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# First-Generation Leaders: A Qualitative Examination of Characteristics, Traits, and Identity of First-Generation Graduates in Leadership

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FIRST-GENERATION LEADERS:
A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF CHARACTERISTICS, TRAITS, AND
IDENTITY OF FIRST-GENERATION GRADUATES IN LEADERSHIP

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By
Jamie L. Woolery
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**Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Mandy & Bobby, both of whom are not present to see the life they provided for me. The strength and momentum forward in life is owed to the strength they showed each day throughout the short time I had with them. I have yet to meet anyone as strong or courageous as the two of them.

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**Abstract**

This study looked at first-generation college graduates and their paths to
successful leadership roles. First-generation college students are defined by the
National Association of Personnel Administrators (NASPA) as students from
families in which their biological parents did not complete a four-year college
degree (NASPA, 2017). An investigation was conducted on demographics,
access to education, opportunity, and other factors that lend themselves to
successful first-generation leaders who changed the narrative for themselves and
their communities. This study looked at the previously conducted literature to
provide background support for the need of the research, along with further
recommendations and interviews which added resources to the ongoing
research. Literature has suggested first-generation college students need
additional support, guidance, and mentoring to succeed; and first-generation
college students struggle to find a place to grow and support within higher
education institutions.

Throughout this study, the researcher analyzed data to determine the way
in which access, affordability, leadership opportunity, and mentorship have

provided successful paths for leaders to change their stories and access essential leadership roles within higher education institutions. The study explored conversations through qualitative analysis and phenomenological study and sought to explore complex and challenging conversations alongside real experiences. The interview process allowed the interviewees to reflect upon their experiences while in their studies (both undergraduate and graduate) as first-generation college students. The conversations were conducted in person throughout the 30- to 60-minute interviews (if location permitted) or via zoom; some opted for email interviews to remain mindful of their time as leaders. The participants' indicators were removed for anonymity to allow them to speak openly and candidly about their experiences concerning characteristics, traits, and identity as first-generation college students, graduates, and leaders.

The findings of this study resulted in concluding that the participants were part of a phenomenon that showed the characteristics, traits, and identity that most of them felt included resiliency, hard-working, and determined. It proved that first-generation students embody a variety of soft skills that set them apart, but also set them up for success as leaders. The study resulted in understanding how to better serve first-generation students throughout their collegiate experience to embrace and advocate for them as leaders.

**CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

This study explores the characteristics, traits, and identities of first-generation graduates who became leaders in higher education. First-generation students are defined by the National Association of Personnel Administrators (NASPA) as students from families in which their biological parents did not complete a four-year college degree (NASPA, n.d.). Currently, little is known about the relationship between first-generation college students and their careers and successes after graduation, specifically those regarded as leaders in higher education. This study helps to close the gaps to better understand and serve first-generation college students while enrolled to lead them to successful graduation and into the workforce.

**Statement of the Problem**

First-generation students are the first in their families to seek postsecondary education and may be unaware of available supports and resources in the university setting. These students need additional support to navigate the essential steps in higher education, including access to financial aid, housing, purchasing of meal plans, or registering for classes. Ideally, access to those resources should be an equal opportunity and available for all; the challenge is that first-generation students may be unaware of how to navigate the higher education system.

Hand and Payne (2008) cited first-generation students as commonly at-risk students forging a better life through education. The author cited First-generation students often are discussed regarding reduced retention and

academic performance, hard to categorize when funding and allocating resources. According to Holland (2020), a lack of rigor exists during the application process and preparing to enter a collegiate environment for a first-generation college student seeking postsecondary education, as these students tend to enroll at less competitive-based colleges (Holland, 2020). These colleges typically are less competitive in academic standards and test scores (ACT or SAT) for enrollment. It would be advantageous for higher education institutions to seek out first-generation students and challenge them with rigorous coursework to enhance their abilities for their future careers.

While access may play a factor on where first-generation students enroll, school familiarity and guidance on choice of university also could impact these decisions. High schools having built-in support services with career and college coaches, TRIO Programs, Gear Up, and other programs can dramatically enhance the outcomes of where first-generation students enroll. Once enrolled, students must find a niche on which they can rely and have access when needed, which could be student government, clubs, sports, student employment, or volunteer work, along with student organizations to promote leadership, innovation, diversity, and opportunity. Identities and the way in which students view themselves on campus have been brought forth as a topic of concern in recent years; students must be able to feel their identity as being seen and understood. One recent study found allowing students to form identities early on and grow within them during their time at a university provides a distinct set of characteristics and traits seen in leaders (Grabsch et al., 2021).

To gain a sense of understanding about educating and providing access to first-generation college students, graduates, and leaders, the researcher evaluated literature and surveys to assess leadership characteristics and traits along with student identities in first-generation college graduates who hold successful leadership titles. The subcategories that were reviewed include the first-generation college student; their experience and involvement; and their characteristics, identity, leadership building and experiences, and traits. Understanding how the formative years in higher education can form a first-generation leader is vital for the future of these students and the future of education, communities, organizations, and businesses. Creating space for first-generation college students and graduates can present the opportunities and resources in a new light to empower their leadership characteristics. In contrast, first-generation college students can help educators engage and redesign programs and curriculum to provide equal access to all students.

In some ways, first-generation college students can be considered as part of marginalized communities with the barriers they face relative to higher education access. No specific cause would prevent universities from providing equal access to all students; however, it does happen, and the experiences created by those disadvantages are equally measured with the outcomes of the other experiences. Conversations at the university levels could promote first-generation students as a form of diversity educators, and institutions can seek to celebrate and form communities within, increasing ways to serve marginalized communities such as first-generation students, in addition to Hispanic and Black

students who will reap the benefits for the institution's success. Allowing access to form community and embrace connections among marginalized groups, first-generation students and other diverse groups can connect and build leadership and empowerment skills through a series of concurrent events formed within student organizations.

**Phenomenon of Interest**

Conversations have surrounded first-generation college students both before they enter college and while they are enrolled, indicating concerns may exist related to their viability in higher education and their ability to achieve success. Throughout previous research, first-generation college students are known to need additional support entering postsecondary education establishments. Higher education institutions are a place of cultural shock to these students (Irlbeck et al., 2014; Flury, 2007; Hicks, 2002). On average, 21% of first-generation college students earn a bachelor's degree in six years, which is below the national average (Bassett, 2021). Both state-funded and federally funded programs are available to provide access to college and programs to support first-generation college students; their downfall is that their regulations from the governing bodies can cause challenges to those first-generation students (Bassett, 2021). Not all first-generation college students can access programs designed for them; they must meet specific standards to qualify, creating another layer of access and a decrease in opportunity (Bassett, 2021).

Examining how first-generation college students' experiences are shaped and how their lived experiences set them apart is an incredible resource for the

next generations of students, graduates, and leaders. Their experiences allow them to access opportunities that create a successful leadership pathway inside and outside higher education. What experiences in their postsecondary careers sufficiently expanded their minds to seek further momentum and reach new destinations with their education? This current study's impact is vast; the more we know about characteristics, traits, and the identities of first-generation college students, graduates, and leaders and what they possess, the better universities and educators can exponentially shape opportunities and access. This study also creates resources to build a new generation of leaders with connections to their traditional roots and identities.

**Background and Justification**

This phenomenon presented as interest exists due to the increased number of first-generation college students seeking a college degree; in recent years, universities have seen an increase in enrollment, although only one in six students are first generation (Irlbeck et al., 2014). Even with only one in six students enrolling as first generation, an influx can be observed of first-generation college graduates entering the world to further education, organizations, government, and more. This study is justified due to the lack of research surrounding society's knowledge about first-generation college graduates as leaders and how their characteristics and traits impact their leadership styles and theories. The environment at higher education institutions has been overwhelming to students, quite laboring, and sometimes taxing.

Understanding the characteristics, traits, and identity of first-generation students and graduates can dramatically shape the way universities look at leadership curriculum, student organizations, and more on campus to fashion experiences that will aid in their future careers. Utilizing the knowledge students bring to the university and the way in which their lives have been shaped can develop a more inclusive atmosphere where students who are part of all communities can break down barriers and achieve success. Understanding the campus environment and redesigning a holistic community can significantly affect students from all backgrounds (Stevenson, 2020).

Higher education institutions that acknowledge students' fundamentals and backgrounds will help to guide them into their careers with a better understanding of the world and a decrease in cultural barriers. Universities and higher education institutions can create increased upward mobility to upsurge first-generation students' and graduates' occupational access, housing opportunities, and healthcare access, as well as break generational poverty cycles for families (Azmitia et al., 2018; Gills et al., 2008; Hochschild, 2016). Education is a controversial topic for many families, and many do not agree or understand the decision for a student to leave and to seek the foundation for additional opportunities within education (Azmitia et al., 2018; London, 1989; Terenzini et al., 1994; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). Higher education institutions must accept these realities and seek to create a family and community alongside their students to allow them to grow, challenge themselves,

and seek out opportunities they otherwise would not have due to their backgrounds.

## Deficiencies in the Evidence

While examining first-generation college graduates as leaders and how they were shaped through characteristics, traits, and identities formed before and during their time at a university, researchers also must address the lack of research and literature on first-generation students and graduates as leaders and community members. Very little research is available on the way in which their lived experiences have shaped who they have become and their impact on organizations and communities. In addition, few studies have linked first-generation graduates and leaders through characteristics, traits, and identity to form conclusive evidence and how leaders were fostered throughout their time at a university or prior to enrolling in a university. This study can bridge that gap and provide essential resources to create an atmosphere to help students be successful while attending a higher education institution, in their careers, and in their lives.

## Audience

The audiences that may benefit from this research include first-generation college students entering higher education institutions, currently enrolled first-generation college students, first-generation college graduates, and those who work with first-generation populations.

**Terminology**

*First-Generation College Student:* Many institutions have chosen to use the federal definition officially developed for TRIO program acceptance and to determine eligibility for Pell Grants, which indicates first-generation students come from families in which their biological parents did not complete a four-year college degree (NASPA, 2017).

*Mentorship:* For this definition, the official language from *Merriam Webster Dictionary* (n.d.) is used: influence, guidance, or direction given by a mentor.

*Social Capital:* This study utilizes the knowledge that social capital is the value of social networks, bonding similar people and bridging between diverse people, with norms of reciprocity (Dekker & Uslaner, 2001; Institute of Social Capital, 2022; Sander, 2002; Uslaner, 2001)

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research project is to support the need for additional services, experience, and access to leadership opportunities and growth for first-generation college students seeking a higher education experience and those who seek to obtain leadership experience. Invited participants include experienced leaders in their field who chose to attend higher education institutions and seek either a bachelor's degree or graduate studies degree. These individuals were chosen from a small pool; each person holds a leadership position in a higher education institution across the United States. The participants are administrators or leaders in higher education institutions classified as first-generation college graduates. Faculty also are included based on their experiences and roles in their community relative to leadership.

