A CASE STUDY OF FIRST-GENERATION, SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE STUDENTS
WITHOUT ACCESS TO STATE-FUNDED SUPPORT SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

This case study analysis explored the experience of senior level first-generation college students without access to intensive academic support programs for first-generation students at a northeast public research university. This study asked the question: how do senior college students who identify as both first-generation and are not served by income-based first-generation programming navigate the college experience? It examined their experience of college admission, the financial aid process, academic life, social life, and future/career preparation in order to gain an understanding of how they got to senior year successfully through a social and cultural capital lens. 13 fourth year students were interviewed. All participants shared a few characteristics: all were traditional college age, reported cumulative grade point averages that were nearly a B or higher, on track to 4 to 4.5-year graduation timelines, and were overwhelmingly Latinx females. They had varied experiences learning the expectations of college, connecting, and reaching senior year successfully. The participants were motivated to find their way, even in the absence of help from home and amidst learning how to speak to faculty and find mentors. The findings of this study help to shed light on some of the successes that these students have, even after navigating common hurdles. While they experienced barriers, they also exceeded expectations and used their own personal drive and skills to find their way to graduation and high GPAs. This work provides an important reminder to advisors and faculty that first-generation college students are not just one homogenous group, they have many experiences of college, some of which end up as on-time, successful pathways through their own drive and motivation. In addition, suggestions are made for improving service to FGCS who are not served by income-based, first-generation programming.

Keywords: first-generation, college, university, advising
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So yes, family and friends, I am finally done. I promised I would tell you, so here you go.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND & SIGNIFICANCE

Introduction

First-generation college students (FGCS), students whose parents do not have a college degree, have been the subject of much research since mass higher education took hold, gaining in popularity as subject matter in the ‘90s and ‘00s. According to the literature, first-generation college students are, more often than other college students, also low-income (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). However, few studies give any airtime to the experience of the subset of first-generation students who are not low-income, even though the data show that they still lag behind their continuing generation peers in graduation rates by 20% (Mortenson, 2017b). While this rate is 20% higher than students who are low-income and first-generation, this difference still exists, yet some universities only offer low-income first-generation students intensive support services, not the entire population (Mortenson, 2017b). Moreover, the literature barely acknowledges that first-generation students are anything other than low-income. Some colleges, such as the one in this study, only serve FGCS who fit income criteria in a comprehensive way. As a result, the purpose of this case study is to learn about the experiences of senior level first-generation students at a large, public four-year institution who are not being served by income-based programming, such as the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) or Student Support Services (SSS) offerings at this particular university. For the purpose of this study, first-generation college students are defined as students whose parents’ highest level of degree completion is a high school diploma. Students who have access to academic support services such as EOF and SSS will not be included, in an effort to learn who those other students are, and what their experiences at the university have been. Although the university in this study has various levels of programming for first-generation students who qualify financially, the aim
is to capture the experiences of the “other” students who are left to fend for themselves with no formalized supports specific to their first-generation status.

**Background & Significance**

This focus on first-generation students other than solely low-income, program-qualified students is of particular interest because much of the literature on first-generation college students centers upon their identity as low-income, which leaves students who may have more monetary means out of the conversation, though their generational status is the same. Based on the current literature, it is unclear if these populations share the same profile or if differences exist, nor does this account for how different universities serve FGCS. The literature portrays first-generation students as lacking in social capital, having parents who may or may not be supportive but are unhelpful in college activities, needing to work more hours than peers, uninvolved socially, and unlikely to seek advising (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Ishitani, 2006; Karabel, 1972; London, 1989; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Nichols & Islas, 2015, Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Mortenson’s work (2017a, 2017b) best exemplifies why considering the needs of students who are first-generation but not-low income still matters, as the data in his 2017 study show that being first-generation alone reduces the possibility of graduation by 28% (2017b). While this is a lower risk than students who are both first generation and low-income, students who are first-generation, not low-income are still about 20% less likely to graduate in four years than their peers who not low-income and continuing generation (Mortenson 2017b, p. 22). Removing the low-income label and the barriers associated with it still does not level the playing field for first-generation students: this gap shows that there is still something lost in translation.
This qualitative study will use interviews to explore the stories and experiences of this unique subset of first-generation college students, to gain a deeper understanding of their story separate from the low-income assumption that often comes with being identified as first-generation. While many universities, such as the site of this study, which I will refer to as East University (EU), offer intensive academic support programs for low-income first-generation students, not all students have access to these programs. In particular, those who do not qualify financially are left out of rigorous, proven programs such as EOF (State of New Jersey, 2013). This omission of first-generation students who are not low-income seems to assume that they do not need extra networks and supports, and fails to capture students barely above this marker, where many FGCS still fall. As broadly stated by Cahalan (2013), federal programs, while proven to help this population attend and graduate college, only serve less than 5% of the eligible population – a sentiment echoed by the EOF program at East University at their annual EU First forum in 2019. EU, along with the literature on first-generation students, offers little in the way of making visible attempts to help students who are not qualified for federal programming but who are still first-generation, regardless of income level. Even within the literature, while some data show the differences noted above in graduation rates of students who are first-generation and not low-income, there is little to no separation of the population to speak to differences between experiences of the low-income student versus those who do not identify as such, or how some schools serve just “qualified” FGCS.

This research is driven by a gap in the literature, namely that since large numbers of low-income students make up the first-generation college student group, the picture of the group appears to assume that all in the population fit this mold. Even in data sets that point out the income levels across first-generation students (such as Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998) it does
not seem to be the focal point of the research other than pointing out that a larger percentage of first-generation students are from the lowest income quartile. For example, Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) show that while 23.3% of the first-generation students were in the lowest quartile, a much larger number than the 2.2% of students whose parents have a Bachelor’s degree or higher, there is no specific mention of the other 76.7% of first-generation students in regard to their income levels – a large portion of the literature on this population lumps together low-income first-generation in one breath. The fact that first-generation students are more likely to be low-income always seems to be the focal point, even though a large percentage of the first-generation population exists outside of these bounds. In striving to see a different side of the first-generation population, this study hopes to broaden the scope of what a first-generation student looks like in the literature. Anna, a participant in the pilot study stated,

…I don’t think that like it’s recognized that like first-generation can mean so many different things, because I met a lot of like… white students as well who are also like first-generation and… there’s like a sense of feeling lost and a feeling like because you don’t know what’s going on… you don’t have family to rely on for advice, you feel like you don’t belong there. It sometimes feels like you’re taking someone else’s spot, like someone else like who deserves it more.

Based on the depth of literature available by timeframe, first-generation college students as an area of concern began to arise in the 1970s with works such as K. Patricia Cross’s 1971 work on this new population of student – but the population as a whole came into focus in the 1980s and ‘90s. Cross’s (1971a) research on the topic of the “new” students appearing in colleges in the 1970s was some of the most in-depth, detailing the student demographics thoroughly. She readily made the distinction that the highest achieving, well-prepared students
already had access before the 1970s: it was those who were not as prepared that educators must be ready for. Cross described the new student as largely white, but blue collar (by proxy, most often first-generation), and from the lowest third of test scores. Much of the research on this population described these students on a deficiency model: they had academic deficiencies, motivational deficiencies, and financial deficiencies, with more looking for vocational tracks than traditional college students (Cross, 1971a). Woven within these works was the floating idea of elitism: Could these new “disadvantaged” students make it in college? Should they be there? (Reisman, 1971). Though most researchers seemed interested in finding new ways to accommodate and to some extent support a new population of less prepared, first-generation, and minority students, the slight underpinning of many was that there should be some weeding out (by community colleges) and that not all students can or should continue in college. As Cross (1971a) put it, the 1970s were a time when higher education was still largely a meritocracy – but was feeling the pressure to democratize. None the less, most literature of the time recognized a gap between the new student population and what were then considered the traditional students. Cross’s (1971a) study found that the blue collar students were more likely to have financial need and were more likely to work more than fifteen hours a week – yet those who had high grades in high school were doing well, and could be said to have learned the “middle class values” that came along with being a potentially successful college student – creating space for the conversations later to come on cultural capital and first-generation students (Cross, 1971a). Though Cross, like many others in the 1960s and 1970s, often tied income and parental education level into one grouping, the group of students in this category shared common characteristics with the first-generation students studied today: they were more likely to feel that academics were moving too quickly, they were nervous in a competitive classroom, and needed
more advising and personal assistance. She wrote, “Their parents and homes may present a way of life that is no longer adequate for them – and yet the new life promised by higher education is not quite ready for them” (Cross 1971a, p. 84). This mirrors a common sentiment in today’s literature: a clear mismatch between home life and school life, even for those first-generation students who are prepared and successful in college.

Cross’s (1971a) work narrowed the focus on first-generation students, and the research later to come on the topic in the ‘80s and ‘90s only served to bring this population, and the concerns surrounding it into better focus. However, as in 1971, the majority of first-generation students are still White, and more likely to come from lower-earning households (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). The percentage of first-generation students enrolled in college has also remained stable at about one-third of the population (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). In addition, the research that came after on first-generation students often maintained a “gap” or deficiency model of thinking about first-generation students – a model that Cross critiqued even in the ‘70s (Cross, 1973). However, Cross often referred to these students as nontraditional students, which is a term that is now defined differently on campuses such as EU: non-traditional is more often referring to adult students, those who have not come to college right out of high school. Many of the students she’s referring to: women, first-generation, non-White students – are often called underrepresented in universities now.

Back in 1971, Cross wrote, “Young people holding the attitudes of “middle America” – a term frequently used in a pejorative way by intellectuals – may well find intolerance on traditional college campuses for their values and even their backgrounds” (1971b, p. 3). The focus she began to discuss in regard to a mismatch between home and school became a larger focus of the research, resulting in the expanding a literature that supports differences in the social
and cultural capital that first-generation students arrive at college with, which are the theoretical
groundings of this study. Social capital, or the connections and networks available, and cultural
capital, the behaviors, and values one being to a situation (Levinson, 2011), are areas that first-
generation students are shown to be different from their continuing-generation peers. The
literature supports that the lack of college knowledge and networks of help with collegiate
adjustment is leaving first-generation college students with a more tumultuous college
experience than their continuing-generation peers in areas such as persistence, time to
graduation, and connecting with faculty, advisors, and peers (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Engle &
Tinto, 2008; Nichols & Islas, 2015; Stephens et al., 2012). These forms of capital guide how this
study will explore the needs of first-generation college students, namely in how prepared for
college they felt (the cultural capital they arrived with, and that which they felt they had to gain
to succeed), and the networks that they utilized or did not while here at the university to remain
enrolled and making progress.

**First-Generation Services at EU**

East University offers services to first-generation students in a few ways, but most clearly
to students who meet income guidelines for programming. The unit in particular being studied
here, EU Arts and Sciences, is a large academic unit but offers no separate programming itself
for students who do not fit into the university’s already-existing programs for first-generation
students, all of which have income requirements for participation. A look at the success of
programs (in particular the Educational Opportunity Fund) show that the university has had
success in admitting, retaining, and graduating first-generation students *but* leaves a gaping hole
in information and services given to the rest of first-generation students at the university,
especially at the Arts and Sciences unit.
East University has one large, advising-centric program to serve first-generation college students, which is the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF). The program offers intensive advising, counseling, and tutoring as well as financial support to in-state students at the university (East University, 2019). This program, however, comes with financial requirements, as well as other eligibility requirements. For example, according to the Admissions website at East University, for students applying to EU’s EOF programs in 2019-2020, the below income requirements apply:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Size (including student)</th>
<th>Family Gross Income Does Not Exceed</th>
<th>Asset Cap Calculation (Based on Household Size) Not to Exceed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$24,280</td>
<td>$4,856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$32,920</td>
<td>$6,584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$41,560</td>
<td>$8,312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>$50,200</td>
<td>$10,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>$58,840</td>
<td>$11,768</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>$67,480</td>
<td>$13,496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>$76,120</td>
<td>$15,224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>$84,760</td>
<td>$16,952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For each additional household member add</td>
<td>$8,640</td>
<td>$1,728</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Source: https://admissions.east.edu/eof

This program has, for just over 50 years since its inception in 1968, helped many students gain access to college and given them the support systems to succeed. According to EU’s EOF admissions page, students must also be in-state students and “educationally and economically disadvantaged background,” as ambiguous as that might sound (East University, 2019). This
means that left out of this equation are students who do not meet income qualifications, which still leave out plenty of students who still lack financial security. The university has created other programs in attempts to continue to serve this population, but most also have other entry requirements including financial need.

Also a part of blanket programs to help low-income and first-generation students at EU, the Student Support Services (SSS) began in 1972 and offers a broad range of services to students such as workshops, tutoring, and coaching related to academics and careers – with the main goal of increasing graduation and retention rates of this population. However, the eligibility requirements are less clearly defined than the EOF program, as is the number of students they are able to serve. According to their FAQ, including being a US citizen or financial aid recipient, students must be “first-generation, and/or low-income, and/or have a documented disability” (“FAQs,” 2019). In addition, they note another ambiguous measure of inclusion on their website “Prospective Students” (2019), “students must demonstrate some form of academic need” – and also that all eligible students will not be accepted. Another program related to Student Support Services is the Leadership Institute, which also is limited to first-generation, underrepresented students – but only those with financial need (“Leadership Institute,” 2019). These programs offer a less intensive level of connection and support compared to the EOF program, but still give first-generation students a point of contact and support – as long as they qualify, of course.

Finally, East University created the EU First alliance when first-generation students as a whole became a topic at the forefront of college support needs in the 2000s. However, aside from offering occasional programs a few times a year, it is unclear how this alliance is supporting first-generation students. Their website claims they intend to help students graduate – but has no clear path for doing so or what support services are offered to students (“About EU First,” 2019).
They also do not list any figures on how many students are served or in what capacity. As such, the only clear offerings to support first-generation students at East University and its Arts and Sciences school specifically are in the form of those with income and other qualifiers, in EOF and SSS noted above. As an academic advisor at EU Arts and Sciences, this is a major concern for how the students are being served, and sparks the need to find out how those who successfully navigate EU and reach the final year get there: who assisted them along the way if anyone? Who did they reach out to for support since they did not qualify for any of the built-in supports? What, overall, did they experience here? These answers can not only inform how EU Arts and Sciences serves its students but also fill a gap in the story of first-generation college students that exists in the vast pool of literature written on the topic.

As a result of this presumed gap, this study also hopes to serve the purpose of informing and improving advising practices aimed at first-generation students within the Arts and Sciences division of the university. Within the advising services at EU Arts and Sciences, students are not assigned to advisors and advising itself is not a required activity unless students have fallen out of good standing (below a 2.0 term or cumulative grade point average). As such, unlike in the intensive advising programs for low-income first-generation students, students may get through their time at EU without ever setting foot into an academic advisor’s office. The literature (reviewed in Chapter 2), indicates that this lack of connection to advisors and resources can be particularly troubling for first-generation students (Collier & Morgan, 2008). EU Arts and Sciences is the school’s largest unit by far – serving in the neighborhood of 20,000 students (Factbook, 2017). As a result, personalized services have not been a point of focus: students who seek out advising can get it, but advisors will not force students to have a required meeting unless they fall into academic troubles. This is not necessarily always the case at the university
as a whole: for example, at a smaller unit within the university, first-generation students who are not captured by the EOF program are given a 1.0 credit course in their first term, requiring face-to-face interaction with a mentor to encourage connection and academic resources. By learning about the experiences specifically of EU Arts and Sciences first-generation students who have not received any targeted, income-based academic support programs, the advising program can begin to see if or where unmet needs exist for first-generation students who are not currently being served.

**Research Questions**

The following question and sub-questions guide this study, with a focus specifically on social and cultural capital within the academic and social experiences of the population.

1. How do senior level college students who identify as both first-generation and are not served by income-based programming navigate the college experience?
   a. How did first-generation students learn to navigate getting into college, including admission, entry, and funding issues?
   b. What was the learning process for first-generation students who are not served by income-based programming, including learning college expectations and navigating hurdles?
   c. What are the college social experiences of first-generation students who are not served by income-based programming?

A research question map can be found in Appendix A. In order to keep focus on social and cultural capital aspects, the interview questions for this study asked participants specifically *who* helped them along the way and *how* they learned the system.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Who Are First-Generation College Students?

Simply defining the term “first-generation college student” has been a source of controversy in the literature (Peralta & Klonoswki, 2017; Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slaton, 2017). Throughout the literature, first-generation students college students are defined in many ways: some include those who have a parent with a two-year degree as first-gen, some studies do not include students who had a sibling attend college prior, and some do not define the term at all (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). However, as Toutkoushian, Stollberg, and Slaton (2018) explain, these minutiae can change the outcomes when assessing the status and needs of first-generation students. For example, the largest deficits in college enrollment occurred when first-generation was defined as neither parent had a bachelor’s degree or higher. The questions of who qualifies as a parent, and what level of college attendance or achievement counts remain an area of great variance amongst first-generation college students. In addition, as will be explored, the current label of first-generation in reference parental education level was not even widely used until the 1980s.

First-Gens before the ‘80s. In the late 1960s leading into the 1970s, literature on college students that recognized parental educational level as a factor at play focused on three general areas: attrition (“dropouts”), the rise of the idea of universal higher education and the community college expansion, as well as the “new” students that this expansion brought into the college-going community. It is important to note that during this time period, the term that is now common, first-generation college student, was rarely used, if at all. The literature references parental educational level from time to time, as an important factor but never truly central to the texts being written. For example, the literature placed students with low socioeconomic status
First-Gen Successful

(including parental education level of high school only or below) into the category of “problems” which led to attrition as well as the need for new techniques to educate this particular population successfully.

In an era where the median levels of schooling were on the rise to begin with, researchers in the late 1960s were beginning to take note of the existing data on parental education level (usually as a part of socioeconomic status) as related to outcomes in higher education (Spady, 1967). Spady’s 1967 work on mobility and access to higher education put the focus on who had the potential to get ahead, and why. Spady’s research pinned down the concept of an attainment gap: the idea that continuing-generation students were simply faring better than their first-generation counterparts in getting ahead in the world and in education. Though not all areas of this work related specifically to parental education alone, as was the case with much of the early literature on the topic, parental education level is a part of what was considered causal, as Spady wrote: “While boys in low social origins are slowly catching up with their more fortunate counterparts in terms of basic and intermediate levels of education, they are falling relatively farther behind the latter’s rapid increase in college attendance and graduation” (Spady 1967, p. 281). Spady’s (1967) use of parental education level as a part of a larger measure of socioeconomic status was common in this era: income and education (usually of the father) were factors in many other studies at this time as well, making it more difficult to see the exact impact of parental education level alone. For example, Stanfiel’s 1973 research found that students in the lowest groups of socioeconomic status, with parental education of some high school or less as well as in the low-income bracket, were the least likely to continue and succeed in college.

Foundationally, studies that put any focus on parental education (often in conjunction with the above mentioned socioeconomic status) in the 1970s focused on three areas: attrition,
the expansion of higher education into more community colleges and a concept of “universal” access, and how to cope with the “new” students that this expansion brought about. At the same time, much of the research also referenced the reports of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, formed in the late 1960s for the purpose of evaluating the state of higher education and making recommendations on its behalf (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1974). These reports seem to have driven not only choices within higher education but also research at the time. A March 1970 report from the Carnegie Commission put equal opportunity at the forefront, noting family income as well as ethnicity as important factors impeding access (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1974). Further reports in the coming months and years from the Commission reported on the need for open access (June 1970), attention to expanding higher education into urban areas (October 1971), and reforming higher education to accommodate new types of students (June 1972). From these reports and the research available during this timeframe, the same trends carry throughout, with many tying a measure of parental education level into each of these issues.

Attrition rates, or as some called them, “dropouts,” were a popular subject of study in the 1970s. As early as 1969, Cope and Hewitt related college dropouts to what they called “environmental factors.” Though in a very broad sense, they considered familial factors as a part of why a college student might not persist through to graduation. Like much research in the ‘60s, the specificity was lacking in identifying first-generation status as a lone factor, but the family background did come into play. Tinto and Cullen (1973), on the other hand, looked specifically at families they considered lower status in their study of dropouts, stating that “Collegepersisters are more likely to come from families whose parents are more educated” (p. 47). This study also began to pinpoint of some of the areas that remain a focus of first-generation study and support
to this day: social integration, faculty/advisor communication, and extracurricular activities.

Similarly, Tinto and Sherman (1974) looked at intervention programs in existence in 1974, as related to retention. At the higher education level, their research looked at Educational Opportunity programs of varying levels, most of which singled out students of low-income families and minorities, though there was little mention of parental education’s impact within their work. The variance in entry standards at the time made it difficult to study these programs in just one way, as their populations had no true constant (Tinto & Sherman, 1974). In a more thorough study of attrition specifically, Pantages and Creedon (1978) looked at college attrition over the time frame of 1950-1975. As is made clear by the volume of literature surrounding attrition during the 1970s, they addressed this issue as an obvious problem. Nevertheless, they found mixed results in regard to parental education as a contributing factor specifically. They did find that socioeconomic factors contributed to attrition but did not find parental education to be particularly important. Like Tinto and Sherman (1974), Pantages and Creedon (1978) also found similar factors at play that are often studied in first-generation students today: social and extracurricular involvement, as well as faculty contact. The building blocks of what became focal points in first-generation research can be seen within these studies of attrition: the main contributing factors often written about in today’s first-generation research such as social and cultural capital were alive within these studies.

