too much from a student and therefore become detrimental to their academics and social life. Working for the Office of Residential Life as a resident

assistant, for example, was a subject discussed by Melody. Melody shared her initial interest in becoming a resident assistant, as it would provide additional support in cutting her cost for college, but that a conversation with some of her peers who are current resident assistants made her rethink that decision. Melody states:

Although it would help with paying for college, the responsibility and demand was not something I think I could truly commit too. I heard [from friends] that they were spending so much time on RA duties, that they found they had no time for themselves, and the late-night rounds were causing them to be late a lot for their early morning class.

Representation and Community

For the 2021 fall semester, Rowan University's First-generation student population made up 36% (5,504) of the total undergraduate population, with roughly only 4% (542) of them being first-year, First-generation students (Flying First, 2021). When asked whether observing representation in staff, other students or initiatives mattered to them, Helen best summarized what majority of the applicants answered, by saying the following:

It makes me feel like I'm not alone... and it was easier for me to find my place at Rowan. Having professors who I could relate to, it made things less scary. If I needed help in class, it was easy to go to one professor after class to ask some questions. Not that the other professors were approachable, I just didn't feel as comfortable with them.

Students look towards faculty/staff for representation, but also for the sense of finding someone you can say is from your community. Attending college can be a cultural shock for many, and when your family and hometown friends are not close, the feeling of being alone can be overwhelming. Melody shared that she enjoyed meeting others who she shared nothing in common with, but how being around others who are “alike to me” and “share interests” helped her feel more comfortable and at ease.

When asked about their individual communities, various types of communities were named. One shared in common however, was being a part of the Flying First community, which is a learning community initiative conducted through residential life in partnership with Flying First. Students who hold a deeper connection towards their community, are more likely to hold a better overall sense of belonging within their institution and have a higher chance of retention after their first year (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018). After analyzing how the eight participants spoke about their future at Rowan, I would say this statement is true here at Rowan.

Bridging the Gap

When focusing on providing support for First-generation students, institutions of higher education tend to focus on support that they can provide to students on campus. Although this is beneficial, there is a group that is left in the shadows, which if given some support as well, would greatly benefit First-generation students in a positive manner, and that is their families. As a First-generation student on the path to be the first of their family to graduate from a 4-year institution with a bachelor's degree, there is a lot of emotions and impact with every step these students take. Unfortunately, a common

trend found is a disconnect between First-generation students and their family due to their family not being able to understand what they are achieving while away at college.

When asked if they were able to communicate with their family what they are planning to achieve academically and socially, and if they felt as though there are barriers in the way of their family truly understanding, here is what all eight students had to say:

Michael: I do communicate with my family but there are definitely barriers in the way because I feel like they understand the work load I have to put in it but not really since they haven't been in my shoes. This usually leads to them minimizing the stress I sometimes face as they don't see how any of this can be challenging me in a negative way.

Melody: No barriers. I feel like my family was and is very understanding of my decisions. I don't know if this means they truly understand what I am doing at college, but it does not impact me beyond that.

Helen: I think that there are certain struggles that they understand. It's hard to explain in detail that I wanted to drop out at some point during my first semester because I felt like I wasn't performing as good as other students. My family didn't understand that the feeling to want to drop out. In their minds I was being ridiculous for even thinking of it. They didn't know the feeling of studying and still not performing well academically.

Kevin: I feel like my family knows what I'm doing but they still do not understand the complexity of the schooling. It's only to a certain extent I can tell

my goals, and sometimes it feels like I'm talking to act like I'm better, which I would never do.

Stephanie: There are some barriers at play, they didn't go to college and are from another country, so they just must take my word for a lot of stuff. They understand but to an extent.

Laurel: I believe there are challenges us First-generation students face when trying to connect back with our families. Personally, it's hard to go back home because I feel as though I can't share what I have learned while away at college. Outside of my community at Rowan, there aren't many I can explain what I want to do career wise and why it costs so much.

Gregory: There are barriers that make it difficult, but I try my best to explain it in ways that they can follow along. Most of the trouble comes when conversations of cost come up. Some of my family see it as an investment for "our families future", while others see it as a waste of time, and money.

