The Social Capital First-Generation Students use to Succeed in College: A Qualitative Investigation of the Educational Opportunity Fund Program

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ABSTRACT

First-generation students comprise nearly half of the college going population, but are also disproportionately more likely to drop out of college before their third year (RTI International, 2019). Scholars tend to argue that first-generation college students lack the social capital, or access to resource rich networks that can provide information about the kinds of knowledge, and behaviors valued within the higher education environment. Various programmatic supports have been developed at the federal, state, and university level to support these students, including the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF), a state funded program that provides academic and personal resources for first-generation, low-income students throughout their college experience.

Few studies have asked first-generation students themselves about their perceptions of and experiences in the EOF program, what aspects of the higher education environment support or challenge their persistence, and what kinds of social capital they draw on to be successful. The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to address these shortcomings, by exploring what forms of social capital first-generation students within the EOF Program perceived as beneficial for their retention and persistence. The research questions guiding this study were as follows: 1.) What are first generation student experiences as they navigate the college environment? 2.) What are the students' experiences and perceptions of the social capital the EOF program provides? 3.) How do students' experiences inform how EOF and other targeted support programs could provide social capital to better contribute to first-generation student success?

Data analysis revealed three major themes: 1) participants families and backgrounds were sources of social capital that helped them get into and persist in college, 2.) that participants
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demonstrated agency in their college experiences in how they mobilized social capital within their networks to meet their specific needs, and 3.) the relationships participants formed within EOF were foundational to all students college experiences—regardless of their proximity to the program. The implications of these findings are considered for researchers and practitioners who support first-generation students, and recommendations for program modifications and assessment are offered.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

College degree attainment has been widely touted as the conduit to better life outcomes, such as improved health, happiness, and longevity, as well as overall economic stability and mobility (Taylor, Fry, & Oates, 2014; Torche, 2011). The disparities between those who obtain a college degree and those who don’t have become even more prevalent in recent years; in 2019 for example, adults over the age of 25 with a college degree earned over $25,000 more a year than those with only a high school diploma (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). While the benefits of completing a post-secondary education are well established, the equality of access to higher education and subsequent degree attainment unfortunately remains highly stratified by family income and generational status (Calahan, Perna, Yamashita, Wright-Kim, & Jiang, 2019; Torche, 2011).

The disparity in who gets access to, and completes a college degree, is apparent in the fact that only 21% of first-generation, low-income students obtain a college degree within six-years of enrollment, and are significantly more likely to drop out of college before their third year in comparison to their continuing generation and higher-income peers (Calahan et al., 2019; Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). First-generation students, defined in this study as those whose parents did not obtain a bachelor’s degree or go to college (Thayer, 2000), demographically tend to be disproportionately students of color and from lower socioeconomic (SES) families (Bui, 2002; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). In general, students who identify as first-generation and/or low-income, are often described in the research as being less academically prepared for college and having lower educational aspirations, persistence rates, and degree attainment (Berkner, He, & Cataldi,
These post-secondary outcomes for first-generation, low-income students are hardly surprising given the research demonstrating a strong link between parental household income and child educational achievement (Calahan et al., 2019). Particularly, the K-12 experiences of first-generation, low-income students are markedly different than their middle-higher income peers, in that they are often disproportionately placed into low-skilled ability groups in elementary school, score substantially lower on math, reading, and standardized tests, and are less likely to participate in targeted out of school educational enrichment activities (Calahan et al., 2019; Condron, 2007; Downey & Condron, 2016; Zhao, 2016). Additionally, first-generation, low-income students are also less likely to have taken AP classes in high school, have completed an academic focused curriculum by the time they graduate, and have fewer aspirations or plans for college (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018; Duncan & Murnane, 2016; Lareau, 2003). The lack of academic preparation first-generation, low-income students receive can make the college experience exceptionally difficult, as evidenced by the fact that these students are more likely to take remedial courses, have lower GPAs, take fewer or lighter course loads that delay their time to graduation, and be less engaged in and feel connected to the college campus as a whole (Ishitani, 2016; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pratt, Hardwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfield, 2019).

However, it is not only economic factors that influence access and success in post-secondary education for first generation college students. Much research has pointed to how the identity of being first-generation creates challenges for students within higher education environments, impacting their ability to successfully integrate and persist in college (DeRosa & Nadine, 2014; Garriot & Nisle, 2018; Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2012). The knowledge and
resources first-generation students learn within their families/communities may often counteract with the structure of university/college environments (Calarco, 2014; Condron, 2007; Lareau, 2003, 2015). Scholars have pointed to the propensity of first-generation students from lower income backgrounds to be embedded within communities that emphasize the needs of the collective as opposed to the self, creating more interdependent motivations to attend college, such as getting a degree to be a role model for younger siblings, or to get into a career than can support their family (Stephens, et al., 2012).

In contrast, many higher education institutions tend to promote independent values, and generally are set up for, and embody the interests of those who possess the social practices of the dominant culture, typically those of white, middle-class educated backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1993; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Nash, 1990). As the first in their family to go to college, first-generation students do not have the ability to draw on their parents' experience or knowledge of the higher education environment like their continuing generation peers, making their navigation of these institutions particularly challenging (Garriott & Nisle, 2018). Both this “cultural clash” in values and experiences, as well as a lack of specific institutional knowledge can lead to first generation, low-income students not feeling connected or valued within the campus environment or lacking a sense of belonging, which has been shown to be a critical factor in a students' decision to persist in college (Costello et al., 2018; DeRosa & Dolby, 2014; Means & Pyne, 2017; Stebleton et al., 2014; Tinto, 2017; Woolsey & Shepler, 2011).

Given the lack of social, academic, and economic resources, scholars often frame first-generation, low-income students in higher education settings as “resource deficient”. That is, they are often conceptualized as having a lack of sufficient capital, or the knowledge and understanding of the dominant cultural expectations necessary for success (Bourdieu, 1986;
Dumais & Ward, 2010). Scholars (Ashtiani & Feliciano, 2018; Lin, 2008; Portes, 2000),
describe social capital as the connections to individuals within social networks, groups, and
institutions that provide access to valuable resources, knowledge, and benefits. Within the
college context, social capital can be derived from interactions with peers and group activities,
as well as be facilitated through relationships and connections with institutional agents, who
can be educators, mentors, counselors, and staff (Dika & Singh, 2002; Jensen & Jetten, 2015).
A number of studies have demonstrated the importance of access to institutional agents in
helping first-generation, low-income students acquire social capital, including helping them
build resilience and achieve academic success, as well as overcome internalized feelings of
incapability within the college environment (Dowd, 2013; Morales, 2010).

One way that universities and practitioners have addressed the need to provide the “right”
capital for first-generation, low-income students to succeed at college is through support
programs and services (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014; Schelbe et al., 2019; Smith, 2007). While these
programs vary in size and scope, they generally focus on promoting college access and
completion through targeted academic skill development, various social and community
building activities and the provision of comprehensive personal support (Chaney 2010;
Conefrey, 2018; Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Schwartz et al., 2018; Zeisher, Chan,
Heuer, & Cominole, 2015). More importantly, many of these programs/services purposefully
create opportunities to help students build social capital through access to staff, faculty,
mentors, and peers that provide support and resources to enable students to better navigate the
college entry and integration process (Jehangir, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Schwartz et al.,
2018). It is assumed that, through these relationships, students learn forms of “acceptable”
institutional capital, or knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes, that enable success in higher education environments (Smith, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

The Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) Program at Rutgers University-Camden is a program that encompasses targeted supports and resources for first-generation, low-income students. For first-year students, the EOF Program supports their transition from high school through a residential summer program that enables students to take college-level courses, connect with staff and faculty, as well as learn resources and information to help ease their transition to college. During their time in the program, students are assigned an EOF counselor who works with them 1:1, providing academic and personal support as they navigate the college environment (Rutgers University-Camden EOF, home, n.d.). Additionally, all students are required to participate in several workshops each semester that are focused on skill and resource building to help them be successful in each stage of their college career.

Through access to counselors and staff that offer various forms of support from admission to graduation, the EOF program seemingly provides the type of social capital described in the literature as imperative to help first-generation, low-income students successfully navigate the college environment. However, despite the support and intensive services the EOF program offers, the program consistently loses students within their first two years of college. For instance, for those cohorts that started between the years 2013-2016, on average, only 63% of students remained by the time they started their third year of college (Office of Data Analytics and Campus Planning, Personal Correspondence, October 2019). These statistics point to a lack of depth in understanding of the actual use and impact of the support available to students in the EOF program on their overall college experience. This is
further highlighted by the fact that the few available studies on the EOF Program, and of college support programs in general, are descriptive in nature, offering little insight or critical analysis on the intended and unintended outcomes of the components of these programs on student persistence (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Watson & Chen, 2019).

Compounding this issue further is the limited research on the experiences of first-generation, low-income students as told from their perspective. Despite the fact that in recent years researchers have increasingly used more qualitative methods to better understand first generation, low-income student experiences (Dowd, 2013; Garriott & Nisle, 2018; Means & Pyne, 2007; Morales, 2010; Smith, 2007; Schelbe et al., 2019), the literature related to this population tends to be largely deficit oriented (Calahan et al., 2019; Cataldi, et al., 2018; Duggan, 2001; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Much of the research focuses on what the students themselves lack that contribute to lower retention and persistence rates, rather than utilizing their perspectives to truly understand the tensions of navigating the world of their family and home community within the structure and expectations of the higher education environment (Garriott, 2020; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Reid & Moore, 2008; Schelbe et al., 2019). Therefore, the largely deficit-oriented approach found in the literature does not consider the assets first-generation, low-income students may bring with them that impact their experiences, such as the ways they draw on their families and backgrounds to serve as sources of motivation, resilience, and support in their ability to persist in achieving a college degree (Azmitia, Sumabat-Estrada, Cheong, & Covarrubias, 2018; Garriott, 2020; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006).

Together, this lack of first-generation, low-income student perspectives within the literature leaves a critical gap in understanding the factors that contribute to student persistence, particularly their experiences within the environment, how these perceptions influence key
variables, such as self-efficacy and sense of belonging, and if targeted programs and services like EOF actually meet their needs (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Reid & Moore, 2008; Schelbe et al., 2019; Tinto, 2017).

Purpose & Research Questions

This study sought to elevate the voices of a group of first-generation students who have experiences with the EOF program, with the aim of exploring what forms of social capital first-generation, low-income students utilize and perceive as beneficial for their retention and persistence. By foregrounding the voices of first-generation, low-income students this study aimed to understand if and how being a part of a targeted support program such as EOF mediated their college experience. Utilizing qualitative interviews, students were asked to narrate their perspectives (Galletta, 2013), of the EOF program, and to describe in their words the sources of support that they have used to navigate the college environment. Through these interviews, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are first generation student experiences as they navigate the college environment?
   a. What forms of social capital do students perceive as helping them feel a part of the campus?
   b. What forms of social capital do students perceive as helping them to persist in college?

2. What are the students' experiences and perceptions of the social capital the EOF program provides?
   a. Does their participation in the program impact the types of social capital they find helpful in their college experiences?
b. What aspects of social capital, if any, do students perceive as impacting their desire to persist?

3. How do students’ experiences inform how EOF and other targeted support programs provide social capital to better contribute to first-generation student success?
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand the experiences and perceptions of first-generation, low-income students as they navigated the interplay between their individual backgrounds and the institution of higher education, social capital was used as the overarching framework that guided this study. Particularly, social capital was utilized to understand both the perceptions students have and their use of the support resources available to them within their networks inside and outside of the EOF Program.

Social Capital

As conceptualized by Lin (2000, 2008), this study drew upon a multi-dimensional framework approach that looks at both the access to, and the mobilization of potential social resources in an individual’s network that help cultivate social capital. Lin (2000), defines social capital as “the investment and use of embedded resources in social relations for expected returns” (p.786). In this conception, social capital can be viewed as valued resources derived from an individual’s network, thus making the access to and characteristics of, networks critically important in the amount of and type of capital available to an individual (Lin, 2000; Pena-Lopez & Sánchez-Santos, 2017).

Lin (2000), identifies two aspects of networks as enabling the acquisition of these different types of resources. The first are horizontal processes or "bonding" social capital, that typically involve relationships with family or members of one's community and are characterized by trust and a system of reciprocity (Lin, 2000; Monkman, Ronald, Theramene, 2005; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Next, are vertical processes, or "bridging" social capital, that are relationships...
or ties that connect individuals to other people and groups who have access to information and resources from institutions of power (Andriani, 2013; Monkman et al., 2005). As such, the social capital available may vary depending on an individual’s use of bridging or bonding processes. In general, as individuals branch further out from the inner circle of their group the intensity of the relationships decreases, but the density in their network increases allowing for the possibility of more access to a diverse, and possibly better set of resources and information (Lin, 2000).

The amount of bridging and bonding social capital one has within their networks can be related to two main factors according to Lin (2000): access and mobility. Access refers to the quality or quantity of resources an individual has available to them within their social networks (Lin, 2000; Pena-Lopez & Sanchez-Santos, 2017). According to Lin (1999), the extent of access to resource networks are largely based on individual characteristics such as “human capital (education, experiences), initial positions (parental or prior job statuses), and social ties” that serve as sorts of predispositions into what type of networks individuals have available (p.471). Importantly, this distinction of access recognizes the inherent inequality in social capital, in that groups differentially occupy socioeconomic and social standings in a society; therefore individuals are likely to consistently interact with, and share sentiments and resources with those close to and similar to them in characteristics (Lin, 2000, p.787). As a result, individuals who are a part of and primarily interact within “lower” social groups such as those from low-SES communities, may have less access to influential and valued forms of informational resources or social capital, than those from higher socioeconomic groups who may have more access to more varied and diverse resources because of their position in society (Lin, 2000).

Mobility refers to the ability of individuals to extract and utilize particular resources within the networks they have access to (Lin, 2000, p.786; Pena-López & Sánchez-Santos,
The dimension of mobility highlights the fact that simply having access to, or being embedded within, social networks does not immediately equate to the ability to effectively utilize the resources available to generate social capital (Ashtianai & Feliciano, 2018). This is due to the fact that the propensity and ability to mobilize social capital within a given network is complicated and influenced by a myriad of factors, including social contexts (proximity of relationships to individuals, perceived needs and benefits given the situation), as well as individual decisions and skills (how and when to utilize resources), goals, and expected outcomes (Lin, 2005; Pena-Lopez & Sanches-Santos, 2017).

Within the context of this study, the intersection of the backgrounds of first-generation, low-income students within the confines of the institutional environment, creates a plethora of contextual considerations in how these students perceive and utilize resources available to them. For example, literature has espoused the importance of students having access to bridging social capital in higher education, such as institutional agents like staff, faculty, or mentors, who can intentionally utilize their role to transmit resources on their behalf (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p.1067). By having access to individuals outside of their immediate networks in the form of institutional agents, individuals from underrepresented backgrounds such as first-generation, low-income students, should then theoretically have an opportunity to garner more “valued” forms of social capital through the access to resources, support systems, and privileges that are specifically meant to help their success within higher education (Lin, 2000; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Tovar, 2015, p.51).

However, by utilizing Lin’s (2000, 2008), conceptualization of social capital as an outcome of both accessibility and mobilization, this study aimed to look beyond the benefits of having access by critically examining the ways in which first-generation, low-income students
actually perceive and are able to utilize the resources available to them within the EOF Program. Further, by using the voices of students, this study also sought to expand the notion of what sources of social capital within the individual networks of first-generation, low-income students are considered valuable and contribute to their success in higher education (Lin, 2000, 2008).