Astin’s 1975 research on attrition, unlike his peers’ research at the time, spent a good portion of time addressing the issue of parental education specifically. Using a large, representative national sample beginning in 1968 with follow up in 1972, Astin’s study found family background to be one of the major contributing factors in dropping out. Astin (1975) wrote, “The greater dropout-proneness of students from low-income families is attributable to
their less educated parents, lesser ability and lower motivation, and greater concern about finances” (p. 35). In this research, Astin (1975) continued to lay the groundwork for contributing factors that are studied today in first-generation research: financial burden, poorly prepared students, and culture shock on campus. Though this is not the only issue that Astin raised in regard to dropout, the separation of parental education level from other factors is unique for the era. Haller and Portes’s (1973) research also showed a link between the attainment processes of parents and children. It is important to note that many of these studies generally only took father’s education level into account.

The next trend in the literature involving parental education level or generational status in the 1970s involved the move from mass higher education to an idea of near universal higher education, or as some called it, universal access. During the 1960s the percentages of students attending some form of post-secondary education rose significantly: according to Riesman et al., (1971), about half of high school students were seeking higher education by 1966. Included in this expansion were a huge number of new community colleges: 457 community colleges opened in the 1960s in the US, more than doubling the amount of community colleges in existence prior (“Community Colleges Past to Present”). This alone was enough to shake up the population of who could attend college as well as create some serious demographic changes in the data surrounding college students. The community college students were largely those with blue collar parents, and as a result, many fit into the category of first-generation students, even if the literature of the time did not title them as such (Karabel, 1972). According to Karabel’s research on the trends of stratification in these new community colleges, students whose fathers’ education level was less than high school graduation were more likely to choose vocational tracks within the college system. It is at this time in the literature that community colleges
became associated with the “bottom track” of higher education: with students of low status and social class; the lowest rung of college life, just above high school graduates (Cope, 1973). Karabel (1972) wrote, “Community colleges exist in part to reconcile students’ culturally induced hopes for mobility with their eventual destinations, transforming structurally induced failure into individual failures,” (p. 556) in effect claiming that the universal availability of community college allows people to believe that lack of upward mobility is their own fault. Brazziel’s (1970) work supported a different area of this concept: the new colleges being created in the ‘70s should be made to support an urban underclass of students who need more remedial help to catch up, which seems to associate itself with the general concept of the community college at the time: students who may not make it without help. By proxy of socioeconomic status, open access to entry, and lower cost, the community college boom also meant a boom in first-generation college student attendance. The expansion of community colleges, while necessary to accommodate larger populations of students as a result of the baby boom and GI Bill, are made to sound like a sort of dumping ground by the literature of the time. When Reisman et al. (1970) wrote that “new commuter colleges were designed to take some of the heat off the state universities…” (p. 252), it feels a bit derogatory toward the low income, first-generation students they were designed to accommodate.

The final trend in the 1970s literature referencing parental education levels was in regard to how to service the “new” students that the expansion of higher education brought. According to the literature, educators were identifying the need to serve “large numbers of first-generation college students, many of whom will have come through school systems which were weak or which were not equipped to deal effectively with children from families with low to moderate incomes” (Brazziel 1970, p. 173). Recommendations included more federal funding, remedial
coursework, as well as smaller classes (Brazziel, 1970; Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1974). Terms like “bridge the gap” and “underprepared” began to be frequently used in the literature describing these new students (Reisman et al., 1970). A Carnegie Commission report from 1972 concluded, “Moreover, mass higher education has brought into the colleges new types of students, many of whom lack any prior family background in college attendance. These new students bring with them new problems” (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1974). According to an NCES report, those attending college in fall 1978 were about half first-generation students, and about one-third low income (Grant & Eiden, 1980). As college populations changed and became more diverse in socioeconomic status, the idea that these “new” students were problematic became a common theme throughout the literature of the 1970s. Detailed earlier, K. Patricia Cross’s 1971 work on these students added a great deal to the conversation on who first-generation college students were, and the gaps that appeared to exist within this new population, such as working more, having financial need, and the difference in behaviors and expectations in the classroom.

The literature of the 1970s on student attrition, the community college expansion, and the new student population entering college all laid the groundwork for linking parental education (and income level, by proxy) to educational outcomes and success. While the literature was less explicit than it would become in the following years, the basic ideas were intertwined into the research: parental education level and income were both factors that seemed to point to different levels of success in students, particularly in the new students entering higher education in the 1970s. Many researchers in the ‘60s and ‘70s wrote about socioeconomic status and attainment, however, it was those who took the time to separate out parental education level as a factor that began interest in this as a potential factor worthy of study (Sewell, 1974; Sewell & Shah, 1968,
Ayers, 1974). The reports and literature of the time did not focus solely upon this figure as the only factor in these students’ success, but parental education level was beginning to show itself as an important variable and one worth studying. At this same time, policy was also impacting how schools could serve first-generation and low-income students.

**Higher Education Act of 1965: New Funds, New Programs.** For many years, first-generation students were simply a part of the “other” populations that were viewed as deficient and in need of extra capital to gain footing in college. Today’s colleges and universities have separated them out into their own area of interest, but the roots of this reform began in earnest during the Civil Rights era when new types of federal funding created pockets of money for certain groups – and along with that, differentiated those groups from the rest of the students (Ravitch, 1983). In essence, the Civil Rights era created the first-generation college student population by offering more funding with the Higher Education Act of 1965 to allow in new types of students, but even today we are still working to help these students feel like they belong in a system built for elites as they attempt to navigate the deficiency models still in place and the negative feedback loops exacerbated by policy from this era (Congressional Research Service, 2017; Ravitch, 1983; Roithmayr, 2014).

First-generation (in reference to parental education level) may not have become a buzzword in literature and in practice until recently, but in reality, this population was a part of the expansion of education that occurred with the Civil Rights era reforms. The Civil Rights era helped cultivate the image of the first-generation college student is known today by drawing attention to groups other than white, upper- and middle- class students in education systems. At this time, not unlike other eras, the education system was seen as a good place to attempt to solve society’s greater issues. Out of the aftermath of riots in a local city, the Educational Opportunity
Fund was created in the state where this university is located— a program specifically to serve low-income, first-generation students to not only get to college but also help them thrive once there (State of New Jersey, 2013). While this program does not serve all first-generation students, since the portion of the population are also low-income, this program has been integral in getting and keeping first-generation students in college. This also reflects how funding in education was altered during the Civil Rights era. As Title I brought funding into low-income neighborhoods at the elementary and secondary level, the federal government also began to fund what Tyack and Hansot (1982) called “categorical programs” (p. 242). Some of these programs were targeted at those who would later be called first-generation college students: underrepresented, low-income, minority students. This invited a new group of students into the education system and provided resources for them to gain footing with their continuing-generation peers.

**First-Generation in the ‘80s.** In the 1980s literature surrounding the first-generation college student as topic of interest on its own began to take form. Researchers in the ‘80s focused their lenses in more closely on the students they had begun discussing earlier: the low socioeconomic status student, and along with that came a focus on their parental education levels. It was in the 1980s literature that the term first-generation began to be used more frequently: while not all research around the topical area focused solely upon the first-generation student, they begin to edge their way into a more central role. Research still existed (as it does today) that used socioeconomic status as a larger measure, including parental education level, to assess things like attainment or the characteristics of the college-going population (Alexander, Riordan, Fennessey, & Pallas, 1982; Teachman, 1987). However, at this point in the literature, there was a growing body of work that took the parental education aspect of socioeconomic
status and began to think more deeply about it. For example, Stage and Hossler (1989) looked at
the same question of college aspirations of high school students that was researched in the ‘50s
and ‘60s – but instead of looking simply at socioeconomic status as one measure, they looked
more specifically at a few smaller aspects of parental influences, one being education level. By
the end of the decade, London’s 1989 qualitative work, “Breaking Away: A Study of First-
Generation College Students and their Families” became a piece that everyone in the ‘90s and
‘00s would cite when writing about this population in particular.

Linking up with a concern of the 1970s, attrition, in 1982 Billson and Terry reported on
first-generation students as related to attrition. Their work started to solidify the picture of the
first-generation college student that was hinted at in attrition literature in the ‘70s but pulled the
focus in more closely on the first-generation student in particular. Billson and Terry (1982)
described the first-generation student as less likely to be involved on campus, less supported by
parents, taking on a heavier job load outside of school, more likely to live off campus, and more
likely to dropout. While these assertions are not surprising compared to the base of research on
attrition in the 1970s, what is relevant is that Billson and Terry (1982) tied them specifically to
first-generation students. They described the hardships particular to this population by saying
that, “…they are making a longer jump from the social status of their parents than are second-
generation students. And they are making that jump with fewer resources and less support and
positive role modeling from significant others” (p. 18).

Researchers in the 1980s were beginning to ask questions about who first-generation
college students were, not just if they existed as a part of the whole. Data had long been collected
on parental education level in National Center for Educational Statistics research, but it seemed
that it wasn’t until the ‘80s that researchers thought it would matter enough to study as a singular
measure (Grant & Eiden, 1982). Willett’s work on community college students in 1989 looked at this population quite specifically and confirmed the thought that the community college student at the time was in fact often a first-generation college student. Willett’s research provided a connection between the concerns about new student populations within the community colleges, but on a more detailed level, getting to know more about who these students were outside of a more generalized socioeconomic status lens.

Richardson and Skinner’s 1988 research broke first-generation students into two distinct categories: those who were fulfilling a dream of their parents: their parents had valued and pushed education throughout their childhood, even though they were low income and uneducated, and those who had never intended to go to college at all. The overarching theme of the “dreamer” category was stress: culture shock, reluctance to seek help – both of which remain common themes in first-generation research. As the decade’s research wore on, it became clear that the literature was suggesting that institutions should work harder to serve these students and recognize their existence. Pratt and Skaggs (1989) also mentioned that, though first-generation students often had similar aspirations to continuing-generation students, they were less likely to feel prepared for college as well as unlikely to join social clubs like fraternities or sororities.

Literature in the 1980s reads a bit like a “getting to know you” about the first-generation student, the beginnings of what it might feel like to be the first in one’s family to attend college, and the building of a knowledge base around this concept. Piorkowski (1983) referred to this as survivor’s guilt: her research discussed the low-income, urban, first-generation student as having to manage a delicate balance between school and home. While struggling to keep up at school, these students had to also try to save face at home so that family members do not think they had
risen too high above their social status, along with trying to not be too overwhelmed with guilt if they were able to become upwardly mobile.

This idea of familial conflict is a concept commonly written about in current first-generation research: first-generation students are often faced with more family problems and stressors than continuing-generation students (Zwerling & London, 1992). In what has become oft-cited research on the topic of first-generation students, London’s 1989 work looked closely at a few first-generation students to describe their circumstances in detail. It appears to have been one of the first up-close, qualitative studies of its kind on first-generation students specifically. London separated the students into categories: “bound” to their home with conflict from family members who both wanted them to go out and achieve but also remain at home to help, “delegated” to do better than their parents, “exemplars” who must be an example for the younger generation at home, and those “expelled” from the home, who never truly fit in. The students in his study also echoed the guilt discussed in Piorkowski (1983): the feelings of “breakaway guilt” as London (1989) called it.

**First-Generation College Students in the Present.** National statistics report that first-generation college students are more likely to be low-income than continuing-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). In fact, low-income first-generation college students specifically are the central focus of much of the literature in the field. In addition to the increased likelihood of being low-income, first-generation students are also more likely to be minorities and older in age (Engle & Tinto, 2008, Terenzini et al., 1996). These characteristics seem to stack the deck against this population in a traditional college environment, and the low persistence rates that also follow these students support that (Ishitani, 2006). However, the fact that first-generation students exist outside of just
those who are low-income gets minimal recognition in the available research. It is easy to see how some colleges and universities have narrowed their focus to only serve this portion of the group in a comprehensive way.

As a whole, first-generation college students in the research show a need for early support once they’ve arrived at college. Dika and D’Amico (2015) found that the first semester GPA of first-generation STEM students is a quick way to tell if they will remain in the STEM major or change to another area. These same students, when faced with trouble their first semester, are less likely to seek advice from faculty or advisors compared to their continuing-generation peers. For example, unlike their peers, first-generation students likely have no family or friends in their major field to ask if they too had struggled with a subject and still pursued their chosen field (Nichols & Islas, 2015). Programs like Educational Opportunity programs (EOP/EOF) intend to fill gaps in both intensive academic support and also helping students to gain capital. In a population less likely to seek help, these seem like key supports to keep first-generation students on a path toward graduation from early on (Winograd & Rust, 2014).

Winograd and Rust (2014) found that being enrolled in an EOP program allows first-generation students to feel more comfortable seeking help, as well as become more aware of available services for support. First-generation students are also less likely to be involved on campus and less likely to use support services on their own (Nichols & Islas, 2015; Pike & Kuh, 2005), therefore programs that require this at-risk group to integrate and use support services do seem to be helpful (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Winograd & Rust, 2014). It becomes something of a tour-de-force: as Winograd and Rust (2014) write: “EOP program participation was the strongest predictor of service use” (p. 33). Since these programs have financial requirements that eliminate students whose families make too much money, this of course begs the question: who supports
first-generation students lucky enough to be more financially stable – even if only slightly more so – or those who do not qualify otherwise? This study plans to explore this question.

**Academic Challenges**

Research suggests that first-generation students face challenges in the academic realm from their first term in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nicolas & Islas, 2015; Williams & Hellman, 2004; Winograd & Rust, 2014). This includes areas such as the type of instruction they respond best to (Nicolas & Islas, 2015), how they adapt to professor requests, their use of resources (Winograd & Rust, 2014), major choice (Engle & Tinto, 2008), and how they self-regulate (Williams & Hellman, 2004). Upon setting foot into university, first-generation students and continuing-generations students appear to have different assumptions about what is expected of them in the classroom and how they react to setbacks. The first-generation students in Nichols and Islas’s (2015) study preferred course work with very specific, direct guidelines and did not as readily criticize their professors as compared to continuing-generation students. Collier and Morgan (2008) found similar results: their first-generation participants felt intimidated by their professors and feared asking for help. Some of the first-generation students studied expressed feeling inferiority when struggling, but involvement in programming specifically for first-generation students was found to alleviate some of these trouble spots and make students more aware of available supports on campus (Winograd & Rust, 2014). In addition, first-generation students who struggle in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Math) major classes are more likely to change their major compared to continuing-generation students who face similar adversity (Dika & D’Amico, 2016; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nichols & Islas, 2015).
Social Integration

First-generation students may also be at a social disadvantage when trying to integrate into the college social scene. The research in this area suggests that first-generation students are outliers not only in the academic side of college, but also in the social realm (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al. 2004; Penrose, 2002; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Wilkins, 2014). National data show that first-generation students are more likely to live off-campus and enroll in less credit hours (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Pike and Kuh (2005) wrote, “Specifically, first-generation students were less engaged overall and less likely to successfully integrate diverse college experiences,” (p. 289). This finding is echoed in other works, where first-generation students are found to be less likely to be involved in extracurriculars as well (Pascarella et al., 2004). Interestingly, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) found that while first-generation students are not as likely to participate in social activities, they actually reap more positive benefits from doing so. Engle and Tinto’s 2008 research shows that these students are even less likely to participate in academic-related extracurriculars, like group study. In Wilkins’s 2014 research, a group of first-generation white males felt that their status as low-income left them out of their wealthy peers’ social plans. Though a small sample, their experiences portray the isolation that can go along with first-generation status and its accompanying likelihood of being low-income (Wilkins, 2014). These results leave one to wonder if first-generation students who are not low-income feel the same social strain or have the same work and family obligations that interfere with out-of-classroom opportunities.

Living on-campus can allow students to integrate more quickly into all aspects of college life – however, this is a luxury that many first-generation students cannot afford. Pike and Kuh (2005) found that living off-campus leads to less involvement and a less positive experience of
college life in general. Commuter first-generation students, spending less time on campus, do not seem to learn the values and norms of being a college student as quickly as their peers (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Living-learning programs for first-generation students have shown success at aiding integration, but they are not available everywhere nor can all afford on-campus living (Inkelas et al., 2007). Since the data show that more FGCS are low-income than continuing-generation students, these issues may be as much related to their class status as their generational status, as working many hours and not being able to afford to live on-campus are certainly income-related factors.

**Intersectionality**

Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) seminal works on intersectionality brought to the forefront the fact that discrimination is not linear and exists along many axes at the same time. Crenshaw likened race and sex discrimination to a traffic accident that, while it might hit straight on sometimes, you can also be hit from multiple directions with discrimination (1989). First-generation students, already more likely to be not White, but also low-income compared to their peers, have multiple axis where a lack of power can come into play. For example, first-generation students at EU, a Predominantly White Institution, are taught by mostly White faculty members. As of 2017-2018, 57.3% of faculty at EU were White, compared to a mere 3.1% who were African American, and 3.5% Latinx (East University, 2018, Fact Book). It is still unfortunately fairly common that students will leave college without being taught by faculty with the same race/ethnicity as them (Nuru, Wang, Abetz, & Nelson, 2019). As such, racism, sexism, and patriarchal power structures are still a part of the everyday equation as they navigate college life.
It would be unfair to categorize all first-generation students as having had a singular experience or having the same characteristics. While there are many likelihoods mentioned in the profile of first-generation students above, it is also incredibly important to note that their experiences are varied and are not just one singular tale. This is at the heart of this study: beginning to unpack the unique experiences that exist within a subset of the first-generation college students often lumped in with others. As it turns out, some first-generation students by definition do not even identify with being first-generation, or only minimally so – but overall, the collective “we” of first-generation students is likely not as collective as one might imagine (Orbe, 2004). A smaller subset of the available literature discusses some of the differences that are known to exist amongst first-generation college students. As Kim, Choi, and Park (in press) wrote, “While a great deal of heterogeneity among first-generation college students exists, first-generation college students have been historically treated as homogenous by programs and policies aimed at helping them succeed in college” (p. 2). Nguyen and Nguyen (2018) argue that the term first-generation student itself is now an unquestioned as a term, when in fact it includes a large group of students who are not homogenous. Who is even included? Why are we talking about them as one group? As reflected upon earlier, the term itself is used to mean many different versions of parental education depending on the research (as long as neither parent has a bachelor’s degree). Nguyen and Nguyen (2018) assert that first-generation students are “standing at the crossroads of several marginalized identities” (p. 157) – and this study aims to portray at least one other side of the first-generation student, the student who is not being served by income-based first-generation student programming.

One area of discussion of different experiences of first-generation students is those who are the first in their family to attend college as compared to those who have an older sibling who
attended ahead of them (Kim et al., in press). They describe these siblings attending prior as “cultural brokers,” offering some of the information their parents were lacking (p. 3). This helps those who are not the first first-generation student in the family to have outcomes closer to continuing generation students, in that they may be more likely to use academic resources and have potential academic success (Kim et al., in press).

Social class and classism are other identities that intersect with being first-generation – and since the purpose of this study is to specifically break out students who do not meet income qualifications for FGCS programs at EU, this area is of particular value to the proposed research. Allan, Garriott, and Keene (2016) targeted perceptions of classism as related to outcomes of first-generation college students. Using three types of classism, citational classism (stereotypes of people from lower class backgrounds), interpersonal classism (devaluing/not including those from lower social classes), and institutionalized classism (structures in the university that leave out those of lower classes), Allan et al., (2016) found that both social class and first-generational status predicted institutional and interpersonal classism – and in fact, lack of access to finances was more related to classism than first-generation status itself. As Allen et al., (2016) notes, “Scholars and people working with college students should not assume that being a first-generation student and being from a lower social class are equivalent” (p. 493) and that advisors must be aware of these biases while working with students. In fact, the data of Núñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) have long shown this is not the case, but the discussion around and service to first-generation students still comes to a focus on the low-income student.

First-generation student identities also often intersect with the identity of immigrant families, creating varied experiences from first-generation students whose parents are from the country where they are attending college. The literature suggests that this added layer of identity
complicates the experiences of college further and is important to acknowledge. As George Mwangi (2018) points out, even immigrant students whose parents have degrees, but from other countries, had less college knowledge than their peers with parents from the US. This includes gaps in information such as admissions requirements and cost expectations, among other areas.