Jennifer: I am able to communicate to the best of my abilities with my family about my academic and social planning but there are barriers at play for them to fully understand.

Through the answers of eight different individuals, it can be said that in order to promote a healthy campus environment for the students, something should be done in order to spread educational knowledge regarding the college process and what it entails for the First-generation student for their family members. There is a lot of pressure that a

First-generation student must face throughout their college career, and the fact, assuming their families are main supporters of theirs, that their family members cannot truly grasp their actions and motives can create a not so supportive environment back home.

Chapter V

Summary, Discussion, Conclusion, Recommendations

This section will serve as the final chapter and will be used to discuss in deeper depth the research questions that were used to guide this research. By listening to the experiences shared by First-generation, first-year students, it is hoped to promote an emphasis on how to promote or continue initiatives that support these students so that institutions can better serve and create a positive experience for them.

Summary of the Study

There are many methods institutions can implement to promote spaces for students to grow, and throughout their first year, it is even more vital to assist students in creating a connection with their institution and its community. Through this connection, a sense of belonging can be promoted which will grant the student more opportunities to succeed (Gilbert-Thomas, 2018). Based on the findings covered, without a sense of belonging, First-generation students are more likely to suffer in various categories such as retention or academic success. In order to promote a sense of belonging however, institutions must better understand the many potential barriers that can stand in the way of First-generation, first-year students from achieving this.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1

What programs held by departments at Rowan University, such as Housing (& dining services), Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Division of Student Life,

Student Government Association, etc., create and enhance a first-year, First-generation students on-campus sense of community and welcoming?

Based on the interviews conducted with the participants, Rowan University, through its various departments/offices, does indeed offer programs/initiatives that assist in creating and enhancing a sense of community and welcoming for first-year, First-generation students. Some examples given by students were early access to campus culture through initiatives such as ASCEND/E.O.F, growth in skills within the classroom through courses such as Rowan 101 and outside the classroom through career workshops/fairs, a healthy social environment through 200+ clubs/organizations under the Student Government Association, and finally community engagement through events such as the presidents parade.

With First-generation students making 36% of Rowans undergraduate students, it is vital for institutions to place a focus on creating an environment for these students to grow (Flying First, 2021). It is even more critical that institutions do such a thing as we are returning from a virtual school setting for many of these young scholars. Although it was not brought up by any of the participants, it can be imagined that the transition to college may have been more challenging for these students after a full year of conducting class through a computer screen, while in the middle of a pandemic.

Research Question 2

What resources are accessible and known for first-year, First-generation students when in specific times of need? Need can consist of financial, professional, academic, and social.

There is an array of resources that is accessible for First-generation, first-year students when in times of need and during normal day to day activities as well. As mentioned in research question 1's review, Rowan offers various resources that can aid in different categories of need. The only issue that seems to appear from analyzing data collected throughout the interviews, is the manner in which the knowledge of these resources is being transferred. Out of the eight participants, six stated that they did not hear much about such resources. However, it was also common that students would follow up with the fact that they were not constantly checking their student emails. Solely depending on an email format to pass information is limiting, however it is observed that Rowan offices/departments continue to evolve their effectiveness by adding additional formats of passing information, such as social media accounts on platforms heavily accessed by today's student population. For example, as we have endured two long years of being in a pandemic, financial efforts have been made to assist students who need support. You would be able to access information regarding such efforts through email, Instagram, Facebook and even Yik-Yak.

Research Question 3

What is Rowan University doing to give a sense of community to its students, but also their parents? As First-generations students, this is also a brand-new experience for the parents.

For most First-generation students, family is an important supporting factor for them. Unfortunately, more often First-generation students find themselves separated or distant from their families throughout their college experience due to multiple variables.

For starters, some may deal with a language barrier when attempting to communicate what you are accomplishing with older generations of your family, or they may feel a sense of “guilt” when dealing with material that the family members would not be able to provide support for. Regardless the reason, it is evident after listening to the participants that there is a serious gap between First-generation students and their families. This is a serious matter in which institutions of higher education must focus on, as this negatively impacts one of the students most vital support systems.