Literature Review

The literature reviewed here pertains to the experiences of first-generation, low-income students across different spectrums in higher education and their use of support. First, to provide context on how first-generation, low-income students are described by researchers, two sets of literature will be explored: the descriptive and often deficit-oriented research that associates educational outcomes as largely a function of these students' backgrounds, and research that investigates the higher education environment and how it impacts these students in their identity development. Next, studies that investigate the use of networks by first-generation, low-income students to access forms of social capital in college will be examined. Last, studies of EOF and college support programs similar in scope and objective to the EOF program will be briefly reviewed to situate this study’s potential contribution to the literature.

First Generation College Students in the Literature

To understand why research has framed first-generation students in college in an often deficit-oriented lens, it is important to first delineate how “success” in higher education has largely been defined by scholars. Although there are multiple definitions of this construct, generally, student “success” within the university has been associated with GPA, persistence and retention, four to six-year graduation rates, and involvement and integration into the university environment (Thayer, 2000; Tinto, 2006). It is within these standards of success that first-generation college students have become an increasing topic of interest within the
literature, particularly because of the staggering differences in educational outcomes for these students in comparison to their continuing generation peers (Calahan et al., 2019; Cataldi et al., 2018; Engle & Tinto, 2018). For example, data from the 2004/09 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal study showed that six years after entering higher education, 56% of first-generation students, in comparison to 40% of their continuing-generation peers (one or more parent with a college degree), had not completed a bachelor’s degree (RTI International, 2019b). Additionally, within this same study, researchers found that first-generation students (48%), were less likely than their continuing generation peers (67%) to demonstrate persistence, or obtain a credential from an institution or be enrolled (without stop out) after three years (Cataldi et al., 2018, p.8). These staggering differences in educational outcomes are compounded by the fact that first-generation students have increasingly become a large percentage of the college population, with 56% of students in higher education identifying as first-generation (neither parent had a bachelor’s degree) in the academic year 2015-2016 (RTI International, 2019a).

Given these statistics, much research has been devoted to identifying the factors that contribute to these disparities in first-generation student educational outcomes, often focusing on the role of their individual characteristics and backgrounds (Garriott, 2020; Schelbe et al., 2019). This interest has been substantiated by the fact that social scientists have established a strong link between family social origins, particularly between parental educational and occupational level, and the educational outcomes of children (Ford, 2018). As a result, using largely quantitative, correlational and quasi-experimental designs, research on first-generation students has generally focused on how their backgrounds have contributed to their lower educational outcomes (Calahan et al., 2019; Duggan, 2001; Lohflink, 2005; & Stebleton, Soria,
& Huesman, 2014). Two of the most cited of these characteristics discussed within the literature are reviewed below.

**Socioeconomic status**

It is important to note that while not all first-generation students identify as low-income, research has established that a large percentage of first-generation students, in comparison to their continuing generation peers, are more likely to come from households that earn $50,000 or less (77% vs. 29%) a year (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017). As such, much research has focused on the intersection of being from a lower socioeconomic (SES) community and identifying as first-generation, as lower SES status has been associated with lower educational persistence rates and degree attainment in college (Pascarella et. al, 2004, Paulsen & St. John, 2002, NCES 2003; Walpole, 2003).

Students from low-SES backgrounds are more likely to attend lower-resourced schools that provide insufficient academic preparation for college in comparison to their middle-high income peers (Calahan et al., 2019; Condron, 2007; Downey & Condron, 2016; Zhao, 2016). These funding inequities have significant impacts on educational achievement with schools in these districts generally providing less resources that promote academic success, such as early childhood education, rigorous curriculum, and quality teachers (Martin, et al., 2018). In higher education, the lack of substantial financial resources often forces low-income students to heavily rely on financial aid to pay for tuition, as well as work more hours to support themselves and/or their family (Lopez, 2018). These financial constraints can contribute to a number of obstacles that inhibit academic success for students, including having to drop out or take courses part-time in order to sustain themselves financially, or work more hours which can
constrict their ability to engage in the campus community (Garriott & Nisle, 2018; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pratt et al., 2019).

In addition to lack of sufficient academic preparation, another obstacle identified by researchers is that parents of low-income students, often due to financial constraints, are less likely to be able to be directly involved in their child’s education, including attending school meetings and events, and talking to their children regularly about school and college planning (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). This is significant as research has demonstrated that parental encouragement and involvement during a student’s K-12 years are significant factors in college enrollment, in that parents can help transmit the value of higher education to their children, including the importance of SAT’s, extracurricular involvement, and completing college applications that enable college matriculation (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018).

**Lack of Capital**

In addition to SES status, much research has pointed to how first-generation students are more likely to be embedded in “lower resourced communities,” due to their parents’ educational background and SES; impacting their ability to obtain the appropriate cultural capital, or the knowledge and understanding of the dominant cultural expectations within a context, such as the university (Bourdieu, 1986; Collier & Morgan, 2007; Darling & Smith, 2007; Dumais & Ward, 2010). This inability to draw upon family for information and for help in navigating higher education structures can put students at a distinct disadvantage in college, in that they lack the knowledge, practices, and behaviors that are promoted and considered acceptable within these institutions (Bourdieu, 1993; Dumais & Ward, 2010). Particularly, scholars have pointed to how first-generation, low-income students may have difficulty
navigating the institutional structure and mastering the “role” of being a college student (Collier & Morgan, 2007). Additionally, given their families lack of contextual insight, they may not receive the necessary or “right” support from their families or communities, which can work to negatively impact persistence and retention (Collier & Morgan, 2007; Darling & Smith, 2007; Thayer, 2000).

Given these reported disadvantages, many scholars have long emphasized the importance of these students having access to supports and resources within the university environment (Museus, 2012; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Stebleton & Soria, 2014; Schwartz, et al., 2018; Thayer, 2000; Tovar, 2015). This research has emphasized support in the form of relationships with institutional agents (faculty, staff, mentors), that can provide access to social capital, or resources, services, and information to help first-generation, low-income students successfully integrate into and navigate the structure of the higher education environment (Schwartz et al., 2018; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Thayer, 2000).

While this support is undoubtedly valuable, this framework creates a deficit-narrative that to be successful, first-generation, low-income students must be filled with academic information, resources, and skills that will help assimilate them into institutions, ultimately limiting our understanding of these students' experiences. As Garriott (2020), succinctly outlines:

“At the root of first-generation, economically marginalized students (FGEM)’ academic and career trajectories are structural conditions that shape their opportunities, barriers, and success. Unfortunately, these barriers are often described in a manner that unintentionally pathologizes FGEM students (e.g., Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke, 2011) rather than critiquing the hegemonic practices of institutions that serve them” (p. 84).

That is, in addition to their backgrounds, it is important to take into consideration how other aspects of these students experiences may contribute to their educational outcomes.
Challenges within Universities

This next section examines the research on the major obstacles first generation students face within the higher education environment. It is within here that another aspect of student success that is more difficult to measure is explored; the extent in which students are “satisfied with their experience and feel comfortable and affirmed in the learning environment” (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007, p. 8) is explored. This section will focus on research that has assessed the clash between first-generation student identity and college culture, specifically the ways in which this divergence impacts students experiences, perceived sense of belonging, and desire to persist.

First generation Student Identity

Identity is described as: "one's personally held beliefs about the self in relation to social groups (i.e., race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation), and the ways one expresses that relationship" (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009, p.577). Identity is socially constructed and process-oriented in that an individual's sense of self is constructed through their interactions with the broader social context and dominant culture (Alessandria & Nelson, 2005; Torres et al., 2009). Cultural models of self-describe how one "understands themselves in relation to others and the social context," with researchers finding social class background as one such aspect of identity that individuals use to understand themselves (Stephens, Markus, Fryberg, & Johnson, 2012b, p.1180).

SES. Primarily, research has focused on how individuals from working-class and lower-income backgrounds tend to have less economic capital and thus less opportunity for economic or environmental progression (Stephens et al., 2012a). This lack of progression creates a propensity for individuals from lower-SES backgrounds to be embedded in family and
community networks that resemble a collective, where the needs of others and the significance of one’s role in the community are emphasized, resulting in these individuals developing more interdependent rather than independent mindsets (Stephens et al., 2012a; Woolcock & Narrayan, 2000;).

**Race.** Additionally, research has also demonstrated that first-generation students are also more likely to be students of color, particularly of African American or Hispanic heritage (RTI International, 2019a). It is important to recognize the implications of these statistics, because while much of the literature recognizes that first-generation college students are more likely to be students of color, there are only a select handful of researchers (i.e. Gray, Johnson, Kish-Gephart, & Tilton, 2018; Jehangir, 2009; Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012; Sanchez-Connally, 2018; Williams & Coaxum, 2018; Yosso, 2005), who have actually examined how student experiences in college are impacted by the intersection of first-generation identity, class, and race. Much like class, race has been identified as an important aspect of identity that develops in adolescence and is used by individuals to frame their sense of self in the world (Gray et al., 2018). Within spaces of power and privilege, the intersection of being from a lower SES background and identifying as a person of color can be especially challenging, as these individuals can be subject to microaggressions, stereotyping, and threats related to both their class and racial identities (Gray et al., 2018).

Colleges, depending on type (i.e. Predominantly White (PWI) vs. more racially diverse institutions) can serve to either “affirm, challenge, or renegotiate” a student’s identity as they experience encounters with others who are either similar or dissimilar to them in race and/or class (Gray et al., 2018, p. 1229). Research that has explored the experiences of first-generation, low-income students of color have demonstrated how microaggressions or
stereotype threats related to their racial identity can take an emotional toll on students; creating feelings of isolation, invisibility and marginalization, as well as decreased confidence in their abilities, and overall satisfaction within college (Jehangir, 2009; Sanchez-Connally, 2018; Williams & Coaxum, 2018). For example, several first-generation students who identified as Hispanic within Sanchez-Connally’s (2018) qualitative study described feeling stressed and anxious during what they described as repeated prejudiced encounters with faculty, peers and administrators that made them feel inadequate in their abilities to master the dominant academic language. These types of encounters result in students of color having to utilize various mechanisms to persevere in college, such as “code switching” or “altering of language/dialect, behaviors, and/or mannerisms, to respond to different contexts based on race and social class differences” when talking to professors or other administrators (Gray et al., 2018, p. 1241), drawing on the strength and support of their families, cultivating strong peer networks with students similar to them in backgrounds, and utilizing sources of support within the university (Jehangir, 2009; Sanchez-Connally, 2018, Rios-Aguilar & Deil Amen, 2012; Williams & Coaxum, 2018).

Identity and Sense of Belonging

Given the often complex and intersecting identities of first-generation, low-income students, the literature has demonstrated that these students often experience a dissonance between their identities and the hegemonic structures of higher education environments; impacting their sense of belonging, or perceived level of social integration on campus and being a valued member of the community (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salamone, 2002; Tovar et al., 2009). Sense of belonging has its roots in Tinto’s (1975), Model of Student Attrition, and espouses that a student's propensity to stay in college is due to how well they assimilate into the
social and academic life of the institution (Dewitz et al., 2009). Similarly, Schlossberg (1989), posited that a feeling of significance or mattering, in that the student feels recognized and valued within the university setting, is an important contributor to persistence (Flett, Khan, & Su, 2019). Taken together, researchers have demonstrated that a feeling of sense of belonging and mattering on campus has been shown to contribute to academic motivation, persistence, and well-being within the university (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Kuh, 2001).

This sense of belonging has been cited as particularly critical for marginalized populations, such as first-generation, low-income students who may feel ostracized from not understanding social codes and norms of the college environment (Costello et al., 2018; Soria & Stebleton, 2014; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Thus, it is important to provide an overview of the research that has demonstrated how the structures and practices of university environments can both contribute to feelings of inadequacy as well as belonging in first-generation students.

**Quantitative studies.** Stephens et al., (2012b), conducted a series of quantitative studies, including surveys and experiments to uncover if American universities promote independent norms of being and how these norms impacted first-generation working-class students' normative models of self. The researchers found that many American universities generally endorse middle-class norms of independence, which they found to significantly impact students at one private university. Particularly, for those first-generation low-income students who reported having more interdependent motivations for attending college, a "cultural mismatch" occurred between their norms and the independent norms perpetuated by the university (Stephen et al., 2012b). To see how this impacted performance, the researchers used an experimental design in which a subsect of these students read a university welcome letter that was either purposefully independent or interdependent in nature and then were asked to complete a series of academic
tasks to see if the letter influenced how difficult they perceived the tasks (Stephens et al., 2012b). The researchers found that when the welcome letter espoused a university culture of more traditional independent norms, first-generation students perceived the academic tasks as more difficult, as well as performed more poorly than their continuing generation peers (Stephens et al., 2012b).

Studies utilizing correlational approaches also confirm that first-generation, and lower SES students often report feeling a lower sense of belonging in comparison to continuing generation peers due to these conflicts with their identity (Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Stebleton et al., 2014). These studies have cited perceptions of the campus environment as a factor in their feelings of integration and institutional satisfaction, such as difficulty in building relationships with institutional agents (faculty, staff, peers), and feelings of isolation due to their values not being reflected in the curriculum (Soria & Stebleton 2013; Jehangir, 2009; Woosley & Shepler, 2011).

**Qualitative studies.** While quantitative studies such as those described above are indeed crucial in establishing the challenges students face in college because of their first-generation identity, they lack the inclusion of student voices to provide a deeper understanding of how their experiences in the higher education environment contribute to their feelings of belonging. Studies like DeRosa & Nadine’s (2014), semi-structured interview of six first-generation students who were part of a TRIO program, serve to highlight the ways students experience their social class backgrounds and first-generation status within a university. In this study, students discussed feeling disconnected and misunderstood at times from faculty, staff, and peers who did not understand their financial challenges and need to work, which contributed to them feeling devalued at times within the university context (DeRosa & Nadine, 2014).
These findings were similarly found in a study by Gray et al. (2018), that explored the experiences of first-generation students from various social class and racial backgrounds on college campuses. In their semi-structured interviews with 31 students, the researchers found that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were consistently reminded of their class differences across institutional contexts, and in day-to-day situations on campus that contributed to feelings of identity threat (Gray et al., 2018). Additionally, many of the students of color interviewed also described experiences of racial microaggressions, stereotype threats, and assumptions about their socioeconomic backgrounds and character (i.e. they were poor or ghetto) because of the color of their skin (Gray et al., 2018). Particularly, students who were racial minorities were often assumed to be from lower class backgrounds by peers and professors, highlighting the ways in which race and social class can be “collapsed and assumed equivalent” within structures such as the university, ultimately leading to devaluing and essentialization of students (Gray et al., 2018, p. 1239).

Similarly, a study by Lehmann (2014), uncovered the identity processes academically and socially successful working-class students, many of whom were first-generation, adapted in order to be successful in a large four-year university in Ontario. The researchers interviewed participants three separate times throughout their academic career (first, second, and final years of study), and found that for these students, success was partly attributed to transformation of their habitus (i.e. habits, skills, dispositions), to one of a more middle-class culture similar to that of the university (Lehmann, 2014). This transformation process for many students resulted in personal growth, including different and expanded understandings of the world, which helped contribute to academic and social adjustment and success (Lehmann, 2014). However, despite the successes these students had in college, this identity transformation process was also the
source of stress and confliction, as many students described having to dissolve friendships from home, endure conflicting relationships with parents, and feelings of guilt and confusion relating to their changing views of their working-class backgrounds (Lehmann, 2014).