According to Baum and Flores (2011), children who arrive in the US before age 12 have better educational outcomes, but the college-going process continues to be harder for children whose parents do not speak English well. The sentiment of lacking language skills as an additional hurdle was echoed by Sánchez-Connally (2018) and led to students feeling inadequate in the classroom. Not all of the research suggested negative impacts for children of immigrants in college: the literature also supported that Latinx students in particular had a sense of pride, optimism, and perseverance that helped to carry them through and cope with the hurdles they faced (O’Neal, Espino, Goldthrite, Morin, Weston, Hernandez, & Fuhrmann, 2016). In addition, being a child of immigrants also increased the chance of enrolling in college (Baum & Flores, 2011). While the literature also notes that being a Latina child of immigrant parents in particular may come with expectations of putting family first, including possibly acting as parent figures to younger siblings or contributing money back home, these students also found that being self-sufficient was a way of helping the family, as well, and sometimes a more sustainable one for college students (Sy & Romero, 2008).

The literature on the intersection of being first-generation and Latinx is broad and covers both gendered issues as well as intersections specific to certain ethnicities, as well. Some literature caters to the female experience within a specific Latinx community, such as Ceja (2004), who found that Chicanas entering college found their parents’ encouragement to be the most important factor influencing their college attendance. This encouragement helped the
women to see college as something within reach. Other factors influencing college attendance for Chicanas was their high school success, trying to avoid their parents’ mistakes, and trying to create a “better life” than their parents had (Ceja, 2004). Interestingly, Morales (2008b) reported that his Hispanic female participants faced more resistance in college attendance from their boyfriends, husbands, and fathers but were more motivated by their post-collegiate goals than their male counterparts, and used that to stay the course. His female participants also reported feeling pressure to help at home and stay close to home, similar to Sy and Romero’s (2008) report of Latinx women. In terms of finding success at college, the literature shows that Latinx students who felt they fit in at the university felt less barriers on their journey. While they often credited their success to self-efficacy, in fact, upon further investigation cultural fit and family support also played a role (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005). Family most often played a role in coping support, and Latinx students often found cultural centers on campus to be safe spaces (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórazano (2009) called these counter spaces community building, and found that they helped Latinx students combat the racial microaggressions and stress from being on campus.

Though focused more on attrition, Martinez, Sher, Krull, and Wood (2009) also broke down the first-generation group into other elements to gather a more complete understanding of this group’s attrition- and found that low GPAs had a larger impact on the possibility that a first-generation student would drop out than their peers. However, complicating the concept of intersectional identities and how first-generation students exist in the college strata, many studies such as these (Allan et al., 2016; Martinez et al., 2009) are based on samples of majority traditional age White students – even though the literature details that first-generation students are more often non-White and older than continuing-generation students (Nguyen & Nguyen,
2018). While these other aspects of the first-generation experience are essential to tease out, some of the studies attempting to do so leave much still to be discovered. As Nuru et al. (2019) wrote, “there is no monolithic FGCS identity but instead multiple threads of their identity complicate and inform their lived experiences” (p. 24).

**Social & Cultural Capital**

Social capital, or the ties and networks that we use to navigate society, and cultural capital, the values, behaviors, and knowledge that we bring with us, are both concepts often used to guide the study of first-generation college students (Levinson, 2011; Putnam, 2000). Data suggests that in order to be successful, first-generation college students need networks of help and to learn to adapt to the values and behaviors expected in college fairly quickly to be successful (Nichols & Islas, 2015; Saunders & Serna, 2004). In particular, first-generation students must learn how to become college students without a role model who has already “been there” and “done that.” Continuing-generation students, by definition alone, have a parent that fits that bill; first-generation students do not. Thus, the challenge of learning to be a college student (and a good one, at that) and mobilizing social capital are areas that researchers have found worthwhile to study in the first-generation college student population (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Collier & Morgan, 2008).

First-generation literature portrays the social capital of first-generation college students as deficient: they have parents who are not able to help with many aspects of college navigation, often no friends or family at home to call for internships or course advice, and even if their schools offer resources, first-generation students seem to not know how to find or use them (Martin et al., 2014; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Perna & Titus, 2005; Rubio et al., 2017). In addition, first-generation college students often have more homogenous networks whereas
continuing-generation students likely have a broader range of social circles and professional networks. First-generation students are more likely to ask their high school teachers and counselors questions about college, whereas continuing-generation students can simply ask their parents (Martin et al., 2014). As a result, the literature also shows a running theme of self-reliance and trying to solve problems on their own amongst first-generation students, with varying levels of success (Lehmann, 2009; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Rubio et al., 2017).

First-generation students are also more likely to be working and living off-campus than their peers, which aligns with the fact that they are also more likely to be low-income (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008). From a social capital lens, this can be viewed in light of how these hours spent off-campus can negatively impact the formation of social networks potentially important to the students’ future growth and connections within the university environment. Potential part-time enrollment is also a factor that negatively impacts integration on campus (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). All of these factors can impact the students’ time spent on campus to do things like speak with professors and interact socially, leaving them more likely to remain outsiders to the norms of the college world than continuing-generation students, who may have schedules that more easily adapt to being fully involved in the campus environment. As a result of spending less time on campus, learning the cultural expectations of college and reflecting them into actions may take longer, if it happens at all. The abundance of data that show that first-generation students do not know how to find resources and support, and therefore assume they have to figure things out on their own, which is evidence that they are struggling to learn the system (Lehmann, 2009; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Rubio et al., 2017). On large campuses such as East University, knowing how to navigate the resources available is often half the battle. However, if other first-generation students are able to be on campus and be involved more than
their low-income, program eligible peers, the question remains if this allows them to act more like continuing-generation students in gaining the know-how to learn the expectations put upon them as college students.

Cultural capital, Bourdieu’s concept that people bring with them a certain set of values and behaviors, comes into play in how first-generation students learn to adapt to the college environment (Levinson, 2011). In the literature, first-generation students have trouble adapting to the expectations of college professors, both in how they interact with faculty but also in terms of in-classroom expectations (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Collier & Morgan, 2008). Their “habitus,” as Bourdieu called it, impacts how they think and act as college students – and evidence suggests that the habitus first-generation students bring in with them is often inconsistent with typical college classroom expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008, Levinson, 2011; Nichols & Islas, 2015). Jehangir (2010) put it simply in stating, “…they have not been acculturated to college in the same way that students whose parents attended college have. As such, the academic and social milieu of college is alienating and challenging to navigate” (p. 45).

Interaction with faculty and mentors is the subject of multiple studies involving first-generation college students. Looking into first-generation students’ cultural capital, Collier and Morgan (2008) recognized that being successful in college entails more than just being smart enough to attend. For these students, who are the first in their family, the ability to learn a new role – the college student – is also important to success. As Nichols and Islas’ (2015) research reveals, parents’ experiences can help students know what to expect – and obviously this population does not have the benefit of that. Collier and Morgan (2008) took this concept further. Their research demonstrates that first-generations students are more intimidated by their professors than continuing-generation students. Additionally, similar to Nichols and Islas’s
(2015) findings, these students have fewer outside resources to seek out for input: for a first-generation pre-medical student, there is often no doctor as a family friend to ask for advice, and no parent who can tell them which advisor on campus to meet with for help. Simply put, their lack of social capital inhibits their ability to learn the new culture of college and gain irreplaceable cultural capital (Collier & Morgan, 2008). These interactions may also be colored by gender roles, for example, Kim and Sax (2009) found that male students were more likely to get research opportunities with faculty and speak in lectures than their female peers, and being first-generation on top of that decreased the likelihood that males or females would take those actions.

Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, and Johnson (2012) propose that there is also a cultural mismatch between the norms of working-class students and the university atmosphere, something that would impact many first-generation students given the statistics on income level. In linking up to the cultural capital a working-class student may bring to college, Stephens et al., (2012) suggests that the very expectations upheld in the culture of university – fronting the messaging of encouraged independence, doing things on one’s own, and “finding yourself” at college does not mesh with working class norms. In looking specifically at the advising expectations and norms at EU Arts and Sciences, this rings true: students are expected to figure out and navigate much of their academic journey and needs alone, then show up to an advising office if they need help. In Stephens et al.’s (2012) study, universities that portrayed themselves as putting more emphasis on being part of the community as opposed to do-it-yourself were able to eliminate some of the cultural mismatch for first-generation students without impacting continuing-generation students. This seemingly innocuous change in language and purpose could be a relatively easy way for universities to make an effort to be more supportive of the capital
their first-generation students bring with them. Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012) lay the gauntlet upon the institution to be responsible for helping bridge this gap: “Intentional measures must therefore be taken to counter the absence of college-related cultural capital for first-generation students” (p. 75) – as opposed to assuming they must simply learn the rules of the game by trial and error, as so often seems to be the case right now for those not given extra supports.

**Improving Capital.** A segment of the current literature focuses on strategies to improve first-generation outcomes and networks. However, Schwartz et al. (2018) and Fruiht and Chan (2018) both critique the scalability of many of the current efforts to assist first-generation college students. Fruiht and Chan (2018) make the assertion that current programming efforts such as the ones offered at this university in the form of Student Equity and the Educational Opportunity Fund (among others) simply “cannot be scaled to provide high-quality services to all students who need them,” (p. 387) – which matches up directly with the purpose of this study. The main focus on many campuses (such as EU) has been on intensive programming for a small number of students who fit into the low-income mold of first-generation students, leaving some out to dry with no programming specific to their needs at all.

Schwartz et al. (2018) studied the Connected Scholars Program, which attempts to create comfort in networking amongst first-generation college students. The fear of interacting with faculty the that literature suggests plagues many first-generation students could be seen as a product of parenting styles in low-income households, where children are to be seen and not heard, and adults are not negotiated with (Lareau, 2003; Nichols & Islas, 2015). However, the Connected Scholars Program, while effective in getting students to use help-seeking behaviors, like so many other first-generation programs, only applied to a summer bridge program for low-
income students (Schwartz et al., 2018). This is a common pattern amongst first-generation literature: studies often include only students in programming for low-income first-generation students or assume all are low-income to begin with. Similarly, Engle, Bermeo, and O’Brien’s 2006 study also felt heavily for summer bridge and pre-college programs – however, those programs are often offered only to those who are low-income, as they are monetarily costly and outfitting the entire first-generation college student population in this way seems unlikely. Other work with low-income access programs have led to similar results but while these programs exist help to build networks, they are not offered to all first-generation students.

Means and Pyne (2017) do, however, show that faculty themselves can help to build connections that will foster resiliency in their first-generation students, similar to the findings of mentorship studies where naturally occurring mentorships help to bring first-generation college students to parity with their continuing-generation peers in terms of academic attainment (Fruiht & Chan, 2018). Problematically, first-generation students may not have the networks that contain potential mentors with college experiences, so their pool of mentors to choose from may be lacking, comparatively (Martin et al., 2014). González, Stoner, and Jovel’s (2003) work also supports the notion that students who are chosen for a program even prior to college such as a gifted program or college preparation program aid in exposure to college options and therefore increases the social capital of students surrounding their college knowledge and access.

First-generation students who do find a way to connect with networks on campus and off find that they are good sources of support (Irlbeck, Adams, Akers, Burris, & Jones, 2014; Saunders & Serna, 2004). This includes other students, former teachers, faculty connections, as well as parents. Parental connections remain a source of support for many first-generation students, but not in academically helpful ways. First-generation parental support is more of a
push than pull, emotional rather than instrumental, and while parents try to help, they do not really “get it” (Irlbeck et al., 2014; Nichols & Islas, 2015; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). In the area of college assistance, the social networks that first-generation college students have readily available to them have less to offer than that of continuing-generation students (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). That is not to say that first-generation students do not call home: Palbusa and Gauvain (2017) write that while both generations of students connected with their parents with similar frequency, “non-first-generation students reported that conversations with their parents about college were more helpful and of better quality” (p. 110). As with the other studies mentioned here, no differentiation is made between low-income and other first-generation students.

A bit of a deviation from most of the literature on first-generation social and cultural capital, Lehmann (2009) studied first-generation students who viewed their working-class work ethic as an asset in getting through tough times in college. These students re-identified themselves as hard-working and self-sufficient as a means to keep pushing through without the supports others had access to (Lehmann, 2009). This viewpoint, though not always echoed elsewhere in the literature on cultural capital, offers a counterpoint to the studies already reviewed, and a new way of looking at first-generation college students’ non-dominant forms of capital. This challenges Bourdieu’s traditional way of thinking about cultural capital and introduces alternative versions.

Yosso (2005) asserts that the capital that Bourdieu spoke to was that of a White middle-class standard, and failed to account for other capital, the kind that Lehmann’s (2009) participants saw as assets, not deficiencies. Yosso (2005) writes of potential areas of valuable capital in particular that participants in this study may be more likely to have: things like
language capital and survival skills as forms of capital. Yosso’s work finds value in capital other than just Bourdieu’s White middle-class version, which is important, because few first-gen students are likely to possess that anyway. These strengths, though, because they may be less obviously tied to the traditional academic realm, are often devalued or completely overlooked (Aquino Sosa, Sasso, & Pascua Dea, 2019). Heinz Housel and Harvey (2009) write, “like many FGS, we may have lacked college preparation, but we possessed survival skills in spades” (p. 17). Yosso (2005) writes of Communities of Color as places where students can find strength as opposed to the deficiency-based model that Bourdieu’s cultural capital forefronts. Instead, Yosso (2005) speaks of community cultural wealth, and six types of capital that Students of Color can draw from, as opposed to framing their cultural capital as deficient. Aspirational capital is the ability to keep hope and aspirations alive amidst struggles. She calls the skill of being able to communicate in multiple languages linguistic capital, and the community connections and history familial capital (Yosso, 2005). The social capital of Communities of Color also holds value in Yosso’s work, as the social networks of immigrant families often remain strong, even if they are more emotional than substantive networks. Yosso (2005) names navigational capital as the ability to move through spaces not built for Communities of college – such as the university space, in this instance. Finally, she calls the way that Parents of Color might teach their children to challenge inequality in the system resistant capital. In the first-generation realm where students are the first in their families to attend institutions made for and by White, middle-class people and their traditional educational expectations and values, these alternative forms of cultural capital can be a source of strength as opposed to weakness.

The literature reviewed here notes some important issues with first-generation interventions and means of gaining social and cultural capital, in that the proven fixes are often
intensive and hard to scale to serve all first-generation students (Fruhi & Chan, 2018). Even the promising finding that first-generation students can gain resiliency by having mentors is flawed, since the networks that first-generation students have access to are not likely comparable to that of their continuing-generation peers (Fruhi & Chan, 2018; Martin et al., 2014; Mean & Pyne, 2017). In addition, while parental support exists, it is shown to be of a different, less academically helpful quality than the support that continuing-generation students have access to (Irlbeck et al., 2014). Problematically, if these students do not know they may be lacking the habitus and networks, there is no reason to believe they will seek out extra assistance on their own (Atherton, 2014). Is being outside of the resources allocated to low-income students detrimental to first-generation students who do not qualify? This study aims to add some light to the experiences within this unseen part of the population. As it turns out, first-generation students must learn more than just study skills: they must learn to become part of a new culture as well.

Educational Opportunity Programs and First-Generation Supports

First-generation students in today’s colleges and universities are profiled as a group in need of assistance, as evidenced by the multitude of programs and initiatives around the country aimed at adding resources to their toolkit (“I’m First, n.d.). The research surrounding first-generation students also supports this assertion (Horwedel, 2008; Peck, 2011; Wiggins, 2011). While first-generation students have been a minority portion of the college-going population since its existence, they were largely under the radar until the Civil Rights era. During this time, the reforms that took place helped to frame this population in the way that it is seen today. For many years, first-generation students were simply a part of the “other” populations that were viewed as deficient and in need of extra capital to gain footing in college. Today’s colleges and universities have separated them out into their own area of interest, but the roots of this reform
began in earnest during the Civil Rights era when new types of federal funding created pockets of money for certain groups – and along with that, differentiated those groups from the rest of the students (Ravitch, 1983). In essence, the Civil Rights era created the first-generation college student population by offering more funding with the Higher Education Act of 1965 to allow in new types of students, but even today we are still working to help these students feel like they belong in a system built for elites as they attempt to navigate the deficiency models still in place and the negative feedback loops exacerbated by policy from the Civil Rights era (Congressional Research Service, 2017; Ravitch, 1983; Roithmayr, 2014). It was at this time that TRIO programs such as Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services all surfaced as a result of this act (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012).

**Gaps in the Literature**

The concern for outcomes of first-generation college students is apparent by the volume of literature and programming created in the last two decades, however, what remains unclear is whether researchers are interested in knowing the specific experiences of more than just FGCS who are low-income. Only a few studies even mention that others exist, most of those mentioned above seem to assume that the low-income experience, because it is a big portion of first-generation students and often a qualifier for services, is the only experience. Even at East University, the first-generation programming is given to those who meet income and other qualifications. The studies that do break out income brackets still see a gap between first-generation students and those who are not, both at the low-income level and above it (Mortenson, 2017b). Why, then, are income-based programs relied upon and the seemingly murky middle of the first-generation students ignored? This study aims to begin to fill that gap and explore how first-generation college students who have a little bit more money (or did not
qualify for other reasons) than their program-supported peers are faring. Discovering if
differences exist in this subset of the first-generation population can inform how universities as a
whole treat their first-generation college students, and on the smaller scale, best practices for
how advisors assist first-generation students on a daily basis at EU Arts and Sciences. Regardless
of outcome, giving voice to this subset of first-generation students will add to the body of
literature, which has left them out of the picture.
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Research Design

This case study analysis used interviews to examine the college experiences of first-generation college students who did not have access to services offered to low-income FGCS at the university. By using a case study approach, this unique group of students had space to tell their story separate from those FGCS at the university who were given extra supports specifically because of their first-generation status (Creswell, 2007). As the goal of a case study is to explore a single situation or case comprehensively, this study’s lens is narrow, focusing on a smaller, less represented population within an existing population. Though case study methodology does not take on a single form, it has value in seeking an in-depth understanding of the case or situation (O’Leary, 2004). The intrinsic value in studying this particular case is to learn more about the experience of a portion of the FGCS population that is not served by first-generation services this particular university, and who may be left out of services at other universities as well.

Interview questions (see Appendix B) where derived from the research questions, which focused on the students’ experiences of social and cultural capital in college, inquiring about the networks at home they utilized during college, the campus connections that they made both socially and academically, and areas of development that were experienced as problematic. In doing this, how these students navigated college as first-generation students without intensive advising programs had space to emerge, which aligns with the purpose of this study. A research question map in Appendix A details the relationship between the research questions, data collection, and data analysis.

Theoretical Framework
This study was guided by social and cultural capital as theoretical groundings, to focus on the networks that these first-generation students may have tapped into (or not) to get to their final year of college at a large, public institution offering them no formal, first-generation specific support. It has been suggested that first-generation college students have few college-related networks at home and at the same time are less likely than their peers to engage networks on campus. In particular, this group of students did not have the access to intensive support services given to other FGCS who fit income and other criteria at the university, making them their own unique group. Then, learning how they created the cultural capital they needed: the values and actions needed to get to senior year of college, paints the full picture of the networks and habits they used to enter the final year. Bourdieu’s 1986 work speaks to having education as a sign of cultural competence that can be exchanged for economic capital and passed down within families. In the world of first-generation college students, these students are seeking to gain that competence potentially without the benefit of the cultural capital of how to get there. Missing from his work is the concept that other forms of capital contain value as well. Yosso (2005) discusses the concept that other forms of capital outside of this white, middle-class capital exist. Adding this more nuanced view of capital allows for the potential to see how these students leveraged other skills than just traditionally expected educational values to succeed, as well.

As described by Coleman (1988), social capital is multifaceted. It not only creates trust within the system that one is a part of, for example, being able to buy a soda at the corner store “on credit” because you are a local – it also leaves out those who are not a part of that in-group: if you are not a known part of that community/club/group, you may not be trusted. Important to this study and a student’s college experience, Coleman (1988) also relays the concept of social capital as functioning as an information source: having friends that know things about what you
need (i.e. a college experience/education) and who can keep you in the know are an important resource to have, and a gap in knowledge when you do not. This study sought to know more about the social capital status of FGCS who were not eligible for first-generation support services at the university, services which aim to give qualified first-gen students more college networks than they would otherwise have without these programs. The ability to have access to networks of people that can be relied upon for information and support is dependent upon the connections these students have prior to college and are able to make within the college setting, which, in the FGCS group, may not exist. It also aimed to learn more about the way these students gathered the cultural capital necessary to succeed, and how they navigated any hurdles in values and beliefs they may have encountered (Bourdieu, 1986). This study dug deeper into how (and if) they made these connections, and what skills they used to reach senior year successfully. By focusing this study on capital, learning what and who these FGCS leveraged to gain the cultural capital necessary to succeed adds to the bank of knowledge that advisors at the university can use to learn about what connections FGCS might benefit from in attempting to more fully support this part of the population who are currently unsupported from a first-generation standpoint.

Pilot Study

A pilot study of three students meeting the study’s criteria was completed in Spring 2018, which helped to inform the choices made for the design of this study. For the pilot, 254 first-generation seniors (Class of 2019) were sent a recruitment email over a period of about a month, resulting in three participants. The participants, referred to by the pseudonyms April, Anna, and Emily, were all female, 4th year senior students who lived on campus for most of their time at EU. They were headed toward on-time graduations, and academically successful. They all had
parental support for tuition. At the same time, they all experienced and navigated East University and its expectations in different ways both from each other, as well as when compared to the first-generation literature. However, they also had plenty of similarities both to each other and the literature, allowing their experiences to be categorized into some broad categories based on both the research questions and their experiences.