**Conceptual Framework**

First-Generation college students are more likely to require additional support and guidance from higher education institutions and their professionals. Conversely, first-generation students possess a strong foundation of resiliency, lived experiences, and additional experiences both prior to college and upon enrolling that shape the phenomenon being studied. First-generation students are enrolling in postsecondary education institutions; however, they are enrolling less than other students.

To meet the requirements of first-generation college students and graduates, higher education institutions must be prepared with additional resources and support to aid in the success of these students. Understanding the direct connection between university support, leadership, engagement, and lived experiences in relation to identity, characteristics, and traits of first-generation students will help institutions engage and prepare the next cohort of leaders.

By engaging first-generation students early and throughout their careers in higher education institutions, the students grow and increase their success throughout their post-graduation careers. Being engaged and connected to support, resources, and communities on campus not only increases success while enrolled, but also following completion, ultimately creating a foundation for better serving students throughout curriculum, engagement, support, and services.

Transformational leadership is a means for higher education professionals and institutions to look at ways to advance education in a practical and efficient

manner to enable first-generation students to feel empowered to engage in leadership opportunities regardless of their lived experiences. According to Burns (1978), transformational leadership theory is a process in which leaders and followers help each other to advance to higher levels of morale and motivations. Burns established a concept for both transactional and transformational leadership in his research. Transformational leadership must include approaches to significantly change the life and livelihoods of people and organizations. Creating optimal resources for first-generation college students and graduates to engage in life altering leadership roles greatly enhances the student, their families, the institution, and their communities. By enabling first-generation students access to leadership opportunities, transformational leadership is created. Establishing space for first-generation students to connect in their most authentic self and with their identities to the institution, mentors, students, and leaders is a critical point in creating space for future first-generation leaders. Transformational leadership is a platform that creates equal access to transform people and organizations live; no better place exists for that to be implemented more than in a higher education establishment.

### Research Questions

1. What characteristics, traits, and sense of identity do first-generation college students embody to contribute to successful leadership in higher education?
2. What lived experiences, student involvement, and university support contributed to first-generation students' leadership experiences? Sub

question: How did those experiences influence the first-generation college graduates' leadership personalities and career influences?

3. What factor or contribution did past lived experiences have on leadership characteristics and style for first-generation students and their success?

## Overview of Methodology

This phenomenological qualitative study showcases leadership characteristics, traits, and identities of first-generation college graduates in their current position and how they were developed throughout their lives both prior to and during their time at a university. Phenomenology studies seek to understand the lived experiences of individuals and their intentions within their lived world (Miller & Crabtree, 1999). Researchers understand their own biases and set them aside to dive into the participants' answers and conversations to use this method. In addition, practitioners have referred to this concept as "bracketing," which means to put your biases and experiences aside to fully understand the participants of the study (Miller & Crabtree, 1999).

## Summary

This chapter provided readers and future researchers with information on first-generation college students and graduates who seek leadership opportunities in their future careers. This study reviews those characteristics, traits, and identities developed throughout their lived experiences prior to and during their time at a university, as well as expanding educators' experiences to incorporate more leadership development and resources for first-generation students. This research study explains linkages between university resources

and development and first-generation graduates who choose to hold leadership

positions.

**CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This chapter includes a discussion of previous literature on first-generation students' topics, characteristics, traits, and identity, as well as their leadership development and how universities and colleges can foster inclusive leadership empowerment through student engagement. The retention of first-generation students and how higher education reviews services that serve those students is imperative to understanding the future of education.

Understanding that which first-generation students need to be successful and to honor their lived experiences throughout their time at a university or college(s) can develop their leadership skills leading to more employability and more engagement and connections in their communities. Overall, this development of the first-generation student into graduates and eventually into successful leaders is important for an efficacious future of higher education.

**First-Generation College Student**

The road to higher education and degrees is not equal for all students. Those from lower socioeconomic status and minority groups face harder routes and more complex challenges when seeking a degree (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). In 2008, 50% of high school graduates came from households making less than $50,000 per year; in that same year, 16% of high school graduates came from families making less than $20,000 per year (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; McDonough, 2004). Lower socioeconomic status leads to a significant inequity for those entering higher education.

First-generation college students also may struggle with academic preparation, lack of counseling from mentors and peer-to-peer, and daily roadblocks linked to their status as a first-generation student navigating a platform of education that can create extensive barriers (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Students seek campus community members to help with bridging these gaps and providing support and resources to fulfill the promise of education and a commitment to a better life. These students depend on academic advisors, administrators, and campus staff to lead the way; with these campus members, they must continue to develop a sense of commitment to first-generation students and understand their unique perspectives and experiences (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016).

One-way institutions mitigate increasing gaps and facilitate academic success and social integration into their campus community, as well as surrounding communities, is to provide mentoring with a formal structure so students feel connected to faculty early on (Allen & Eby, 2008; Mireles-Rios & Garcia, 2019) Mentoring can emerge in a variety of forms, including faculty and staff members. Dugan and Komives (2007) recommended faculty and staff in higher education create relationships in which students can receive one-on-one attention in a college environment to set them up for success (Hirsch et al., 2021). To help first-generation students acclimate to higher education, institutions that build rapport and relationships, along with assisting them in building relationships with faculty, can affect the outcomes of those first-generation students (Bassett, 2020; Collier & Morgan, 2008).

By engaging students in mentoring and one-on-one support from faculty and staff who have previously been first-generation students or have worked closely with these students, they relate to persons who can guide them through university life, lived experiences, and hopefully into the world of careers and graduate schools. Research has shown when students engage in mentoring, their leadership development is positively influenced, encouraging support of both personal and professional growth while acknowledging the experiences of the students (Campbell et al., 2012; Connolly, 2017; Hirsch et al., 2021;). As higher education institutions and professionals begin to redesign programming for first-generation students, they must include information and procedures on mentorship and how to develop a working relationship with faculty and staff to guide them through a college career and potentially into careers and possibly graduate school.

**First-Generation Student Resources and Needs**

Six key factors arose in a recent study from (Re)Defined by Booth et al. (2013) on what students indicate they need to succeed. Students feel they need help from the university to be (1) directed: to tell them exactly what they need to know and how to achieve the task, (2) focused: to help students stay on track, (3) nurtured: allowing students to feel somebody wants and helps them succeed, (4) engaged: actively participating in class, (5) connected: feeling they are part of a community at their institution, and (6) valued: student skills, abilities, talents, and more were recognized and seen as a contribution to the campus community (Booth et al., 2013). In reviewing these six key factors, students of all

backgrounds desire the same opportunities and connections on campus. As educators and administrators, our responsibility is to hold these needs up and make them a reality for an inclusive environment.

In the same study by Booth et al. (2013), students spoke of their struggles in understanding what was expected of them to succeed in college. Realizing first-generation students need additional support to succeed is at the core of understanding these students. Many need a clear plan and learning environment laid out for them with expectations and deadlines delineated. As universities reshape their focus and attempt more efficient use of resources for these students, it is imperative they also consider how to include their faculty and staff in the decision-making process. Allowing these faculty and staff to utilize what they know and help students benefit from those skills can create rapport and continue to provide retention efforts for these students.

Academic preparedness is an expectation of higher education; however, this can be a space in which first-generation students are underprepared. Their under preparedness can lead to poor academic performance and a more challenging transition into college life, which ultimately results in poor attainment and progression for a degree (Atherton, 2014). Frustration and overall difficulties during their first semester and year lead first-generation students to drop out or take time off (Atherton, 2014). Precollegiate programs are available to help students close the gap on academic preparedness, including TRIO, GEAR UP, and other programs; if students are identified early, they can take advantage of these programs to improve their transition into college. Universities can provide a

transition period through summer bridge programs and mentorship upon arrival.

Resources to develop interactions with their peers and on-campus personnel

also can decrease the risk of negative attrition (Atherton, 2014).

For some students, belonging and feeling as though they are seen was

not their primary challenge; paying tuition and living expenses (47%) and

struggling academically (21%) were at the top of their list of concerns (Azmitia et

al., 2018). First-generation students often require more student loans to pay for

necessities such as housing, books, travel and transportation, and food (DeRosa

& Dolby, 2014). They also may have some discrepancies in their financial aid

from their chosen university. These financial resource constraints cause great

stress to students.

**First-Generation College Student Characteristics, Identities, and Traits**

Educators and higher education institutions can provide the resources to

actively give first-generation college students the items they need to be

successful. One key may be to switch mindsets from a deficit-based approach to

an asset-based approach with first-generation students. Focusing on the

students' characteristics, traits, and personality (identity) can allow students to

feel empowered and access successful career pathways. A deficit-based

approach may cause campus community members to have low expectations

from the performance and development of these students; by shifting to an asset-

based approach, first-generation student strengths such as resilience are more

visible to educators and help students to feel empowered (Owen et al., 2019).

First-generation students and graduates arrive on campus with backgrounds, histories, and more that shape who they are to become successful. Using those resources already in their toolkit, along with a shift in mindset for higher education institutions, can impact the success, retention, and graduation of each of those students and how they utilize those resources in their communities to become successful leaders. In a Campus Labs survey of 750,000 students, first-generation college student respondents scored higher than non-first-generation college student peers on four of six non-cognitive skills related to academic persistence and success (Almeida et. al., 2019). First-generation college students scored higher in self-efficacy for learning, intellectual engagement, educational commitment, and campus engagement (although they scored lower in social comfort and resiliency).

The characteristics on which first-generation students scored higher are foundational tools that can ultimately translate into leadership roles. Tools like self-efficacy, engagement, and commitment help students gain access to career and leadership opportunities while ensuring their story and history as a first-generation student are held in high regard. Understanding that each student is unique on a college campus, while also understanding the resources available, can help higher education institutions advocate for first-generation students.

When educators and institutions view students, specifically first-generation students, they must connect students' characteristics, traits, and lived experiences to help them feel connected at the university. Essentially, higher education serves a role in building aspects of students' identity and helping them

grow through a new season of their lives. For some students, their characteristics of community service, professional social networking, and new forms of activism and social problem solving (Owen et al., 2019) raise the bar for educators and institutions to meet students where they are and to foster these characteristics into future leadership roles. These students are taking their lived experiences and putting them outside the classroom and confronting their engagement in new and uncharted ways (Owen et al., 2019). Higher education institutions have an opportunity to be catalysts for identity development alongside leadership development to propel the new generation of leaders into the organizations, education, and political aspects of the world.

Many times, perseverance is a learned trait from years of a family's perseverance and determination; these students seek a different life for themselves, and this perseverance serves them well. For many, dropping out of college is not an option, which can be rooted in their cultural or familial values, and their resiliency to finish is strong. While it is hard to pinpoint the exact experience that shapes their resiliency, their values are held in high regard; for a lot of these students, it is imperative due to being family translators, caregivers, or seeking a better life, and their education is the way to enable success.

**First-Generation College Student Engagement**

Student affairs professionals and higher education administrators have an opportunity to build a platform for student connection and engagement. Student involvement on campus through living-learning communities, Greek Life, registered student organizations, alumni office ambassadors, intramurals, and

student government, along with other various commitments, can provide outstanding community, connection, and growth in terms of leadership and development. These entities are essentially incubators for the next generation of growth and development. The world has seen trends in leadership and how it has developed over time; leadership has become an increasingly important element of success and failure in organizations (Goldberg, 2017).