The use of student voices has also helped shed light on what aspects of a campus environment can contribute to a sense of belonging. For instance, Means & Pyne's (2017) case study of 10 low-income first-generation college students, and Costello et al.'s, (2018), survey study (using qualitative components), of 49 first-generation students both found that positive interactions and relationships with institutional agents and peers were reported as promoting belonging for students. Particularly, when institutional agents showed interest in student’s well-being or encouraged class or campus participation, participants associated this with feelings of mattering or sense of belonging (Costello et al., 2018; Means & Pyne, 2017). The impact of positive interactions on feelings of belonging was also demonstrated in Jehangir’s (2009), study of a learning community with a multicultural curriculum that invited first-generation, low-income students to regularly reflect on and offer their lived experiences (Jehangir, 2009). In their interview with 25 of the participants, students spoke of how this approach helped them feel both valued and validated, allowing them to better connect to the curriculum as well as other peers; contributing to their success (Jehangir, 2009).

In summary, while it is critical to understand how first-generation, low-income students’ backgrounds influence their academic preparation, acquisition of capital, and integration into the university; the largely quantitative and descriptive studies available in the literature fail to capture the complexities of these students experience (Garriott, 2020; Reid & Moore, 2008; Schelbe et al., 2019; Tinto, 2017). It is through qualitative studies like those reviewed here that it becomes evident that higher education institutions can contribute to these students feelings of
belonging or isolation within the environments they create. As the next section will
demonstrate, to help navigate these experiences in higher education, many first-generation,
low-income students rely on different aspects of their individual networks as sources of support
and motivation to help them persist.

Networks and the Acquisition of Social Capital for College Persistence

Within the higher education setting, cultural capital is often portrayed as the level of
knowledge students have of the “hidden curriculum” of institutions (e.g. understanding the
expectations and language used by professors, the ability to engage authority figures, and
navigating the system) that enables success (Collier & Morgan, 2004; Dumais & Ward, 2010;
O’Shea, 2016). For first-generation and other students from marginalized backgrounds, social
capital then is often discussed as a means to frame the level of access these students have to
networks that can provide these resources and knowledge to empower them to be successful
within the college environment (Acar, 2011; Dika & Singh, 2002; Dowd, Pak, & Bensimon,
2013; Morales, 2010). In a comprehensive review of the applications of social capital in
educational literature, Dika & Singh (2002), found that social capital is positively linked with
educational attainment, achievement, and psychosocial factors related to education.

Given that first-generation, low-income college students tend to come from more
interdependent communities, understanding the acquisition and mobilization of social capital
within their individual networks is critical when considering educational outcomes (Stephens et
al., 2012a). Despite the often significant role family and community play in these students
lives, much literature heavily emphasizes the importance of these students having access to
institutional agents-in the form of faculty, staff, and mentors, to provide the right social capital
to help guide them successfully within higher education environments (Dika & Singh, 2002,
Morales, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). While these types of network connections have proven to be critical (Dowd, 2013; Morales, 2010; Tovar, 2015), this emphasis on the role of institutional agents as the primary source of the “right” social capital for success in college can leave little room for the examination of how other networks, such as those in an individual’s family or community, impact student persistence and success in college.

**Family as Support**

Research has demonstrated that “high social support from network members can have a complementary effect and compensate for lack of information-related social capital” (Mishra, 2020, p. 3). Family support in particular has been cited as a significant factor in the educational outcomes of underrepresented youth, as demonstrated by Mishra (2020), who used a social capital and social networks perspective to systematically review the literature pertaining to academic outcomes in higher education. Mishra (2020), found that family not only serves as a critical source of support for underrepresented students in higher education, but also as a factor in persistence. Indeed, the importance of family support has been demonstrated in various studies, such as one by Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh (2006), who conducted in-depth interviews with 10 Mexican American adolescents. The researchers found parents were cited as significant contributors to the students’ academic experiences, acting as sources of social capital through the various supports and motivation they provided students. Similarly, Perez & McDonough (2008), in their interviews with 106 Latin(a/o) high school juniors and seniors, found that social capital was derived from information exchanged with extended family members, particularly those who had experiences with college. The comfort and familiarity with these extended family members allowed for an open avenue of communication that provided significant
information for the students that helped in their college planning process (Perez & McDonough, 2008).

Nichols & Islas (2016), used a mixed-methods approach to explore the differential uses of social and cultural capital between first-generation and continuing-generation pre-med students in their first year of college. Utilizing Lin’s (2002), view of social capital, the researchers found that there were substantial differences in terms of the types, quantity, and uses of social capital between the two groups of students. Specifically, while the researchers found that all “students relied on their parents during their first year,” first-generation students relied heavily on parental capital, in the form of their parents pushing them to persist as their main form of support, rarely interacting with faculty in the institution (Nichols & Islas, 2016, p.85-86).

The Use of Networks for Success

Research has also demonstrated the ways in which different aspects of first-generation students, low-income students networks provide resources throughout their college experiences. Ashtiani & Feliciano (2018), analyzed three waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescence to Adult Health survey to examine how access to social capital across three contexts: family, schools, and communities, promote low-income youth’s educational attainment. The researchers conceptualized social capital as resources that are both embedded in one’s social networks, as well as mobilization, or actual usage of social ties as a means to understand if a particular type of social capital was more influential for educational success (Ashtiani & Feliciano, 2018, p. 441). They found that access to all types of social capital is positively associated with college entry and completion, but more importantly, that the mobilization of social capital via mentoring relationships with certain professionals (teachers,
coaches, employers) was particularly influential on the college completion of low-income students (Ashtiani & Feliciano, 2018, p. 455).

The varied impacts of students’ networks were also demonstrated in a study by Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen (2012). The researchers used written essays of 261 Latino/a college students and semi-structured interviews with 61 of those students to investigate the support and information students received from “various school, home, and community sources,” in order to understand the roles of their networks in their initial and ongoing decisions about college and their career (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012, p.184). For the lower SES first-generation students, participants cited that while family was a constant fixture throughout their college trajectory, serving as a source of motivation and support, they were largely unable to provide social capital as it related to their professional development (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012). Rather, participants referenced the use of other network ties, particularly high school personnel, to provide “professionally relevant” social capital to help them make decisions as it related to their initial transition into college (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012). Unfortunately, once in their first year many of these ties dissipated, leaving many participants struggling to recreate these social networks within the university or relying on family as their primary resource in decisions about college or their career (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012).

Lastly, Martin (2015), used narrative inquiry to interview 48 undergraduate engineering students to understand how first-generation students (FGC) become aware of, accessed, and utilized social capital in college. The researchers found that while first-generation college students identified their families as high sources of emotional support, they reported relying heavily on educational personnel, such as those in the TRIO Program, to provide information and resources related to college preparation and major selection (Martin et. al, 2014; Martin, 2015). Interestingly, the researchers also found that while the first-generation college students
typically had networks of institutional social capital they regularly accessed, they did not seem to always use these individuals or resources purposefully (Martin, 2015). Rather, the researchers emphasized that the first-generation students within this study exemplified what Lin (2000), has described as the “invisible hand of social capital,” meaning that these students reaped the benefits of being part of resource rich networks despite not always intentionally mobilizing the resources available (Martin, 2015, p. 1180).

As this section has demonstrated, social capital can take shape in varying forms within an individual’s network—family, school, and community, and can be enacted and utilized for different purposes depending on the context (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012). By viewing social capital from this perspective, these studies exemplify how first generation and/or low-income students utilize multiple resources from different aspects of their networks, such as support and motivation from their family, or information and opportunities from educators, to shape and help them move through their college experiences.

Support Programs for First-Generation College Students

Support programs for first-generation, low-income students have been prevalent for decades; originating from the passage of the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965. The HEA established among other things, federal financial aid and educational opportunity grants to provide better access to higher education for those from lower-socioeconomic families and communities (Mortenson, 1991, p.6). Title IV of the HEA established the foundation we know today of federal student aid in higher education, and also founded the federal TRIO programs, which are arguably the most well-known set of federally funded access and support programs for first-generation, low-income students (Blumenthal & Morone, 2010, p.177).
The HEA and creation of the TRIO programs subsequently paved the way for other opportunity programs to be established; including the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program. EOF was established by New Jersey law in 1968 as a means to “ensure meaningful access to higher education to those who come from backgrounds of educational and economic disadvantage” (New Jersey (NJ) Secretary of Higher Education, 2020). In general, researchers across the literature have emphasized the importance of these programs in helping to provide institutional support to first-generation and/or low-income students as they transition and navigate the university environment (Engle et al., 2008; Martin, 2015).

For this study, research of support programs was limited to those that provide services to first-generation and low-income students once they are enrolled in college.

**State and Federal Programs**

**EOF**

The EOF Program is a NJ state funded program that currently operates within 42 institutions; community college and four-year universities across the state (State of NJ Office of Secretary of Higher Education (OHSE), n.d.). The EOF Program provides services to students who demonstrate significant limitations in their economic and educational resources and can thus benefit from the academic and financial support services the program provides. To be eligible, students must demonstrate at least two years of historical poverty, as determined by the state’s household income guidelines which are set at 200% of the federal poverty level. Additionally, students must display one other academic or economic need-based characteristic, such as being first-generation, having a sibling who participated in the EOF program, or have completed a Gear Up or college bound grant program to be eligible (NJ.Gov, n.d.). Students can be admitted either as a first-year student, or as a transfer student, and can remain in the program as long as they remain financially eligible and follow the institution's program requirements. Each EOF
program provides various academic and financial support services; 1:1 counseling, workshops/programs, a summer bridge program for incoming first year students, and financial assistance in the form of a grant that can range from $200 to $2,650 annually (State of NJ OSHE, n.d.). While each program operates under these same basic premises and structure, each individual campus program can vary in their recruitment efforts, first-year student academic admission criteria, and administration of program services (State of NJ OSHE, n.d.).

Research on EOF. Despite the existence of the program for over 50 years, there are very few published studies that examine the effectiveness of EOF on student outcomes. Rather, descriptive and dissertation studies serve as the bulk of research found that examine aspects of the program services and its impact on students. While the lack of empirical research on the EOF program is disappointing, the few qualitative studies reviewed (dissertation and non), do provide important glimpses into student perspectives on the supportive role the program plays in their college experiences.

Walker’s (2019), dissertation study investigated the effectiveness of an EOF program in helping current and former African American males at Rutgers-New Brunswick navigate challenges that arose within their college experiences. Through focus groups, observations, and interviews the author found that many of the participants described the EOF program to be “like family” to them, providing support, motivation, and resources that enabled them to be better prepared academically as well as feel a better sense of belonging on campus-helping their retention (Walker, 2019). Notably, participants within this program described how aspects of the program-such as daily “good news” emails that highlighted academic/career opportunities and the success of alumni, helped them feel motivated to persevere as well as connect them with opportunities such as internships (Walker, 2019). Additionally, many of the participants
expressed the positive impact participating in the pre-college summer institute had on them, allowing them to make connections with peers and get a “head start” in navigating the institution and academic coursework (Walker, 2019, p.71).

Another dissertation study by Hennessy-Himmelheber (2015), examined the characteristics of students and university environments that lead to the cultivation of social capital for first generation, low-income students at a large research institution (Hennessy-Himmelheber, 2015). In interviews with 22 students, the researcher found that participants were more likely to establish a connection in environments they felt demonstrated care and where they felt understood. For those participants in the EOF program, many cited their counselor in particular as a source of mentorship, friendship, family, and guidance that helped them as they navigated the university environment (Hennessy-Himmelheber, 2015). However, despite these connections, some participants described struggling to consistently utilize the resources the EOF program provided as well as establish connections within the university (Hennessy-Himmelheber, 2015). These difficulties were attributed to finding aspects of the university environment uncaring, or feelings of fear or embarrassment to ask for help despite knowing the availability and importance of the connections available to them (Hennessy-Himmelheber, 2015).

There was one published qualitative study found on student experiences within EOF by researchers Williams & Coaxum (2018), that examined the lived experience of “black men pursuing a college degree within the support of an Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program at a community college” (p. 69). In their semi-structured interviews with 10 of these students, the researchers found that the participants reported the services provided by the EOF program as important and beneficial, particularly valuing the connection to their advisors within the program
SOCIAL CAPITAL AND FIRST GEN EXPERIENCES

(Williams & Coaxum, 2018). The services not only helped them feel supported in their development, but also helped them be academically and socially engaged within the institution, contributing to their success (Williams & Coaxum, 2018). Similar to Walker’s (2019), study the participants also placed their participation in EOF as an important aspect of their college journey; providing support, resources, and information that were instrumental in their navigation of the institution (Williams & Coaxum, 2018).

Lastly, there were two published evaluations that explored the impact of the EOF program on student outcomes. The first was an intervention study conducted by Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski (2007), that explored the effects of a six-week EOF summer institute program on 95 students at a large research university. Specifically, the researchers were looking to see how participation in the summer program impacted resilience, social support, and ethnic identity in students (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007). The researchers found a significant association between participation in the summer institute and self-reported feelings of peer support and revered experiences with administrators during the program (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007). However, this data only focused on the impact of the summer program shortly after participation as opposed to long-term outcomes such as first-semester retention rates or GPA, making it difficult actually to assess the longstanding impact on students.

The second study conducted by Watson & Chen (2019), studied the effects of participating in the EOF program at a NJ community college on the first-semester retention of students. The researchers sampled 570 first-time freshmen who had participated in the EOF program from the years 2008-2013, and compared them with students who met qualifications of the program (i.e. gross income), but were not part of the program (Watson & Chen, 2019). Utilizing logistic regression to examine the effects, researchers found that the EOF program
when controlling for all other factors, “was significant in predicting first-semester retention” with those students participating having “higher odds of first semester retention” than those students who were not in the program (Watson & Chen, 2019, p.398). This study, much like the one done by Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski (2007), are essential in that they provide some evaluative data on the impact of the EOF program on student outcomes and experience. However, without the use of student voices, these studies are unable to provide insight into how and what aspects of these EOF programs in particular contributed to these effects.

**Additional State and Federal Support Programs**

At the state and federal level, there are a few other well-known support programs that target first-generation, low-income students similar to EOF. These include the Federal TRIO SSS program, and state level programs such as Pennsylvania’s ACT 101, and New York’s Higher Education Opportunity Program. Collectively, all of these programs work to help students from economically and financially disadvantaged backgrounds be successful in college by providing support such as academic counseling/tutoring, mentoring, academic and skill building workshops, and financial aid for tuition and books (New York State Education Dept. n.d.; Pennsylvania Higher Education Authority, n.d.; U.S. Dept. of Education, TRIO, n.d.). This section will review the literature on TRIO programs as a means to highlight the impact of similar support programs to EOF on student outcomes.

**TRIO**

As the first federally funded set of college access and support programs, the TRIO program is arguably one of the most well-known and cited supports within the literature discussed by scholars for first-generation, low-income students (U.S. Dept. of Ed. Support Services Program, n.d.; Perna, 2015; Thayer, 2000). TRIO comprises several different programs
that collectively focus on providing services to individuals from low-income households, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to help them “progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to post baccalaureate programs” (U.S. Dept of Ed, Federal Trio Programs, n.d.). Given the focus of this study, the research reviewed here focuses specifically on the Student Support Services (SSS) program.