As a whole, the experiences of the pilot study participants do paint a picture of some similarities to the first-generation literature. Emily, April, and Anna struggled, especially the first two years, to find resources and talk to faculty and advisors, as the literature suggests is common for first-generation students (Winograd & Rust, 2014). As Anna relayed, “it becomes really stressful when you don’t know what the appropriate resources are on campus. So, I didn’t know how to start looking… I didn’t have like, guidance.” They spoke of being intimidated by faculty, not talking to advisors, not knowing how to adjust schedules during add/drop, and not knowing that certain events or experiences were happening, keeping in line with the extant research (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Nichols & Islas, 2015). They also related to having moments where they didn’t know, or wished they’d known something about college life, keeping with the literature’s suggestion that first-generation students do not arrive with all of the cultural capital they will need eventually (Collier & Morgan, 2008). However, instead of stopping out or becoming frustrated, these participants powered through, largely on the wings of their own self-determination and drive. None named a particular person or thing that drove them on to keep going as they figured it out – they just did. This echoes the self-reliance portrayed in the literature, but in a positive way. This drive to continue and figure out how to move forward is different than the literature’s finding that first-generation students will stop out or take longer to graduate as a result of these roadblocks: these students defied those odds (Ishitani, 2006). Also
similar to first-generation students in the literature, these participants mostly found their families to be sources of emotional support but completely unhelpful in terms of college life and academics (Irlbeck et al., 2014; Nichols & Islas, 2015; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). When moving into looking for internships or jobs, they had no one in the family in their field: no social capital to draw on for career advice or assistance, not unlike the literature would suggest (Martin et al., 2014). However, one leveraged networks from volunteering, and the other two were leveraging internships and attending career networking events to create new networks in their fields. While the learning curve took at least those first two years in college, these participants were figuring it out.

The participants also experienced differences from the typical first-generation college student portrayed in the literature. Emily, April, and Anna all lived on campus, were involved in campus activities, and were not funding their own tuition. These were all out of the norm compared to most representations of first-generation students in the literature (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Inkelas et al., 2007, Pascarella et al., 2004). Though all self-identified in the middle income range (lower- to upper-middle income), they also noted moments where money was an issue: Emily spoke of not getting much financial aid even though it felt like they could’ve qualified for some: “That sucks cause we could’ve used some help.” April mentioned the rising tuition (especially as an out-of-state student) and Anna did not join an event because of monetary obligations. All of the participants found social life easy and were involved on campus. While they didn’t make this connection themselves, the literature speaks of first-generation students as working more hours than the participants did and living at home, making involvement hard (Pike & Kuh, 2005). It seems they were freed from the burden of being home and extensive work, and thus had the social lives that first-gens who do not have those privileges lack. In addition, while
the literature states that first-generation students may not talk to professors and advisors, all had positive experiences with certain faculty in their junior and/or senior years, but none could explain how exactly they learned this skill – other than just doing it and facing their fear. As April stated, “I just kind of winged it a little bit.”

The pilot interviews told the story of not only common experiences to the first-generation literature, but also outlier experiences of first-generation students who learned the norms, dug into social life on campus, created bonds with faculty, and most importantly, were academically successful and graduating on time. They shared the experiences with their first-generation peers in the literature of unhelpful family networks, feeling lost, not knowing certain parts of college, and feeling monetary stressors: however, they overcame those things to get to the end goal. The experiences of the pilot participants propelled the need for further exploration to see if these tales of stumbles followed by self-motivation, determination, and eventual success without first-gen university support services was more common than one might think, given the negative light often shown in the literature. Lessons learned from this pilot that inform the full-length study not only include attempting to diversify the sample of students by offering a gift card as incentive, as well as affording a more flexible timeline to complete the interviews. The pilot study fell at a time when seniors may be particularly busy, the last two months of their final year. In the final study, interviews were conducted in the fall term, which is generally believed to be less busy for senior students.

Participants

This study included 13 senior-level first-generation college students at the East University, Arts and Sciences division who were not in any of the first-generation, income-based academic support services at the university such as the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) or
programs offered by Student Support Services (SSS). All but one student self-identified above low-income. For the purpose of this study, first-generation is defined as those whose parents’ highest level of degree is a high school diploma or less. This sample was chosen because the intensive advising services such as EOF and SSS are offered to low-income first-generation college students but are not available to all first-generation students at the university. Senior-level students are defined as those, at the time of this study, with a class year of 2020, as this is how Arts and Sciences students are defined by the institution. The students in this study were, at minimum, in their fourth year of study at the university. By including any student with a class year of 2020, the sample allowed for those who have moved through their studies “on time” as the university would define it (four year graduation), as well as those who have taken more time to reach the final year, which, as discussed in the literature, would not appear to be atypical for a first-generation student (Ishitani, 2006; Mortenson, 2017b). However, all of the respondents were on a traditional four to four- and one-half-year path, and in the fall semester of the fourth year at the time of the interview. Students who transferred into EU were also eliminated to focus on students whose 4-year college experiences were at EU, to best inform how the services within just this university were utilized. As an academic advisor at EU Arts and Sciences, it is the outlier first-generation students, those without intensive support services, who must reply upon the advising office’s services as their main academic resource. Thus, learning more about their stories was of particular interest to my role in serving students. In addition, by choosing senior level students, the students had the opportunity to have more college experiences to reflect upon and speak to, adding depth to their cases. By using this criterion sample, the participants were able to provide rich, university-specific responses.
Procedure

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval from the university, seniors at EU Arts and Sciences who fit the first-generation criteria were recruited by email (Appendix C), and then were directed to complete a short survey (Appendix D) to determine their self-reported income level, class status, transfer status, and services used at the university. Flyers were also placed in academic buildings and cultural center throughout the university (Appendix C). The goal for participant total was 10-15 students, with hopes that this would garner a diverse picture of the population’s experiences with enough detail to begin to see overlap or thematic similarities (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2015; Patton, 2002). While this sample was not intended to be representative of the university population as a whole, it sought to engage enough students to get an array of experiences from first-generation students to reach a point of shared experiences (Merriam, 2009; O’Leary, 2014).

A total of 730 potential participants were solicited by email in November 2019 during the fall semester of their senior year. Emails were sent twice, so 1460 emails garnered a total of 54 students who began the pre-screening survey. Of these students, 32 students completed the entire survey and fit the required criteria. Of those 32 students, 13 responded to follow-up emails, scheduled, and completed an interview. One modification based on the pilot study was the addition of an incentive of a $15 university gift card offered to the participants in the hopes of garnering more responses than the pilot study (1% response rate, 3 out of 254). Indeed, the pre-screening survey of this study garnered a 4% response rate of qualified participants (32 of 730), and 14 students followed up to schedule an interview after multiple attempts to follow up by email (still 1% response rate). Only one student scheduled an interview but did not show up. Interviews ended in early December, just as final examinations were beginning on campus.
Therefore, 13 interviews were conducted with students fitting these criteria between November and December of 2019.

The 13 participants shared a few characteristics, which were random occurrences and not intentionally sought out in sampling: all were traditional college age (defined as 18-24 years of age), and all reported cumulative grade point averages that were nearly a B or higher (none under a 2.8, 11 of 13 at a 3.0 – B average or higher). All but one was on track for an on-time 4-year graduation: entering in Fall 2016 with a finish date expected in 2020. One participant will complete after an extra fall term, in January 2021, and one graduated a term early, just after we interviewed. The participants were overwhelmingly Latinx females – only two males responded to the emails to schedule an interview. Their majors were varied, including Genetics, Public Health, English, and Psychology, to name a few. When asked whether they considered themselves low income, low-middle income, middle income, upper-middle income, or high income, only one chose low income, even though 11 of the 13 participants self-reported that they qualified for free or reduced lunch in school prior to entering college. The majority (84.6% - 11 of 13) had at least one parent born in another country, with parental home countries of Colombia, India, England, Peru, Mexico, Egypt, Ecuador, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic: 6 of these participants were born outside of the US as well. Only 4 of the 13 participants were commuter students, 3 of which relayed this as a significant stressor in speaking of their experiences. All students worked in some capacity throughout their time at EU, both on and off campus, some in multiple jobs. Their work hours varied, but only one student reported working more than twenty hours per week. These students had an array of experiences learning the expectations of college, connecting, and finding their way to senior year successfully. These experiences are detailed in Chapter 4.
Setting

This study took place at a large public research institution on the east coast, which I refer to as East University (EU). The chosen site serves a diverse group of undergraduates, across many majors, income levels, races, and ethnicities, which offered the opportunity for a broad sample to be solicited in the initial outreach. This study focuses on participants in one unit – its largest academic unit - Arts and Sciences division, at the university’s main campus, which serves roughly 20,000 undergraduates as of fall 2018 (East University, Fact Book, 2018). Services available to first-generation students at EU were detailed specifically in Chapter 1. East University is a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), and according to university statistics as of 2018, the race/ethnicity breakdown of the entire undergraduate population on the main campus (across all units) at EU was: 7% African-American, 26.8% Asian, 13.2% Asian, 37.9% White, 3.5% Multirace, 9.6% Non-Resident Alien, and 2.1% Other. The gender makeup of the undergraduate population as of 2018 was 48.6% female, and 51.4% male (East University, Fact Book, 2018).

Researcher Positionality

As an academic advisor at EU, I hold a position of authority through the eyes of undergraduate students. In approaching this research, I sought to distance myself from this position to encourage my participants to be comfortable and willing to share with me, as opposed to seeing me in the role of an authority figure. As with the pilot study and as required by the Institutional Review Board, the recruitment email was sent out by a colleague to avoid coercion and ensure voluntary participation. When the participants were recruited for interviews, I made sure to not include my signature or titles, and to use my first name in replies to remain casual. The large size of Arts and Sciences, the liberal arts school within the university, allowed me a
large variety of potential respondents, and none of the participants were students with whom I had an advising relationship. Neutral spaces such as library quiet rooms and meeting spaces instead of my personal office were used to conduct interviews in an attempt to lessen the power dynamic that exists (Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffele, 2012). My position as an advisor was also helpful to me: I am experienced with interviewing and drawing out information from students in my role each day. Additionally, at the close of each interview, I offered reciprocity for my participants’ time by offering contact information of helpful resources at EU (such as counseling resources, disability services, learning centers – See Appendix F, handout), as well as my own time as an advisor. A few students have since taken advantage of this opportunity and reached out for questions related to their academics and senior status.

Finally, my position as a first-generation student influenced what I heard and how I responded to my participants. I worked to remain neutral within the interviews, but also disclosed my first-generation status, in the hopes that it would make my participants feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. I occasionally related my own experiences where they made sense to a participant’s comments, however maintained a focus on the students’ experiences. I believe this self-disclosure helped to build a sense of comfort and rapport with my participants.

Data Collection

Data were collected from participants in person, using audio-taped interviews. Written consent for both the interview and audio recording were taken (see Appendix E). Participants were asked questions about their experiences at the university as first-generation college students, including how they navigated the following areas: a) choosing and getting into college, b) financial aid/loans, c) academics, d) social life, and e) career/internship exploration.
Appendix B for interview guide). The goal was to gain a clear picture of how first-generation students who are left out of the intensive support services offered to other FGCS at the university learn to navigate college, specifically homing in the networks they used for help along the way. Each participant was interviewed once, using a semi-structured format (Gall et al., 2015; Patton, 2002). Interviews were used to obtain a rich picture of individuals’ experiences, and to allow them space to tell their story in their own way, as first-generation college students who are not receiving support services. Semi-structured interviews allow for the participants to focus more on areas that are meaningful to them, and to move the conversation (within reason) as it fits their needs (Creswell, 2007). Though the semi-structured interviews did keep roughly to the outline, depending on the students’ experiences, some areas received more time than others. Interviews lasted between 36 and 73 minutes. After transcription, member checks were used to make sure that the researcher had accurately captured each participant’s story. The interview transcripts were sent to each participant via private secure link to review and comment upon their transcript. Only one participant chose to add a comment after their review, none chose to strike any information from their transcript. All participants have been identified using pseudonyms in this study to protect their identity.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, I sought to gain a clear picture of my participants’ experiences as they defined them and allowed themes to emerge through the data. Interviews were transcribed by hand, to gain a strong sense of familiarity with the participants’ experiences, after which multiple rounds of coding took place (Merriam, 2009). I transcribed the interviews, which were completed within two weeks of the initial interview. Throughout the process of interviewing, transcription, and coding, memos were kept in order to log new ideas, comments, and to explore
potential areas of interest. These memos recorded impressions directly after each interview, again during the transcription process, explored ideas about themes, and toyed with potential coding methods.

Coding began immediately after all interviews were completed and transcribed. Dedoose was used to code the interviews, allowing for detailed statistics on the codes as well as easy re-coding as layers of codes arose. Using codes allowed for areas of common experience to arise as codes were refined (Creswell, 2007; Saldaña, 2016). The first round of coding was open coding, going through each transcript, marking many codes without true theme, and included descriptive, InVivo, and process codes freely (Saldaña, 2016). This round resulted in 102 codes.

A second round of focused coding was created by looking at the most common codes from round one, combining those that were repetitive or that related the same topic (Saldaña, 2016). This round of categorical aggregation created 13 codes that more clearly showed patterns in the previous 102 codes – linked to both the areas of questioning, such as admissions, financials, academics, social life, and future plans, as well as questioning lines of social and cultural capital in exploring who, and how the students learned how to succeed (Creswell, 2007).

A final round of coding used the round two codes and grouped them into slightly more concise areas of experience of social and cultural capital, along with a few demographic categories, resulting in 10 codes in total (see code book in Appendix G). Each instance of the code was then weighted from 1-10 to indicate if the experience was relayed in a positive, negative, or neutral light. A weight of 1 indicated a negative experience, 5 was neutral, and 10 was positive. This allowed me to see the codes in a different way than the initial rounds of coding, rather than purely upon frequency. It is this final round of coding and weighting that allowed for a fuller picture of the participants’ commonalities and differences as well as thematic
areas to emerge. For example, the findings that nearly all experiences of financial aid were negative in nature arose, whereas future/career network building was different among the participants.

**Trustworthiness**

This study worked to achieve trustworthiness in a few ways. Though relatively small in sample size, the data are trustworthy in that it tells, using quotes and rich detail, the story of the experience of being a first-generation college student without access to first-generation services at this particular university. By supporting the understanding of this story with direct quotations, the participants words and details of the interviews helped to ensure that the story was an accurate telling of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Iterative questioning was used to confirm important questions at different times within the interview process (Shenton, 2004). In addition to tape-recording interviews, member checks were completed to ensure the participants were given the opportunity to review their transcript for accuracy and add or detract anything at that time (Merriam, 2009; Vogt et al., 2012). Dependability was sought in maintaining detailed trail of how the data were collected, recorded, and coded to ensure the transparency of the research process (Merriam, 2009). Credibility was increased by interviewing enough participants for this study to begin to see patterns in the experience. This level of saturation helps to show that the experiences depicted here are less likely to be unique, one-off experiences of just a single participant (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). The study sample, though small, did show allow for themes to emerge across the participants – both in relation to the literature on first-generation students, as well as in opposition to that literature. In addition, by sampling from students not known to me as the researcher, I attempted decreased the potential bias of a student seeing me as a figure of authority and potentially painting a rosier picture of university services. By trying to
distance myself from my position of authority within the university and building rapport with the participants as a FGCS myself, I also attempted to increase the potential honesty of participant stories (Shenton, 2004).
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of a group of first-generation, senior-level college students who did not qualify for income-based support services at the university. These students, detailed next, had an array of experiences learning the expectations of college, connecting, and finding their way to senior year successfully.

Participant Demographics

The following is a summary of the 13 participants’ demographic information, based upon both their survey data (see Appendix H) and information shared in their interviews. All participants are identified by pseudonyms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Self-Reported Income Level</th>
<th>Free or Reduced Lunch</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gabriella</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>18 - 24</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latinx and White</td>
<td>Upper Middle-income</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>oldest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>18 - 24</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latinx</td>
<td>Lower Middle-income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>youngest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lara</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>18 - 24</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latinx</td>
<td>Middle-income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>oldest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>18 - 24</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle-income</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>only child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiki</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>18 - 24</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Lower Middle-income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>middle child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacqueline</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>18 - 24</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latinx</td>
<td>Middle-income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>youngest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisette</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>18 - 24</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latinx</td>
<td>Lower Middle-income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>only child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisabeth</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>18 - 24</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latinx</td>
<td>Middle-income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>middle child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>18 - 24</td>
<td>White and Middle Eastern</td>
<td>Lower Middle-income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>twin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>18 - 24</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latinx</td>
<td>Middle-income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>oldest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>18 - 24</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latinx</td>
<td>Lower Middle-income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>oldest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harley</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>18 - 24</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latinx</td>
<td>Low-income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>oldest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastian</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>18 - 24</td>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native and Black or African American and Hispanic or Latinx</td>
<td>Lower Middle-income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>youngest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Participant Demographics 1
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Highest Parental Education Level</th>
<th>Birthplace of Family</th>
<th>Campus Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gabriella</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>1 Parent outside of US, Participant in US</td>
<td>On/Near Campus (Not home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>Parents outside of US, Participant in US</td>
<td>On/Near Campus (Not home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lara</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>Parents outside of US, Participant in US</td>
<td>Commuter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Did not complete High School</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>On/Near Campus (Not home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiki</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Parents outside of US, Participant in US</td>
<td>On/Near Campus (Not home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacqueline</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>All outside of the US</td>
<td>Commuter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisette</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>All outside of the US</td>
<td>On/Near Campus (Not home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisabeth</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>Parents outside of US, Participant in US</td>
<td>Commuter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Did not complete High School</td>
<td>All outside of the US</td>
<td>On/Near Campus (Not home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>All outside of the US</td>
<td>On/Near Campus (Not home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>All outside of the US</td>
<td>On/Near Campus (Not home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harley</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>All outside of the US</td>
<td>Commuter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastian</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>On/Near Campus (Not home)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 – Participant Demographics 2

**Participant Descriptions and Background**

**Gabriella.** Self-identified as White and Latinx female, Gabriella was the only participant to define her income status as upper-middle income. Gabriella reported a 3.7 GPA while pursuing an English major, and was admitted as a junior to a competitive joint graduate degree program for teaching. Her parents supported her both financially and emotionally. Dad, a retired police captain, made certain he would fund her college ambitions, and mom provided emotional support. Money did not come up as a barrier often in our conversation. She was the only participant to work just one year of her college career (senior year), though she did work in summers to save up for the school year. Still, Gabriella relayed her experience as containing many moments of anxiety and fear, both socially, academically, and personally. Like many others, she did not utilize advising services often and identified *herself* as the person who was most helpful throughout her college career.

**Maria.** Maria identified as a lower-middle income Latinx female, with parents born in South America. Maria identified two older sisters, much older, one who graduated from the same
university and went on to get a doctorate. However, she only spoke of one sister throughout the conversation. While a sister offered pre-college support in helping Maria during high school, they had a falling out and the sister was not supportive during the start of her college career, resurfacing junior year. As Maria stated, “I see her more as a role model than a mentor.” Maria reported a 3.8 GPA in her psychology major. She noted that while financials were a struggle because her parents had filed for bankruptcy, they were paying for her tuition, and Maria was able to live on campus. Work was a large part of Maria’s college experience, using the money for personal expenses and to contribute to her housing, but did not reflect upon this as a stressor. Maria found social life easy, joining clubs and a sorority. Maria was going to graduate a semester early, in January (just after our interview) instead of May. She completed her senior year with a 3.9 cumulative GPA, was accepted to the Peace Corps, and began working as an ABA therapist with plans to consider a graduate degree in clinical psychology.

Lara. A Latinx woman, Lara was a commuter student who spoke often of stress and lack of time in her conversation, noting the frustration of being from a family who made “just over” the financial requirements for the EOF program and the stress of commuting itself often. Though she began intending to major in science, she later settled into a psychology major and arrived at our interview with a 3.7 GPA. Lara worked all four years, using income to contribute to her tuition, food, and personal expenses. She spoke often of nothing being easy: stress and struggle were staples of our conversation, and she made few connections to faculty and advisors in her time. She planned a gap year before pursuing future schooling but felt unsure about those plans. Lara finished senior year with a 3.752 cumulative GPA.