Allowing students, the opportunity to achieve leadership roles and develop some basic leadership skills as early as their first year in postsecondary schooling could be incredibly impactful to their future success. Most students base their college decisions on three factors: incidental, limited, and personal fit (Holland, 2019). Understanding their choice and what each school can offer them in terms of engagement is essential. Most counselors assume students are gauging schools solely on personal fit, which is the reason universities and colleges must connect with students on all three dimensions (Holland, 2019). Allowing students to view themselves in a space is a fundamental piece of the college access puzzle. This may be a long journey of seeing themselves in universities with first-generation students.

"Evidence has suggested first-generation students who interact with peers have more significant effect sizes on moral development and character, intercultural effectiveness and universal, diverse orientation, and psychological well-being" (Owen et al., 2019; Padgett et al., 2012, p. 262). For educators in higher education to build a foundation in which first-generation students can seek

leadership opportunities, the institution must understand the value of peer interaction and social engagement through various on-campus organizations.

Past studies have found students who are engaged are more successful than those who are not (Grabsch et al., 2021; Brue et al., 2010)—understanding the relationship between academic and personal success engagement, especially in first-generation students and graduates. A university or college can prepare rigorous coursework alongside a whole student engagement experience that can expose students to future successes and opportunities.

### Colleges and Universities to Foster Leadership Development

Burns (1978) noted one of the universal cravings is the hunger for effective and creative leadership. Universities and colleges can foster this creative and compelling leadership with first-generation students through utilizing on-campus participation and engagement. This also can be fostered through course curriculum design; faculty professional development can guide this new and increased leadership commitment.

Characteristics and traits form college students' identities, specifically first-generation college students. Identity has emerged as a potent force in understanding leadership (Grabsch et al., 2021; Ibarra et al., 2014). When understanding how first-generation students become leaders, it is essential to explore how these students' identities are formed and foster their leadership styles. It is crucial to recognize how universities and student engagement while enrolled form their leadership skills.

According to Grabsch et al. (2021), to understand student identity in leadership we must note the pieces that formulate their success; identity is about motivation, authenticity, and conformity. Understanding how these pieces shape identity formulates methods to foster leadership evolution. The National Leadership Research Agenda of the Association of Leadership Educators (ALE) recommends leadership scholars and educators effectively consider social identity through research, education, and practice (Grabsch et al., 2021; Andrenoro et al., 2013).

When considering engagement and students becoming involved in campus lives, individuals tend to grow faster than a team, so fostering specific pieces of development in first-generation students can exponentially increase leadership skills in these students (NASPA, n.d.). Utilizing engagement and learning throughout collegiate atmospheres for first-generation students can employ self-efficacy to understand their experiences and their abilities in shaping them into the next generation of leaders.

The National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) in 2018 found students, while demanding considerable time and effort for engagement, also facilitate outside the classroom experiences and interactions that are meaningful with faculty and their colleagues. They extend their engagement to foster collaboration and seek frequent feedback to grow and include a diverse set of associates (Indiana University NSSE, 2018). When students are viewed as necessary and successful individuals regardless of their experiences, universities promote leadership through actions and involvement. A positive relationship

between socially responsible leadership and students' campus activities has been noted that promotes service participation, fieldwork, and off-campus experiences (Matteo & You, 2020).

Student leadership skills can promote graduate employability and lifelong learning (Skalicky et al., 2020). It is crucial to support student leadership through intentional, transparent, and reflective manners, which prevents imposing limiting definitions of students' leadership and involvement (Skalicky et al., 2020). As the ability to provide student leadership opportunities grows within universities, higher education professionals seek to understand how to become transparent and intentional in their leadership advancement.

**Colleges and Universities Utilize Mentorship to Create Social Capital**

The role of a mentor can emerge from many different roles in higher education, including faculty, staff, student affairs educators, employers, and peers (Hirsh et al., 2021; Parks, 2000). The utilization of mentorship has a constructive association with developing leadership, including socially responsible leadership (Campbell et al., 2012; Collins-Shapiro, 2006; Dugan & Komives, 2007; Dugan & Komives, 2010; Hastings et al., 2015; Hastings & Sunderman, 2019; Hirsh et al., 2021; Komives & Collins-Shapiro, 2006; Komives et al., 2009). By investing in a sound mentorship program throughout higher education institutions, a positive experience can be provided to all students, including first-generation students. "A great need exists to understand better the unique nature of college student leadership development as well as how the college experience contributes to that process" (Hirsh et al., 2021; Dugan &

Komives, 2007, p. 7). Understanding how the dynamic of first-generation students may be significantly different from their peers is important to the awareness of how access and opportunities can be shaped throughout their higher education experience to increase their leadership opportunities.

Mentorship is a relationship between students and mentors (Kawahara et al., 2020). This relationship is both professional and personal in most scenarios and may provide growth and substance over time to those involved. Kawahara et al. (2020) stated no one mentor will serve all needs; it is reasonable to have multiple mentors for guidance in a variety of areas including physical, mental, professional, personal, emotional, and spiritual. For mentoring to work, clear goals, tasks, and objectives must be present that create boundaries and build the relationship.

By engaging in a mentorship relationship, first-generation students have an opportunity to build their social capital. Research has shown having social capital as a first-generation student plays a critical role in college and professional success (Schwartz et al., 2018). These networks on campus and in the professional settings through alumni and influential campus community members create access to capital in the form of connections. Although many interventions for first-generation college students focus on academic preparation, research has suggested finding ways to bolster social capital may be an effective strategy for increasing first-generation college students' persistence (Schwartz et al., 2018). Mentors can create networks and information access to enable students to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to campus. Many

mentors stay in contact with their mentees long after their time on campus ends, empowering students to create their own victory and eventually seek leadership roles of their own.

Mentorship also helps with student accountability through check-ins and meetings (in person, phone, or virtually), resulting in a culture of care coming from the university for first-generation students. Checking in on students throughout the year helps them see their potential and persevere to do their best with grades and involvement on campus; this also can lead to additional (and thus greater social capital) networking opportunities for students to seek jobs, internships, on-campus opportunities, and more. Strengthening behaviors amongst a social network is a behavioral pattern that sociological studies indicate can emphasize the way one's own attitude is shaped (Granovetter, 1973.), allowing mentorship to shape strong patterns in first-generation students will be a valuable asset to their own being but also the well-being of campus communities.

One-way social capital works is in terms of aspirational capital, which is dreaming about the future regardless of circumstances and without considering unattainable goals (O'Shea, 2016). Social networks are highly stratified by socioeconomic class and people tend to befriend and create social entities with those of similar incomes (Chetty, et. al., 2022). Creating a way for first-generation students to look forward to something regardless of their circumstances is a goal for which higher education institutions can strive through mentorship and a variety of engagement opportunities. A fundamental weakness that modern sociological theory fails to account for are micro-level patterns in relation to social

capital (Granovetter, 1973.), campus communities must consider those micro-level pieces to fundamentally build a strong program for social capital increases amongst their students. Campuses will always include students who are more privileged; more advantaged; and potentially even legacy students going for the same career, positions, scholarships, etc., but first-generation students are incredibly talented and can use their lived experiences to shape the way they begin to think about the future. Social capital can also include how tight knit varying groups are amongst specific communities, in this case campus communities; this will inform their level of civic engagement and economic mobility associated with such (Chetty, et. al., 2022). These students can utilize what they know, what they have lived through, and what they are comfortable sharing to embolden their chances as those aspirational capital goals they possess, all while higher education institutions champion a way for them to do so with adequate support. By understanding how universities create economic connectedness, cohesiveness, and civic engagement (Chetty, et. al., 2022) in terms of mentorship and social capital is also important to the livelihood of first-generation students. First-generation students can use mentorship as a form of building social capital, but also embracing their campus communities for the pieces that Chetty describes as part of fundamental social capital.

**Research Limitations**

Understanding first-generation students and their aspirations while enrolled in a higher education institution is essential for serving them. According to an ongoing study through the CGS/GRE Survey of Graduate Enrollment and

Degrees, a 4.3% increase has been noted in applications for admissions to graduate programs, either master's or doctoral degrees, in first-generation students (Carlton, 2015; Kent, 2012). Aspirations such as this can foster leadership and allow students to showcase their lived experiences throughout their work.

This literature review provided a background on first-generation students and graduates, revealing a gap in the research. Studies are available on academic preparedness of first-generation students; but less is known about the stories, histories, characteristics, traits, and identities of first-generation students. The analysis also is missing on how these factors shape first-generation graduates and how they impact leadership and other positions. Understanding both pieces help higher education institutions shape their curriculum, courses, and professional development to better serve first-generation students.

**Summary**

This chapter explored literature to help readers understand first-generation students, their characteristics, traits, and identity, along with how to foster their leadership experiences at higher education institutions. The research must continue to develop and provide additional literature to understand how first-generation students become graduates and eventually successful leaders. Understanding how universities can foster leadership empowerment and development in first-generation students can alter curriculum, student engagement, and more through lived experiences and involvement within university entities.

# CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Throughout this chapter, readers are presented with the methods used in this study to conduct and analyze interviews. The research looked at first-generation student graduates who hold successful leadership roles within higher education and explored their experience to obtain success. This study was conducted in spring 2022 through virtual platforms. The researcher challenged the interviewees to share their experiences and how they shaped their leadership roles and styles through characteristics, traits, and identities they developed from participation in higher education.

## Overview of Research Problem

Little is known about first-generation college graduates and their path to leadership roles. While educators and higher education professionals understand how to retain and support first-generation college students academically, a significant disconnect exists relative to fostering their lived experiences into characteristics, traits, and identities. Understanding these pieces builds them into leaders in their schools, communities, and careers, as well as fosters intentional leadership experiences throughout universities. This study sought to define those lived experiences, characteristics, traits, and identities of successful leaders in higher education and to use them to analyze how to better support the development of first-generation students and graduates into prominent leaders. The lack of resources and information surrounding this topic enabled the researcher to navigate questions and answers to best serve the future of first-generation students. Developing leadership qualities early on significantly

enhances the first-generation college students' experiences both while enrolled and following their time at universities and colleges.

## Research Questions

1. What characteristics, traits, and sense of identity do first-generation college students embody to contribute to successful leadership in higher education?

2. What lived experiences, student involvement, and university support contributed to first-generation students' leadership experiences? Sub question: how did those experiences influence the first-generation college graduates' leadership personalities and career influences?

3. What factor or contribution did past lived experiences have on leadership character

## Qualitative Research Approach

This study explored the characteristics, traits, and identities embodied and experienced by first-generation college graduates to make them successful leaders in their communities and organizations. A qualitative methodology approach was used since this approach best fit the phenomenology inquiry, a line of investigation that seeks to understand individuals' lived experiences and intentions within their lived world (Miller & Crabtree, 1999). The design employed semi-structured, in-depth, open-ended questions as a line of inquiry through interviews with participants. Merriam (2009) defined semi-structured interviews in terms of a mix of more and less structured interview questions that offer flexibility in the answers, but with specific data that are required from all respondents; most of the interviews were guided by questions or topics.