**Research on TRIO SSS.** TRIO SSS provides services such as academic tutoring, as well as counseling and general education services to help “facilitate personal and academic development” as well as provide motivation towards success for first-generation, low-income and/or students with disabilities (U.S. Dept of Ed, Support Services Program, n.d.) A few large scale evaluative and longitudinal studies have been conducted to assess the academic outcomes (i.e., persistence, retention, and graduation) of students who have participated in TRIO programs (Chaney, 2010; Reason et al., 2009; Zeisher & Chen, 2015) Two of these studies focused on the impact of TRIO programs by collecting data from institutions providing support services to TRIO students and compared it to students from similar backgrounds who were not receiving TRIO support services (Chaney, 2010; Zeisher & Chen, 2015). Both of these studies found evidence that participation in TRIO SSS programs and receiving support services in general, were associated with positive academic outcomes such as increased persistence rates, higher GPAs, and six-year graduation rates comparative with non-SSS students (Chaney, 2010; Zeisher & Chen, 2015). Unfortunately, given the descriptive and quantitative nature of both of these studies, neither were able to pinpoint to what support services specific to TRIO, were impactful on student outcomes and how.

**Qualitative studies.** Much like research on EOF, there are limited empirical studies that utilize qualitative methods to investigate the experiences of first-generation, low-income within
TRIO SSS programs. One study found by Quinn, Cornelius-White, & Uribe-Zarain (2019), used a mixed-methods approach consisting of a survey of 66 first-generation college students enrolled in the TRIO program along with interviews of eight of them to understand the impact of their participation in the program on their experiences (Quinn et al., 2019). The researchers used a theory of margin lens to frame these students' experiences, which asserts that two elements: power (deriving from resources such as wealth, social contacts, and physical health), and load (personal and social demands on a person), interact to create a margin of which an individual is able to substantially meet the challenges of life (Quinn et al., 2019, p. 46). Using this framework, the researchers found that TRIO SSS served as a critical power variable, providing support, encouragement and guidance that contributed to their ability to access resources and navigate the university environment, as well as helping them with academic and personal decisions (Quinn et al., 2019).

Much of the other qualitative studies found on the TRIO SSS program were dissertations that focused on understanding how participation in TRIO impacted student experiences. Comparison studies such as Kizart’s (2014), that interviewed 20 first-generation college students from two universities that were both TRIO and non-TRIO participants, looked to see how students’ perceptions and experiences in college varied by their participation in the program, as well as what sources of support they cited as helpful in helping them with their college degree. While students within both groups experienced common obstacles such as adjusting to the academic rigor of college, or lack of understanding from family or friends about the demands and culture of college; those who participated in TRIO indicated that the program provided them with resources, guidance, and support that helped them navigate these challenges (Kizart, 2014). Similarly, Garcia (2015), utilized a multiple case study approach to investigate the experiences
of six Mexican-American first-generation low-income community college students within a TRIO program. Garcia (2015), found that the tutoring, advising, welcoming atmosphere and connection to faculty available in TRIO were cited by participants as a significant factor in their success. Taken together, these studies offer insight into what types of supports first-generation students perceived as helpful within college, and what role their participation TRIO had on their experiences.

University Based Programs or Sources of Support

Given the rising numbers of first-generation students within higher education, it's no surprise that there are a number of initiatives and programs documented within the literature to retain these students. In a comprehensive review of supports available for first-generation college students within four-year institutions, Midkiffe & Grinage (2017), found that efforts for these students focused predominantly on addressing students cognitive needs (i.e. academic preparedness), through: summer bridge programs, specialized advising and mentoring, specialized programs and workshops, learning communities, and pedagogical reforms. While there were many examples of “active” and more formally structured supports available (i.e. like an EOF program), the authors found that predominantly, programs or initiatives for first-generation students operated on a “passive” approach, in that they offered services to first-generation students, but only if students availed themselves of these opportunities (Midkiffe & Grinage, 2017). Additionally, the authors also noted that the majority of the programs they reviewed focused heavily on addressing first-generation students' cognitive factors as opposed to non-cognitive variables like mindset and perseverance related to their social and cultural capital experiences within the institution (Midkiffe & Grinage, 2017).
Schelbe, Becker, Spinelli, & McCray (2019), conducted focus groups and interviews of 25 participants within “GenOne” a first-generation academic retention program at a large southeastern public university. Students within this program are provided intensive supports throughout their first two years of college, including an intensive 8-week summer bridge program prior to the start of their freshman year, as well as access to tutors, study labs, and regular events provided by GenOne staff (Schelbe et al., 2019). The researchers found that a majority of students perceived their participation in GenOne as a significant source of support, strongly impacting their transition into college, particularly through their participation in the summer bridge program and through the support services provided (Schelbe et al., 2019).

Schwartz et al., (2018), utilized a mixed methods explanatory design that investigated the impact of a social capital focused workshop curriculum on the success of first-generation students participating in a summer bridge program. A total of 164 students participated in the 4, one-hour workshop sessions over the summer program. Each of these sessions focused on the role of social capital, mentors, and networking in advancing students in college, strategies to maintain relationships and sources of support on campus, and discussing challenges related to interacting with faculty (Schwartz et al., 2018, p.170). The researchers used the previous summer bridge cohort, who did not receive the social capital treatment, as a comparison to uncover the impact of the program on participants. In addition to finding significant differences in end of first year GPA for the workshop participants, the researchers found in their interviews with 12 of these students, that participants articulated the importance of building connections and reported seeking support from various sources on campus. Overall, the researchers believed these results indicated that the workshop intervention was a significant influence on “first-generation college
students’ attitudes and behaviors” in cultivating social capital, contributing to success in their first year (Schwartz et al., 2018, p.175).

Lastly, researchers have also investigated how faculty working with first-generation students can serve as intentional sources of support within the classroom. For example, Schademan & Thompson (2016), conducted interviews with six instructors and 17 first-generation low-income students as part of a teacher pathway program in a community college to examine beliefs around college student readiness, as well as pedagogies and practices that enabled instructors to serve as cultural agents. Those faculty that took the time to get to know and understand student challenges outside of the classroom, approached students with more success rather than deficit-oriented approaches to their abilities, and viewed themselves as central to helping students develop new forms of readiness to enable their college success (Schademan & Thompson, 2016, p.211). These practices helped to not only promote academic success among the participants as well as connections between the students and professors, but also helped create a classroom environment that promoted a sense of belonging and connection to the larger campus community for participants (Schademan & Thompson, 2016).

Summary

Given the growing numbers of first-generation and/or low-income students in college, it is not surprising that there is an abundance of research on this population. Unfortunately, much of this research has focused on first-generation students themselves, describing the “disadvantages” they have due to their demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds and how these characteristics contribute to their inability to be successful in college compared to their peers. As a result, research has also focused on the importance of providing access to social
capital through institutional supports, either through individuals or support programs like EOF and TRIO SSS, that can fill these students with the “right” knowledge, resources, and skills necessary to both fit within, and navigate the institution successfully. Indeed, as the research has demonstrated here, institutional supports as well as programs like EOF have shown to be a critical aspect of first-generation and/or low-income students' experiences and ability to persist in college.

However, through qualitative studies using student voices, this literature has also demonstrated that first-generation, low-income college students also derive strength, resources, information, and motivation from other aspects of their networks within and outside the institution that contribute to their persistence and success. By elevating student voices, this study aims to contribute to a growing body of literature committed to understanding rather than assuming what factors contribute to first generation, low-income students educational outcomes, in hopes to better utilize programs like EOF to provide support services that are not based on perceived needs, but what students say they need.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Research design

As the focus of this study was on eliciting and capturing the voices of EOF students, a qualitative research design utilizing interviewing was employed. Qualitative research aims to “understand human beings richly textured experiences” by asking questions that allow the participant to reflect on how they have “constructed and understood their experiences” (Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007, p.22-23). Interviews were chosen because they allow the opportunity for participants to provide more in-depth information in regards to their experiences and viewpoints on a topic (Turner, 2010). This is particularly important as this study aimed to elevate the voices of first-generation, low-income students by constructing as complete a picture as possible of their experiences in both higher education and within the EOF program by utilizing their words (DeMarrais, 2004). Further, by giving students agency to narrate their experiences, these interviews helped “bring to the surface the multidimensional nature of lived experience” (Galletta, 2013, p. 2). Qualitative interviews were conducted with 18 current EOF students over the course of fall 2020 and early spring 2021.

Pilot Study

In spring of 2020, a pilot study was conducted to explore how first-generation, low-income students within the EOF Program at Rutgers-Camden perceived and utilized the social capital available to them as they navigated their first two years of college. The two main research questions guiding this pilot study were:

1.) How do students of the EOF Program describe their experiences during their first two years of college as they integrate into, and navigate the college environment?
2.) How do students perceive and experience the support available to them within the EOF Program?

In total, four students, 2 female freshmen and 2 male sophomores, participated in this study which consisted of one, semi-structured interview that took between 30mins-1 hour to complete. Several aspects of this pilot study informed the methodology of this current study.

First, recruiting enough participants was relatively difficult, requiring more targeted outreach than initially anticipated and resulting in challenges obtaining the minimum number of participants for the study. Additionally, given the difficulty in recruitment, the four students who volunteered were ultimately students who were considered (by their EOF Counselor), as relatively active in the EOF Program. Therefore participants’ feedback about their experiences with EOF program services was relatively positive and did not provide critical or diverse insights on the program. To ensure an ample and varied selection of participants for the current study, two adjustments were made. First, the participant pool was widened to include all students, regardless of class year, who were non-transfer admitted. Second, incentives in the form of gift cards were utilized to help draw a wider range of interest and participation for the study.

The second finding from the pilot study that influenced the current research study is the way in which the participants’ backgrounds seemed to influence how they perceived and utilized social capital/institutional support. In the pilot study, it became apparent that utilizing Bourdieu’s (1986), conceptualization of social capital was limiting based on the participants’ use of support. Particularly, the structure and support present from the participants’ families seemed to be a significant factor in what institutional supports within EOF they sought out and utilized, such as supplementing help they were missing from family, or recreating similar types of support systems. As a result, this study employed Lin’s (2000, 2008) conceptualization of social capital
to better encompass the resources within a student’s entire network (family, peers, and institutional agents) that they may draw upon in college. In an effort to capture as much information about students’ networks, the interview protocol was revamped to include questions related to their families as well as their experiences within their communities prior to entering higher education. These questions were intentional, meant to further explore the ways in which the participant’s backgrounds influenced their perceptions and usage of supports available to them within the EOF program and the higher education environment in general.

In what follows I outline the methodology that was informed by this pilot study.

Setting and Sample

Participants for this study were drawn from the EOF Program at Rutgers-University Camden. Rutgers University-Camden is located in the southern area of the state of NJ, and of the three Rutgers campuses, is considerably the smallest, with 7,017 undergraduate and graduate students, 38 majors, and 29 graduate programs all on a 40-acre campus (Rutgers University-Camden, n.d.). The EOF Program at Rutgers-Camden falls under the Division of Student Academic Success that is home to other student support offices such as TRIO SSS, Disability Services, and The Learning Center. At the time of this study, the EOF Program at Rutgers-Camden currently had about 265 students who were either admitted as first year or transfer students. These students were predominantly female (75%), largely identify as either Black (39%) or Hispanic (31.3%), and had an average cumulative GPA of 3.1 in fall 2020.

Participants

Sampling Strategy

The goal of this study is what Maxwell (2008), describes as intellectually driven, in that it aimed to understand the meaning and perceptions of students’ experiences with social capital in
college, as well as the way in which physical (i.e. the campus) and social relationships (i.e. different networks) influence these perceptions and meanings. As such, sampling was purposeful, a technique in qualitative studies that aims to investigate experiences, events, or incidents by identifying and selecting information-rich cases that will help achieve in-depth knowledge of the phenomena of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). This type of sampling involves identifying participants who can offer knowledge and experience about the phenomenon at hand (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Maximum variation is a method of purposeful sampling where participants are selected across a broad spectrum (age, sex, ethnicity) in order to achieve a greater understanding of the given phenomenon by garnering as many perspectives as possible (Sandelowski, 1995). This study utilized demographic and phenomenal maximum variation techniques to purposefully sample 15-20 students. Demographic variation involves sampling for variation on individual characteristics such as gender, where phenomenal variation is sampling to provide a: “representative coverage of variables” to understand the phenomenon under study (Sandelowski, 1995, p.181-182).

Given the range of background characteristics of EOF students, the goal of this study was to include participants who embody the gamut of gender, age, and race within the program. To identify potential research participants, the researcher utilized EOF’s internal data records. To achieve demographic variation, the criteria for participation was kept as open as possible by placing only a few parameters on participation, including: 1.) be a current undergraduate student, 2.) admitted to the program as a freshman, and participated in the Summer Institute. These criteria were chosen in order to garner a wide range of participants that represented the various backgrounds of first-generation, low-income students in the EOF Program, while also
ensuring that the participants interviewed had similar contextual experiences to draw from within the program.

After eligible participants were identified, recruitment was conducted employing a multi-phase approach, starting more broadly and then targeting specific students as necessary. First the researcher had an EOF staff member post a recruitment flyer on the EOF Instagram page, as well as the EOF page of CANVAS, a learning management platform, that provided an overview of the study, incentives for participation (gift card, EOF workshop credit), and how to participate (see Appendix A for recruitment flyer). Additionally, each EOF counselor was asked to send an email to their cohort of eligible students to invite them to take part in an interview study about their experiences within the EOF Program and on the college campus (see Appendix B for recruitment email). This process was repeated several times between October 2020 and January 2021 until the minimum number of participants was exceeded.

This study utilized demographic variation techniques to purposefully sample for a variation on individual characteristics in order to try and achieve a representative sample of students and their experiences within the university and the program. Therefore, as students identified themselves, the researcher kept a record of student characteristics to ensure that participants represented a ride range of student backgrounds such as age, race, and gender as well differential academic profiles determined by their GPA and reported engagement.

Table 1 below represents the 18 participants who participated in this study (using their chosen pseudonyms), as well as their self-reported year they entered the EOF program, gender, ethnicity, age, and GPA at the time of their interview.
Table 1

**Self-reported demographic information of the 18 participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Started Program</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>GPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simba</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riley</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black/Latino</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iris</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian/Vietnamese</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmin</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sienna</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KV</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As demonstrated in the table, participants in this study were largely representative of the general demographic population of EOF, particularly in terms of identified gender and ethnicity, with the majority (61%) identifying as female and over half (55%) identifying as Black and/or Hispanic. Participants self-reported GPA’s were also fairly illustrative of students as a whole within EOF, averaging 3.0. In terms of class year, there was a bit less variation in terms of representation, with the majority of participants having started in the years 2016, 2017, and 2019, with only one student representing those who are started in 2018 or in 2020.

**Data Collection**

Primary data collection in this study consisted of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with 18 EOF students. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they employ a more conversational and informal tone, while also allowing the researcher to ask a set of structured
questions that are explicitly focused on addressing the research questions guiding this study (Longhurst, 2003; Merriam, 2009, p.13).

**Interview Protocol**

This study drew on a phenomenological approach to interviewing in order to understand the “essence or structure of an experience” (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, p. 7), by utilizing open-ended questions to help participants reconstruct their experiences and therefore get as close to their lived reality as possible (Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Seidman, 2006, p.15). Researchers such as Bevan (2014), and Seidman (2006), have provided models for applying a phenomenological structure to interviewing that aim to question and understand participants experiences and behaviors within the context of their life (Seidman, 2006, pp. 15 & 18). The interview protocol within this study drew upon these frameworks to better understand the perceptions and experiences of participants, and specifically used two of Bevan’s (2014), methods “contextualization (natural attitude and life world), and apprehending the phenomenon (modes of appearing, natural attitude)” (p.138), to structure interview questions as outlined below. See Appendix C for interview protocol.