John. John identified as a White male, born in the US but raised near London, England. John was pursuing a genetics major and maintained a 3.7 GPA. He was one of only two
participants whose parents were both in the lowest educational category; neither completed high school. Yet, John’s parents managed to work their way into comfortable positions via networking and instilled this trait into him, and based on his reports, also managed to be comfortable monetarily. Technically a US citizen, but having lived abroad through high school, John often felt he was left out of resources offered to international students and still had a gap in US education system knowledge as a result. John talked about his experience at the university as overly positive. He networked his way into research labs, dinners with professors, clubs, and into meetings with prestigious potential doctoral program colleagues, along with joining an honors program at EU. For example, he talked about his time networking with a professor at local Ivy League school, saying,

There was a professor at [Ivy], who, I sent an email to him and then he sent one back saying ‘Oh yeah like that I've read the paper that you and your boss wrote, I thought that it was really good. Please like come to my lab, just like come and hang out for a few hours.’ Or whatever and I was like alright. So then I went and was talking to him about his science and my work and the rest of his lab, and then at the end of it, he was like, ‘Just to let you know, I'm on the admissions committee.’

John struggled to find a “hard” part of college when asked. He reframed barriers such as not knowing how to calculate a GPA (from the UK education system, without them) as learning opportunities, and tried to find opportunities to mentor other first-generation students, but was frustrated at the lack thereof. John finished his senior year with a 3.74 GPA, multiple scholarships, and acceptance to a prestigious PhD program in genetics.

**Kiki.** The only participant with a parent who attempted college, Kiki was a female, middle child of immigrants from India, with an older sister who graduated from the same
university a few years ahead of her. She lived with her sister in an off-campus apartment her first year as a fiscal choice and felt socially isolated at first as a result. While she had a 3.3 GPA at the time of interview, Kiki stated that she had been a part of three different schools of matriculation at EU, after taking more time than expected to get into the business major she preferred, Supply Chain Management. As a result, she was the only student taking an extra semester to graduate, with an expected January 2021 graduation date. Kiki held multiple jobs throughout her time at EU, and also mentioned that most of her tuition has been covered by aid. Money felt like it crept into the conversation throughout the interview in small ways but was not the focal point. In addition, Kiki spoke of using peers, such as her friends and boyfriend, as a main source of support and resources throughout college.

**Jacqueline.** A Latinx woman, Jacqueline began by telling a story about how she had qualified for the EOF program but had plans to go home to Colombia (where her father remains, and she and her mom moved from when she was 13) during the required summer program, and thus could not participate. Jacqueline talked often about working constantly and hard throughout her college career, both at home and at school. She had an older sister, but was the main support to her mother at home who faced a language barrier, leaving Jacqueline to care for not only her own college life but her mom’s medical insurance, bills, rent, etc. Jacqueline, like Kiki, began at a different unit within the university and qualified for enough aid that most of her tuition was covered (though she called herself middle-income in her questionnaire). While working multiple jobs and commuting, she maintained a 3.2 GPA and a psychology major, but found involvement challenging. She began with medical school intentions but decided to pursue a nursing post-baccalaureate program after her degree completion. She reported finishing senior year on the Dean’s List and with a cumulative GPA of 3.4. Jacqueline relayed that her first-generation status
was a motivator for her. She wanted to make her family proud, and to be able to care for them financially. She took a positive spin on her FGCS status and the fact that she has been navigating life for her family, by stating that unlike her peers, she would leave college aware of how to handle insurance, rent, and real life thanks to having to help her family.

**Lisette.** Lisette identified as a Latinx woman, the only child of a single mother with whom she moved to the US from Colombia as a nine-year-old. Lisette lived on campus, maintained an on-campus job throughout and would return home on weekends to work a different job at home. At the time of our interview, she reported a 3.1 GPA and a cognitive science and psychology double major. Lisette struggled to find time between work and school for personal and social time. She wished that she had persisted in her originally intended biology major at times but did not seek out assistance for college support until later in her career. Though she did not have much support in how to approach future goals at home, she leveraged an internship coordinator and professor to find help exploring career options, and although she described herself as shy, found ways to connect with clubs on campus. Her future plans include pursuing an occupation therapy master’s program after working for a bit.

**Elisabeth.** A Latinx identified female, Elisabeth is one of two participants who was a part of a program at EU for students in middle through high school who were given the opportunity to earn college credits at the university early due to their qualification for free/reduced lunch. Still, she spoke of similar struggles to her peers in navigating financial aid, applications, commuting, and working and didn’t find her connection to that pre-college program helpful once she arrived on campus. Though she identified herself as middle-income, she spoke to large financial barriers in her journey to entering college: helping with bills at home, and working to pay loans, for a car, and basic needs. Though she lived at home, that was also a distraction at
times. Her parents met in the US but were from Ecuador and El Salvador. She expressed feelings of social isolation in being a commuter: when speaking of others who were able to live on campus, “It’s easier for them,” and there was an air of loneliness when asked who she relied upon for help throughout: “It’s just me.” A sociology major with a 3.1 GPA, Elisabeth was using her job in a doctor’s office to learn more about human resources, a field where she was thinking about applying to jobs. She reported finishing her senior year with a final semester on the Dean’s List and a cumulative GPA of 3.2.

**Samantha.** Samantha, a female, identified strongly with her Egyptian upbringing and had a strong sense of community from her Egyptian community and family at home. A political science major, she reported a 3.7 GPA and had a twin sister also at EU in the engineering program. Though they did their applications together, Samantha noted that they both felt pretty clueless about the experience as a whole. While her family pushed education strongly and she and her sister attended a magnet high school, they did not know much about college. In particular, they found figuring out financial aid quite hard, stating:

> I don’t think they understood any of it, so that's what made it really hard especially like when we got financial aid packages and we were trying to figure out like what loans like what interest means what loans like all that stuff…. like literally there was no like guidance with that.

She lived on campus and used a work-study job to fund her own expenses and contribute toward rent and loans. Though she found space to connect socially, she found it took a lot of effort to connect to advisors and faculty. By senior year, Samantha still felt like she was “guessing” about navigating the job search. None the less, Samantha felt that her first-generation status was a
motivating factor and the fact that she was able to figure this out on her own was a badge of honor.

**Tina.** A Latinx woman and oldest child who moved here in 2003 from Mexico with her family, Tina quickly expressed the feelings of uncertainty and not knowing how to do college-related things straight from application all the way to the job search when we spoke. With parents who spoke little English, she said, “all of it was pretty much on me.” Tina spoke openly about the fact that while she received good funding for tuition, she worked to pay for her food and housing. Living on campus was a priority for her, and she deemed it worth taking out loans for. One of the lower GPAs in the group, Tina was a psychology major with a 2.8 GPA at the time. She was unsure of what she wanted to do with her degree other than taking a gap year to work before taking the GRE and applying to graduate programs. Tina struggled to connect with advisors and faculty on campus, and was uncertain how to, for example, ask for references. Her younger sister was a first-year student at the university as well. Tina expressed a strong sense of pressure to be “the first” with her first-generation, first in the family status.

**Carmen.** Carmen, a Latinx woman and oldest child, moved to the US from Peru with her family as a child. She was an out-of-state student and lived on campus, though she often traveled home on weekends to see a boyfriend. She attributed a lot of her social and academic connections with living in a living-learning community on campus and being a part of a women’s residential program. She spoke to having two strong mentors in her life: a high school teacher to help guide her to college whom she still speaks to and relies upon, and a professor in her major, public health, who she connected with early in her EU career. She maintained a 3.4 GPA while working as a clinic interpreter on campus, taking on multiple internships, and working during the summers at home. Like some of her peers, she struggled with science courses
when she first started at the university. She spoke confidently and positively about her experiences with involvement and making connections at the university, and at the same time wished she had been told more about how to navigate college earlier.

**Harley.** A Latinx woman, Harley was the only student who self-identified as low-income on her questionnaire. Harley, an oldest child, came to the US with her family from the Dominican Republic at ten years old. Harley faced many external challenges while in college, including nearly becoming homeless when her family moved to another state before her junior year. At that time, she tried to seek help at the university, but no resources came through and she ended up renting a room on her own off-campus. She worked three jobs and entirely sustained herself. When asked if her parents helped at all, she gave a flat “no,” and pays her own room rent, when living with her family or not. None the less, when asked how working as impacted her time in college, she had a positive approach to its value to her resume. She commuted all four years, thought the last two from very close by. She picked EU for a film program, but felt disconnected from what she referred to as a program where no one looked like her. In addition, she could not connect the art program’s potential financial outcomes, so she transferred into a psychology and communication double major and reported a 3.4 GPA at the time of the interview. Harley spoke of being president of an organization and had less interest in the social scene on campus. Self-discipline was apparent, and she attributed the connections she made through internships to her own need for “overdoing it” and being certain to find someone when she had a question. She hoped to join the Peace Corps and if not, pursue a graduate program out of state, potentially as far as California. At the end of senior year, she reported a final GPA of 3.55 and was accepted into the Peace Corps for the following year in her home country of the Dominican Republic.
Sebastian. One of only two male identified participants, Sebastian was an Afro-Latinx student who was also a part of a pre-college program that offered him the opportunity to take courses at the university from middle school. While this program showed him that college was possible, he too said it did not prepare him much for his arrival as a freshman. Sebastian was from a local town and was reticent to speak about his family situation: he alluded to problems at home when briefly referring to parents. However, he did have an aunt who was a former EU grad who was helpful to him at times. He lived on campus, as he stated that living at home with his family was not a valid option. He talked about two older sisters, one of which had attempted college but not finished. He hoped to become an inspiration to her to come back and finish after he did, stating, “if you don’t cross the line, then how can you pull people across?” Sebastian readily shared his experience struggling to find community within one of the university’s honors programs, and in finding others who looked like him and came from similar backgrounds. A public health and Latino and Caribbean studies double major with a 3.65 GPA, Sebastian was very involved in clubs, organizations, and paid work throughout the university. Though he was admitted to the most prestigious honors unit of the university, he found no one with whom he could relate to there and had to find that connection elsewhere at EU. He spoke highly of his involvement with the university’s cultural center, and very clearly verbalized the areas he felt were missing in diversity and connection for people of color at the university. He felt intimidated by taking on applying to graduate programs, but according to a university article, ended up securing a very prestigious scholarship to study and teach abroad (Madrazo, 2020).

Themes

In analyzing the data and coding the interviews into themes, the approach was two-fold: initially, 102 free form codes were revised into 13 codes to categorize the interviews into
different areas of social capital, cultural capital, and significant experiential areas, which were then collapsed into 10 codes. The final 10 codes were weighted to reflect positive, negative, or neutral experiences, as the participants’ experiences of the very same phenomena varied quite a bit. The final 10 codes of home life, finances, work status, campus status, networks/future plans, social life, cultural capital, first-generation reflection, academic status, and figuring it out alone were able to encapsulate the areas where their experiences converged, though the experiences of these items varied. The positive experiences with these thematic areas felt as though they were the “unexpected positives:” the experiences that were not expected to be easy or positive based on the first-generation literature, but these students put a positive spin on them when they talked about them. The negative experiences often fell in line with what could be considered the typical, expected first-generation challenges, given the literature.

Three Distinct Experiences

Outside of the specific elements for each theme, the participants overall experiences could be grouped into three versions of experience. First, three participants were clearly the most successful at connecting and building connections and opportunities for themselves, or as I will call them, the “Extraordinary Networkers.” While these students still faced some of the expected challenges of being first-generation, they framed their experiences to show the lengths they went to connect and build networks for themselves, and in turn, opportunities and success. Second, the largest group of participants (7), I call them the “Do It Yourself (DIY)” students. These participants found more positives and successes than failures but did not necessarily make the above-and-beyond successes of the first group. They experienced hurdles and spent time speaking to those and focused upon their own pride in figuring things out alone to eventually land upon success. The final group of three participants framed their stories in ways that most
FIRST-GEN SUCCESSFUL

stereotypically felt like the first-generation students of the literature, as tiring, overwhelming, and stressful. They are referred to here as the “Overwhelmed and Exhausted” participants, yet like the other two groups, these participants were still successful in terms of reaching graduation in a timely fashion and with solid grades. The experiences of these groups will be detailed in conglomerate next, but it should be noted that this large variance in experience alone feels like a divergence from the deficiency-focused literature on first-generation students. These students all found success, did not stop out or drop out, and while a small group put stresses and hardships at the front and center of their experience of college, that was not the majority experience. Ten of the thirteen participants told their stories in a largely positive way, even if obstacles had to be overcome to reach the endpoint. This alone is often lost in the literature, which often focuses so hard on where FGCS are faltering in order to find ways to help, the fact that some are already lifting themselves up every day gets lost by the wayside. If one were to look purely at the numbers, the two most in-need students in this study (Harley and Sebastian) would have likely been framed by what they were missing. However, by nature of how they relayed their experience of being first-generation without a built-in, first-gen specific support system on campus, they easily overachieved what a typical FGCS story might look like according to much of the literature. If nothing else, these stories remind us that numbers are not a full picture of how a journey has unfolded.

Extraordinary Networkers. John, Sebastian, and Carmen built large networks from the time they stepped onto campus and prior, an activity that the literature would say is more likely to happen for continuing-generation students. John and Carmen both found mentors in their high schools. John, from the UK, had a counselor in high school helping him to figure out what a GPA was, and making calls to the US at odd hours of the day. Upon arriving at college, he
connected with a figure of authority from EU admissions, was going out to dinner with professors and guests, and joining clubs. When it was time to find research, John had no qualms about emailing and visiting faculty in his intended major, genetics. Having watched his own parents climb the job ladder by networking (without completing high school), John was acutely aware of the value of networks. Carmen leveraged the help of a high school teacher to choose a college. She joined a living-learning community and a residential college, complete with built in mentors, upon arrival. She went on a service trip and connected with a faculty member in her major and used those networks to navigate internships and potential career choices. Sebastian, on paper, had no parental support, financial burdens, housing concerns, and faced struggles to fit in with peers. However, in his telling, he took the struggle to fit in that he experienced his first year and created the networks he needed for others that came after him. Upon finding no one who looked like him in an honors program, he connected with a cultural center and then created the opportunity to build a mentorship program in the honors program to be the face he wanted to see freshman year for others. Though the search for graduate opportunities felt overwhelming, Sebastian had built connections to faculty within his majors and mentors in the programs he was involved in to gather advice on next steps in order to ease that struggle. As he approached graduate school applications, he stated:

I'm relying more and more on my network now: the professors that I've met, the faculty that I've met, I've been reaching out to them, I need a rec letter for this, I don't know how to write this, I don't know how to say this, I need help! And so far they've been amazing, they've been like, let's have lunch, let's have dinner, let's talk about it.
Sebastian was acutely aware of his life chances, and felt he had much more to lose than his continuing-generation and/or higher income peers: this was a motivator for him to take every single opportunity he saw and run with it. When asked about social life, he spoke to this point:

I could NOT act up the same way as these people. I couldn't be publicly intoxicated, I couldn't be like belligerent to the point where I wouldn't be able to walk, like those were not acceptable for me, I had to be on point… For me, it was like I have way too much to lose. I don't, I'm not sure what these people have to lose, but for me if I had been messed up then I'm losing future opportunities and I already have things stacked against me, so … I didn't need to add anything else.

This category is not to say that the ten other participants did not create and leverage networks to find success: some did. However, those in this category took it a step further and built extensive networks to learn, grow, and create opportunities that may not have otherwise existed. Each of the participants in this group also had a unique advantage compared to their peers in the study: they each joined a group not exclusively for FGCS that had access to networks. Sebastian joined an honors program upon entry, though he made it clear that he did not identify or connect well through that access point. He consequently sought out connections through a cultural center. John joined a different honors program in his sophomore year and had a very different experience. He connected with and greatly enjoyed the help of his advisor through that program, but also made his own connections in the genetics department by emailing and speaking with professors. He spoke nonchalantly of this, saying:

I sent a bunch of emails out to genetics professors like ‘Hey I'd like to do some research in your lab,’ and one of them got back to me in five minutes and he was like ‘Yeah I like just had a look at your CV, you look great.’ And that's the guy whose lab I'm still in.
Carmen joined a living-learning community, a residential community, and went abroad where she connected with a professor. As noted by Inkelas et al. (2007), live-in communities such as the ones Carmen and Sebastian joined are shown to help FGCS connect on campus. These three students went above and beyond that connecting with not only peers but also faculty and, interestingly, John was not connected to a program his first year at all but still made those networks. Sebastian did not have a good experience with his built-in community. Only Carmen actually gave credit to the on-campus living community as a contributing to her networks. Though first-generation students may be less likely statistically to connect on campus according to the literature (Pike & Kuh 2005), John, Carmen, and Sebastian are proof positive that not all first-generation students are unsure how to network or refuse to do so – some are willing to go all-in on networking, and find great benefit in doing so.

**Do-It-Yourself (DIY).** This grouping of participants featured a mix of positive, negative, and neutral experiences with each of the ten areas. By and large, everyone in this group faced at least one larger challenge, whether it was an unsupportive family, large financial burdens, a lack of networks, social challenges, or cultural mismatch – but no one in the group told their story based only on these struggles. They all found success academically, and on the whole projected an air of pride or motivation from having found this success on their own. Seven participants fit into this category: Maria, Kiki, Harley, Gabriella, Tina, Samantha, and Lisette.

Of the seven, only two found their family situations to be a barrier: the five others found that their home connections were mostly emotionally supportive and that was helpful in its own right. Many spoke with a parent (often a mother) often, and though their ideas and opinions were not college-life related, the participants found merely having a sounding board and emotional
catchall to be helpful. For example, when Lisette talked to her mom about changing majors, though she reflected that mom didn’t really understand, she was still supportive:

I was comparing it with my friend who was also like in the same kind of boat as me, and her mom was very hard on her because she was gonna switch like majors… My mom was very supportive and she was like, whatever works for you, like that's how it's gonna be.

Harley, on the other hand, when asked if her family supported her monetarily at all, gave a simple, “no,” and it was clear that paying rent, affording food, gas, and living expenses was a stressor for her. None the less, Harley figured out everything she needed to achieve a high GPA, while working three jobs and supporting herself entirely. Even through these things, she spoke of her college experiences highlighting internships, becoming president of a club, and finding pride that her work history would mean that her resume was more complete than her peers who did not have to work. Harley stated, “I may have missed out on sleep and more dedication to study but I also think that it adds to work experience for example my resume right now is super long, because of that… I would say it's, it's valuable to work while you're in school.”

Some of the DIYers spoke to finances as a source of concern throughout their time at EU. Harley, Maria, and Tina talked about finances as the reason for some of the choices they made. Maria, like Harley, worked three jobs throughout part of her time in college, but unlike Harley, made little of it. Maria said that it was just what she did, and she preferred to keep busy. Tina, though her financial status allowed her tuition to be mostly covered by aid, chose to take out loans to live on campus. While she did not regret this decision, she nervously spoke of watching her loans grow, and working to pay for food:
Honestly, financial wise I was kinda hindered by that, because it was just me and my mom paying for my tuition, and FAFSA did help somewhat with it, but there were times where I had to give up a lot of things in order to afford like my meal plan.

On the other side, the other four participants in this group cited little strong concern for finances: Kiki felt lucky to have tuition covered by aid and was working to make sure she had money for extras, Lisette and Gabriella cited family contributions and parental loans to ease their burdens. Samantha made the choice to live in an off-campus apartment for financial reasons but saw that as positive, “I was able to pay my own rent with like the work-study job, which was great, because I didn't have to like worry about like asking my parents or anything.” None expressed finances as an all-consuming barrier or work as a massive detriment to their time at university.

The experiences of networking and social life for the DIY group were also varied: three participants found social connections with peers tough to build. Gabriella thought making friends in college would be easier, but found it challenging and a bit overwhelming at first:

I think it's also just getting used to being here and how to manage everything at once, because like freshman year, I felt like I couldn't do those things because I had some like so much schoolwork to worry about and I knew I had to do good - so there was a lot of pressure like I shouldn't be going out, I should be doing this. Now I realize you can reach a happy medium and that's helped me a lot.

Three others felt they did not connect with faculty or mentors at college and as a result felt unprepared or unsure of their next steps into a future. Samantha spoke about job applications with uncertainty: “I don't really know what direction I’m in, I'm just like applying to anything…. I don't think I know how to use my network or like what the purpose of it is.” This mixed bag of connections is nothing if not a reminder that FGCS are coming into and leaving college with
multiple versions of social capital and experiences, as evidenced in the literature on intersectionality amongst FGCS (Allen et al., 2016; Kim, Choi, & Park, in press).

Conversely, four DIYers found social involvement easy. Lisette even talked about having to dial back involvement: “My issue is getting too involved, so getting involved in something like was just kind of natural.” Samantha found a cultural club that made her feel at home and for which she was grateful. Four others felt that they made connections that would help them navigate the future. For example, Maria and Harley made inroads into both social networking categories with some semblance of ease. Maria referred to herself as a “teacher’s pet” and ended up connecting with one of her employers at the university, describing her networks in this way: “I wouldn't say I have any relationships with Deans or anybody, but working at [employer] I know the director of the clinic really closely.” Harley made a point to reach out every time she needed assistance, going above and beyond to make sure to do that, and rightfully took credit for the work she did there: “I think I have good connections due to the internships and the overdoing it.”