Utilizing a phenomenology study to understand participants' lived experiences best suited this study to support the linkages to a specific phenomenon. Creswell (2007) defined purposeful sampling as the researcher selecting individuals and sites for the study because the researcher can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study. The data collected were rich in information but changed from participant to participant and provided insight into how the singularities occurred and could be linked together. Seeking to expand the knowledge on how characteristics, traits, and identity played a factor in first-generation college graduates and their successful leadership experience, this study created a platform to link the phenomenology together.

In-depth interviews were conducted to gain access to leaders within the higher education community to shape the experiences they thought molded them into the leader they are, along with their leadership philosophy. By understanding the relationship between lived experience and leadership styles, a broad sense of understanding was formulated about developing first-generation students into leaders.

The strategy to not focus solely on one area was intended to benefit the study by inclusivity and through a wide range in experiences, education, and success. Higher education institutions serve communities across the states differently at each institution and how they handle first-generation college students and graduates. This strategy developed an understanding of those students, graduates, and leaders to provide the most accurate data. Utilizing the

research, developing strategic interview questions related to the study enabled the research to be used and cited at various administrative levels throughout education and the community as additional organizational resources were built.

**Settings and Context**

The interviews were conducted via zoom and email. Those conducted via zoom were recorded and transcribed. Questions were designed to explore lived experiences, characteristics, traits, and identity, while others focused on their time at their respected universities and how their adventures before and during helped them develop. In addition, a focus was on demographics to gain better insight into first-generation college students who not only go into education, but also pursue leadership roles.

**Participants and Recruitment**

The participants in this study are administrators or other leaders at higher education institutions classified as first-generation college graduates. This recruitment strategy was nationwide to locate leaders at the university level and those who hold an assistant director or higher title to provide rich data and understand each level of growth.

The participants were recruited for this study via multiple methods. Some were recruited through an email communication to members of a listserv for academic administrators who serve in higher education, accessed by the Western Kentucky University Student Affairs Program. Social media posts and snowball sampling also was used, and some personal invitations were extended to individuals known to the researcher who fit the inclusion criteria.

Participants were sought who are diverse in their ages, ranks, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation to provide a competent view of the composition of higher education leaders and how first-generation college graduates in all contexts access leadership roles and successful opportunities. The criteria included higher education professionals who hold at least the title of assistant director through university president; all are first-generation graduates and are interested in providing insight into their experiences as a first-generation college student and their leadership process. The exclusion criteria included those who are below an assistant director in higher education and those who are not first-generation college students or graduates. The research was not limited based on geographic location to a specific area in the US but relied on nationwide experiences to shape this study.

**Instruments**

The researcher used in-depth interviews to build the interview questions, allowing access to the most accurate data and discussion, along with listening to these leaders' experiences. The study did not use focus groups to make each person's story unique and heard. The in-depth interviews allowed the data to project a common theme among the characteristics, traits, and identity without causing each level to mime the same conclusions and aspects, concluding a phenomenon.

The interview questions consisted of four major themed questions with follow-up questions to each. The themed questions were directly related to the research questions. Additional inquiries followed the original themed questions

using phenomenological data analysis from Moustakas (1994) and Polkinghorne (1989). Allowing the participants to continue to build on their answers provided significant statements of support for the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Data Collection**

The interviews were approximately 30 to 90 minutes in length, and time was reserved for follow-up questions from both the interviewees and interviewer. The researcher also was mindful of their time as higher education professionals.

**Data Management and Analysis**

The researcher analyzed the data received from participants during in-depth interviews using transcription, coding, pattern development, theme development in each interview, and overarching themes that arose. No in-person interviews were conducted. The virtual interviews were recorded using zoom and were transcribed. Once transcribed, each interview was reviewed for accuracy. The researcher searched for clusters of meaning connecting each statement and theme significantly related to one another. Each participant was allowed to review their transcript in total to check for errors or discrepancies.

The analysis was guided by the research questions and identified manually to classify the emerging themes. Coding allowed for themes to emerge gradually. Merriam (2009) noted, "coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of the data so specific aspects of the data can be easily retrieved". The researcher developed a repetitive motion to transcribe the interviews and identify themes; the interviews were recorded utilizing Zoom, as well as transcribed using the Zoom feature. The

process consisted of printing a copy of the interview transcripts and using a color-coding process for each of the codes and eventually categories and themes. Codes were defined as "tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study" (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The color-coding process allowed themes to organically develop. The data and codes were then transferred to a Google Sheet. Following the interviews and watching them at least two times, the researcher listened and examined for commonalities among the languages in case linkage was not found with printed language but rather verbal and non-verbal cues. Using this method of data analysis, it helped the research develop significant statements that linked to the themes listed in this study. The significant statements created a phenomenon and developed a commonality among the participants' incredibly vast lived experiences.

### Ethical Considerations

During this study, it was crucial to preserve anonymity, maintain security of the documents, and create a sense of confidentiality so participants could share sensitive conversations to aid in the research. This was accomplished through utilization of IRB approval and informed consent; The informed consent can be found in the Appendix A.

### Trustworthiness

To demonstrate this study's trustworthiness and validate the findings, the researcher took precautions such as member checking, reflexivity, audit trails, and composing thick and rich data; each method validated the accuracy of the

findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher utilized member checking as one of the primary sources of trustworthiness, reaching out via email to each of the participants to provide a copy of the transcript to review and requesting should they need to add or alter anything in the interview, they should let the researcher know as soon as possible. The transcript was reviewed, and the researcher utilized the recordings for indicators as well. The participants received a copy of their transcript straight from the recording. The email sent can be found in Appendix A.

Another source of trustworthiness involved audit trails to compose rich data. This was done through various journals both during the interviews, rewatching the recordings, and throughout the writing process for data analysis. Various topics were included in these journals, including a brain map to indicate the main themes and significant statements noted by the participants during their interviews. The researcher also used color coding of the interviews on paper while listening to the recordings.

One additional method that provided great trustworthiness to the research during this process was reflexivity. While acknowledging the researcher is a first-generation graduate, leader in higher education, and currently enrolled in an educational leadership program while exploring the topic, bias was acknowledged and understood during the process. While the study was not completely unbiased due to the nature of the research, the researcher used reflexivity to bring the participants' voices to the front of the research.

**Researcher Bias**

Potential bias in this study could include the researcher's experience as a first-generation college student and graduate, along with the corresponding factor of the researcher being employed by a higher education institution. Also, important to note is that the researcher is seeking a doctoral degree focused on higher education leadership. To mitigate this bias, the researcher used journaling and reflecting upon the results of each interview. The researcher also included participants from throughout the US to reduce subjective bias.

**Limitations**

- One limitation of this study is inclusion criteria. As the research progressed, additional leaders who could have been included were excluded due to being below an assistant director level. Those specific individuals (coordinators, advisors, graduate assistants, and more) were originally left out to focus on assistant director or higher, understanding that a variety of schools do not use the title assistant director, but rather use the titles of coordinators, managers, and others, which provides a limitation. Excluding these persons created a limitation and a decrease in active voices to this research. While at the time of research the interviews provided saturation, expanding the inclusion criteria could provide additional research areas.

- Additionally, two of the nine interviews were conducted via email due to scheduling conflicts. Both interviews provided a summary to the questions, but had they been done in person, they could have provided even more information and content for this research.

## Summary

This chapter explained the methodology used within the study. The following chapters include an explanation of data analysis, recommendations, and findings. The participants are detailed in further context as well.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

The final sample from this study included nine individuals who participated in one interview. The interviews were comprised of four questions directly related to their perceptions of success, leadership, and collegiate life as first-generation college students, along with sub-questions under each major-themed question. The research explored educational opportunities, access to those experiences, leadership roles, and other facets linked to the collegiate experience.

The participants in this study involved five females and four males. Four are African American/Black, one is Hispanic/Latinx, one is Asian American, and three are White/Caucasian. All are higher education community members with a title of assistant director or higher. The breakdown and information for each participant can be found in Table 1. A total of 143 significant statements were selected from the interviews and organized into themes. See Table 2 for examples of significant statements and corresponding themes.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

| Participant Name | Race/Ethnicity | Gender Identity | Job Title |
|---|---|---|---|
| Stacy | White/Caucasian | Female | Director |
| Don | White/Caucasian | Male | President |
| Franklin | Asian American | Male | Vice President |
| Ramona | Latina | Female | Director |
| Amara | Black/African American | Female | Director |
| Lorrie | Black/African American | Female | Associate Director |
| Catherine | White/Caucasian | Female | Assistant Director |
| Rowan | Black/African American | Male | Director |
| Tyler | Black/African American | Male | Director |

The overarching theme that emerged during this research study was

Creating Obvious Opportunity. Three sub-themes were (1) I didn't know what I

didn't know: Creating Space for First-Generation Students to Grow; (2)

Mentoring: Creating a Platform to Increase Social Capital of First-Generation

Students and Graduates; and (3) Greatness is Instilled in You: Overcoming

Racism, Trauma, and Lived Experiences. Themes that emerged throughout the

analysis are provided in Figure 1.

**Table 2**

*Significant Statements from Data Analysis*

| Significant Statement | Theme |
|---|---|
| The resources that I would have used. I didn't know that there were Tutoring places on campus. I never used those things, but I think if I knew they were available, I would have. | "I Didn't Know What I Didn't Know": Creating Space for First-Gen Students to Grow |
| Coming from a low-income family, I was never taught how to manage money properly. I had an insane shopping habit and would often end the semester not even be able to afford ramen. | "I Didn't Know What I Didn't Know": Creating Space for First-Gen Students to Grow |
| I learned this first-hand being at a school with students that were legacy. I witnessed them getting positions and opportunities simply because of their parents' connections and not their abilities. | "I Didn't Know What I Didn't Know": Creating Space for First-Gen Students to Grow |
| And so, being undocumented holds a significant hold on me and this way of maneuvering a system that isn't built for people. | "I Didn't Know What I Didn't Know": Creating Space for First-Gen Students to Grow |
| I served as the "Black" person to encourage incoming Black students who wanted to see someone who looked like them. | "Greatness is Instilled in You": Overcoming Racism, Trauma, and Lived Experiences |
| My parents divorced when I was in college, so everything that was going on at home kind of felt distant. | "Greatness is Instilled in You": Overcoming Racism, Trauma, and Lived Experiences |
| No one can take my education away from me. | "Greatness is Instilled in You": Overcoming Racism, Trauma, and Lived Experiences |
| We don't always talk about this journey here during this period also is where you find your faith. | "Greatness is Instilled in You": Overcoming Racism, Trauma, and Lived Experiences |