**Contextualization.** Understanding a person’s particular lived experience involves investigating the context from which the experience gains meaning, as this context allows for the participant to “reconstruct and describe his or her experiences as a form of narrative that will be full of significant information” (Bevan, 2014, p.139). As such, the interview protocol utilized in this study asked participants descriptive questions about their experiences with social capital within different aspects of their lives, such as how they have accessed and utilized sources of support in the institution generally, within the EOF program, and within their family/community before, and throughout college. This description was important because it allowed for
participants to show through their narration the complexities of experience, the relationships/interrelatedness between different aspects of experience that help constitute meaning, and how contextual aspects may influence the perceptions and meanings participants ascribe to their experiences (Bevan, 2014).

**Apprehending the Phenomenon.** In phenomenological approaches to interviewing, it is believed that one’s “identity of an experience or thing” is varied, in that it can be experienced in many ways—either by the individual (depending on context) or by several different people (Bevan, 2014, p. 140). To understand the experience of the participants in detail, this method involves asking both descriptive and structural questions to allow for the participant to continue to narrate and interpret their experience, but also ensure that the researcher is capturing these experiences as authentically as possible (Bevan, 2014). For example, given the research questions in this study are centered around the participants' perceptions of their experiences with social capital, many of the questions within the interview protocol asked the participant to describe their perceptions or experiences with sources of support throughout college, such as within EOF, or in their family or community. To ensure clarity on the participants' perceptions and meanings they gave to an experience, the researcher asked the participants to provide specific, or more-in-depth descriptions on the words they use such as “support” or “care” to describe an experience or relationship. These types of follow-up probes were particularly important in data analysis, leaving less room for the researcher to ascribe subjective interpretation to the participants' experiences.

**Interview Procedure**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Rutgers University-Camden was operating on a largely virtual basis for the 2020-2021 academic year. As such, all interviews with students took place
over Zoom. As participants volunteered to take part in the study, the researcher and participant worked together to agree upon the time/date that was most convenient for the participant via email.

Prior to the scheduled interview, participants were sent a demographic questionnaire to fill out that provided relevant background information for the researcher for data analysis, including the pseudonym they wanted to use to identify them within the study (see Appendix D for demographic questionnaire). Given the virtual nature of the interview, participants were also sent the IRB approved "consent to take part in a research study" form in advance that detailed the purpose of the study, the format, and also included an addendum requesting their consent to audio record the interview (see Appendix E for consent form). At the start of the scheduled interview time, the researcher reviewed the interview protocol to each participant, summarizing the purpose of the study, how the researcher would ensure confidentiality, and also encouraged their honesty and openness as assurance that their answers would have no bearing on their status as an EOF student. The researcher (after consent from the participant) began the audio recording and read through each of the open-ended interview questions prepared, asking follow up/probing questions as necessary to gain clarity or follow statements of interest. Once the interviews were completed, each participant was thanked for their time and participation. To organize the audio files, the researcher labeled each interview by date and the pseudonym name of the participant and stored the files in a folder on her laptop.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

To structure the data analysis portion of this study, the researcher drew upon a series of steps as outlined by researchers such as Creswell & Creswell (2018), Merriam (2009), and Saldana (2016). Analysis coincided with data collection as recommended by Merriam (2009),
as this allowed for a more focused, organized, and organic analysis of the data. The steps of data analysis are outlined below:

**Organizing the Data**

First, as interviews were completed, audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed utilizing a transcription service. To ensure accuracy, be re-familiarized with the content discussed by the participants in the interview, as well as start identifying potential patterns within the interviews, the researcher also reviewed transcriptions as they were completed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2009). After being reviewed, transcriptions were labeled by the pseudonym participants assigned themselves, and put into a specified folder on the researcher’s laptop (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To engage with, and immerse herself in the data, the researcher utilized memoing to record initial thoughts, feelings, and impressions she saw within the data (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008).

**Coding**

Second, multiple rounds of coding, which is “the process of organizing the data by bracketing chunks” in a way that allows the researcher to “index or categorize text in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas about it” was employed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.193; Gibbs, 2018). This study utilized aspects of both inductive and deductive coding processes to organize the data. Inductive coding has been described as a “bottom up” approach that uses the participants’ experiences as a way to generate larger themes, whereas deductive approaches work from the “top down” using the research objectives as a means to organize the data (Creswell, Clark, & Morales, 2007, p.23). Drawing upon both these methods, the researcher started with “open coding” or reading through one interview transcript at a time and writing down words, phrases or concepts that seemed significant or fit a predetermined set of
structured codes that drew from the research questions or conceptual framework such as network-family, or social capital-institutional (Merriam, 2009). This process was continued with each interview transcript until the researcher felt she had reached saturation, or no new codes could be identified (Thomas, 2003). To track this process of developing codes, and to aid in the interpretation of the data set, the researcher created a google spreadsheet, with a tab for each participant that recorded all identified codes that aligned with the research questions or conceptual framework. Additionally, the researcher continued to utilize memoing throughout this process as a way to reflect on the significance and analytic reasoning being assigned to the codes (Charmaz, 2014; Gibbs, 2018).

After the completion of open-coding, the researcher began moving towards categorizing the data by employing axial coding, which aims to reorganize the data set by “grouping similarly coded data” from the initial coding process, including eliminating redundant codes in order to determine the “best representative codes” to put into conceptual categories (Saldana, 2016, p.245). To achieve this, the researcher created a coding tree consisting of all categories and codes that were marked during the open-coding process, going through each piece of data eliminating redundant codes and grouping similar codes. This process was repeated until the researcher felt they had achieved the best representative codes within the data that would allow for the formation of conceptual categories to develop a “taxonomy” in which “relationships between categories and subcategories” could be identified to determine what was happening in the data (Morse, 2008, p.727). At the end of this coding phase the researcher then had a list of words or phrases that best represented the data that was used towards the next step in the analysis process.

Interpretation
Finally, using this taxonomy, the researcher moved towards placing the data into themes, where themes are “an extended phrase or sentence that captures ideas of what a unit of data represents and/or what it is...and serves to unify the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole” (Saldana, 2016). To achieve this, the researcher employed two methods. First, the researcher wrote summaries of each participants interview as a way to succinctly capture their individual themes or stories, in particular how they described their perceptions and experiences as a first-generation student, and how they utilized social capital throughout their journey. Next, the researcher then used concept mapping for each interview transcript to identify similar patterns and themes within participant’s narratives by research questions (i.e. how students talked about being first-generation, how they described their EOF counselor) (Daley, 2004). To track shared themes among participants, the researcher then created a new tab in the google spreadsheet -where themes were organized by topic (i.e. first-generation-motivation, EOF counselor-support) and marked to indicate the number of participants who spoke of the identified theme in that particular way. To help capture these relationships or patterns within the data, the researcher used in-vivo codes, or direct quotes to highlight phrases and words from the participants that best characterized the specific idea or experience (Saldana, 2016). Throughout this process, the researcher continued to utilize memoing as a way to track similar patterns she was noting among participants, as well as any thoughts or questions she had related to the data.

The identified themes allowed the researcher to begin to capture the relationships within the data, and move to the final stage of analyzing and inferring how these interconnections provided evidence towards the research questions. To achieve this, the researcher looked at patterns within the data and how these patterns inferred how, and in what ways, individual
networks influenced the type and sources of social capital first-generation, low-income students perceived as influential in their college experiences and persistence, and if being part of the EOF program impacted these experiences. To identify these patterns and how they provided evidence towards the research questions, analysis occurred through a cyclical process of describing (how did and how many participants talked about this aspect?), comparing (how did themes occur across different groups?), and relating (how did conditions and circumstances impact prevalence?) each theme (Bazeley, 2009, p.10). In particular, the researcher took special care throughout the interpretive phase to understand how the identified patterns within the data aligned with Lin’s (2000, 2008), theoretical framework of social capital. This included noting the different sources of social capital identified by participants within their networks (home/community, school/EOF), patterns among participants in their use of these different resources, as well as the factors that contributed to how students mobilized these different forms of capital.

At the end of this process, the researcher felt she was able to identify a finalized set of themes that captured the similarities and complexities of participants experiences, including how they described/perceived their first-generation status, the sources of social capital they utilized within their networks to aid in their persistence in college, and the overall influence of their participation in EOF in these experiences.

Validity

Creswell & Miller (2000), define validity as how accurate and representative the interpretations and explanations of the data are of participants' realities of the social phenomenon in question. One aspect of qualitative research that can impact validity is the positionality of the researcher, where positionality is determined by “where one stands in
relation to the other” (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, & Lee, 2001, p.411). As the Assistant Director of the EOF Program, the researcher realizes that studying students within her own program can "raise issues of imbalance and power between the inquirer and the participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.184). As such, the researcher considered how this position of authority may have caused identified participants not to want to interview for the present study as well as influenced the characteristics of the sample of participants who did volunteer (i.e. those who are highly active in the program, or have had interactions with the researcher). Further, as Bourke (2014), describes, "just as the participant's experiences are framed in social-cultural contexts, so too are those of the researcher” (p.2). The researcher's identities as white and middle-class situates her within the "dominant" cultural group that creates a set of inherent biases and understanding of the world that may influence observations, as well as participants' responses (Bourke, 2014, p.2).

The researcher recognizes that there are strengths to her positionality that may also have impacted this research study. Just as her position as the Assistant Director may have prevented some students from participating in the interview due to worries of confidentiality or impact on program status, some of those who did volunteer may have been more motivated to do so because of their familiarity to the researcher. Further, given her position in EOF and the number of years working for the program, the researcher has interacted with all the participants prior to their participation in the study, which may have provided helpful context (both consciously and unconsciously) when conducting data analysis, especially for those with whom the researcher had frequent contact. Taken together, recognition of this complete absence of objectivity due to these intersecting identities and positions as the researcher was important in
order to help prevent (as much as possible), coloring the experiences and perceptions of my participants as data is interpreted and themes are applied to the data.

To address these issues with positionality, the researcher used reflexive memoing to record her perspectives and decisions in the analysis of the data throughout the entirety of the process (Birks et al., 2008). Reflexive memoing provided the researcher a safe space to explore ideas while also maintaining awareness of her beliefs and attitudes towards a subject or data (Bevan, 2014). Further, the researcher used the staff within the EOF Program as “mediators” or “individuals who use their position or relationships to facilitate contact between the researcher and the potential informants” to help recruit participants (Kristensen & Ravn, 2015, p.725). Additionally, for those participants who did volunteer, the researcher took measures to make participants aware, through language used both within the recruitment email and at the start of the interview, that their answers would no way impact their status in the program.

Finally, in order to ensure the trustworthiness or credibility of the analysis and findings of this study, two additional procedures were employed:

The first strategy to help ensure credibility within this study was peer-debriefing. This process involves locating an individual who is familiar with the research or the phenomenon being explored to review data within the study. These persons reviewed the study throughout the entire research process to ensure it resonated with someone other than the researcher as valid by asking questions, providing feedback, and challenging assumptions about the data and interpretations within the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p.129). For this, the researcher utilized fellow peers within her doctoral dissertation group, all of whom did not have inside knowledge of the program or its participants so they could come to the research from a fresh perspective.
Lastly, triangulation which is “a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (Creswell & Miller, 2010, p.126) was used. Within this study, triangulation was achieved by only keeping codes from the data analysis process that were consistent across a majority of interviews, which allowed the researcher to search across participants' interviews to identify common themes and experiences.

In summary, using a phenomenological approach to interviewing helped to capture, in their own words, the lived experiences of the first-generation EOF students within this study, while the data analyses steps outlined helped to group these individual narratives into themes. These findings, using the voices of the participants, will be presented in detail in the following chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

Predictions for the success of first-generation students in higher education are grim, with only 21% obtaining a college degree within six-years of enrollment in comparison to 66% of their higher income, continuing-generation peers (Calahan, Addison, Brunt, Patel, & Perna, 2021). Given that these students do not have parents who attended college, and often, but not always, come from lower-resourced communities, they are assumed to lack the skills, information, and support needed for higher education (Calahan et. al, 2019; Garriott, 2020, Schelbe et. al, 2019). As a consequence, these students are seen as uniformly lacking the “right” social capital to successfully navigate college, and therefore need institutional agents who can provide them resources for success (Museus, 2012; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Stebleton & Soria, 2014; Schwartz, et al., 2018; Thayer, 2000; Tovar, 2015). However, the research on first generation students essentializes them as a group, failing “to capture the richness and complexity of these students’ lives” (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018, p.148).

The present research study sought to shift the focus from the “lack of capital” of first-generation, low-income students as the contributors to their lower degree attainment rates, to the structural conditions that legitimatize a particular set of backgrounds and knowledge. Through my conversations with the 18 participants, it became evident that the social capital they used was not isolated to their university experience, rather as agents over their own destinies, they drew upon different networks to help them enter, navigate, and persist in their college education. In this chapter, I use the voices of these students to illustrate the individuals and organizations they
drew on for social capital in their college careers. I start by highlighting the integral role these participants’ families and backgrounds played in not only motivating and helping with their path to college, but also in their persistence therein. I then move to participants’ transition into and through college, and how they extended their networks to include staff, faculty, and peers that could provide them with the informational, emotional and navigational capital they needed. Through my discussion of these findings, two things will be made clear: first, that these participants were the primary agents responsible for their success, in that it was their internal desire to earn a degree that drove them to seek out, and build networks of support they could utilize to help them reach this goal. Second, regardless of how their networks varied, it was evident that for all participants, EOF was a central pillar within their support system, a hub of capital that each drew upon and perceived as being critical to their success.

**Aspirational Capital: “This is something I really want to have for this family”**

Research has demonstrated that educational achievement, including enrolling into, and persisting in post-secondary education, is strongly linked to both parent educational level and household income (Calahan et al., 2019; Cataldi et al., 2018; Duncan & Murnane, 2016; Ford, 2018). Specifically, students who come from higher income communities with one or more parent that has obtained a college degree, are significantly more likely to obtain a bachelor’s degree within six years of enrollment in comparison to their lower income, first-generation peers (Calahan et al., 2019; Pew Research, 2021; Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017). Attending lower-resourced schools that provide insufficient academic preparation for college, financial constraints that prevent families from being able to afford specific resources (i.e. SAT prep), or be involved in college planning, have all been identified as factors that contribute to these differential outcomes for first-generation, low-income students (Martin et al., 2018; Mitchell &
Jaeger, 2018). As a result of their parents educational background and SES status, research points to how first-generation/low-income students are often embedded in families and communities who are unable to provide them with the right cultural capital, or knowledge, behaviors, and skills that will help them to feel more comfortable navigating and understanding the expectations of the university environment (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Garriott & Nisle, 2018).

In general then, the backgrounds of first-generation college students (FGCS), are framed in a deficit manner, forming a narrative that their families are deficient; “lacking” the right resources that can help them to successfully enter and persist in college (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). In contrast to this deficit narrative, participants in this study reported that their family circumstances were a major factor that motivated them to enter higher education. Particularly, rather than being deterred by their circumstances, first-generation students often used their family’s experiences and backgrounds as further motivation to attend college as a means to achieve a better future for themselves (Hebert, 2018; Irlbeck, Adams, Akers, Burris, & Jones, 2014). Indeed, as illustrated by Carter in the title quote, attending college was an intentional choice made by many of the participants to have “new faces and opportunities” away from the circumstances they grew up in. This “aspirational capital,” or a “dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals” (Yosso, 2005, p.78) was common to most of the students in this study.