These nuances detail how the middle ground of being a successful first-generation student with no intrusive support services certainly shares some characteristics with the typical deficits defined in first-generation literature, while at the same time, offering a reminder that all of the gaps do not define every first-generation student. Each student in the DIY category found success and told their story in a positive way for many aspects. Yes, they felt the moments of fear and intimidation that the literature projected they would, even the most outgoing, connected student in the study did (Collier & Morgan, 2008). More so, they expressed their experience of college in terms of what they figured out without the help of others, their “do it yourself”
mentality and the self-motivation they used to persist. Kiki talked about this struggle, but also the pride associated with it when asked if she identified with her FGCS status:

I didn't have those resources: my mom didn't go to college like here or in India, so… she couldn't really help much with that. So I think for me, identifying as a first-generation student is important because it shows how much hard work I put into like my everyday college life and … it makes me proud because I did this with the, obviously, help of other people but like I didn't get as much help from other people as I did from myself, you know what I mean? So I did a lot by myself.

These students told stories of light-bulb moments standing in line at financial aid while their peers had a parent taking care of the entire process, but they also told stories of being able to talk to professors and getting A’s in classes, and making friends and joining clubs. They spoke to being aware that maybe they did not have it the easiest, but they also did not have it the worst, and often of being proud that they had done it themselves. Samantha embodied this spirit, in saying this about her first-generation status and having to “go it alone:”

It's like every time you go through something and it doesn't work out the way you wanted, it just motivates you to like keep going because like eventually you can land, like you know you'll find your way. And like, sure it's hard sometimes, but I think it's made me stronger and it's made me more patient and it's made me more like appreciative and motivated to do better.

Overwhelmed and Exhausted. The final category of participants were those who, while they found success, focused on their struggles within our interviews more frequently than their successes. Upon initial transcript review, these interviews felt as if they fit into the first-generation literature most cleanly. These participants told the story of struggle that was so
prevalent in the literature – the difference being that these participants’ stories all end in success. Lara, Jacqueline, and Elisabeth all struggled mightily with different aspects of the process of navigating college and its hurdles. When asked the easiest part of the college experience, Lara and Elisabeth struggled to find anything. Bound by one clear common thread – commuting – these three students struggled with finding time to be involved and connect alongside commuting, school, and working. They were tired, busy, and often stressed out. Lara spoke to those who had less commitments in their life: “I have a few friends who like don't have to work so I guess they don't get it, like how they don't feel as tired as I do, like I'm already tired from the commute, I'm tired right now from work and sometimes it, um, it just gets tiring.” Jacqueline spoke matter-of-factly of playing the role of translator, paying bills, taking a parent to medical visits, and taking care of insurance issues for her family, while working multiple jobs. For example, she explained a time when this conflicted with her classes by saying, “There was one time when I had to miss class cause I had to go to this doctor’s appointment of my mom because nobody spoke Spanish at the office and I had to go with her. So I had to miss class and I… I just I missed it.” Elisabeth spoke of a desire to be involved but clubs meeting too late at night for a commuter, as well as not knowing how to connect with faculty, except one in her minor. Lara similarity found regret in not being able to be involved because of the timing of club meetings and stated: “It's really hard because they're all meeting at night and I don't want to go home that late. So today like that's what my one regret, like I'm not in any clubs.” Even things that seem as if they should be simple, bringing lunch from home, became a pain point because Elisabeth was a commuter: “A lot of the times I remember not eating for an entire day because I don't have time to stop and or there's no microwaves where I’m at, so I can't heat up what I have, and I'm
not gonna eat it cold.” Lara spoke timidly about her future prospects, her lack of connection to faculty, and how her parents don’t understand her desire to take a year off:

 For letters of rec though, it’s hard when I don't really live on campus, so I’ve never really connected would any staff mentors or faculty… They [parents] want me to go straight to grad school but I keep telling them I don’t think I'm ready, because I don't even have all this stuff…. I still need time to get stuff together.

These moments of being unaware, afraid, or not knowing took up more time in their interviews than that of their peers in the previous two categories, but they were still in a similar position: in senior year, on the way to graduation on-time. It just seemed to wear on them a bit harder, as the literature suggested it could. The connecting factor for these students was their status as commuters, which made them feel that creating the social networks they needed (connecting to friends, or faculty) harder. This echoed the warnings made by Pike and Kuh (2005) that living off-campus led FGCS to be less involved. These students clearly felt that they had a harder time doing it all compared to the on-campus students in this study.

None the less, despite characterizing their stays at EU as full of struggle and without as much of a sense of pride as evident as the DIY group, these three participants did find motivation in finishing. It was clear that making their families proud or assisting younger siblings toward the same path was a motivator. As Jacqueline put it, “I want to make them proud like beyond their wildest imaginations.” Interestingly Harley, whose story as a whole fell into the DIY category, was also a commuter, but as her situation at home was very complicated, she did not lean heavily on that status as a major stressor, unlike Jacqueline, Elisabeth, and Lara did. When asked about her FGCS status specifically, Elisabeth took the high road, in being sure to mention the struggle, but also the pride: “I mean it's been hard sometimes. Sometimes I think like I'm doing something
to better myself and I'm also making my parents proud.” Jacqueline, on the other hand, could not hold back her frustrations during her time here, but again, ended with the motivation to continue despite those struggles:

It was just so mentally draining like I would literally cry like at times when I didn’t understand things, everyone… you know I don't really reach out so I was just crying all on my own and then I would talk to my friends at home and … you just gotta keep going, like it's gonna pay off at the end.

**Common Achievements**

Academically, these students could all be categorized as successful: they reached senior year with GPAs near B or higher (as such are in good academic standing, which is considered a 2.0 cumulative grade point average – a C average - or higher), and will graduate within 8 to 9 semesters (4 to 4.5 years). The resilience seen in all of these students related to the academically resilient students that Morales (2008a) wrote of, as he described his participants as having a “stick-to-itness and dogged determination necessary to reach goals while maintaining a sense of malleability” (p. 245). Many were looking forward to admission to graduate programs, others to potential careers. None expressed danger or fear of not graduating: given the information shared, that confidence is both warranted and earned. What, then, is the common denominator that allowed these first-generation students to reach the finish line unlike so many of their peers who became literal statistics of dropouts or stop-outs? Though this study does not offer a large enough sample size to generalize, there were some common threads that may have helped them do this.
First, all of the students expressed self-motivation to be in college and goals associated with that. College itself was the goal for some, with future plans a little less solid, and others were motivated by potential careers. Regardless of the reason, they all expressed a need and motivation to fight through the challenging parts of learning college to finish successfully. Though the first one to two years was not particularly “easy” for most of the students – all faced challenges either in the classroom or socially finding their way – they all expressed a level of “I just figured it out” in many aspects of their time at EU, driven by a simple need to get through the challenge to meet their goal of finishing college. Most of the time they expressed “how” they did it simply – they just did. None were deterred to the point of giving up, even when they came upon challenges such as course failures, overwhelming lecture halls, social isolation, tiring commutes, or extenuating family circumstances. As the literature suggested, none arrived with a slew of social networks or knowing everything they needed to about how to succeed in college: they, some more successfully, than others, found the motivation to create those things on their own (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004). They all fought to overcome, stuck around, and made it out to the other side successfully. Maybe this meant changing majors, learning to manage their time better, learning to ask questions or speak with faculty, joining a club, or finding support in friends: no matter the solution, they all found their way out of the struggles of getting acclimated to college through their own determination to do so. Gabriella talked about this journey to fight and overcome by saying,

I've gotten to the point where like I've done it this far, I know that I always figure it out…you know you I used to like get so nervous like starting classes like literally the week before winter break I was like, I need to take like a mental rest … now I kind of have a mindset where it's like, okay look whatever happens I’ll figure it out.
Parental support for going to college and completing a degree was clear from 11 of the 14 participants. Though no one had parents who knew how to give academic or college-related advice, all but Sebastian and Harley spoke to their parents being good cheerleaders or motivators for reaching the end goal, and they were not actively trying to put barriers in the participants’ way on that journey – unlike some of the parents in the literature, saddling their children with guilt for not staying home or to contributing to the family income (London, 1989; Piorkowski, 1983). Even those who found acting as translators or doing paperwork for their parents an additional challenge expressed that their families supported the goal of achieving a college degree: these high familial aspirations fit into Yosso's (2005) alternative forms of capital in aspirational capital. These were not the students Billson and Terry talked about in 1982 who were largely unsupported by their parents. In the case of Sebastian and Harley, their parents were mostly non-existent in the conversation: their parents lives were unrelated to the participants’ college lives, and while their parents did not offer support, they also did not actively interfere or attempt to push them away from their pursuit of a degree. None of the participants were charged with fully supporting their family, or for caring entirely for younger siblings, unlike the literature might suggest (Sy & Romero, 2008).

Small differences from the social and cultural capital of the FGCS in the literature existed: these students were not contributing significantly to the family income, their parents were not urging them to stay home, nine of the thirteen were able to live on campus and most had time to join at least a club or two. Three of the four commuter students expressed the most stress and least involvement – so it seems some of these seemingly small differences may have been enough to give these students the extra leg-up compared to a FGCS who has more familial burdens or must live at home. Academically, though, living at home or not, these students were
all achieving highly. The three who built the most networks were in involved in honors and learning communities, ringing true to what Inkelas et al. (2007) wrote, involvement in communities on campus helps to build capital.

**Shared Experiences**

**Unexpected Positives**

First-generation students can be pigeon-holed as having parents who require them to help out with the family at home either monetarily or with siblings. While two of the participants (Harley and Sebastian) were self-supported, meaning their parents did not contribute to their tuition, housing, or basic needs, none of the participants were expected to raise younger siblings or significantly contribute money back to their family incomes. Some of the participants did help with translation and with helping younger siblings navigate school-related items. However, more commonly the participants found value in the emotional support of family members at home. Yes, they all made clear that their families were not helpful in making college-related decisions – none the less, the value they placed on the support and encouragement of parents and family members was large. This emotional support and encouragement were an unexpectedly positive aspect of the interviews. Many students reported calling home to speak with a parent often and receiving helpful cheerleading from home. Though not traditional college-related cultural capital in terms of values and behaviors needed in the classroom, knowing they have the support of their family to press on could certainly have played a role in allowing these students to continue rather than drop out when things felt challenging. Though this seems different to the traditional cultural capital narrative, it does fit into the literature specifically surrounding Latinx students and leveraging familial capital (Yosso, 2005).
About half of the participants did not express large financial concerns. Given that 11 of the 13 participants qualified for free or reduced lunch prior to college, this was surprising. John and Gabriella referenced monetary concerns the least out of the group. Interestingly, some of the participants for whom one would have imagined that finances would be a major stressor turned out not to be. For example, Kiki expressed gratefulness for not having to take out loans because her tuition was almost entirely funded by financial aid:

I realize how lucky I am right now because … I know so so many people who have been, you know, struggling with loans. like my boyfriend, he is, he had, he was in EOF and he like graduated two years ago and from [EU] and he still has like a lot of loans.

She did talk about making some choices based on finances (such as living with her sister), but those financial concerns did not play a huge role in her responses as a stressor otherwise.

All of the participants worked (at varying levels) while enrolled in college, but surprisingly, only Elisabeth and Samantha spoke about working as a large weight upon their shoulders. The rest of the group found positives in having worked while being in school: Harley spoke about it boosting her resume, Jacqueline and Lisette used jobs to inform their future career paths, Gabriella liked her work, and a few students mentioned it gave structure to their time or just felt like something they had always done – as Lisette said, “I think it’s helped me with time commitment.” Kiki talked about not knowing what else she would be doing with her time if she wasn’t working. Jacqueline described her time as just a fact of life:

You know, I feel like I've been doing it since the beginning, so I don't really know how it, I don't, like I can't tell the difference because I haven’t had a period in which I haven't worked for me to say ‘oh I can see how it's affected me.’ Because I've just been doing both the entire time.
The positive and nonchalant spin on work was unexpected, as the literature largely points to first-generation students as working more than their peers, but never really touches on the possibility that this could be seen as a positive or just a fact of life (Engle & Tinto, 2008) – only Lehmann (2009) considered that thought. Maybe then, this positive perspective is another form of capital itself, a survival skill to justify a way of life. Aquino et al. (2019) talked about devalued or overlooked strengths - maybe the academic world simply doesn’t see this ability to multitask and manage time as the asset that it could be, when done well.

Social life was easier for most of these participants than the literature might suggest (Pascarella et al., 2004). The commuters, with the exception of Harley, did feel as though they fit into the first-generation literature’s trap of being less involved but the majority of the participants not only lived on-campus but they also got involved. Even if social life was on their own terms, for example, for those who chose not to party or who felt more social anxiety, found friend groups and most joined clubs. Harley, a commuter with a lot going on outside of school, even found time to be president of a club. These students, for the most part, did not sit on the sidelines. Even outside of club involvement, they all found peer support to be a positive part of their experience. Lara talked about studying with a friend to help learn the system: “A friend I would study with… like that spring semester that I did really good, we studied. We had two classes together so we studied together. I think from there I started figuring out how to like ‘work’ college.” Similarly, Maria leveraged peers for resume critique: “My one friend, she looks over at resumes. I've sent her my resumes so she can like fix it up.” Carmen used friends to help learn how to register for courses: “It was my friends who are helping me out but they are also different majors so it was sort of like, just being with them when [the registration system] opens and like doing it together but like planning, it was basically on my own.”
Being first-generation itself came with some surprising positives through the eyes of these students. Sebastian felt a sense of grit and courageousness associated with this status: “It’s about being a trailblazer first: it’s about being afraid, but also courageous.” Carmen and Tina both found comfort in having friends who were also first-generation, and as Tina put it, “It was like we were all in this together.” Samantha appreciated that she had been raised with a good work ethic as a part of being the first and felt that having to do things on her own made her stronger and more thankful. Others felt a sense of pride associated with being first in the family that provided motivation during tough times. Though certainly moments of stress and struggle arose within the status, there was a lot of hopeful, positive associations with being first-generation from these participants as they stood toeing the finish line of graduation. A comment that Carmen made hearkened to the concept of alternative forms of capital brought up by Yosso (2005):

My parents have always like made me self-accountable…they've been treating me like a grown-up since my brother was born basically, cause I like basically helped raise him so that really made me mature so when I came out here I wasn't really like … I didn't study but that was because I think I didn't have to, not because I didn't want to. So like, I thought I was doing like what I should be doing… I'm very responsible, so I think that really helped to push me along the way.

Some might see only the differences that could be detrimental to first-generation students, but the students in this study found benefits in their upbringings, as well. Cunningham (2019) wrote about the concept of navigating between different worlds, and the students in this study faced that. From having to do paperwork for parents, acting as translator, or not wanting to invite parents to an event, this ability to navigate two (or more) worlds was a part of many of their
college experiences. However, the participants rarely spoke of this moving between worlds with a sense that it was the main struggle they faced; it was just part of a larger whole.

Typical First-Generation Pitfalls: Shared Struggles

Certainly, not all experiences of the participants were positive. There were times when they felt burdened, stressed, and struggled in the areas that the literature points to as pain points. First and foremost, 3 of the 4 commuter students struggled with time, stress, and connecting socially as the literature suggests is common for first-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005). These students spoke of wanting to join clubs but since most met in the late evening, it was not convenient or worth staying on campus for. Others envied those who were able to live on campus because they could make friends right in their dorm.

It was not common amongst the participants to be immediately comfortable asking for help from resources such as faculty advisors. While these students all eventually came around to being able to do that to support their success, the typical first-generation unwillingness to seek assistance took over the first couple of years. Sebastian stated, “self-advocacy really took its hold junior year: the first few years I felt like uncomfortable asking for anything - I didn't ask for any extensions, I just suffered.” This sentiment was echoed by other participants as well. They talked about feeling like they were taking up the professors’ time with “dumb” questions or the feeling incompetent for not knowing something as a hindrance to seeking assistance. Paulson and Griswold (2009) work related to these students’ experiences of FGCS feeling uncomfortable asking for help, especially if they might feel embarrassed. Where these students fall out of that prediction is that they all eventually found someone to chat with by their later years. For some, it was a faculty member, others, peers, or employers. Some connected heavily, others minimally, but they did on the whole overcome this connection pitfall.
The participants all struggled with knowing how to navigate three areas universally: the college admissions application, the financial aid application, and the expectations of the classroom/college. For the college application process, even those who had a helpful guidance counselor or joint school program to help found points within the process that gave them pause. Quite a few of the participants had help with some of the basics of the admissions application either from older siblings or cousins, a mentor in high school, or peers. While Pérez and McDonough (2008) suggested that Latinx students (like most of the participants here) are more likely to rely on peers, relatively, and pre-college contacts in their application processes, these students sometimes used those networks but were rarely comforted or felt assisted by them. Some participants spoke to not knowing they could apply for fee waivers for college applications, others did not realize that, after applying, out-of-state colleges were not fiscally possible. Jacqueline and Tina even spoke of crying while doing applications. Elisabeth talked of not knowing how, or when, or how many times to take the SAT. Tina, the oldest child of parents who did not speak much English, was largely on her own. Even the students who had access to a mentor or helpful guidance counselor in high school expressed struggles in these processes: sure, those mentors would “check” their essays but when left to their own computers to put in the applications, it was often the participants and Google, figuring it out. Even John, the participant who struggled to find a “hard” part of college, struggled with the application: he was from the UK, and had a hard time finding someone to help him translate UK grades to US GPAs, along with things like having to apply for health insurance himself.

Even more stressful than the college application was the financial aid application. A sea of numbers and tax forms, the students had to ask their parents for documents. Financially, all of the participants felt overwhelmed by the process of applying for aid and figuring out how to pay
for college. Their parents did not know how to do the forms either, so even if a friendly sibling
or parent watched over, the financial aid documents were still a major stressor for all of the
participants. Maria spoke of trying to get help from her mom with paperwork but essentially
having to do it on her own and feeling the burden of that. As their college careers wore on, the
financial paperwork, while it became familiar, still presented struggles. Two participants spoke
of being in the financial aid office to take care of paperwork and, seeing a person in front of them
have a parent take care of the same things they were doing alone, felt envious of those “lucky
enough” to not be first-generation. Jacqueline felt this strongly, and spoke of it in anecdote about
being at the financial aid office:

There was one time that I went to financial aid because I was trying to apply for summer
aid, and I went and I was behind this guy who was on his phone … and his dad was just
doing all the talking, taking care of everything. I was just like, oh my god that must be so
nice, like he's not even, he doesn't even know what's going on, like he's… I don't
know… I was so jealous… and then they went away and then I had to figure out the
thing. Lots of my friends, like their parents went to, like they went to college, like they've
been here, and they don't understand and I have talked to them and they don't understand
how privileged they are, that they don't have to worry about anything.

Even Gabriella, whose parents were funding her tuition entirely and who had the least negative
comments in regard to finances, had to complete all of the actual work to pay term bills and
interact with student accounting herself. As she stated, “I'm managing the whole process. They
don't know how to do it really. Um so like I do it, they just supply me with the bank account to
do it, if that makes sense.” Though the funding was there, it was up to her to manage the process
herself because her parents did not know any more than she did. Participants spoke openly about
feeling clueless about loans, percentage rates, and paying back. Tina’s take on this topic was common:

At that point, I am just an eighteen year old with barely a bank account in my name, so I didn't know what to take and what not to take, so I just took whatever they gave me because I guess I needed as much help. So I just took whatever loans I took, subsidized, unsubsidized and such… It was my, like my friends explaining it to me. I'm like hey guys, did you also get these loans? And they explained to me on the process and like what the each of them meant, and how I should pay them and such and also online like a bunch of, on Twitter, I guess the people I follow are also college students and they were giving tips sometimes, they're like oh you should pay it like this and this - but it wasn't really like the university or people who were supposed to help me that helped me.

These application processes were universally challenging for the participants, though the stress level expressed from these processes varied from what seemed like an inconvenience to a major stressor. Carmen talked about hearing from others that you could ask for more money, and the lack of knowledge that she felt when she found that out:

I actually know like this guy that like his mom like went to a university, and like she knew like if you wrote a letter to the financial aid office asking for more money saying like my son has other options like give him a little bit more money and he'll go to this school and I was like, you can do that??? … I needed that! And then I was like, they're well off, they don't even need that, I’m struggling out here! So like, just having that knowledge like his mom had is like the choices and like you can actually ask for more… it's like you're sort of like complacent, like you feel lucky to be here so you’re like oh, I’ll make do.
The knowledge gap of the financial aid and the lack of networks to help with the process felt the most fitting with the “typical” FGCS social and cultural capital in the literature. No one spoke confidently about the financial aid process. At best, some felt they had learned a little, or knew how to do the paperwork better, but none claimed expertise. Unlike the students ahead of them in the financial aid line, they never got the benefit of a parent explaining to them what had just happened after each interaction. However, without knowing the experience of a continuing-generation student’s feelings on financial aid at EU, it is hard to know if this lack of college financial aid knowledge was due entirely to being first-generation, or being fairly young and new to managing finances, as well.