| Significant Statement | Theme |
|---|---|
| Until people matter and put the institution ownership, students know their systems in place for them to come here where they belong. | "Greatness is Instilled in You": Overcoming Racism, Trauma, and Lived Experiences |
| One of the things I always tell people is what the message are we saying, welcome to the team, now leave your identities at the door. | "Greatness is Instilled in You": Overcoming Racism, Trauma, and Lived Experiences |
| And you can you're going to take me out of this, you know, and so, there was pressure from my mom to save her. | "Greatness is Instilled in You": Overcoming Racism, Trauma, and Lived Experiences |
| Organizations are adhering to a different demographic multi-generational home. | "Greatness is Instilled in You": Overcoming Racism, Trauma, and Lived Experiences |
| I felt empowered to do many things (as a first gen); They (mentors) saw something in me and would cultivate that. | Mentoring: Creating a Platform to Increase Social Capital among First-Gen Students and Graduates |
| You know the level of confidence that you see me share with you right now has not always been here. | Mentoring: Creating a Platform to Increase Social Capital among First-Gen Students and Graduates |
| But really, the transformational college experience and those were probably the things that I look back and say, what did I miss out on. | Mentoring: Creating a Platform to Increase Social Capital among First-Gen Students and Graduates |
| It was the right people at the right time in the right environment, and we cultivated a lot of times of mattering and belonging versus belonging and mattering. | Mentoring: Creating a Platform to Increase Social Capital among First-Gen Students and Graduates |
| You know, education, as an equalizer as an opportunity like I like those stories, I think, still stick with me. | Mentoring: Creating a Platform to Increase Social Capital among First-Gen Students and Graduates |

| Significant Statement | Theme |
|---|---|
| If you were to ask me for like a quick response, what is the number one barrier for students? It's the lack of network and social capital. | Mentoring: Creating a Platform to Increase Social Capital among First-Gen Students and Graduates |
| Understand that (loving students), and you feel like you can align your practice and purpose to that; they with first gen and all that intersectionality, like learn it loves it to appreciate it and see it as an asset. | Mentoring: Creating a Platform to Increase Social Capital among First-Gen Students and Graduates |

*Note.* These statements are from the participants directly with formulated meanings relating to the themes of the analysis.

**Figure 1**

Theme Tree
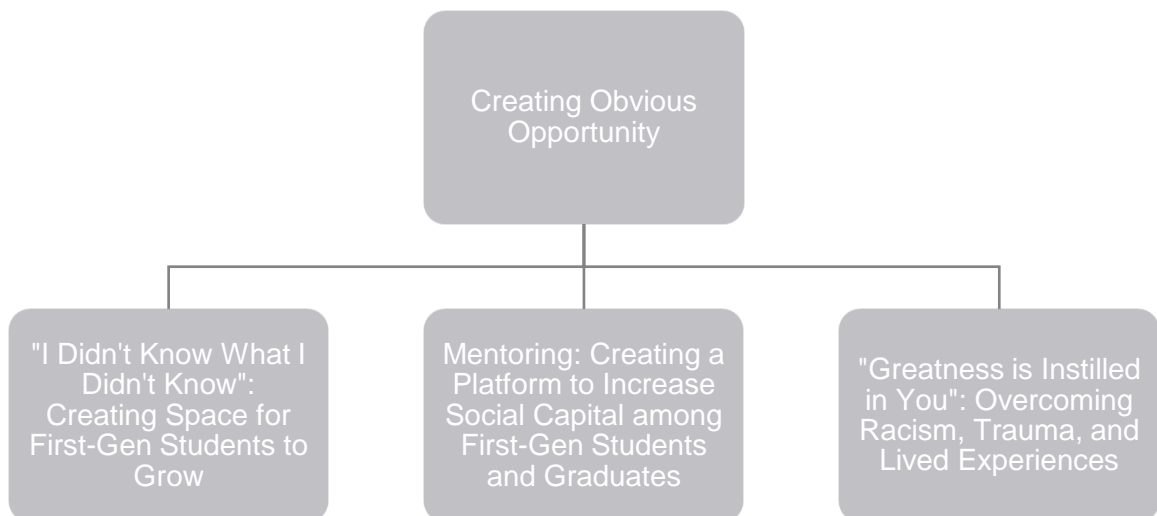
**Overarching Theme**

*"Creating Obvious Opportunity" for first-generation students*

The overarching or carrying theme of this study was "Creating Obvious Opportunity" for first-generation students. This theme could have been an umbrella theme to tie all other themes and give an easier way to interpret the data. The core of the data focused on creating opportunity so incredibly obvious for first-generation students that they could identify it and would know how to create the most of their time in higher education, regardless of their circumstance. Participants noted often first-generation students were unsure what to do, where to go, or how to access help, much less create a path to get involved in on-campus activities or leadership. In some circumstances, surviving and creating a realistic pathway to graduation was a top priority for first-generation students. Institutions, faculty, and staff who work with first-generation students and eventually graduates could be looking ahead at a transition to serve students with the apparent opportunity and embody the missions of their institutions.

Amara said this about being a leader today and reflecting on her time in higher education:

"Now, I try to emulate the type of leader that I wish I were back when I was younger. I regret not being involved, so I am more on campus now."

Catherine commented about social capital and creating obvious opportunity for students:

"So my class was kind of attached to that living-learning community, and the dean of students was my instructor, and then there was a student mentor in that class who happened to be the SGA President, so right off the bat I was introduced to an administrator and a major student leader, and I still say that that greatly enhanced my first-year experience and kind of the lens through which I experienced college, especially that first semester, and so the dean of students was and still is a very close mentor of mine."

Ramona spoke about creating opportunities:

"Creating these opportunities that are obvious to them to be able to engage in leadership positions because, like I said, how am I supposed to know where to look if I am having such a hard time just navigating the campus as itself."

This overarching theme set the tone for the other themes, it was important to acknowledge that each participant indicated that if given clear and concise opportunity more first-generation students would take advantage of those. Having higher education institutions understand the need for clear communication about opportunity especially to those unfamiliar with the systems will increase participation and engagement. As higher education adapts to the influx of first-generation students, we can also adapt our knowledge of experiences prior to arrival and upon entering and adjust our engagement programming accordingly.

The following themes emerged under this overarching theme. Quotes from participants are included for support.

*I didn't know what I didn't Know: Creating Space for First-Gen Students to Grow*

All nine participants mentioned the concept of not knowing what you didn't know, and it seemed that everyone around them knew before they arrived the secrets to success at the collegiate level. Looking back, it was as simple as it sounds: they didn't know because they didn't know. The participants wanted to know to what the other students were privy and understand how to be successful at this new academic level but being first-generation gave them an additional setback they were not originally planning on. Understanding systems that potentially are not designed for you is a challenge.

This challenge can come from being a first-generation college student, but it also can come from being part of an underrepresented population, doubly stacking the deck against a student in this new chapter of their life. Understanding how to create room for first-generation students, but also students who are already from an underrepresented population, is essential for higher education institutions. According to the Center for First-Generation Student Success at NASPA (n.d.), approximately 33% of the higher education students are first-generation. The Center also reported 18% of first-generation students are Black/African American, 25% are Hispanic/Latinx, 6% are Asian, 1% are American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.5% are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (2021).

Understanding each of these participants' stories and how they felt their life as a first-generation college student affected their abilities to grow during their collegiate experience was an important asset to the research. The unique

challenge of being a first-generation student, coupled with being from an

underrepresented population, helped to acknowledge the struggles and the

ability of each participant to allow assessment of the situation to provide the

research with a voice to impact the future of first-generation students, graduates,

and leaders.

Stacy explained her view on not knowing things her peers seemed to

know:

"'The resources that I would have used, I didn't know that there were tutoring

places on campus. I never used those things, but I think if I knew they were

available, I would have. I keep saying we don't know until we know."

Amara explained that she didn't know specific things about college and

how she handled that pressure:

"Coming from a low-income family, I was never taught how to manage

money properly. I had an insane shopping habit and would often end the

semester not even be able to afford ramen. We don't know what we don't know. I

didn't know or understand the importance of student engagement."

Tyler explained his leadership developed from students' experiences and

being both first-generation and from an underrepresented population in this

manner:

"I was highly engaged on campus, and this provided me with the

opportunity to meet many that were not like me. I was able to lean into

who I was and wanted to be. For me, in many cases, I served as the

"Black" person to encourage incoming Black students who wanted to see

someone who looked like them. I am so grateful for these experiences because they prepared me for life I would and am living. I believe and know that I am an overcomer! Being at a predominately White school gave me the strength to realize that I do not need validation from others to know my value or worth. I have learned to be authentic in all spaces, which is important to me."

Franklin discussed how to view the intersectionality of both first-generation students and their underrepresented populations:

"Yeah, absolutely, and they (higher education institutions) with first-gen and all of that intersectionality is like learn it loves it to appreciate it and see it as an asset, not as there are problems that we have to bring up to speed right like."

Information on university campuses can be daunting if you are unfamiliar with accessing it. This theme lends itself to higher education institutions being more transparent with communication and their information. It is important that students know what they don't know, its critical that higher education beings breaking that silo down in the universities to lend itself to a more inclusive and vibrant campus community. Students are resilient and will preserver, but they need the information and to all start on the same line to do so. There were several conversations within this study and the participants that indicated that one of the main barriers they faced were systems that were not designed for them and the lack of knowledge that they had in comparison to their counterparts.

*Mentoring: Creating a Platform to Increase Social Capital of First-Gen Students and Graduates*

Another theme that emerged was focused on mentors and the ability or inability to participate in a formal or informal mentoring process. Almost all nine participants mentioned various methods in which their mentors shaped the person they became, helped them find resources, and gave them access to opportunities, including leadership roles on campus. Participating in a mentoring relationship helped to shape the experience of first-generation students and graduates; it created a tighter support network for students on campus. Utilizing both faculty and staff mentorship, as well as peer-to-peer mentoring, is a way to set first-generation students up for success in their collegiate careers. Understanding knowledge exists that first-generation graduates, faculty, staff, and students can share with one another to make the transition to college a smoother one is essential. This transition can be filled with trials, having someone who is available to guide and counsel students in the unique facets of being the first person in their families to attend college. Creating both formal and informal processes where students can network and engage with mentors is an important component of building a space where students feel supported and motivated to succeed. Formal processes may include matching mentors and mentees through questionnaires and abilities, but informal processes may include mixers for first-generation faculty and staff to network with incoming students to match and create that foundation. A variety of ways are available to support this initiative, and it is critical that higher education institutions capitalize

on the value mentoring can bring to the persistence and graduation of first-generation students. Within our campus communities, a way exists to create a foundation for mentorship, but beyond campus there is also a need to formulate working partnerships that can facilitate mentorship for specific majors, careers, etc. We can utilize our networks beyond campus to create a solid foundation for future leaders to enter the workforce post-graduation and succeed.

These nine stories provide context for how each participant experienced mentorship and how that mentorship affected them as a student and as a professional in their leadership experience. Being able to see the value of mentorship is critical to the livelihood of higher education institutions, as well as first-generation college students. The experience mentorship can provide to a collegiate atmosphere is something that impacts students for years.

In discussing his life experiences surrounding his success and transition from high school to college, Tyler shared that his experience provided support through community members: "Other experience(s) that shaped me was being associated with my community park. A woman sought to keep kids off the street and provide them with opportunities to see and do things they otherwise would not."