To be sure, many of the participants came from challenging circumstances but it was in witnessing the struggles that their families faced that motivated students to aspire to a college education. Danielle, for example, described college as a way to “make something more of myself” after growing up around domestic abuse and witnessing the impact of hard labor jobs on family members. Similarly, Martin, described how seeing his brother and other members of his
community have children at a young age was what led him to start thinking about an alternative path for himself:

When my brother had his first child, at the age of 14. That was when I was like, is this what my life is going to be a young father, working? He worked nonstop to do his best for his daughter, …but even that was like never enough so like he was always stressed and I knew that was like, not the lifestyle that I wanted to live.

Likewise, X and KV described how the challenging and unstable circumstances of their childhoods are what put them on the path to go to college. X, recounted having to live on his friend’s couch for his junior and senior years of high school after he and his family, due to extenuating circumstances, were kicked out of his grandparents’ home. This experience, along with witnessing the outcomes of his peers growing up in sometimes violent, gang infused neighborhoods, served as contributing factors that led him to think about college “more seriously” likening it as an opportunity to “get out of the town” he was in and experience “new opportunities.” For KV, being placed in foster care at age 15 contributed to a period of time in high school in which she described getting “F’s in everything,” due to “not really caring about nothing.” It wasn’t until the end of her sophomore year when she realized she actually was “pretty good” at school, and her desire to “not be like my parents” that prompted her to get more serious about going to college. However, it was being placed in foster care that she ultimately credits for putting her on the path to higher education, recounting in our conversation how it forced her to “grow up” and “mature” faster, and how she felt if she had stayed with her mom her trajectory would have ultimately been different:

I would have been a mom. Because when I was 15, I got pregnant. So I would have been a mom. If I was with my mom, I would have been, I feel like someone, a high school
dropout, I would have been someone that had no goals in life, being able to work at Walmart for the rest of my life and be okay with it. Because I knew my mom would always have somewhere for me to live.

However, it was not simply that many participants wanted to use higher education as an escape, it was the messaging they both internalized from their families and the actions that their families took on their behalf that contributed to their perception of the importance of possessing a college degree.

Recent research (Hebert; 2018; Hines, Cooper, & Corral 2019; Irlbeck et al., 2014; LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Mishra, 2020; Saenz, Garcia-Louis, Drake, & Guida, 2018), has found that families are often an important source of motivation and support when it comes to first generation students’ decisions to enroll in higher education. Indeed, scholars have demonstrated that when family members place emphasis on the power of higher education to break the cycle of poverty and encourage their children to pursue a degree, it can be especially influential on non-traditional and underrepresented youth’s educational aspirations (Gofen 2009, Mishra, 2020). In this study, 14 of the 18 students described the varying but important roles their families played in their own journey, one of which was their educational aspirations. Specifically, participants, described how success and higher education were inextricably linked together in their homes, using terms like “drilled in my head” and “embedded in my brain,” to portray how the expectation of college became implanted early on. This was especially true for the four participants whose families immigrated from other countries. Their families perceived higher education in America as the gateway to better life outcomes and opportunities. Jennifer, a Black female whose family is from Ghana, described how some of her cousins are now “floating” after coming to the United States and not taking advantage of higher
education, resulting in Jennifer’s mom instilling into her that college was “not a game,” but an opportunity she needs to take seriously. While Simba, an Asian male, discussed how his grandparents and parents viewed college as “the only way” to achieve the “American Dream” they wanted for him and their family. For James, a Hispanic male from a large family, it was his mother’s inability to afford education in Mexico that made her push him to go to college:

My mom never had the money to afford to go to school, not even middle school or anything, so she wasn't really educated or anything. So education was the most important thing to her, and so in her mind getting that college degree, she could tell everyone at home back at Mexico, and she can just tell everyone … and be happy and proud and she thinks a college degree is equal to success in life. So that's why she really wanted me to get that.

Aside from instilling motivation and a confidence that higher education was a destined part of their future, some of the participants’ families took specific actions to ensure that they could go to college. Participants reported that their families moved them to completely different school districts, and in some cases, into other family member’s homes to help set them up for a better chance of getting into college. For example Iris, described her mom putting her in a Charter high school, “something she did not do for her other four kids” because she wanted “more for her” and not to “fall through the system” because she was a good student. While X recounted how his mom was scared that if he stayed “in a ghetto school” that he would become “a product of the environment” leading her to move him and his sister to his grandparents’ home when he was 12. These examples serve to contradict the dominant narrative that first-generation, low-income families lack resources when it comes to their students education (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021), instead, highlighting how in addition to providing motivation and confidence,
families can also be savvy in their child’s educational success, by making intentional choices that better lead to their enrollment in college.

For 13 of the participants, it was the emotional support, reassurance, and/or motivation they received from their family that they credited as an important factor for their persistence in college. Even though families did not always understand what students were experiencing, the pride of them being in college along with their consistent encouragement in the form of verbal affirmations like “you can do it” and “you are almost there” served as a type of social capital-or an emotional resource they relied on to help them persevere in college. Indeed, other researchers have noted that this type of social support from ones network “can have a complementary effect and compensate for lack of information-related social capital” (Mishra, 2020, p.3). So while families may not be able to provide their children with the dominant forms of capital or school specific information and resources to help them navigate higher education, they do often serve as significant sources of educational aspiration, motivation, and emotional support that develops feelings of belonging and confidence in their children. Thus, even if families don’t understand the expectations or experiences their children face in college specifically, by acting as cheerleaders, they are able to help their children internalize a belief that as the first in their family, they can be successful in obtaining a degree despite any obstacles they may face (McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Mishra, 2020).

However, research has also documented that while many first-generation students families play positive roles in their college experiences, the mismatch in obligations and expectations between home and school can be significant sources of strain (Covarrubias et al., 2019). Indeed, despite the affirmations they did receive from home, many participants described feeling stressed by the lack of understanding or support from their families when it came to their
experiences in college. This was compounded by the fact that as the first in their family to go to college, many students felt a sense of pressure to do well in order to be a good example for their siblings or community, which resulted in feelings of “I can’t mess up,” or a fear of “disappointing” people in their lives. Iris, described how it is “really hard to go to anyone” in her family because “they don’t understand everything I am going through” and “how difficult it can get sometimes,” making her feel a bit disconnected and frustrated with them. While Danielle described her frustrations with her family’s questioning and lack of understanding:

I come back home and the semester is over, and they're like, "What grades did you get?"

And I’d tell them what grades I got and they say, "Oh well, you can do better than a C and you need to apply yourself more." But they’ve never been in my shoes to tell me that.

In addition to feeling pressure and tension to succeed, a few participants also discussed the challenges of not being able to draw on their families for financial support the way some of their peers could. James for example described the disbelief he felt when discovering that the families of some of his non-first-generation peers paid for their apartments, allowing them to “focus on school,” something he struggled with because his family had “no money” which meant he had to work so he could “eat and pay rent.” While David discussed his awareness of how being “first gen” contributed to challenges that others did not face:

Times where I may not have had money to get certain resources or even to eat sometimes while being on campus certain periods, and that may not seem like it's a direct correlation to being a first-generation college student but it kinda is, 'cause I kinda talked about before, that's kind of an opportunity gap. So, it's not like I have a mother who can just send me, "Oh, you need this? Oh, let me get it for you" Or a family who just has money
to say, "Oh." Like, they definitely help... but it's not always as easy as it may be for someone else, if that makes sense.

Whether as sources of strain or support, it was evident that participants’ backgrounds continued to play an important role in how they experienced their higher education journey. Most notably, it is the way that these students drew upon their families, their circumstances, and other resources within their networks that highlights their agency in getting to and through college. As the remainder of this chapter will demonstrate, as students became immersed into the campus environment, they continued to be purposeful by identifying individuals within the campus to be part of their network that could provide them the support, information/skills, or opportunities that they needed to achieve their goal of earning a college degree.

“This was the community I needed” – The transition and integration to college and EOF

For marginalized populations such as first-generation, low-income students, having a network of support within the university is a critical factor in promoting campus engagement, satisfaction, and degree persistence (Costello et. al., 2018; Means & Pyne, 2017). Not only do these students generally lack the contextual awareness of the expectations and practices within these environments, but in general, higher education institutions tend to be structured in favor of the dominant culture, or those of white, middle-class backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1993; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Nash, 1990). Thus, the transition for FGCS is especially precarious as they endure the added burden of trying to assimilate into a space that is not only unfamiliar, but is generally not designed for the identities of underrepresented or minoritized students (Costello et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2018; Soria & Stebleton, 2014; Woolsey & Shepler, 2011).

Given these challenges, literature on FGCS often discusses how sense of belonging in college is critical to their persistence and retention, with belonging defined as the perception one
has of being a valued member of the community, as well as the level of social integration and attachment to the campus (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salamone, 2002; Tovar et al., 2009). This connection to, and perception of, the college environment as a place of comfort, is heavily influenced by the depth of meaningful and supportive relationships a student is able to form on campus (Ezeofor, Mwangi, & Thelamour, 2019). However, research has shown FGC students are more likely to feel disconnected and dissatisfied with the college environment than their peers, citing challenges with the collectivist vs. individualist cultures/values between their homes and school, as well as issues with microaggressions, stereotyping, and other assumptions or threats related to class and/or racial identities (Ezeofor et al., 2019; Gray et al. 2018; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Stebelton et al., 2014; Stephens et al. 2012b).

Feeling a sense of belonging and social connectedness on campus then, particularly for marginalized populations, is a critical influence on persistence, retention, academic motivation, stress levels, as well as overall satisfaction within the university (Costello et al. 2019; Ezeofor et al., 2019; Flett et al., 2019; Means & Pyne, 2017). As a result, research has heavily espoused the importance of underrepresented students having access to networks who can provide forms of social and cultural capital that help make their transition into, and navigation of, college easier. Specifically, scholars have pointed to how having access to agents that can offer information and resources related to academic success like tutoring, internships and research opportunities, as well as be able to provide forms of social and emotional support, can contribute to students feeling like they matter or are cared for in the campus community (Kornbluh, bell, Vierra, & Herrnstadt, 2021; Lee, Chung, Park, 2018; Lin, 2000; Pena-Lopez & Sánchez-Santos, 2017).

Given that FGCS are more at-risk to feel disengaged on campus, this study was interested in understanding how these participants described their own sense of belonging at the university,
and how these perceptions influenced their overall experiences. In our discussions about their transition into and through college, students described building upon their pre-college networks that were mostly grounded in family by creating connections with faculty, staff, and peers on campus. As the smallest among the three main Rutgers campuses, Camden offers unique opportunities for students to easily build connections with not only fellow peers, but staff and faculty as well (Rutgers-University, n.d.). Indeed, for 9 of the participants in this study, positive interactions with faculty and staff contributed to perceptions of the campus environment as “understanding” and “welcoming,” which helped them feel “included,” “comfortable,” “valued” and more confident as David explains:

I feel I belong there; I feel like I'm a part of the community and I feel like I am cheered and valued there. I don't feel like an impostor, if that makes sense. I know sometimes people will go to a university then they feel like, "Maybe I'm not smart enough to be here," or "I don't belong here, I'm not a good fit, but I feel like Rutgers was probably the perfect fit for me.

As found by other researchers, this feeling of belonging or community, for many participants, was because an individual, particularly a staff or faculty member displayed genuine concern and care for their success, helping to promote feelings of mattering and belonging in students (Costello et al., 2018; Means & Pyne, 2017). KV for example, described how the Dean of Students’ office was immensely helpful when she had to file a restraining order against another student on campus, and how their demeanor made the situation less overwhelming, describing “it was like people you don’t even know that actually cared for your well-being." While Hope credited her persistence to her professor’s support and willingness to advocate for her after she nearly failed the fall 2020 semester due to COVID:
I hadn't shown my face, I was terrified what he was gonna say to me. And then he was so caring about it. And I was like, "Oh, okay, I guess I'm gonna stay." I didn't really notice that my name was out there at that moment. I felt like they were just like, "Oh well, that's another theater student gone." I didn't realize that they actually cared about me in that community.

Similarly, Ava, whose mom was her “biggest advocate” in high school in helping her to establish her learning accommodations, reflected on how she struggled speaking up for herself when she transitioned to college because she was uncomfortable interacting with the then director of Disability Services. When the new “amazing” staff started her sophomore year however, she described their support as not only enabling her success in college but her ability to self-advocate again:

They have been at the forefront because, without them, I wouldn't be as successful as I am. I don't mean to say that to sound conceited at all, I truly mean that as I believe my academic performance wouldn't be where it is if it weren't for them. Not only that, but they've been advocates for me amazingly all throughout my experience, but they've also taught me how to self-advocate, which is really important, because they won't be there for me once... I'm sure they'll be there, if I need to talk to them, but they won't be there for me moving forward.

As found by other scholars (DeRosa & Nadine, 2014; Gray et al., 2018; Mishra, 2020), it wasn’t just the positive, but also the negative experiences with campus personnel described by participants that highlighted the impact of these interactions, recalling how faculty who left “as soon as classes ended” did not seem to “care” whether students understood material, as well as being visibly “annoyed” when asked for help, contributed to feelings of stress and dissatisfaction
in their experiences. Thus, the central role of supportive mentors and staff on campus was critical in contributing to a positive sense of well-being for the first-generation college students (Garriott & Nisle 2018) in this study. Having reliable staff and faculty members they could turn to contributed to students like Ava and Hope building confidence in their abilities to navigate the ups and downs of college.

While not all participants provided examples of interactions with specific faculty or staff on campus that contributed to their feelings of positivity on campus, it was clear that being part of a smaller, more diverse community at Camden helped participant’s overall feelings of belonging. In particular, as the next section will explore, it was their participation in the EOF Program specifically, that helped to establish a foundation or a feeling of security on the campus from the onset of college.

**EOF as a Hub**

For the 18 participants of this study, EOF served as a hub, defined here as a focal point, from which all other activities, actions and relationships emanate (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It was within their participation in the program that students formed the beginnings of their on-campus networks, establishing connections with faculty, staff and peers, that for many, remained significant aspects of their support system all throughout their time in college. Armed with the knowledge that the program would always be there to provide support—regardless if it was informational, financial, interpersonal, or emotional, being part of EOF then, gave participants an increased sense of confidence as they moved through their college experiences.

EOF is a state-funded grant program that was formed in 1968 in response to increasing concerns over inequality in educational access and outcomes for students from disenfranchised communities (State of NJ OSHE, n.d.). The premise of the program is to provide access to, and
support in higher education to students from underrepresented backgrounds to aid in their success throughout their time in college (State of NJ OSHE, n.d.). As such, the EOF program structure is predicated on the notion that this population of students needs to be given a particular set of cultural and social capital to be successful in college (Schelbe et al., 2019; Wibrowski, Matthews, Kitsantas, 2017). In particular, program components are grounded in literature that emphasizes the importance of FGCS having access to social capital, or relationships/connections with institutional agents (faculty, staff, and peers) that can provide them with the “appropriate” cultural capital, such as information, resources, and skills to navigate university life successfully (Bourdieu, 1986, Dumais & Ward, 2010). As a result, EOF is purposefully structured to provide students with the opportunity to form relationships with university personnel that can give them these forms of capital to aid in their personal and academic success.