Learning what to expect in a college classroom and in navigating college life in general was a longer process for the participants. Some stumbled over sciences and swapped majors as a result, others spent time trying to figure out how to study, time management, figure out the expectations of a college professor, or how to schedule classes or plan ahead. Most faced academic challenges: learning to study, taking science courses that were harder than anything taken prior, or finding ways to feel comfortable in lecture hall courses. Learning the behaviors, or cultural capital needed to “do” college was hard. Lisette talked about the adjustment she felt in her classes:

I just didn’t balance free time and schoolwork well because it was my first time like having so much freedom and my home was always very very strict, so I didn't do well academically and then sophomore year was when I started like working and like just focusing a bit more and that's when I started going up.

However, by junior year (some sooner), all had found relative comfort in the classroom and in a major they enjoyed. For some, such as Jacqueline and Lisette, this meant ditching an
intended STEM major for a social science or humanities degree. For others, this meant ignoring the advice of advisors to push through to the major they truly wanted, like Kiki, who was told by an advisor to explore another path after getting two D grades in important business courses. Instead, she continued to pursue that path and succeeded. Maria, too, was motivated by being told by an advisor to use caution in overloading credits. Using that as motivation, she succeeded in credit overloads and graduated a semester early. Gabriella sought out the help of an advisor and found the meeting too short and the advisor unhelpful and too general. Others got through their initial lecture hall sciences and settled into their science-related major in time (John, Sebastian). They learned by asking peers or just eventually “figuring it out” that office hours were meetings with faculty, and they learned that they could study with peers, or arrange their own schedules to manage their time better to study more efficiently. However, most did not attribute gaining this level of college cultural capital to a formal experience: they either gleaned from peers or learned just by doing it themselves. Gabriella talked about this pivot from being terrified to being “fine” nonchalantly: “I only had one class my first day of classes and I was so scared and I was so so so so nervous and it was like in one of the bigger lecture halls and being so scared and anyway it was fine.” They failed a course or two, and recovered, never dipping too deep into dangers zones to be dismissed. Where other FGCS may have stopped out and become a part of the statistic that leads to lower graduation rates (Mortenson, 2017b), these students found the motivation to figure it out themselves and remain.

Outside of just academic challenges in the classroom, Harley and Sebastian spoke of cultural mismatches with their peers that were significant challenges their first year or two. They expressed some of the challenges of being a person of color at a PWI. For Harley, she chose to attend EU for a film program but finding that she was one of the only students of color in her
classes left her feeling as if she did not fit in. She reflected on her time in the film program by saying,

I remember feeling a little bit left out, especially, I'm only speaking of that program, it's different from [Arts and Sciences] and classes here, but I was like one of the only people of color there and the people there were very cliquey, so I felt super lonely and I think that was part, one of the factors that made me want to not go.

She later switched into a psychology and communications double major and found that her courses in Arts and Sciences were more diverse. She also liked seeing a stronger connection to future jobs in this new pathway. Sebastian entered an honors program at the university and felt that no one who had his life experience as a low-income, person of color was present in the program. He did not relate to his cohort, and in his entry-level science courses for his Public Health major, he also did not see himself. He did end up finding what he called “his people” in a cultural center on campus, and in his double major in Latino & Caribbean Studies, but this mismatch presented a significant stressor for Sebastian. He articulated these feelings of difference at many points in the interview, such as when talking about finding social connections:

The culture is different too, like when you come from different districts, like there's a there's a culture of grit and there's a culture of like humility, I think, that came from where I grew up in, versus someone growing up in another township that doesn't have to deal with the same things that I had to deal with. So outside of [his honor’s program], I found my people… I have a lot of [another EU campus] friends and like I realized that we connected based on our experience here as being first-gen, from an inner-city
environment surrounded by people who are not like us at all. And we're using our grit to survive and kind of like thrive in a way, or try to thrive.

He also spoke of feelings of being an imposter, and instead of leaving, he chose to become who he needed to see. He began a first-gen program in his honors program and became a mentor there, along with involvement in the cultural center. Sebastian, in learning what was expected of him to thrive in college, but also innovating to become a mentor for others, is an example of both learning the expected cultural capital and also taking his own social and navigational capital and showing that they can hold value as well (Bourdieu, 1986; Yosso, 2005).

As a sample of mostly Latinx students, the participants in this study also faced the fact that many of their professors did not look like them, based on the numerical breakdown provided in Chapter 2. Only Sebastian took this on directly in his interview, speaking about not seeing people who looked like him both in his honors program and also in the classroom. However, many participants also expressed hesitance in speaking to their faculty during years one and two – would this have been different if they saw more faculty who looked like them (Crenshaw, 1991)? Crenshaw (1988) wrote, “minority students may be disinclined to actively participate” (p. 10). While this did not apply to all of the students in this study, in fact, some noted that they were always willing to speak out in class – if it impacted even some, it continues to be a barrier to an equitable experience of college. Interestingly, two participants called out a particular challenging writing course required in year one as a mismatch of expectations of how language was to be used. John talked about his professor devaluing his “version” of English (being from the UK) and downgrading him until he adjusted to US English, and Gabriella spoke about taking time to understand how her professor wanted her to write. The seemingly small need to live up to the expectations of prim and proper writing style in academia created hurdles they had to cross.
One aspect that was absent or just a blip on the radar in most conversations, save for one student in an honors program (John), was the presence of academic advising throughout their college careers as a support system. One of the benefits that are given to first-generation students at EU who are enrolled in the Educational Opportunity Fund is an advisor who is a constant force in the students’ lives. Students at EU who are eligible for Student Support Services also receive advising resources. The participants in this study, by nature of the intended sample, had access to neither of these programs. When asked if they used advising services, only one cited a truly positive, sustained experience of academic advising. John became a part of an honors program in his second year, and as a result received an assigned advisor with whom he connected often and spoke highly. The other students did not connect in a sustained way with academic advisors at EU, though some found mentors in faculty later in their college careers. A few stopped in once or twice but did not return even if they rated the experience as somewhat helpful. The more common experience of advising was that if they tried it, they found it too general, too fast, or simply unhelpful. Tina talked about her advising attempts and said, “Most of the advisors, or both of the two advisers that I went to didn't really help out in anything, and I just didn't really… like go out of my way to ask questions.” Gabriella articulated a similar experience of attempting to see an advisor. Samantha expressed wanting to have just one person she could see, who could get to know her (instead of being unassigned):

I think kind of like what I was saying before… like just having somebody, an advisor that you can like talk to… like someone since freshman year. I know smaller colleges do that but [EU Arts and Sciences] doesn’t, I don't know. And I know like they have that for maybe for the smaller departments or whatever but I think if I was assigned to like
somebody I can talk to, and have them throughout my whole four years I think that would have been great cause and it's like they kind of follow up with you.

Lisette specified that she had attempted advising but it was too general and did not really refer her to specific people who could have helped her. Jacqueline critiqued the advisors available in saying, “They were varying levels of helpful depending on who I talked to.” In fact, Maria, Kiki, and Jacqueline all talked of being told _not_ to do something challenging by an advisor, ignoring that advice, and succeeding despite it. Participants expressed wishes that someone had helped them to learn to navigate the most basic aspects of an academic career in college. Gabriella expressed this need clearly, “I wish they'd told like us even about like registering for classes. That was something that was totally, I had to figure that out cause the advisor … he did not help me.” Learning to choose courses, navigate the systems to do so, start to explore career options, learn about new majors, or simply get good advice about their academic futures were all on their own. Carmen expressed “I don't even think I was really reached out to, so I felt like I had to make the first step and it was like as like a freshman like I felt like there was so much going on that I felt like that was a step I didn't need to take.”

The classroom, and the college environment, proved challenging for all of the students at various levels. What remains unique about these participants is that they all fought to make sure these challenges did not define them: they either pushed through and quite literally became the change, they found support in peers or faculty, or they changed paths to find a route they identified with. None dropped out, none succumbed to sustained poor grades, and none let these challenges define their college career. Though these students found their way to senior year successfully, they still fell victim to wishing they had known more or found more resources at the university at one point or another in their careers. As Carmen put it,
There should be like a how-to book or something like that, um, because like I came in the first year and I thought it was just like, you go to classes, you do your work, and that's it… but there's like so much more than that if you really want to like succeed… there's so many things that I'm still finding out about now, I’m like, oh I'm about to graduate it would have been cool to know that two years ago.

Some participants talked specifically with some resentment about not being able to qualify for programs like EOF or SSS and the resources that came with those programs. John, one of the best networked students, wished he had been able to mentor other first-generation students, but he was unable to find anyone to help him do this. A good amount of not knowing how to find or do certain things still existed within these students’ stories, and while they were not often the central tale that they told, they still contributed to their version of a first-generation student story: it is just that unlike much of the literature on FGCS, these stories all end in success.

**Commonalities Due to Sample**

Findings that emerged from this study but were not intended were due to the grouping of students who agreed to participate. As noted, the participants were overwhelming Latinx women. Of the participant group, 10 of 13 identify as Latinx, either entirely or mixed with another race. Eleven of the 13 participants were from immigrant families, six of those traveled to the US as children themselves with their families. Though these demographic details did not appear to be central to the stories that they told in relation to their college experience as first-generation college students, it is important to discuss how their experiences could have been impacted by the effects of race and being first- or second-generation immigrants, along with first-generation college students. The literature suggests that the intersections of being first-generation, as well as children of immigrants and/or Latinx students add complexity to the experience of college.
The female participants in this study spoke of calling home and finding parents to be helpful emotional support systems. The literature on Latinx college students suggests that things like close familial ties and talking with friends and relatives are common strengths and helpful coping mechanisms in this community (Gloria et al., 2005). However, the literature also points to the possibility that Latinx females may find themselves expected to stay close to home or to help support siblings or have family responsibilities (Morales, 2008b; Sy & Romero, 2008). None of the participants in this study felt those burdens, though some did talk about self-sufficiency, not needing to ask parents for anything, and saw this as way of helping out the family by not adding to their burden (Sy & Romero, 2008). Jacqueline, in particular, talked about how her cousins had been forced to help out the family and her mother was making every effort to make sure she did not have to do that, so Jacqueline was doing her part by working so she did not have to ask her mother for extras.

Sebastian talked about the cultural center on campus being a home for him. Research by Yosso et al. (2009) found that building and finding spaces such as this are key for Latinx community building on campus. Harley left a film program because she did not see other students who looked like her, and she could not connect the field to future prospects. Though community and family are noted in the literature as very important to Latinx students, it was actually Kiki and Samantha who spoke more toward ties to community in their home, in Indian and Egyptian communities, respectively. This is not to say that family and community were not as important to the Latinx participants as the literature suggests it should be, but that most did not talk as much about familial experiences except when stating that they would often call home to seek emotional support.
Being a first- or second-generation immigrant was brought up by the participants in different ways. Tina talked about having parents who spoke little English, Maria was hesitant to invite her parents to a sorority event because they did not speak English as well as her peers’ parents, Jacqueline acted as translator for her parents. These extra pieces of the puzzle added to the students’ journeys as first-generation college students and first- or second-generation immigrants. The literature details some of the additional challenges that this creates, such as even less college knowledge at home, and language barriers (Baum & Flores, 2011; George Mwangi, 2018; Sánchez-Connally, 2018). However, these students focused more on the support they received from their families, as Baume and Flores (2011) found that children of immigrants were more likely to enroll in college (though that did not necessarily mean degree completion). They also echoed the sense of pride and perseverance that O’Neal et al. (2016) discussed, though they did not necessarily connect that to their status as first- or second-generation immigrants in particular. Though these students told their stories at times somewhat removed from what is likely the full story of their family’s involvement in their lives, since the questioning surrounded their college experiences, the literature on Latinx and immigrant families suggests that these two parts of their beings likely often intersected with their experiences of college.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study explored the experience of senior (fourth year) first-generation college students without access to intensive academic support programs for first-generation students at a northeast university. This study asked the question: how do senior college students who identify as both first-generation and are not served by income-based first-generation programming navigate the college experience? It examined their navigation of college admission, the financial aid process, academic life, social life, and their thoughts on career or future preparation in order to gain an understanding of how they got to senior year successfully. It documented their struggles, successes, and the people and things that helped them to reach that point. The goal of studying this population in particular was to learn more about the students who did not qualify for the programs available at the university specifically made for students who fit into the low-income first-generation group that is so often front and center of the literature. In addition, since those groups received specific services at the university, it was also helpful to learn what the “rest” of the first-generation students were experiencing. As an advisor at said university, beginning to fill this information gap can help to mold future process in assisting students outside of what is typically thought of when first-generation comes to mind. In the following section, the implications of the findings are discussed.

Lessons Learned

The goal of this study was to find out how these FGCS who were left out of services for first-generation students found their way getting to college, how they were surviving once here, and by nature of the sample, how they reached the success they did. The focus, in particular, was on social and cultural capital: who they connected with along the way that led to learning the college way of life. It was clear going into the study that the literature portrayed FGCS in a
certain way most often. They are portrayed as likely to be low-income students without anyone at home to help, who struggle to connect with faculty and with social connections, who are more likely to drop out or stop out, who work many hours and often live off campus, and who do not find or use resources at the university (Choy, 2001; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nichols & Islas, 2015). Since there are programs at the university offered to some low-income FGCS, but not the students in this study, I sought to find out how the other half lived, so to speak, since they are left out of specific services and treated like the rest of the continuing-generation population at the university. Would their experiences match up with the picture painted by the literature of low-income FGCS, or would they have their own nuances as result of being placed in a different category than our served first-generation students?

First and foremost, these participants figured it out. They did not seem to have more or less help than the literature would suggest – but in each part of their journey, they utilized their own motivation and drive to figure it out. FGCS literature talks about self-reliance as a trait in first-generation students, but often framed more so in the negative light of the inability or unwillingness to ask for help and often in the way that students didn’t find resources (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Winograd & Rust, 2014). Morales’s (2008a) work on academic resilience felt more fitting to the way these students talked about how they found their way in higher education. The participants in this study were motivated to reach success and to find their way by both attempting to be the first in the family, but also in some instances to make their families proud. They took figuring out how to talk to faculty in stride for the most part, after the initial fear. Aside from three commuter students, they found friends even if they claimed to be shy at first. None of these things were perfect – but they successfully did them. They didn’t sit on the sidelines and pout through all four years at how hard it was (though some did cry at first) – they
found the drive to push through and connect when and where they needed, to get the resources or social support they needed.

As the literature suggests, the participants did need help gaining networks on campus when they began. None the less, most of these students eventually made helpful connections, some more than others. Those who found strong bonds (most through their own work, not the university’s) told extremely positive experiences of those networks and their helpfulness. This is reflective of the literature, which notes that first-generation students who do find help feel the benefits are great (Irlbeck et al., 2014; Saunders & Serna, 2004). The three quickest and most robust networkers were connected to non-FGCS programs: honors or living-learning programs. Even outside of these well-connected students, seven others comfortably found their way to making connections with faculty or mentors on campus to help them in different parts of their journey – though not necessarily sustained or lasting ones. Three students most like those portrayed in the literature really expressed struggles in this area. Only the most connected students had people who they could say were consistently helpful. Stacked up against literature that seems to suggest first-generation students are often deficient in the ability to find and make social networks that are helpful at college, this does not necessarily tell that same story. The majority – not the minority - of the participants here did find at least someone to connect to, even if it took a bit of time and work to connect.

In terms of cultural capital, learning the behaviors and values expected in college, this took time for the participants, but it did happen. Their successful timelines to graduation and GPAs would not have been so if it did not. These students all finished on time (3.5 to 4.5 years), and never stopped out, becoming the outliers in the graduation rates found in the literature (Ishitani, 2006; Mortenson, 2017b). Instead of dropping out or stopping out like the literature
talks about, though the participants felt the intimidation and cluelessness and “wish I had
known” moments that the literature said they would, the difference is that these students didn’t
dwell in this challenge. They spoke about learning the ropes of college as if they had taken it in
stride. They learned to google financial aid application questions, they asked friends about how
to use the registration system, and they eventually asked professors about class-related items
often enough to get to the finish line with success and, for the most part, a positive perspective
on the overall journey.

Family presence is a big part of the literature on social capital for first-generation
students. These students shared the sentiment held by most of the literature that their parents
were not particularly helpful in college-related tasks. However, not all of their families presented
a roadblock or made life harder – in fact, nearly all had positive (or neutral) things to say about
their family’s role. The literature often portrayed the families of FGCS as adding to the students’
burdens with things like expecting them to live at home, care for siblings, or being more likely to
work full-time or enroll part-time (Engle & Tinto, 2008; London, 1989; Nuñez & Cuccaro-
Alamin, 1998; Zwerling & London, 1992). These students were not faced with those burdens:
none spoke of having to be responsible for siblings entirely or being expected to help support
their families. Two students did not have any financial support from their family at all, and while
those students faced extra challenges in emotional support and living needs, they also did not
present those at the forefront of their struggles. More commonly, the students talked about how
the emotional support and cheerleading they received from their parents was helpful and kept
them going. This is mentioned in Palbusa and Gauvain (2017), though the focus there was on the
lower quality of the conversations FGCS compared to continuing-generation students. The
participants who lived away from home talked about calling home often and getting motivation
and support from parents. For those who lived at home, though they were home, they spoke about families who made them meals to take to school, or who helped them with flashcards for exams. Though this type of social network is not necessarily instrumental help in college activities, most of the participants talked about how important it was to them to know that they and their college journey was supported. Though this capital does not fit neatly into the social capital that the literature suggests FGCS need to succeed in college, the stories of the participants made it clear that their family’s support was important to them. Though not a social network that could link them to jobs or careers, this alternative version of capital provided emotional support and helped them to continue the fight to succeed.

Work was a fact of life for the participants, but not in the all-encompassing or on-campus involvement derailing kind of way that seemed imminent in the literature (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini et al., 1996). All of the participants worked at varying levels, and while some talked of it as tiring, they all seemed to see it as a part of their day and not the biggest hurdle they faced. The three commuter students voiced more struggles with social life and campus involvement than those on-campus, as predicted by the literature, but even the on-campus students worked (Inkelas, et al., 2007; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

These factors point to a group of FGCS that exist beyond the stereotypes in so much of the literature. In reading about and trying to find ways to better support first-generation students, it is so often the deficiencies that arise, not the successes. Yes, it is certainly important to know (as an advisor) how a first-generation student might struggle and the hardships that they are more likely to encounter than their first-generation peers. But in a time when first-generation students have been studied intensively for more than thirty years, it is also important to acknowledge that this group contains more than just deficits. The findings of this study, in particular, help to shed
light on some of the successes that these students have. While they have areas that were troubling and fit well into the literature, they also exceeded expectations and used their own personal drive and skills to find their way to graduation and high GPAs. When trying to support and advise FGCS, this is often left out of the advisors’ base of knowledge. It is important to remind advisors and faculty that FGCS students are not just one homogenous group, as more recent literature such as Kim et al. (in press) and Nguyen and Nguyen (2018) speak to, they have many experiences of college and some of those can be well-adjusted, on-time, successful pathways.

**How Can We Help?**

At the end of their interviews, participants were asked what would have made their journey and experience easier. Just like each participant had a different focus for their struggles or successes, the answers were equally as varied. John, who was the only student who found it hard to find a “hard part” about the college experience, wished he had been able to give back more as a first-generation student. For example, he reached out to the first-generation alliance on campus to see how he could mentor other students – and never heard back. In fact, only a few of the participants knew about the EU First alliance, and if they did, they were uncertain what their purpose was or how they helped. In the end, John was able to teach a first-year course as a senior and took the initiative to sure to incorporate the topic of first-generation students into his conversations – but never found a way to formally mentor students such as himself. On the other hand, other participants wished there had been a handbook, or person to guide them from the start, even with the things that seemed simple by senior year like how to choose classes, what a semester was, or how to navigate the large campuses. Some compared their time without programming to students who did qualify: if they had been part of EOF, for example.
As the largest unit at EU, Arts and Sciences students are not assigned to advisors, therefore if they are not lucky enough to be a part of honors programs, they do not have anyone reaching out to them on a regular basis to check in academically. Out of the 13 students, only Sebastian started at the university in an honors program, and unfortunately, he failed to connect with his available advisors even then. John admitted to an honors program in year two and found his assigned advisor to be a great help. The other 11 students had no consistent voice reaching out to them after each term, or at any point, just checking in.

These answers, combined with the overall findings of how these students connected on campus and learned the behaviors needed to succeed along the way, have informed the below suggestions for future considerations.

**Future Considerations**

The implications of the stories told here offer insights into potential areas where the university, and universities such as EU, where only low-income first-generation students are offered support services can improve the first-generation college student experience. The commonalities of the participant experiences centered around a few areas, and I have made suggestions below based upon those areas.