Institutions place a heavy emphasis on creating communities that we each can be a part of, and although there are some family-oriented initiatives for students and their families to enjoy, more can be done in order to promote such settings for a much more diverse population.

Conclusion

In the end, no negative consequences can be found when focusing on strengthening a student’s sense of belonging at their institution. Every student deserves the opportunity to feel as though they belong where they stand. Regardless of where they stand, they should know and feel that they are a part of the community they walk by every day for the next potential four years. Through the shared experiences of the participants, some common factors were determined amongst their answers. For starters, understanding the negative constraints that follow a term, like “First-generation”, does have the potential to not include those who rightfully should be included, as well as carry over barriers that not all students who fall under this term may face. Subsequently, Rowan does do a fair job at creating initiatives and spaces for First-generation, first-year

students to access support academically, socially, and professionally, and at an early start. Third, students gain from the opportunity to relate to strangers with similar backgrounds while in not so similar environments, in order to turn said environment into one that they can prosper. Finally, in order to promote growth within the community, Rowan must also realize and place focus on promoting growth outside of the community through the students' families. There are many obstacles that a First-generation, first-year-student may face, but with the cooperation of the community as a whole, no student can be left to fail.

Recommendations for Practice and Further Research

The following recommendations have been created by using results from this research study in addition to the already existing literature on First-generation, first-year success through having a positive sense of belonging to their institution.

Recommendations for Research

A student's motivation and engagement within the classroom and out can be significantly related to their sense of belonging at their institution of higher education (Freeman et al., 2007). A sense of belonging is also shown to have a direct impact on the student experience, and overall student retention (Tovar et al., 2009). With this, and the experiences shared by the participants within this research in mind, it further emphasizes the need to continue with further research highlighting additional variables that can impact a First-generation student's success within their first year. Seeing the impact having a sense of belonging can have by promoting more success for students and institutions, analyzing other variables that are negatively impacting first-year, First-

generation students is beneficial for all parties involved. Some examples of other areas of interest to research I would recommend are looking at First-generation students and the college impact on them when compared to their siblings, the impact a First-generation student's growth within their identity has on their relationship with their family or how institutions can better promote a successful college career for First-generation students who are considered adults, and over 25 years of age.

Recommendations for General Practice

To promote a more welcoming and accepting institution for the families of students, it could be vital to step go beyond what is in place when it comes to activities, they already host. First-generation students are shown to hold complicated feelings towards their families, peers, and community when it comes to their growth throughout college, such as guilt and stress (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). As they grow and evolve into their future, the connections with their old and new communities can be put to the test. Therefore, institutions can assist their First-generation student population by adding or expanding programming to include their communities. Rowan already reaches out to parents; however this could be taken a step further by adding languages to the promotional material used. Conducting promotion through social media is popular, however, this can also limit the potential eyes it reaches. An idea such as a newsletter promoting the campus and their child's involvement at it could be a very pleasing initiative. The repetition of the same family-oriented programming hosted every year is another factor that minimizes outreach, and therefore limiting the connection the student families can also share with the institution. Placing an emphasis on indulging programming with a focus on an array of factors that make us all different from one

another, such as cultural backgrounds, can create more dialogue for us to understand more about each other, and therefore connect.

Recommendations for Rowan University

Reaching First-generation, first-year students at the earliest opportunity is essential so that they may better be prepared for the obstacles they may face in college. It is important to remember that not every challenge comes from an academic perspective. I would highly recommend Flying First create an initiative similar to summer bridge programs, however in way that promotes social connections as well as campus resource information before student's step foot on campus. A camp program would be a phenomenal method of enacting this, as this would promote independent and community growth amongst the students in attendance.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Materials

First-generation Students and Their College Experience Based on Sense of
Community

Recruitment Email Version 1

Subject: Searching for First-Year, First-Generation Students to Participate in Research
Study Request

Good Morning/Afternoon,

My name is Jorge L. Gonzalez-Palacios, and I am currently in the process of completing my Higher Education Administration master's program here at Rowan. Part of the program's graduation requirement is that second year students conduct research based on a topic of their choosing and interest and to write a thesis. I have chosen to write my thesis on the relationship between having a sense of community and the first-year experience of first-generation students. In order to determine the experiences of these students, I need to interview first-generation students who are 18 years of age or older and who are currently in their second semester of their first year at Rowan University's Glassboro Campus.