Catherine described her experience transitioning from high school to college student as,

> "Kind of right off the bat I was introduced to an administrator in a major student leader, and I still say that that greatly enhanced my first-year experience and kind of the lens through which I experienced college,

especially that first semester, and so the dean of students was and still is

a very close mentor of mine.*"*

Ramona described her experience with her mentors and the intentionality of her experiences:

"And she (mentor) like was supportive and she's like I see myself in you

know and like some of these navigational skills I was able to learn. I just

feel like we're not as purposeful with our outreach or our intentions of

connecting with these students, and the biggest thing is accessibility*."*

Being able to set students up for success from the beginning of their collegiate journeys is an incredible feat for higher education institutions but embracing a mentorship programming model and connecting first-year, first-generation students with a mentor from the beginning is one of the best ways to create retention amongst them. Not every student will want to or even need to be part of the mentorship models but allowing the opportunity to be embraced as an additional opportunity is crucial. Almost all the participants in this study spoke about their mentors and how without them they are not sure they would have made it through their degrees and into the successful leadership roles they hold now, each of them is still in contact with the persons who took the time to mentor them during those first years. Including education and information on how to become part of a mentorship model and experience is something universities could create a sense of community through for all students, including first-generation students; this is a tangible way they can take that experience their careers and leadership roles with them.

*Greatness is Instilled in You: Overcoming Racism, Trauma, and Lived*

*Experiences*

The last theme that emerged was the way in which trauma, racism, and their own lived experiences shaped the participants' lives and how first-generation students, and graduates face additional pressure when attending a university. Understanding the vitality of lived experiences and how they impact the world around us is a necessary resource for higher education institutions. The ability to not only understand what students are going through, but also to begin to build up resources within the campus communities is critical.

To support the trauma, racism, and lived personal experiences on campus communities would benefit institutions to create space to work through those experiences. Counseling centers are essential to this process, as well as space within individual colleges with specialized resources. In 2021, an annual report by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMS, 2021) de-identified data and concluded that contributions were made by 180 college and university counseling centers describing 153,233 unique college students seeking mental health treatment, 4,043 clinicians, and over 1,135,520 appointments. This information provides a good indicator that traumatic events and lived experiences deserve increased freedom to process and move forward in a collegiate environment. Understanding first-generation students come with their own set of lived experiences and life that occurs in conjunction with their college experience can dramatically enhance the services that can be provided by higher education institutions and how these students feel supported in that process.

As higher education institutions and professionals begin to understand stories like those in this research, it can paint a picture of how first-generation students experience life, which can be crucial to better support systems and resources. Allowing students to have an open dialogue about their experience, be it trauma, racism, mental health, or familial issues, is a component which must be implemented to create an environment on campuses that is inclusive and welcoming. Saying higher education professionals and institutions are accepting is insufficient; the dialogue and resources must be open and well thought out for first-generation students, as well as for all students.

Lorrie commented on her lived experiences and growing up in an underrepresented area of Chicago with a candid expression:

> "I wanted to be someone who could be impactful and influential within my community. I had an undergraduate professor who said to me, one day, what do you want to do? I said you know, honestly, I said, you know I'm a little girl from the south side of Chicago. I just want to get my bachelor's degree. You know greatness is instilled in you."

Rowan, an African American male from Texas, described his experience:

> "My grandmother raised me. And so, being raised by her, I'll say most of my experiences were shaped by her. Okay, even going to (school) is in the middle of East Texas. I tell people we have three branches, the KKK. Again, that brought up just more micro aggressions and various stereotypes. And so, from a college perspective, I was telling people I've had to learn how to code-switching adjust the line."

Franklin discussed his experience with this theme and his lived experiences through a different lens than the others, but with the same candidness:

"I was talking with a higher education colleague about just the imposter experience imposter syndrome. I was a person that always wanted to feel accepted, and I would be very much like an amphibian trying to morph into different social spaces. I was experiencing a lot of internalized homophobias; then I'd be like, I always put a strong wall up too. I very much was it a kind of internalized racism as well for myself, and so, I started to understand the value of diverse spaces, and you know why it's important to feel like you have community."

Stacy remarked on her experience entering college and overcoming trauma:

"My dad died whenever I was a senior in high school, and we were they were self-employed, so my dad was a coal truck driver. I saw my mom and dad's struggles, and I didn't want to. Because I knew that she could not sustain herself, I think it goes back to that there was the money piece and that first generational piece of it. I never wanted to rely on somebody else to make sure that my family and I were okay; I wanted to know that I could do it myself and had the means to do it."

Franklin described the way student support in relation to lived experiences can impact the student at an institution:

"I would say is that, like I just feel like students support cannot happen only in like a student affairs division or student success Office like it well integrated with faculty support and academics."

Each student who begins a collegiate journey has the greatness to become a success story instilled within them, they need the support from higher education professionals and institutions to do so. Changing the way that institutions think about their students, especially first-generation students and how to be inclusive of their lived experiences as well as their needs as they begin to shape some fundamental curriculum and engagement models is essential to the success of students, but also institutions. Participants in this study shared their experiences, they also shared that the way they felt and the way they were made to see themselves in some areas was something they had to overcome to see themselves as great and assets to their communities. Higher education can and should do better regarding those lived experiences being part of a larger conversation of belonginess and connectivity amongst college campuses.

**Summary**

In this chapter, the researcher connected the analysis to the phenomena linking mentorship, opportunities, lived experience, trauma, racism, and more to the need for institutions of higher education to create apparent opportunities for first-generation college students and graduates which eventually will aid in the leadership development of those students. First-generation leaders are developed in their college careers and creating a space for growth and

experiences in which they feel belonging, valued, and realistic expectation is

essential.

# CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The personal narratives provided by this research help to further the future of first-generation students' experiences in higher education through more leadership opportunities. During the research, nine participants identified themselves as first-generation college graduates holding a leadership position of assistant director or above in a higher education institution across the US. The interview questions were open-ended and can be found in Appendix C. The interview questions also are discussed in this chapter along with the literature. These questions provided an opportunity for each participant to share as much or as little as they saw fit for their circumstances.

This study is increasingly relevant due to the influx of first-generation college students enrolling over the last few years. The increased numbers of these students also have increased the knowledge needed by professionals to serve them and to aid in their development. A growing number of first-generation students, individuals from marginalized backgrounds, and racial and ethnic minorities are entering college (Anderson, 2003; Crissman & Ishler, 2005; Goode et al., 2020). These individuals face daunting challenges that limit their retention because they are less familiar with college culture or with its underlying hidden curriculum (Goode, 2020; Horn, 2003; Smith, 2013). Along with the resources provided in higher education institutions, college and university professionals also need to prepare students to seek leadership roles and successful platforms to utilize their knowledge both as first-generation students and as students and graduates who are significantly different from their colleagues and use those experiences to propel their professional lives.

**Study Overview**

This research study investigated the lived experiences, challenges, successes, and collegiate experiences of first-generation students and graduates leading up to their leadership roles. The framework for this study was shaped around transformational leadership to understand how positive transformational experiences in college can create leadership opportunities and encouragement for future leaders after graduation. Transformational leadership theory, according to Burns (1978), is a process by which leaders and followers help each other advance to higher levels of morals and motivations. First-generation students are the first in their families to seek postsecondary education; therefore, they may be unaware of available supports and resources in the university setting. Understanding how the impact of student experiences from first-generation students directly affects the graduates will help us send prepared graduates and leaders into the world ready to rise and succeed.

**Research Question 1:** What characteristics, traits, and sense of identity do first-generation college students embody to contribute to successful leadership in higher education?

In listening to each participant's narratives, it was clear some common themes arose surrounding their traits, characteristics, and identities. The main theme to which all participants related was resiliency. According to *Merriam-Webster* (n.d.), resilience is the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change. A resilient student is an individual more able to bounce back from adversity or other challenges (Meyer et al., 2008); these students are

likely to be more successful. Each of the nine participants had some aspect of resiliency in their story, whether overcoming racism, personal and familial trauma, or their personal lived experiences. Undoubtedly, their resiliency to the circumstance helped them navigate a world that, in some cases, was not designed for them. Despite challenges in belonging, participants reported many resources or moments that made them feel welcomed and kept them from leaving the university (Azmitia et al., 2018).

Additionally, characteristics, traits, and identity aspects evident throughout each interviewee's stories included being hard working, determined, optimistic, kind, authentic, taking the initiative, and self-awareness. Each developed a sense of identity throughout their time in college and after graduation upon entering leadership roles. It was clear each looked back on their lived experiences as some of these characteristics and traits and, ultimately, their identity. A successful transition bridges the student's home environment with the collegiate environment, which is critical, especially in the student's first year of study (Garcia, 2010; Inkelas et al., 2006). Considering how their lived experiences shaped each of these participants helps higher education institutions determine their methods of understanding, engaging, and inspiring first-generation students to reach the pinnacles of their journeys. Research has shown building social capital throughout the college journey helps students be more successful and improve the outcomes of their lives (Schwartz et al., 2018). Increasing places where students feel they can grow and succeed with reduced obstacles is essential to the first-generation college student experience.

**Research Question 2:** What lived experiences, student involvement, and university support contributed to first-generation students' leadership experiences?

Each participant shared pieces of their lived experiences with student involvement, mentorship, access, and more. They detailed how their experiences differed but were vaguely similar with affordability, financial barriers, familial obligations, and expectations to work more than one job. Alongside that, they shared the profound ways their university time changed the person they were, the person they would become, and ultimately the leader they became.

Involvement in student organizations, presence at campus programs, participation in study groups, or attendance at outside lectures are ways first-generation students can become academically and socially integrated in campus life, which can increase persistence (Garcia, 2010). Throughout each interview, it was clear there was a weaving together of mentorship and faculty support from their institutions that developed them as students and leaders. Mentorship may help students feel better connected to others, leading to a higher sense of attachment in college (Evans & Peel, 1999; Graham et al., 2022;). The participants spoke highly of each person who helped them through their journey and contributed to their overall success—noting that many are still in touch with their mentors or faculty from their undergraduate and graduate degree. This type of support is sincere, creating a path to retention and graduation for first-generation college students; higher education professionals must invest in the incoming classes of students. Mentors who take an active approach to teaching

success strategies rather than adopting a "sink or swim" mentality for first-year college students elicit student feelings of connection, self- efficacy, and sustainable motivation (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Graham et al., 2022).

During the interviews, several mentions were made of how the contributors were involved on campus through Greek life, student government, research, orientation leaders, and on-campus jobs. Huang and Chang (2004) found a positive relationship between academic and co-curricular involvement. Therefore, when involvement in co-curricular activities increases, a corresponding increase occurs in academic involvement (Garcia, 2010). How they were involved showed them the way in which both leaders were admired; it shaped pathways to clear communication, expectations, and realities. Along with being active in various ways, these participants felt connected and belonged to their university community, even if they were sometimes over-involved to feel a sense of belonging. The more involved college students are in the academic and social aspects of campus life, the more they benefit in terms of learning and personal development (Garcia, 2010; Huang & Chang, 2004). Astin's (1977) study of college students found those students who devote much more time and effort to academic pursuits tend to become isolated from their peers, therefore showing below average changes in personalities and behaviors (Garcia, 2010).