This introduction to capital for first-year admitted students begins with the Summer Institute (SI), a 5-week bridge program that introduces them to college prior to the start of their freshman year. As part of their admissions requirement, all first-year students are required to attend the Summer Institute to help them jumpstart their transition into the university, helping them to get a taste of what it feels like to take college level courses and be immersed in the campus. During the five-weeks, students are expected to take 1-2 classes, attend structured support sessions and informational workshops, as well as participate in peer-led community building activities. Additionally, the SI is typically structured to be residential, requiring participants to stay on campus Sunday through Thursday evenings, giving students the opportunity to experience living in the campus community. The SI is completely free to students.

After the SI, students continue to be a part of and receive various supports from EOF, with the program able to support participants for up to six years of college study as long as they
remain financially eligible. One of the major aspects of this support that also works to provide relevant cultural capital to students, is through the workshops they are required to attend each semester. Workshop topics are carefully researched and chosen to cover all aspects of student development throughout college, including self-regulation, study habits, communication skills, financial literacy, post-graduation prep, and campus engagement/networking building. Through these workshops, students are exposed to a wide variety of information that is meant to help them to be successful in their personal, educational, and career goals—both during their time on campus as well as post-graduation.

Additionally, workshops provide the space for students to build a sense of community within the program, connecting them not only with program facilitators, but fellow peers as well. To help better build these relationships among students specifically, over half of the workshops offered are cohort based, a process that starts during the Summer Institute and continues throughout their time in the program, allowing students the opportunity to connect with the same peers within their class year at least once a month.

In addition to workshops, another major component the program offers is financial support to help students pay for their college expenses. This financial support includes a grant provided each semester to help cover the costs of tuition and fees and, depending on funding availability, EOF offers other types of financial support for students to help them persist with their academic careers—such as paying for learning assessments, graduate school exam fees, as well as sponsoring trips to conferences or other engagement experiences.

The final component of the EOF Program that makes up this comprehensive group of resources, is the provision of a counselor. All EOF students are assigned a counselor when they enter the program, with the intention that they will work with this individual throughout college
until graduation. The counseling component is meant to provide both cultural and social forms of capital to help students be successful in their educational goals. Cultural capital is generally embedded within the 1:1 meetings with their EOF counselors, who provide information and resources to help students successfully navigate their academic, personal, and career-related experiences. In terms of social capital, counselors serve as personal advocates and guides to students, helping them to connect to and feel comfortable in establishing a network of support consisting of faculty, staff, and peers on campus.

While EOF is designed as a comprehensive program, it was the Summer Institute and counseling that were the most influential aspects of participants’ experiences. These two EOF program components seemed to be the most influential because they gave participants the opportunities to form resource rich relationships with staff, faculty and peers, giving them direct access to capital they could utilize as needed to help them be successful in college (Lin, 2000). However, the results will also demonstrate that how students both perceived and mobilized this capital was dependent on their proximity of relationships to agents within the program, their individual goals, and more importantly what they perceived they needed to help them be successful.

The Starting Point: Summer Institute Experience

Following research (Schwartz et al., 2018; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Thayer, 2000), on the critical factors needed to help the successful transition of first-generation students, The Summer Institute (SI) is a structured 5-week experience meant to help students get more prepared to navigate the expectations of university life. This is achieved by having students essentially do a “trial run” of college, by taking courses, participating in
academic skill-building workshops, connecting with campus offices, and building community with their peers.

One major aspect of summer bridge programs that target underrepresented populations is providing opportunities for students to engage in academic coursework and support to help them become familiar with, and therefore more prepared for, the academic rigors and expectations of the university (Garza & Gonzalez-Quiroz, 2018). Given their propensity to attend lower-resourced high schools, these intensive academic components are meant then to help offset the “disadvantage” that these students many have in terms of their skills, readiness, and confidence when it comes to college level work (Schelbe et al., 2019). In the EOF program, academic skill building and preparation has historically been addressed by having students take 1-2 college level courses during their first summer that are typically paired with supplemental instruction or targeted academic support, as well as participation in workshops or seminars that familiarize them with academic success skills such as time management, note-taking, and study habits. Through these academic components, one of the primary goals of the SI is to give students the opportunity to experience the routines of being a college student, a practice that Jasmine described as really advantageous in her adjustment:

It was helpful of trying to get into the routine of getting work done like, like due dates and stuff, like just trying to, I guess, what's the word I'm trying to use? Um just getting used to the flow of being a college student

In addition to the academic components, students are exposed to a wide variety of information, resources, and skills during the SI that is meant to give them a base understanding of university life. This capital is embedded within the program structure throughout the 5-weeks, giving students the opportunity to practice interacting with the campus by attending college level
courses, living in the residence halls, and coming into contact with personnel from various support offices, like Dean of Students, Career Center, and the Wellness Center, who act as workshop facilitators or support staff. For KV, being familiarized with university platforms and practices during her SI was something she found to be helpful as a first-generation student:

That's why I said EOF was just so helpful, because I would not know how to hell to work SAKAI. Like, I wouldn't know how to look, like just finding books cheaper. I rather just go to the bookstore and spend that money and just know that I got the right book, like, I don't like to do all this online stuff. I am more of like a hands-on person, because I wasn't taught, my parents did not go to college.

Like KV, the majority of the students (13 of the 18), described the “advantage” they felt having the opportunity to practice being “in the flow” of college as a first-generation student during the summer, since they didn’t “know what school is about,” making their transition in the fall less overwhelming. SI then provided the information, skills, and “life lessons” that helped participants to feel more prepared to navigate the expectations and challenges of their first year. Even Keith, whose SI experience and first year was virtual because of the COVID-19 pandemic, noted the difference immediately in the fall semester between himself and his non-EOF peers:

I've seen that in class, like, people don't know a lot of things. But since I was in EOF and I already was exposed to that information or that environment. So the virtual setting for instance, we did that in EOF. So EOF students don't really have much problem with it. But some students are going crazy about it. Like oh, virtual, but we already were exposed to that. So I would say it, it helped me at least prepare for college and I was more ready for college. If I wasn't a part of EOF, I would probably be, you know, I'm not really nervous a lot, but I would actually feel that nervousness right now.
While attending classes, workshops, and living in the dorms during the SI all help students to learn the expectations of university life, much of the cultural capital given to students during the 5-weeks is through their participation in Raptor 101. Offered 1-2x a week with their counselor, Raptor 101 is meant to be a simulation of a university first year experience course as a way to help with students acclimation to college (Kuh, 2008). Whereas the structure of Raptor 101 has changed over the years, the goals have remained largely the same-to provide students with a basic understanding of the differences between college and high school (i.e. expectations and responsibilities), as well as engage in hands on activities (such as group projects, reflection exercises, mock interviews, etc.), to help build their communication, self-reflection, and teamwork skills that will help them navigate the university environment. For Carter, Raptor 101, or his “life lessons” class, was an impactful experience because it “trained” him to be a “better person” overall, helping him to learn how to “go about and think about” life situations outside of class. While for Danielle, the knowledge and hands on practice she experienced during Raptor 101 was something she found to be valuable throughout college:

One thing I know is, when we were in EOF in the summer they told us how to write an email and people didn't think how important that was. When you come in in the fall, every semester I always get it, the professor always says, "Please email me correctly. If you don't email me correctly with the right heading and the right ending, you will not get a response," and a lot of professors are like that. If you don't do it in a professional manner, in the way an adult should then they're not gonna respond to you. So not only did it help me with my etiquette, but it helped me know where to go, how to get there and what to do once I get there.
In addition to introducing students to the academic rigors of college, the summer experience is designed to specifically help students build networks of support within the program. Drawing on the large body of research that emphasizes the importance of first-generation college students having positive connections and relationships with institutional agents and peers in college (Costello et al. 2019; Ezeofor et al., 2019; Flett et al., 2019; Means & Pyne, 2017), the SI is purposefully structured to provide a space in which resource-rich relationships can be formed. This is achieved through required, 1:1 individual weekly meetings with student’s assigned counselor, handpicking staff, faculty, and peer leaders to support the program, as well as providing targeted opportunities within the 5-weeks for students to socialize and establish relationships that can become integrated into their overall support networks. Indeed, while participants described the academic preparation and practice of college life in SI as significant, it was the opportunity they had to make connections with others during those 5-weeks that proved to be the most impactful on their college experience long-term.

The impact of these connections was evident in the conversation with Jasmine, who discussed how the structure of her summer experience gave her the opportunity to take a class with Dr. J, the Vice-Chancellor for the Division during the Summer Institute. Equipped with the encouragement of her EOF counselor, she purposefully formed a link that eventually turned into an important relationship:

Before we even started our classes with the Summer Institute, Miss S was like, oh, you might want to take advantage of Dr. J, because he's the Vice Chancellor. Someone nice to have like a recommendation and just someone just to have a relationship with. When I had his class, it was actually nice. And I felt like I always asked questions, always asking stuff like advice and stuff. Um, and then one time, I was having trouble on my essay, my
extra credit essay in the beginning of the semester, and I went to him, I spoke to him a few times when I felt stressed out and stuff. So I think like, actually using my support, and him knowing that I was trying, and that I do want to get an education, it was kind of like, okay, here's this opportunity now, you know.

Being immersed in an intensive 5-week experience with counselors, faculty and support staff provided opportunities for students to form resourceful relationships like the one Jasmine described with Dr. J. In addition to providing important information and support, these connections with institutional agents also helped students to feel more established within and secure on the campus. Being connected to individuals who were “welcoming and supportive” not only made navigating the university easier, but also helped students to feel more comfortable within the environment generally. KV for example described how she was “really nervous” that as a first-generation student she would not be able to “do good” in college since her family did not have any “experience at all,” but that having the support of EOF helped her to feel “more comfortable” about her background within the larger campus community. While for David, it was the connections he made during his SI experience that changed his mind from transferring out, as he explained:

Once I got through EOF, making friends and having deeper connections with you guys, it kinda made me... I didn't wanna transfer after that. It never really even crossed my mind again, like, “two years, let me transfer and go somewhere else.” I just, at that point, I knew I wanted to stay at Rutgers Camden. It was the right place for me.

Outside of counselors and staff, relationships with peers were also highly cited by 12 of the students as being meaningful aspects of their participation in EOF. It was within the confines and intensity of the 5-week Summer Institute where these important “bonds” with their peers
were formed. Even virtually, the SI gave Keith the opportunity to actually “see faces” of his fellow students, an important facet of college that he described missing during his first year.

While Bella, who grew up only with brothers, described how being able to live in a suite with other female peers gave her “sisters” that she was still bonded to as a senior. Participants described how their shared identities and similar backgrounds made it easy to form connections and build relationships with peers in the program, a factor found by other researchers as well (Means & Pyne, 2017; Schelbe et al., 2019). For example, Ava a senior, described how one of the most positive instances she experienced in EOF was during an RA activity in SI where she learned her peers had similar struggles:

I don't really know if it was a workshop, but all of us were in one room together, and it was an activity that we had to do and we wrote down our biggest struggle on a piece of paper, crumpled it up, throw it, and then we had to go find a piece of paper, pick it up, and then we would read it aloud. So that was powerful and very moving, for us to hear our struggles aloud, read by another person, and then to be reading someone else's struggles aloud. It was just really eye-opening, because you also realize that other people were facing the same struggles as you.

For underrepresented students especially, being part of social identity-based organization that provide the opportunity to connect with peers of similar socioeconomic, cultural, or racial backgrounds, have been shown to help with students sense of belonging and mitigate feelings of isolation on campus (Ezeofor et al., 2019; Means & Pyne, 2017; Schelbe et al., 2019). Knowing that others could “understand” what they were going through because they were all “kind of the same, all lost in college,” made the relationships with these peers a key source of emotional support during challenging moments. As Jasmine described:
I feel like I only have friends that's in EOF, like, I'd speak to people outside of EOF. But I feel like, my actual friends are from EOF, and that we all hang out together. Because we understand what each every one of us is going through, like, financially, just like being in college in general

Indeed, their shared backgrounds as well as the intensity of their SI experience created a platform for some participants to create strong bonds that lasted throughout college, calling these peers “friends for life,” or even a new family they could rely on, as James described:

The thing is, we don't even call each other friends. We're more of like family to me. So like in my EOF, especially the Summer Institute. They really became like my friends for life, even Austin that didn't end up with us, he... me and him still talk to this day because we connected so deeply throughout those years. And me and Tray also are really buddies, we're really good friends and a lot of people from EOF, like that's my main group right there. Iris, too, became one of my good friends, and it's just like … my college experience would have never been the same without them.

These relationships among peers were perceived as a fundamental aspect of the program, evident by the fact, that the most highly suggested change participants identified was for there to be more opportunities for EOF students to connect with one another to help build the “support” and “family” aspect of the program. X for example, even recommended EOF create a formal mentoring program after he felt the difference of having someone to “lean on” who has “been through it”:

Just the way they've always kind of made themselves available even beyond just being like a RA and everything, like I know even after the process was over, I would still see James and Martin with like some of the EOF kids from my generation, or younger trying
to help them out and give them tips and like things to like help guide them along this path of like life or college because life gets complicated enough. And some people get lost in it, especially when they don't have someone, especially when they don't have people like them in their life to help kind of guide them along the way or like kind of show them a path.

Thus, the SI served as the starting point for the participants’ college experience, providing them with capital, in the form of information and resources through workshops and coursework, to help them feel more prepared as they transitioned into their first year. It was the relationships they established with staff, fellow peers, and in particular their counselor, that proved to be the unifying aspect for participants however, indicated by all as the most beneficial source of support they drew upon the program throughout college.

**EOF Counselors**

Previous research has demonstrated that for underrepresented youth, in addition to having access to a “wide variety of supportive adults,” being connected with a “single, trusted nonparent adult” to “anchor” their network of relationships, has helped them to be “more aware of the web of social resources available to them, encouraged them to trust other adults to help, and taught them how to skillfully access these resources” (Hagler, 2018, p.156). For all participants in this study, regardless of their backgrounds, or overall proximity to the program, it was clear that the EOF counselors served as a type of anchor that guided their experiences in college. Whether it was emotional or informational in nature, these relationships were a centralized source of social capital for participants, where the resources and forms of institutional support “embedded” within these relationships, helped students to navigate the structures of higher education (Stanton & Salazar, 2011, p.1096). This access, as well as the knowledge that they could utilize the
support of their counselor whenever needed, helped those like KV feel she could be successful in college:

   It’s hard. Just to navigate period. It’s like wow, this is complicated. Oh, my gosh, I don’t understand this. I don't know how I am supposed to do this, or registration itself. I feel like Miss S. is always there. As soon as I need Miss S., I have her phone number, like we all have each other’s phone number, soon as I need her I call her.