I am reaching out to you because you have been identified as a first-generation student who is currently in their second semester of their first year here at Rowan. If you meet such requirements, you can participate in my study. I will be conducting interviews on Rowan property, that will take between 30-45 minutes. Throughout this time, you will

be asked 8 questions regarding your sense of community based off your first-year experience at Rowan University's Glassboro Campus. These interviews can be scheduled to best fit your schedule, and it is important to note that your participation is completely voluntary. If you are interested in participating in my study, you can email me at **gonzal174@students.rowan.edu**. Your participation is truly appreciated. If you hold any further questions, please do not hesitate to reach out. I would be more than happy to clarify any potential questions.

Thank You for Your Time.

Dr. Drew Tinnin and Jorge L. Gonzalez-Palacios

(Primary Investigator)

tinnin@rowan.edu gonzal174@students.rowan.edu

This study has been approved by Rowan University's IRB (Study PRO-2021-651)

Appendix B

Informed Consent

KEY INFORMATION AND CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Title: First-generation Students and Their First Year Success Based Off Their Sense of Community at A 4-Year Institution

Principal Investigator: Andrew Tinnin, Ed.D.

Your participation is being asked for this research study. The purpose of this research study is to determine how and what effects a First-Generation student's sense of community and how it can correlate with their first-year experience at Rowan University.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to be a part of in an in-person interview that will last approximately between 30-45 minutes, on campus. You will be asked 8 questions regarding your sense of community at Rowan University. It is important to remember that your participation is completely voluntarily, and only you have the ability to choose to participate or not.

This study holds minimal risk and there are no physical dangers to respondents. There may be no direct benefit from participating in this study. Results from this study may potentially assist in providing recommendations to institutions on how to better serve this student population, and also highlight that sense of community is indeed a strong factor that affects student success.

To be eligible to participate in this study, you must be between the ages of 18-25, a "first-generation student" and currently in their first year at Rowan University's Glassboro campus.

This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study, and it will provide you with more detailed information that will help you decide whether you wish to volunteer for this research study. It is important that you take your time to make your decision. You may share this consent form with a family member or anyone else before agreeing to participate in the study. If you have questions at any time, you should feel free to ask the study team and should expect to be given answers that you completely understand. The study team will answer any question you might have before volunteering to take part in this study.

ADULT CONSENT FORM FOR SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH

Title: First-generation Students and Their First Year Success Based Off Their Sense of Community at A 4-Year Institution

Principal Investigator: Andrew Tinnin, Ed.D.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this research study is to determine how and what effects a First-Generation student's sense of community and how it can correlate with their first-year experience at Rowan University.

2. Why have you been asked to take part in this study?

You have been asked to take part in this study because you have been identified as a first-generation student who is currently in their first year at Rowan.

3. What will you be asked to do if you take part in this research study?

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an in-person interview and asked 8 questions regarding your experiences at Rowan, with a focus on if having/or not a sense of community influenced those experiences.

4. Who may take part in this research study? And who may not?

Students who have been identified as "first-generation" and are currently in their first year are eligible to participate. If students do not meet either criterion, they are not eligible to participate.

5. How long will the study take and where will the research study be conducted?

This interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes and will be conducted on Rowan University grounds.

6. How many visits may take to complete the study?

Only one interview session is required for this study.

7. What are the risks and/or discomforts you might experience if you take part in this study?

This is a minimal risk study, and no physical dangers to respondents are present.

8. Are there any benefits for you if you choose to take part in this research study?

There may be no direct benefit from choosing to take part in this study. Results from this study may potentially assist in providing recommendations to institutions on how to better serve this student population, and also highlight that sense of community is indeed a strong factor that affects student success.

9. What are the alternatives if you do not wish to participate in the study?

Your alternative is to not participate in this study.