**Sub Question 2a**: How did those experiences influence the first-generation college graduates' leadership personalities and career influences?

Equity-advancing considerations of disparities between student populations call attention to the conditions of unequal and inadequate

educational opportunities, versus presuming inherent differences in achievement

based on student demographics, identities, or capabilities (Snowden, 2022).

Each participant shared lived experiences throughout college, their personalities

changing over time, and the world which dramatically influenced the careers they

represent today. For this research, understanding their journeys, all different yet

connected, proves students' lived experiences impact their outcomes for

graduation and leadership traits. While the expectation to finish college is set for

everyone, the determination, perseverance, and opportunistic attitude of each

first-generation graduate, this research makes it clear there were expectations

from themselves for being successful and the people with whom they surrounded

themselves.

**Research Question 3:** What factor or contribution did past lived experiences

　　have on leadership character?

　　The task of immersing oneself into a college or university setting is even

more critical for emerging majority students who may lack the "capital" (Bourdieu,

1986) necessary for academic success (Goode et al., 2020). Each participant

detailed accounts of the way in which their experiences shaped the person they

became. Both professionally and personally, they recounted how their lived

experiences during childhood, adolescence, and collegiate years designed their

leadership styles, personality, identity, and interactions with others. The interview

questions were designed to give an aspect of autonomy to the participants, a

place where they could steer the conversation. The participants are complex,

having dealt with intense trauma and lived experiences, including but not limited to racism, familial deaths, divorces, financial obstacles, and more.

Participants included ways those pieces of their lives have molded them; but more important, this study detailed how they formed their careers. With the assistance of mentors, friends, family, colleagues, and people who took a general interest in their well-being, they overcame various barriers to lead them into their leadership position. Unbeknownst at the time, this investment in them as first-generation students were incredibly transformative. Out of sheer necessity in implementing higher education directives, faculty are now required to operate as a nexus of social and emotional support resources within the institutional contexts of "best-practices in serving students" as part of the effort to increase student retention and persistence of the most vulnerable. In the contexts of teaching, faculty perform care labor (Goode, 2020).

Participants recounted narratives of memories that were incredibly scary, and it was an honor to hear them. These stories were pieces of them, the way they were designed, the way they saw the world, the way they knew they wanted to be and do more, and the aspect of making sure they were giving back or paying forward the assistance they received to the next generation of first-generation students (and graduates). Roles and identity are further shaped by identity salience, with those roles farther up on the hierarchy of our own identities being more likely to influence behavior (Goode, 2020; Hogg et al., 1995). Ramona and Franklin gave real accounts of what it looks like to be indebted to their world, to know they must seek to provide a future for the incoming classes

and work toward a path that will honor and hear students from all backgrounds and areas, all genders, all sexualities, and all races. Their work is to love students and create opportunities that are accessible and designed with personal identities in mind–a worthy mission.

## Implications for Further Study

The findings of this research study suggest several implications that both higher education institutions and professionals can develop to aid in the success of first-generation students. Participants shared experiences that can change higher education institutions. Three fundamental implications can impact the future success of first-generation students. First, this study helps executive-level leadership and administration redesign curriculum in the university setting to allow for more oversight and student engagement within classes, expanding the way students learn and self-govern. Understanding that this study was limited to the context of redesigning curriculum adaptations, this is an area of future research and exploration into the best practice of restructuring.

Second, higher education institutions and professionals can recreate methods of registered student organizations, creating space for all students with equitable growth ability regardless of access to resources. Registered student organizations are the backbone of student engagement; allowing space in which first-generation students can feel a sense of belonging and acceptance is crucial. All students do not have equitable resources to position themselves within their registered student organization for leadership; the administration could rethink these limited resources to include all student abilities and access.

Finally, administration in higher education institutions can look at how we think about student leadership as positional and deconstruct it. Leadership does not include only positional leadership. The way students serve their communities, their campus, their colleagues, and their departments are all platforms for leadership. Allowing our campus communities to deconstruct the idea of leadership as a student who is in power in student government or a registered student organization can potentially enhance how faculty and staff become involved with helping students seek leadership opportunities through service learning, mentorship, research, conference attendance, professional development, leadership development opportunities, publications, and other sources. Faculty and staff are exceptional allies to first-generation students; deconstructing some of the barriers to access leadership within our campus community or the local community benefits everyone.

**Limitations**

- As noted earlier, one limitation of this study is inclusion criteria. As the research progressed, additional leaders could have been included but were excluded due to being below an assistant director level. Those specific persons (coordinators, advisors, graduate assistants, and more) were originally left out to focus on assistant director or higher, understanding that a variety of schools do not use the title of assistant director, but rather, use the titles of coordinators, managers, and others. Excluding these persons creates a limitation and a decrease in active voices to this research. While at the time

of research the interviews provided saturation, expanding the inclusion criteria could provide additional research areas.

- Additionally, two of the nine interviews were conducted via email due to scheduling conflicts. Both interviews provide a summary to the questions; however, had they been done in person, they could provide even more information and content for this research.

## Recommendations for Future Research

While a semi-structured interview was conducted on each of the nine participants, allowing for open-ended questions to be explained more in depth at the participant's discretion would have allowed for an assortment of additional information gathered regarding characteristics, identity, and traits that each participant had felt or had embodied. Following the completion of this study, some areas surfaced from which higher education could benefit with further research:

1. Continuing to interview and explore first-generation college graduates leading within higher education at various levels.

2. Interviewing and conducting additional qualitative studies on how first-generation graduates lead their organizations outside higher education and comparing the two.

3. Engaging in additional research on equitable strategies for student engagement across all facets of campus communities.

4. Conducting research with first-generation students to gather their perspective on leadership and engagement within their campus communities, along with

characteristics, traits, and identities they are developing within their lived experiences; and

5. Exploring additional outlets on how mentorship engages first-generation students/graduates more effectively and the best methods to connect students and mentors in a more detailed manner.

6. Conducting a trait survey to measure perceptions of first-generation graduates' traits in leadership.

7. Expand the definition of first-generation students outside of the NASPA recommended definition to include students who are outside the biological parents to some degree.

8. Expand inclusions/exclusion criteria and redesigning pieces of the study to focus on non-positional leadership.

9. Expand inclusion/exclusion criteria to Greek life advisor/leadership roles as well for those who were first-generation.

**Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions**

The researcher recommends the following for higher education institutions:

1. **Engage first-generation college graduates (alumni) in redesigning curriculum.**

Allowing alumni of institutions to actively engage in their alma mater's redesign of curriculum to support students like themselves narrows down a focus on what students need, what would benefit them, and how to create a method of success within classrooms. Alumni know what would have helped them be successful or more engaged on campus; they know what they wished they had seen or had

helped with. Allowing the opportunity to hear from the graduates increases the

probability that higher education institutions are addressing concerns that are

going unseen. Also, as a bonus, allowing alumni to have an active voice in

completing this type of project increases the likelihood that they remain engaged

and potentially even offer to mentor students from their colleges or department,

increasing the amount of social capital students can develop.

2. **Engage first-generation college students in their development.**

Like first-generation college graduates, it is vital to allow students to invest in

their development through curriculum and engagement. They understand the

unforeseen circumstances those in leadership cannot always see; offering them

an investment into their future creates a sense of buy-in and retains the students

and graduates them. Allowing them this access to leadership to voice concerns

and to see change happen also creates a desire to return and give back to the

institution and professionals who shaped their career trajectory.

3. **Develop strategies to create equitable guidance in registered student**

**organizations on campus.**

Registered student organizations are crucial to the success of students on

campus, including first-generation students; the engagement on campus creates

a sense of place and belonging. Higher education institutions must develop

equitable guidance for these registered student organizations to move forward

with finances, living arrangements, and overall equity. To advance in student

organizations, an additional cost could be added, especially if seeking a

leadership role with necessities, travel, etc. Understanding this occurs and

having a solution to find a process to help first-generation students feel as though they can advance would dramatically help student engagement on campus.

4. **Create pathways for leadership outside of registered student organizations.**

   Positional leadership within organizations is an excellent resource for students but understanding that leadership comes in various forms is equally essential. Higher education institutions can take a deep look into who students are becoming involved within their colleges, departments, campus, communities, and local communities and encourage participation. Are students traveling on a service-learning project? Are students engaging in research with a faculty member who is also a mentor? Are students taking volunteer hours within a local organization?

   More than one way exists to gain leadership experience; as a professional in higher education, there are ways from which this can come within our departments and colleges. Is there a research project a student could benefit from, especially if they are looking at graduate or professional school? Understanding and knowing students within our areas is half the battle with creating a more equitable space for students. Who are these students? What are their barriers? What are they facing at home? Once we know those things, how can institutions make leadership expand into other platforms? Allowing students to also engage in professional development and conferences is a great way to get them involved in administration, but not specifically in registered student organizations.

5. **Establish a first-generation resource center on campus.**

Many colleges and universities have seen the value in fostering first-generation student success but creating a centralized space for these students to feel involved and where they can seek encouragement, help, and guidance is increasingly critical to the well-being of each first-generation student. In creating this space, it is also crucial to be aware of employees hired, ensuring most are first-generation graduates or have extensive experience creating success for those students. This is a consolidated place where assistance can be accessed regardless of the situation.

6. **Decrease barriers for students to engage in their campus community and build social capital.**

   This may be one of the more challenging aspects for higher education institutions and professionals in which to partake. Regardless, it is a much-needed resource for first-generation students. Decreasing barriers for students to engage in mentoring, alumni engagement opportunities, professional development (including leadership development), and more is essential to redefining how first-generation students are viewed and how they see themselves. This research proves they are resilient, hardworking, and determined. Still, it wasn't until later in life that many interviewees saw themselves as leaders and could lead their teams and begin using their lived experiences differently. Institutions could shift their mindset early on, give them this resource while in college, and provide the assets to tackle leadership upon graduation with new insight.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to engage and understand the experiences of first-generation students and graduates who have chosen to pursue leadership opportunities post-graduation and the characteristics, traits, and identity aspects they developed through their lives. Utilizing Burns (1978) and transformational leadership theory, the researcher was able to learn and tell the stories of each participant to create a phenomenon that when a first-generation student receives support through various means, their knowledge and abilities increase, creating a successful pathway to their future careers. These students utilized their lived experiences to shape their paths fundamentally.

In conclusion, creating a space in higher education where the entire student is seen, instead of their circumstances, is essential to grow professionally and personally. It is increasingly important that higher education professionals work to redesign the thought processes surrounding equitable education for first-generation students and the future of leadership. Redesigning curriculum and engagement protocol and creating less linear paths of leadership is vital. Higher education institutions and professionals who approach this task with conviction will see increasing success in their student body, predominantly first-generation students, and graduates.