1. **Increase support at a basic level for navigating financial aid.** While EOF students have advisors from the summer prior to their entry to help with all areas of navigation, the rest of the student body is left to fend for themselves in an overwhelming financial aid process. Even simple terminology was cited by participants as things they had to learn, largely by themselves, while students ahead of them in line had parents with them to help.
2. **Connect students to advisors early.** While all of these students “made it” to senior year, no one claimed that the first year was easy. Each had moments of not knowing who to ask or just doing things on their own – maybe right, maybe wrong. When asked if they had a mentor or support person *throughout* their time, few could name someone who was there the whole time. As a unit within the institution that does not assign academic advisors, these first-generation students noted that just having someone reach out could have been helpful. As Carmen said,

> I don't even think I was really reached out to, so I felt like I had to make the first step, and it was like as like a freshman, like I felt like there was so much going on that … that was a step I didn't need to take. And like, I know we have to be responsible but like… I think it would’ve like made a better impression and then them making me realize that like this is what's expected of you.

Even a peer mentor was suggested as potentially helpful, something that would likely not strain resources as much in a large institution. In particular, this must be in a way that is accessible and easy for commuters, not just on-campus students. This connection can also assist with suggestion number one, as advisors can help students to connect with financial aid officers. At EU, advisors are the staff who help students figure out registration, class schedules, choosing majors, and all of the small aspects that lead to the larger whole of a student feeling like they know what they are doing academically.

3. **Help students connect with faculty.** While a couple of the participants were excellent networkers, most took time to learn this skill – some were still feeling this struggle at the time of the interview, entering their final term in college (Collier &
Morgan, 2008). The three least-connected students felt unsure about how to approach faculty for letters of recommendation, or even where to start with a job search, all areas where faculty connections would be helpful. While it seems EU takes pride in faculty identifying their status as first-generation for their EU First alliance, it doesn’t make attempts to offer students a casual, less intimidating way for students to learn how exactly to become comfortable with their faculty. A more formal faculty mentorship or first-generation networking program open to all FGCS, not just supported students, might help to alleviate that fear. At EU, faculty are the main source of major/minor advice, connections to lab and internship experiences, and have a large depth of knowledge about potential careers and opportunities in graduate schools and the job market in their field. Having both this connection and the previously mentioned advising connection covers all bases of academic knowledge, from the base level to the more specific.

A simpler recommendation is also to begin by simply acknowledging that more first-generation students than just low-income, program-supported students exist throughout the university. Resources and time at large, public universities are often slim, and programs such as EOF are time and money intensive. It is not expected that the intrusive advising and support models used by EOF are sustainable for a large population of students, but a pared down version of mentorship or even simply offering advising services in a personal way made available to first-generation students other than just those in programming could go a long way to keep a first-generation student from feeling as if they must figure it out alone, as so many said they did. Not every first-generation student needs forced advising every term: this group “made it” without that at all – but those in this group who found a trusted source of information either in a
faculty member (Carmen), or an advisor (John) noted positive experiences having done so. Those who did not connect much at all relayed feelings of anxiety and uncertainty at various points along the way (Tina, Lara). Therefore, making this an offering available to them, with well-trained advisors and faculty could offer a helping hand to those who want to reach out for it.

In addition to informing how FGCS are served at EU Arts and Sciences, the findings of this study may help other universities who only serve part of their first-generation students by giving them a glimpse into what their “other” FGCS may be experiencing. These findings may also be helpful to various stakeholders within the university in examining the practices surrounding services offered to first-generation students as a whole. More specifically, since the students were from one unit within the university, Arts and Sciences, this unit may find the results particularly useful in configuring advising services around this population.

Limitations

This study found that the experiences of just a small number of first-generation students were varied: some faced relatively few struggles, some struggled but overcame, and others faced a great deal of struggle and were working to overcome every day. These findings are specific to this particular sample, at a large public research university. A larger, more representative study including more gender, race, income, and academic status representation could offer a better picture of the group of students who are not being served at a university such as EU, where only low-income first-generation students have access to intensive support services. A longitudinal study could offer a look into the ebbs and flows of their journey, as opposed to just a picture at the end, as was taken here. For example, the results of this study were students who had made it to the end – a longer study could capture students from first year to senior year, including those who do not make it to the end goal. Future studies could also document more sources of
information, such as focus groups and/or student records to gather a fuller picture. In addition, the picture could likely also look quite different if transfer students from community colleges were included: they were not included here, to narrow the focus just to experiences at EU. The diversity of experience even within a small, unrepresentative sample of participants leaves room to believe that further study of these students could tell interesting stories that remain untold in the first-generation literature.

The ability of this study to be generalized to larger populations is limited by multiple factors. A larger, more comprehensive study over time could certainly tell more about the long term experiences of first-gen students without programming if they were interviewed at the start and end of their programs, as opposed to just the end, getting the full breadth of their feelings on the experience as opposed to just at the point of realizing they are very close to reaching the end goal. In addition, the sample resulted from emailing all first-generation senior students (730 students total), and even though an incentive was offered, garnered few responses. After emailing each student twice (1460 emails), only 56 students began the screening survey and only 32 completed it and fit the qualifications. Out of the 32, only 13 scheduled and showed up to an interview. This small sample resulted in a large number of Latinx females and few males – and while the study didn’t intend to find all students who would be considered fairly successful, participants had relatively high GPAs: none were at the borderline of a probation or warning GPA. Thus, based on sample alone, this study very clearly misses out on other portions of first-generation students without access to programming: those struggling more heavily in their courses, those from other racial backgrounds, and more balanced gender representation.

The impact of race is not limited to the impacts it has in the classroom. As a White researcher interviewing students who were, all but one, different races and ethnicities than
myself, the students may not have felt as comfortable talking about problems they faced with bias at the university. Though a few spoke out on this topic, more may have felt comfortable to share such experiences if I were not White. In addition, further study could aim to learn more about the experiences of FGCS in relation to their experience of race and gender on campus and at home. Further study based on just female Latinx first-generation students could explore the role of family and community in their success, or study toward White male FGCS could examine the privileges provided them in the US college system not often at the forefront in FGCS literature.

In terms of experience, the participants were all interviewed in November and December of their senior year. As the year would wear on, it turns out that this was well-timed, as the Spring term was interrupted by a global event that surely would have changed the focus of much of their interviews and likely garnered even smaller response rate, as students were moved off-campus into online-only instruction. The timing of gathering responses from students in their senior year was its own limitation: by interviewing students who had “made it” it leaves out those who have dropped out prior, and also may have created more a more rosy reflection than, for example, if the participants had been interviewed during their first year when most faced some adjustment struggles. None the less, the ability to reflect upon multiple years of experiences at EU was determined to be the right fit for this particular study.

While the sample does not lend itself to generalizability, it is still believed that the experiences of these students can still add to the literature on first-generation college students by adding a voice to some of the successes that can occur, as well as by not specifically limiting the study based on income or being part of an income-based program. Much of the data surrounding first-generation students focuses on the graduation rate deficits that exist compared to continuing
generation students (Mortenson, 2017b) – though not representative, this study hopes to shed
some light on some of the ways that students have come to find success amidst differing levels of
the hurdles that already detailed abundantly in the literature. In addition, in a time when many
universities have some kind of programming for first-generation low-income students, but
potentially not all first-gens, such as EU, by interviewing participants outside of this group, this
study offers a sample of experiences in the first-generation world from a wider-angle lens.
References


“FAQs.” (2019). Student Support Services website, retrieved July 19, 2019 from https://sss.east.edu/students/faqs


APPENDICES

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### Appendix A
#### Research Question Map

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Type of Data Collected</th>
<th>Focusing On</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do students who identify as both first-generation and are not served by income-based programming navigate the college experience?</td>
<td>- Student record data to find population</td>
<td>- Jr/Sr first-gen only, narrow out EOF &amp; outside transfers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Short Questionnaire to narrow</td>
<td>- Confirm parental ed level, ask self-identified income level, ask if getting support services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. How do they learn to navigate getting into college, including admissions, entry, funding?</td>
<td>- Interviews with:</td>
<td>- Who do they ask for help in each step?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 – 15 First-generation juniors and Seniors at the Arts &amp; Sciences who are not receiving income-based first-generation programming.</td>
<td>Ask specifically about family role, advisors, faculty (social capital)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- What were the roadblocks in each step?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. How do they learn to be college students, including learning expectations and navigating hurdles?</td>
<td></td>
<td>- What did they feel they &quot;didn't know&quot; and how did they learn it? (cultural capital)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- How do they describe their experience of being a first-gen overall?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. What are their social experiences on campus?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B:
Interview Protocol

1. Background Questions
First of all, thank you for agreeing to speak with me. I look forward to learning more about your experiences as a first-generation college student here at [EU]. As a first-gen student myself, this topic is very important to me. As I mentioned, this interview will be confidential, and I will use a pseudonym to identify you.

First, please tell me a bit about your background. What are your parents’/guardians’ highest level of degree? [get detailed answer: high school, some college, no college for each]

Do you have any siblings? [If any older or college age ask about college attendance]

Tell me about the town that you grew up in. [expand: Class? Size?]

What was your high school like academically?

Tell me about your family’s role in your decision to go to college. [Supportive? Helpful?]

When you chose [EU], what did they think?

2. Entering College/Admissions
In this next part of the interview, I’d like to learn more about your experience entering college. What can you remember about the actual process of admissions to college – applying, etc.

Did anyone help you with the application?

What was the process like when you were deciding where to attend college?

Did finances play a role in your decision?

Now that you have been here for a while, what would you have changed about how you choose and applied to college? Would you have made a different decision?

3. Financial Aid/Loans
After applying for and choosing a college, the next piece of the puzzle is figuring out how to pay for it. Tell me about your thought process when you first started thinking about how you’d fund your education.

Who was involved in that conversation?

What was the process of applying for financial aid or loans like for you? [If applicable]

Did you have any assistance with that process?
Was there anyone that was particularly helpful to you in learning how to navigate these pieces of the puzzle before you got to college?

Have you worked while taking classes at any point in your time here?
   If so:
       What do your earnings go toward, mostly?
       How do you think this impact yours experience of college?

4. Academic Experience
   Now, I’d like to discuss your experience of the classroom and academics here at [EU]. Talk a bit about what classes were like for you when you first started as a freshman.

   How prepared did you feel for the college workload?

   What did you think about the expectations of your professors, initially?

   Has that changed now? [if yes, why do you think that is?]

   Would you be comfortable sharing with me your current GPA?

   What year is this for you? [Get if they are in 4th year, traditional senior etc]

   Tell me about your experiences talking to faculty since you’ve been here.[Challenging? Easy?]

   What has been your experience of talking to advisors? [How often? Type of advisor?]

   What sort of support have your family and friends at home offered you, in regard to your college academic life?

   Is there anyone at home that you’ve asked for academic advice or help at home?

   Do you ever go to friends or study groups for academic support amongst your peers?

   Have you ever gotten academic tutoring or help outside of what [EU] offers?

5. Social Experience
   When you arrived on campus, tell me what your experience of social life was like for you.

   Was there anything you wanted to do but felt you couldn’t, or shouldn’t? [barriers?]

   Can you recall a time when there was something about social life here on campus surprised you or felt completely unexpected? [the “no one told me that” moment]

   How has your social life on campus changed over the years that you’ve been here?

6. Post-College Connections
Now that you are further along in your college experiences, I’d like to learn more about how you’re navigating some of the things that occur later in college.

Have you tried searching for internships, placements, or possible career choices?
   If yes, who was helpful in your searches?
   If no, do you plan to? Who do you think you’ll ask for help?

Do you know anyone in your family or friends at home that works in the area that you are considering?

What does your family think of your career goals?

How do you think your networks and connections compare to those of your friends?

7. Closing
What do you think were some of the biggest issues you faced in college?

What was the easiest part of college for you?

Explain to me what sorts of things you talk to you family about when you discuss college life.

Is there someone or something in particular that sticks out to you as particularly helpful in helping you ‘get through” college?

What kinds of services or supports do you think would have helped you in your time here?

What has being a first-generation college student meant to you?

Do you ever feel "different" than your peers socially or academically because you are a first-generation student?

Have you ever attended any of the [EU] First events here on campus? [Have you heard of them]

If you could go back to the beginning of your college experience, is there anything that you would have done differently?

Is there anything else that you’d like to share with me about your experiences here at college as a first-generation or in general?

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your experiences with me. If you have any further questions, please reach out to me at the contact information listed on the consent form that you have a paper copy of.
Appendix C: Recruitment Email & Flyer

Dear Student,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study. I am an Ed.D. student at the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University. I am seeking participants for my dissertation research on first-generation college students.

The purpose of my research is to understand the college experiences of senior level first-generation college students at [East University - location] who are not being served by income-based programming, such as the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) or Student Support Services (SSS). First-generation students are defined as students whose parents’ highest level of degree completion is a high school diploma.

Participants will be asked to complete a short survey to determine eligibility first, and those who meet the study criteria will be asked to complete a roughly 60 minute audio-taped interview, scheduled at their own convenience in a public space on the [East University-location] campus.

This study does not offer any specific benefit to its participants, but the researcher will provide information on advising and resources available on campus to the participants. All participation will be confidential, with names removed from any written analysis and records stored in a secure location. You will be given a $15 EU gift card as a token of appreciation for your participation.

If you are interested in being a part of this study, please take the pre-study survey to determine if you fit the criteria listed above. The survey is linked here: XXX

Thank you for taking the time consider being a part of my study. If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please feel free to contact me directly by phone at --- or by email at ---@---.

Michelle Neumyer
---@---
Phone:
Recruitment Flyer:

SEEKING PARTICIPANTS FOR FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT STUDY!

If you are an SAS Senior?
Is a first-gen college student?
Interested? Take this survey to see if you fit the study criteria!
tinyurl.com/

Seeking 1st gen, Seniors for an interview study on college experiences. Interviews will be approximately 1 hour in length and participants will receive a $15 gift card.
Appendix D:
Pre-Screen Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey! It is designed to find candidates for an interview study on first-generation college student experiences. This survey should take you about five minutes to complete. You may opt out at any time.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Michelle Neumyer at.

What is your class year here at?
- First Year
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior

Did you transfer to from another college or university?
- Yes
- No

What is the highest level of education that your parent(s)/guardian(s) have completed?
- Parent/Guardian 1
- Parent/Guardian 2
Have you ever been a part of the following programs at Educational Opportunity Fund, Student Support Services?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

How would you categorize your family's income level?

- [ ] Low-income
- [ ] Lower Middle-income
- [ ] Middle-income
- [ ] Upper Middle-income
- [ ] High-income

Did you ever receive free or reduced school lunch?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

What is your family's estimated household income?

- [ ] Less than 19,999
- [ ] $20,000 - $39,999
- [ ] $40,000 - $59,999
- [ ] $60,000 - $79,999
- [ ] $80,000 - $99,999
- [ ] $100,000 - $124,999
- [ ] $125,000 - $150,000
- [ ] More than $150,000
What is your age?
- under 18
- 18 - 24
- 25 - 34
- 35 - 44
- 45 - 54
- 55 - 64
- 65 or older

What is your gender identity? (Check all that apply)
- Man
- Woman
- Non-binary
- Transgender
- Another gender not listed above
- Choose not to answer

What race/ethnicity do you identify as? (You may choose more than one)
- Asian
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other
- Choose not to answer

Please provide an email address where you can be contacted to schedule an interview to participate in this study.

Thank you for completing this pre-study survey! Your time is greatly appreciated. If you have been chosen to be a part of this study, you will be contacted by the researcher, Michelle Neumyer, at the email that you have provided.
Appendix E
Informed Consent Forms

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Michelle Neumyer, who is a student in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University. The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of first-generation college students who do not self-identify as low-income and are not receiving income-based services such as those offered by the Educational Opportunity Fund or Student Support Services.

Approximately 25 subjects will participate in the study, and each individual's participation will last approximately 60 minutes. Participation in this study will involve a 60 minute interview. This study requires that interviews be recorded by audio tape. By consenting to this interview, you are also consenting to the interview being audio recorded.

This research is confidential. Confidential means that the research records will include some information about you and this information will be stored in such a manner that some linkage between your identity and the response in the research exists. Some of the information collected about you includes your experiences of becoming and being a first-generation college student. Please note that we will keep this information confidential by limiting individuals’ access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location. Audio recordings, interview transcripts and all other research data, including any linkages to participant identity will be kept on a password protected file, which only the researcher has access to. Participants will be referred to in writing and transcription by pseudonym only.

The research team and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, results will be stated using pseudonyms only. All study data will be kept for three years per Federal Regulation, then destroyed.

The risks of participation is the potential discomfort of sharing personal experiences during college. You have been told that the benefits of taking part in this study may be access to academic advising services and information about other campus services as requested or as necessary. However, you may receive no direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.

If you have any questions about the study or study procedures, you may contact myself at [email protected], or Dr. Tomlinson-Clarke, Graduate School of Education, at [email protected]. You may also contact my faculty advisor Dr. Saundra Tomlinson-Clarke, Graduate School of Education, at [email protected]

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact an IRB Administrator at the Rutgers University, Arts and Sciences IRB:

Institutional Review Board
Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey
Liberty Plaza / Suite 3200
335 George Street, 3rd Floor
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Phone: 732-235-2866
Email: human-subjects@oreg.rutgers.edu

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.
Sign below if you agree to participate in this research study:

Subject (Print) ________________________________

Subject Signature ____________________________ Date ___________________

Principal Investigator Signature __________________ Date ___________________

For IRB Use Only. This Section Must be Included on the Consent Form and Cannot Be Altered Except For Updates to the Version Date.

Document Version: v1.0
Page 1
Audio/Visual Addendum to Consent Form

(This form is to be attached, as applicable, to the main consent if taping. Otherwise it should be removed. Sample language is noted in boldfaced italics within the brackets [ ] and should be removed).

You have already agreed to participate in a research study entitled: Outside of the Low-Income Assumption: First-Generation College Student Experiences conducted by Michelle Neumyer. We are asking for your permission to allow us to audiotape (sound), as part of that research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for analysis by the research team.

The recording(s) will include a pseudonym that you have chosen to identify yourself with. If you say anything that you believe at a later point may be hurtful and/or damage your reputation, then you can ask the interviewer to rewind the recording and record over such information OR you can ask that certain text be removed from the dataset/transcripts.

The recording(s) will be stored in a locked cabinet and labeled with your chosen pseudonym. The recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the study procedures.

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

Subject (Print) ________________________________

Subject Signature ___________________________ Date ________________________

Principal Investigator Signature __________________ Date ____________________

For Use Only. This Section Must be Included on the Consent Form and Cannot Be Altered Except For Updates to the Version Date.

Document Version: v1.0
Page 2
### Appendix F
Resource Handout

**Helpful Resources at [Institution]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Academic Advising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Learning Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Office of Disability Services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Dean of Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Counseling, Alcohol, &amp; Other Drug Assistance Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- PD (Emergency/After Hours Assistance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Acute Psychiatric Service (APS) – 24 hour emergency service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Suicide Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- National Crisis Text Line</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- First-Generation Resources
## Appendix G

**Code Book**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First-Gen reflection</td>
<td>Comments about the experience of being first-generation in particular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Status</td>
<td>Reference to on or off campus status/ Experiences related to that status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>References to money/financial situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Status</td>
<td>Working during college, reflections on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Capital</td>
<td>Negative and Positive experiences of cultural capital useful in college, learning expectations and values, bringing own cultural capital into the college experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Status (college)</td>
<td>References to how participant is doing in college or the experience of college academics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figuring It Out Alone</td>
<td>Social Capital Elements (trust/solidarity): references to having no help or just doing things on own, having figure things out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Life</td>
<td>Social Capital Elements: Instances of social experiences, extracurriculars, involvement with college life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Life/Pre-College</td>
<td>Social Capital Elements: networks related to family and pre-college experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networks/Future Plans</td>
<td>Social Capital elements: references to career or future related networks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix H
Pre-Screen Survey Data
Questions that eliminated students were excluded – transfer status, senior level status, participation in other programs at the University.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the highest level of education that your parent(s)/guardian(s) have completed? - Parent/Guardian 1</th>
<th>Did Not Complete HS</th>
<th>HS Diploma</th>
<th>Some College</th>
<th>Associate's Degree</th>
<th>Blank/other</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent/Guardian 1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent/Guardian 2</td>
<td>6 4 1 0 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conglomerate: Highest degree by participant</td>
<td>2 10 1 0 0</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How would you categorize your family's income level?</th>
<th>Low Income</th>
<th>Lower-Middle Income</th>
<th>Middle Income</th>
<th>Upper-Middle Income</th>
<th>High Income</th>
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<td>6 5 1 0</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did you ever receive free or reduced school lunch?</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>2</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is your family's estimated household income?</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 19,000</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20,000-39,999</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40,000-59,999</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60,000-79,999</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80,000-99,999</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000-124,999</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>125,000-150,000</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 150,000</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is your age?</th>
<th>18-24</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is your gender identity? (Check all that apply)</th>
<th>Man</th>
<th>Woman</th>
<th>non-binary</th>
<th>transgender</th>
<th>Another gender not listed</th>
<th>Choose not to answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What race/ethnicity do you identify as? (You may choose more than one)</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latinx</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific islander</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose not to answer</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, Middle Eastern</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latinx, White</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latinx</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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</table>