10. How many subjects will be enrolled in the study?

15 students will be enrolled in the study.

11. How will you know if new information is learned that may affect whether you are willing to stay in this research study?

During the course of the study, you will be updated about any new information that may affect whether you are willing to continue taking part in the study. If new information is learned that may affect you, you will be contacted.

12. Will there be any cost to you to take part in this study?

There is no cost in order to take part in this study.

13. Will you be paid to take part in this study?

You will **not** be paid to participate in this study.

14. Are you providing any identifiable private information as part of this research study?

No.

15. How will information about you be kept private or confidential?

All efforts will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential, but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Your personal information may be given out, if required by law. Presentations and publications to the public and at scientific conferences and meetings will not use your name and other personal information. Research data collected during the course of the interviews (de-identified or reported in aggregate) will be included in the thesis. All data collected during this study will be kept in a private password-protected account.

16. What will happen if you do not wish to take part in the study or if you later decide not to stay in the study?

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may change your mind at any time.

If you do not want to enter the study or decide to stop participating, your relationship with the study staff will not change, and you may do so without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also withdraw your consent for the use of data already collected about you, but you must do this in writing to Andrew Tinnin, Ed.D. at tinnin@rowan.edu.

If you decide to withdraw from the study for any reason, you may be asked to participate in one meeting with the Principal Investigator.

17. Who can you call if you have any questions?

If you have any questions about taking part in this study or if you feel you may have suffered a research related injury, you can call the Principal Investigator:

Andrew Tinnin, Ed.D.
Educational Services and Leadership, College of Education
856-256-4909

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can call:

Office of Research Compliance
(856) 256-4058– Glassboro/CMSRU

18. What are your rights if you decide to take part in this research study?

You have the right to ask questions about any part of the study at any time. You should not sign this form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have been given answers to all of your questions.

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read the entire information about the research study, research risks, benefits and the alternatives, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed.

All of my questions about this form or this study have been answered and I agree to volunteer to participate in the study.

[] Yes, I agree to participate in this study.

Name/Signature

ROWAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
AUDIO/VIDEOTAPE ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM (*SAMPLE*)

You have already agreed to participate in a research study conducted by Andrew Tinnin, Ed.D. We are asking for your permission to allow us to record your interview for transcription purposes as part of that research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for:

- analysis by the research team
- Transcription purposes

The recording(s) will include only your name and your answers to the 8 questions asked.

The recording(s) will be stored in a Rowan Google; password protected Google drive.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

[] Yes, I agree to be recorded as a part of this study.

Name/Signature

Appendix C

Interview Questions

For this study, I will be conducting a qualitative phenomenological study. Students that choose to willingly volunteer for this study are First-Generation, first-year students from Rowan University's Glassboro campus. The students will take, approximately, a 30-45 minute in-person interview. The questions are as follows:

1. What does it mean to you to not only be a part of a community, but to have a community at a college?
2. What made you choose Rowan University as the institution in which you will be pursuing your bachelors?
3. As a first-year, first-generation student, what initiatives on behalf of the institution were memorable for you regarding feeling as part of a community?
4. How often do you hear about programming centered on supporting first-generation students?
5. What do you believe, has assisted you in filling the academically and social gaps that you may have felt you struggled with in the beginning of your first year?
6. Are you able to communicate with your family what you are planning to achieve academically and socially, or do you feel as though there are barriers at play for them to understand?
7. What would you say has negatively impacted while on school grounds regarding feeling a sense of community?
8. Based off your overall first-year experience as a first-generation student at Rowan, would you recommend this campus as a supportive and healthy campus setting for future students?

Appendix D

Institutional Review Board Approval

Date: 4-12-2022

IRB #: PRO-2021-651
Title: First Generation Experience
Creation Date: 11-18-2021
End Date: 2-3-2023
Status: **Approved**
Principal Investigator: Drew Tinnin
Review Board: Glassboro/CMSRU
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved
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Key Study Contacts

Member	Drew Tinnin	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	tinnin@rowan.edu
Member	Jorge Gonzalez-Palacios	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	gonzal174@students.rowan.edu