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## APPENDIX A: IRB Informed consent and approval letter

**INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT**
<u>Only</u> WKU IRB stamped, and approved forms are to be used with participants

**Project Title:** First-Generation Leaders: A Qualitative Examination of Characteristics, Traits, and Identity of First-Generation Graduates in Leadership
**Investigator:** Jamie Woolery, Ed.D. Candidate, Educational Leadership,
Email: jamie.woolery283@topper.wku.edu

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.
**You must be 18 years old or older to participate in this research study.**

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

1.      **Nature and Purpose of the Project:** A study seeking to explore the connection between first-generation students and graduates as leaders in higher education. The purpose of this project is to further the conversation and impact the future success of first-generation students as they shape their collegiate experiences.

2.      **Explanation of Procedures:** Each participant is agreeing to participate in an interview that will be conducted via zoom, recorded, and transcribed for analyzation. The interview could last as little as 30 minutes or as much as 90 minutes depending on the participant. There will be at least one additional follow up email or zoom interview regarding this study and the questions that were answered.

3.      **Discomfort and Risks:** There may be potential discomfort in discussing previously lived experiences and potential trauma. While there will be follow-up questions, it is up to the participants what they chose to share and explore with the researcher.

4.      **Benefits:** This study will have significant benefits on how college and universities can shape their leadership curriculum to help first-generation students with acclimation and experiences on campus. This study will benefit the future of higher education in means of understanding diversity and inclusion on a scale of first-generation students and expanding services to embody additional resources.

5.      **Confidentiality:** During this study, it is crucial to preserve anonymity, the records will be viewed, stored, and maintained in private, secure files only accessible by the P.I. and advising faculty for three years following the study, after which time they will be destroyed. To demonstrate this study's trustworthiness and validate the findings, the study will take precautions such as member checking, reflexivity, audit trails, and composing thick and rich data to provide an opportunity to this study and the research formed from the in-depth interviews. This research could be utilized to shape how universities serve first-generation students and graduates; for these universities and colleges to learn and grow from this research and study, it is vitally important that this research be trustworthy and validated. Extra validation occurs from the dissertation committee members and stakeholders to comply with the IRB standards.

WKU IRB# 22-217
Approved: 3/08/2022
End Date: 8/31/2022
EXPEDITED
Original: 3/08/2022

6.      **Refusal/Withdrawal:**  Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University.  Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

*You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.*

_____          _____
Signature of Participant                                                      Date


_____          _____
Witness                                                                          Date

- I agree to the audio/video recording of the research. *(Initial here)* _____

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT
THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Robin Pyles, Human Protections Administrator
TELEPHONE:  (270) 745-3360

**APPENDIX B:** Email to Recruit Participants to the Study

Hello!

I am completing my Ed.D. dissertation research. I am looking for participants who would be willing to be interviewed via zoom and recorded.

**The volunteers/participants need to be:**

- First-Generation College Graduates
- Leaders in Higher Education (assistant director or higher)

The interviews will take 30-90 minutes and be guided by questions to prompt responses from the participant's lived experience both before and during college, leadership development, university support of your experiences, barriers, and support as a first-generation college student and graduate, and leader.

If you are interested in helping with this research, please email: jamie.woolery283@topper.wku.edu

**APPENDIX C:** Interview Questions

- What experiences from your youth shaped you?

  - o Did you always want to pursue an education after high school?

    - ▪ What support did you have to do so?

    - ▪ What barriers did you face pursuing your education?

  - o How do you feel your traits, characteristics, and identity were shaped by your experiences?

    - ▪ Can you provide a scenario?

- How did your university experience continue to shape your characteristics and identity?

  - o Were you actively engaged on campus?

    - ▪ What did you participate in?

  - o How do you feel that your university supported fostering growth in those characteristics and identity?

  - o How do you feel that your university created additional barriers to your characteristics and identity?

- How do you believe that your experiences helped develop your leadership identity?

  - o How did your university experience create or influence your leadership today?

  - o What past experiences either before or during your university (undergraduate or graduate degrees) do you embody as a part of your identity today?

- Were there any significant factors that contributed to your identity outside of education?

  - o If there were factors, can you explain how those factors shaped your experiences with leadership?

  - o And how have those factors fostered growth in your life both professionally and personally?

- What do you feel is one of the biggest barriers to first-generation students gaining access to leadership experience and connecting lived experiences with knowledge of leadership?

- What do you feel is one of the biggest supports to first-generation students gaining access to leadership experience and connecting lived experiences with knowledge of leadership?

  - o How can higher education institutions help break down barriers regarding this?

**APPENDIX D:** Research Questions

1. What characteristics, traits, and sense of identity do first-generation college students embody to contribute to successful leadership in higher education?

2. What lived experiences, student involvement, and university support contributed to first-generation students' leadership experiences?

   a. Sub question: how did those experiences influence the first-generation college graduates' leadership personalities and career influences?

3. What factor or contribution did past lived experiences have on leadership character

**APPENDIX E:** Email to Participants to Review their Transcript

Hello [Insert Participant's Name here],

Thanks so much for participating in my dissertation research "First-Generation Leaders:  A Qualitative Examination of Characteristics, Traits, and Identity of First-Generation Graduates in Leadership". I am truly humbled you participated, I enjoyed connecting with you and I appreciate your ability to be candid with our discussion.

As we discussed, you will find attached the transcript from your interview with me. It is straight from the recording translation, I have pulled certain aspects out to include in our significant statements, not everything will be included. I have reviewed the recordings multiple times and did not solely rely on this transcript, there may not be a significant amount of editing to these.

Your interview offered considerable information to the study and will be incredibly beneficial in this research.

As a reminder, all identifiable information will be redacted, and you will have a pseudonym name.

Please let me know if you see a need to clarify any statements as they appear in your transcript or if you'd like to add anything additionally to your transcript.

Take care,

Jamie Woolery
Jamie.woolery283@topper.wku.edu | 859-421-3608

**APPENDIX F:** Audit Trail

The researcher utilized an audit trail to reflect and document the dissertation process.

<u>Purpose of Study</u>

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of higher education professionals and their ascendance to leadership roles. The researcher set out to explore lived experiences both prior to and throughout their college careers leading to their success in leadership roles at the current date.

<u>Spring 2021</u>
- 
  I began researching leadership topics that would benefit the populations I intended to build a career with and would like to serve in capacities with throughout my career. I started with some conversations with colleagues and faculty to narrow the topics down.

<u>Summer 2021</u>

- I attended residency with the WKU Ed.D. program led by Dr. Nicholas Brake for a week on campus at WKU.
- I took my qualifying exam in July 2021 and passed the exam with distinction.
- I proceeded to explore research topics.

<u>Fall 2021</u>

- I enrolled in my final set of classes (internship) and one additional class.
- I worked towards finalizing my dissertation committee. Made up of Dr. Aaron Hughey (Chair), Dr. Nicholas Brake (Member), and Dr. Dana Howell (Member)
- I narrowed down a topic and began researching that topic throughout the semester. Gathering resources to begin writing chapters 1-3 over winter break.

<u>Winter 2022:</u>
- I began writing chapters 1-3 of this dissertation.

<u>Spring 2022:</u>

- I enrolled in 6 hours of dissertation classwork.
- I defended my dissertation proposal on Feb. 22$^{nd}$, 2022.
- I finished my IRB and submitted it on Feb. 25$^{th}$.

- I received IRB approval on March 8th.
- I worked with Dr. Hughey to formulate the email and call for participants.
- I scheduled interviews via zoom beginning March 30th, 2022, continuing through April 28th, 2022.
- First Interview: March 30th
- Second Interview: March 31st
- Third Interview: April 1st
- Fourth Interview April 6th
- Fifth Interview: April 6th
- Sixth Interview: April 7th
- Seventh Interview: April 8th
- Eighth Interview: April 11th
- Ninth Interview: April 28th
- I took notes at each interview as well as recorded them and had them transcribed using Zoom Recordings.
- I began working with the analyzation of the information, rewatching the interviews and reading the transcripts. I printed and color coded each interview developing themes.
- I took those themes and input them into a Google Sheet.
- From the codes, I developed categories.
- From there I met with Dr. Dana Howell and discussed the progress with analyzation. We discussed developing significant statements and going ahead and developing themes for each. Talking about umbrella themes with branch off themes for each.
- From the categories, I developed themes.
- I discussed briefly with Dr. Dana Howell the progress I had made with the themes, she signed off and I began working on research for additional support and chapters 4 and five.
- All the codes, categories, and themes along with significant statements were kept in a Google Sheet document for access.
- Talked to April from the Ed.D. office to make sure we were all set for the final leg of the hours and how to schedule defense/when.
- Sent interviewees transcripts review email.


Summer 2022

- I continued research.
- I analyzed the data a little more and began writing chapter 4 and 5.
- First draft of entire dissertation goes to the committee on July 11th.
- Received edits back. Make edits.
- Send second draft back to the committee.
- Received edits. Make edits.
- Send to professional editor.

<u>Fall 2022</u>

- Enrolled in 6 hours of dissertation classwork.
- Work with committee (and April from Ed.D. office to schedule defense)
- Conclude defense. Send committee and dean final draft of this dissertation.

## APPENDIX G: Codebook

| Emergent Codes | Description of Codes | Emergent Themes |
|---|---|---|
| Socioeconomically Disadvantaged | Description on how their socioeconomic status impacted their life. | 1. Creating Obvious Opportunity |
| Student Engagement | Description on how they were engaged or not on campus or in their communities. | 2. I didn't know what I didn't know: Creating Space for First-Gen Students to Grow |
| Spirituality/Religion | Descriptions on their faith and religion, and how that impact them in their experiences. | 3. Mentoring: Creating a Platform to Increase Social Capital of First-Gen Students & Graduates |
| Higher Education Expectations | Descriptions of their expectations that were discussed in their lives prior to college. | 4. Greatness is Instilled in You: Overcoming Racism, Trauma, and Lived Experiences |
| Mentorship | Description on how they received mentoring, who mentored them, and how that impacted them in their leadership today. | |
| Identity | Description on how they developed their identity during their lived experience and college careers. Along with how that has impacted their leadership styles. | |
| Family Hinderance and Support | Description on how their family were supportive or unsupportive on their journey to higher education and leadership. | |
| Trauma and Mental Health Obstacles | Description on how their trauma and mental | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | health was a significant barrier during their collegiate careers and in some case even today. | |
| Social Capital | Description on how they needed social capital when they enrolled, engaged, and was a student or thought social capital would help them before their college career or future students on social capital. | |
| Collegiate Obstacles and Enhancement | Description on what obstacles were in their way or what enhancements that they saw that their colleges did well to enhance their experience. | |
| Leadership Development and Investment | Description on what their colleges did to provide leadership development and how that impacted them in their current path. | |

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A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF CHARACTERISTICS, TRAITS, AND IDENTITY OF FIRST-GENERATION GRADUATES IN LEADERSHIP

Keywords (3-5 keywords not included in the title that uniquely describe content): First-Generation, Leadership, Student, Engagement

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Additional Committee Members: Dr. Nicholas Brake Dr. Dana Howell

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