   Like KV, all participants spoke of the advantages of having an EOF Counselor in helping them be successful as they navigated college, but how much and in what ways participants used this capital varied however, dependent on the characteristics of their relationships and the type of support they sought. For example, Jasmine described how it took time before she activated the capital available to her within the relationship with her counselor, Miss, S., citing her good support system at home contributing to her perception that she didn’t need the resources within the program. It took establishing a trusting relationship over time, and a realization that she was going to have to start “building certain connections and relationships with particular people on campus” that inspired her to mobilize the capital her counselor offered:

   Um, I feel like in the beginning, I wasn't really using the resources that I had in front of me, especially with, EOF until, like, maybe I would say around midterm time. I would just do the basic, Yeah, I'm fine. This is what's going on in class. That's it. But like, um, I think it was more so just building the relationship with my counselor, and knowing that I can trust my counselor with certain things, and um actually listening and getting advice, and telling them like, what's going on, so they can give me that extra support, and different resources that I can reach out that can help me to succeed.
The relationship between Jasmine and her counselor then, was an important factor in her mobilization of the resources available to her in EOF. Establishing a strong foundational relationship not only contributed to Jasmine feeling more open to utilizing the capital that Miss. S. had to offer her, but also perceiving these supports as integral to her success. Similarly, Riley, recalled being put on academic probation her freshman year after not taking college “seriously,” making her “angry and upset” and “quick to blame everyone else around” her. Seriously questioning staying in college, she described how a conversation with her counselor, Dr. C led to a turning point not only in their relationship but how she perceived EOF in general:

When I told him that I wanted to quit college, when on academic probation, we actually sat in his office for almost a good three hours, and that really stuck with me because it was like, wow, he's really willing to sit here and talk through everything. I think that experience was kinda... really made me appreciate EOF, just because he just showed above and beyond what he does for the students.

Researchers (Ko, Wang, & Xu, 2013), have outlined how social support can be provided in multiple forms to others, including informational (knowledge/facts/advice), emotional (caring, empathy, concern), and esteem (messages that promote skills, abilities, value) (p.193). As these relationships were established, participants described the different types of social support their counselor provided that they perceived as helpful throughout their college experience. Certainly, all participants referred to how the informational support their counselors provided, including helping them to understand campus practice and policies, as well as tips and resources related to academic skill building, all were immensely beneficial in their ability to navigate university life. In addition, half of the participants pointed specifically to their counselor’s guidance, feedback, and commitment to holding them accountable, as being instrumental in their personal
development and success in college. Danielle for example, described how one of the main ways that her counselor, Dr. C. supported her was by being “honest” with her:

I know that I have an attitude in that I can be very blunt, but I do it with good intentions, and some people might take it the wrong way. I might take some people's attitude the wrong way, but when I do things, it's like when I realize that I'm possibly wrong and I need somebody to tell me about myself, I call him and he tells it to me straight and that's just what I need. I need somebody that's gonna tell me right from wrong and he tells me right from wrong, he doesn’t sugarcoat it, not one bit. I think that’s really what I needed.

Similarly, Sienna described how her counselor, Mrs. C., was always “very helpful and willing to listen,” and didn’t “judge” her for her mistakes. However, it was not just the care Mrs. C demonstrated but the accountability she demanded from Sienna that she described to be most beneficial. Saying that while Mrs. C was sympathetic, she was “not biased,” in that “if you are wrong, she is going to tell you,” an approach Sienna contributed to teaching her “a lot about honesty” during college.

In addition to information and resources, nearly all of the participants described an instance in which their counselor provided emotional support—in the form of care, reassurance and encouragement— that helped them to carry through academic and personal challenges. Ava for example, portrayed Miss S., as being someone she has been able to go to for “everything” the past few years, including issues with professors and her accommodations. While she expressed appreciating all these aspects of their relationship, it was apparent that she especially valued the emotional support Miss S. offered when she was struggling with her mom’s health complications:
So she went to the doctor and found out that she had to have a full hysterectomy. Which is a very big deal, and so that was hard, especially because there were just a lot of complications, so the surgery kept getting pushed off. She still hasn't had it. And Miss S., she confided in me and shared some of her own personal things like with her mom, and it was just really... It was comforting. It was very comforting in the moment, and in hindsight too. It was nice to know that she had experienced similar things, and that she was there to understand and help in whatever way she could.

Similarly Bella, described how having a counselor to talk to at times when she feels its “needed” has been “very helpful” to her throughout college, especially when she is in need of reassurance during times of stress. In our conversation, she spoke of a specific instance where she called her counselor, Miss. C., and how appreciative she was that she took the time to help her work through her moment of panic:

I know one time when I got one of my exam grades back in. It was that and then it was like another friend situation piled on top of that, it was at nighttime. It was late at night I was able to call my counselor and like I was in a car crying and I told her what happened and stuff like that. And like, she talked me through and made sure I was driving home safe and calmed me down.

Some participants like KV and David, regularly relied on the emotional support they received from their shared EOF counselor, Miss S., to help them navigate their struggles in college. For KV, it was Miss S’s “uplifting” personality, the way she listened, and her ability to calm her down, that at one point had her seeing her “almost every day,” to help KV work through issues and discomforts she was experiencing in her personal and academic life. While David, who described Miss. S. like a “therapist” to him, articulated how her support—including checking on
him frequently, and providing a comforting ear, was critical to helping him work through the stresses he experienced in his life:

If she doesn't hear from me, she's texting me to check up on me, if I don't text back, she's emailing to make sure I'm okay. And I literally can talk to her about anything and it is a judgment free zone, and she gives the best advice. And we're very alike in a lot of ways, so every time we talk, I just feel so much better afterwards. She always lets me know I can call her and text her whenever... It's just like... I feel like I always have someone there. She goes like the... It doesn't just feel like she's just an EOF counselor, if that makes sense.

The depth of care conveyed within these supports helped to establish for some participants, a perception of their counselor as a type of family figure. For example, Carter, spoke of how he thought of his counselor Mr. T., like a father not only because the ways they connected on a personal level, but because he kept things honest with him in a way that others did not:

It was like a father like son stuff, you know, it was that type of connection you know when we clicked up it was like, we only knew each other. He was a person that really gave me the real you know, because everybody you know would really sugarcoat things and really try to make it seem sweet so you would understand it, but him he was like, dude, like, this is what it is and now this is what it's gonna be even if the truth hurt the truth has to be there.

As demonstrated in Carter’s narrative, it was the repeated efforts made by counselors to show care for their overall success and well-being in their interactions, that created this “family” like feeling for some participants. Riley for example, used familial terms to describe both her former and current EOF counselors, referring to Dr. C, as a “father figure” because of how “caring and
supportive” he was, and Miss. S., her current counselor, like a “sister” because of the way she consistently supported her during “the ups and downs of college.”

Similarly, Jennifer explained how her counselor, Mr. T., repeatedly demonstrated his care for her, describing an instance in our conversation where he stepped away from a conference session to talk to her on the phone and help her work through a relationship issue. It was efforts like this and the ways in which he proved to her that he was “always in her corner” that helped develop this perspective that he was a type of father figure. Likewise, for James, it wasn’t just the advice and encouragement that Dr. C. gave him that contributed to James’s perception of him as like an “uncle I always wanted,” it was the care he consistently exhibited for his well-being and success:

Dr. C, He was just the best... I felt like he was the best mentor for me. Dr. C. really does care a lot about his students and all that, and I know that because he cares about me a lot. He always made sure I was okay. He always called me. He was like, "Hey, are you okay and how're you feeling?" Anytime he thought that I was down he took me to his office, asked me if I was okay.

In general, all participants referred to their counselor as a type of anchor, or a significant source of support that guided them throughout different aspects of their college journey. This support took place in many forms, whether it was providing information, demonstrating care, or offering encouragement, students described how this capital helped them be successful throughout the ups and downs of college. As the next section will demonstrate, it was the characteristics and emotional depth of these relationships, in combination with what capital students perceived as necessary to help them be successful, that ultimately determined their proximity to the EOF program and the role it played in their overall college experience.
Relationships and Proximity to EOF: Networks and Capital

According to Lin (2000), social capital is an outcome of access to resources as well as mobility, or the ability or propensity of an individual to extract and utilize particular resources within the networks they have access to (Lin, 2000, p.786; Pena-López & Sánchez-Santos, 2017). The inclination of individuals to activate the capital available to them is complicated and influenced by a number of factors, such as perceived needs and benefits, expected outcomes, and proximity of relationships (Lin, 2005; Pena-Lopez & Sanches-Santos, 2017). Mobilization is a critical construct of social capital, because it demonstrates that simply being embedded within resource rich networks, such as those like EOF, do not automatically equate to the acquisition of social capital for all individuals (Ashtianai & Feliciano, 2018).

Indeed, while all participants described receiving some form of capital from their connections within the EOF program, not all of them activated, and therefore benefitted from, these resources in the same way. The capital participants extracted ranged, dependent on their proximity, or how immersed they were in the program. This proximity was determined not only by the emotional depth of participants’ relationships with counselors or staff, but their individual characteristics and backgrounds. Taken together, these compounding factors not only influenced how participants perceived and utilized the capital available to them within their connections, but also contributed to how embedded they were in the EOF Program overall.

On one end of this continuum, were six participants who perceived EOF as being more than just the program, rather it was a home, their core network comprised of all the relationships they had formed within the physical space of EOF, a suite comprised of other support staff from the Learning Center, Disability Services, and TRIO SSS. On the other end of the spectrum for three participants, EOF was a touchpoint, a place they could turn to when they needed guidance
and support, but not a major player in their day-to-day experiences. In between those two extremes is where the majority of the participants fell, immersed in EOF but in a more purposeful way, utilizing the specific resources, information, and support from the program that were missing within the other aspects of their college support networks. Regardless of where participants fell on this continuum, EOF served as an anchor to all their college experiences, providing a base of support they knew they could draw upon at any time, much of which, lived in the relationship with their EOF Counselor.

**EOF as Home**

While all participants indicated that EOF was a source of important support and resources in college, for 6 participants, the program was their primary network, their home away from home on campus. Home for these students meant a safe and comfortable space comprised of staff members and fellow peers that were like “family” to them. This home was more than EOF program staff, it encompassed all the relationships they had made within the office space where EOF is located, evidenced by how they interchanged “EOF” with “Learning Center” or “CLASS” in our conversations.

The suite where EOF is located is home to several other academic support services on campus such as tutoring, TRIO SSS, and the Office of Disability Services. For these students who were in the suite “all the time,” having multiple offices in a small space created opportunities to build a network with other institutional agents, or peers that they otherwise may not have interacted with. In addition to having access to multiple informational resources, these relationships also provided additional layers of emotional support they needed throughout college, something Jennifer described as essential to her success:
Being in the Learning Center all the time. I met so many new people like Mrs. A, I got closer to Miss M. I got closer to you, RJ, oh my goodness RJ too is the best, he's really the best too, that was really, really good positive good experience. And I feel like when I'm in the Learning Center like you guys make it easier and make it feel like it's okay to mess up, it's okay because I have people here who are willing to help me and pick me back up.

Similarly, David who possessed a wide network on campus through his connections with faculty and staff, spoke of how he viewed the center as his main network of support in college:

Pretty much in the EOF office, you, Miss M, Mrs. A, RJ, Miss D, everyone, Miss S, Dr. C. It's mostly been all you guys, you guys and my professors, but mostly you guys... Who have really helped... I can't really think... I can't understate the involvement that Miss M. and Mrs. A have in my success and everything. They're like motherly figures for me.

In both of these narratives, Jennifer and David name specific individuals-RJ, Mrs. A, and Miss D, who work within the center in other support programs, but are not EOF staff. It was the proximity of these connections—the shared physical space that EOF and these staff members shared— that contributed to Jennifer and David viewing EOF as not just a singular program, but a hub of relationships that made up a significant portion of their support network.

Conversations with James, Martin, and Iris similarly highlighted the ways in which their network of relationships expanded beyond EOF and through the suite because of their continuously close proximity to other staff as work study students at the front desk. Martin, for example, a senior who had been working in the suite for a few years, described EOF as very “central” to his college experience because he was able to work in the office, saying that he would have been in a “very different place” and not “nearly as involved” if it weren’t for this
forced proximity. This included forming deep bonds with fellow EOF peers like James, who he met as a freshman but got “really close” with over the past three years working in the center, describing him as “an impactful person” on his college experience. This presence in the office was also an important factor in keeping Martin connected with his current EOF counselor, Mr. T, a “guiding hand” who has supported him emotionally and personally the last few years. In addition, it also led him to be recommended for TRIO SSS in his junior year, giving him the opportunity to develop a deep bond with Dr. C, a former EOF Counselor and the current Assistant Director for the program, two sources of support that he described drawing upon throughout college:

> Just talking to people in general, like I will talk to my friends about a certain subject and get their point of view, I will talk to Mr. T or Dr. C and get their point of view, see what matches up how I can go on, and that emotional support is very important.

It is important to note that for these 6 students who viewed EOF as their home, the program was not the only network they were embedded within on campus, as all were involved in organizations or clubs that gave them a wide range of peers and staff within the community they could draw upon. However, it was the emotional support and understanding they received within the network of relationships they had with individuals in the office that distinguished these connections and made them more central in their experiences. This was especially true for Iris and James, who both described lacking the necessary understanding or support from their families that they needed to navigate the challenges of college life. For both, this void served as a source of motivation to establish several relationships within the office, creating a space for themselves on campus that became a “home” as Iris described:
Working inside the office has been very positive because I've created relationships with the workers like yourself and Miss M. and everything. And I can definitely say that has been more positive than anything, cause even before I went to Greece, when I took the photo of all you guys, you guys were home. You guys were another family to me.

This feeling did not happen right away for James, who described struggling with his desire to persist in college his first two years as a result of surrounding himself with the “wrong” people, receiving poor grades, and lacking confidence in his academic abilities. Feeling depressed, he recalled how shortly after confiding in his counselor his desire to drop out of school, he was given the opportunity to work at the front desk:

The thing that really got me out of the funk was literally working at the Learning Center. That's why I can't ever really forget the Learning Center, 'cause that was what taught me a lot of things, and it was just... I think that job was what really turned it around for me, 'cause I met other people, and then that's when I learned about the RA position and all that so it was really helpful for me.

It was apparent that James saw these individuals as each possessing resources valuable to his success, purposefully seeking out and incorporating capital from each that had a “drastic” role on his college experience. This wasn’t just within James’ relationships with staff, but also with fellow students, recounting how having the opportunity to be an RA during the EOF Summer Institute not only changed his perception of himself and his disability but increased his confidence overall:

I never really felt like people really looked up to me because of my disability, but they actually did look up to me ‘cause they would always tell me. And they always were, they were always wanting to talk to me or trying to get advice from me. And they really
helped me out and made me feel more comfortable with who I was. And so as much as they say that I helped them, they helped me a lot more.

According to Lin (2001), social capital is characterized by three factors: accessibility (resources existing in the network), availability (having connection to the resources through an identified individual in the network), and activation (mobilizing the resource in a particular way to reach a goal) (Martin, 2015, p.1171). Having the chance to work in the office provided James, Iris, and Martin the right “environmental assets” or access to several supportive institutional agents for them to draw upon (Hagler, 2018, p.154 & Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). While working in the office certainly gave them a different “advantage” than the other participants, an increased proximity that made it easier for them to build these connections, access and availability alone did not create these relationships.

Jennifer and David for example, both of whom did not work in the office, managed to create an extensive network of support among the various staff. For them, it was the emotional support they sought on campus paired with connections they established within EOF, that put them in the office frequently, contributing to the development of these other relationships. On the other end of the spectrum was X, who alongside Martin, James, and Iris-worked in the office but unlike them-did not create the depth of relationships among staff because he felt he did not need as much support to navigate college. Both of these examples reinforce the notion that access alone does not necessarily equate to the mobilization of resources, but rather is dependent on several factors that influence how individuals perceive and utilize capital (Lin 2000, 2008). For these participants in particular, it was a mix of their internal desire and comfort within these spaces that enabled them to build and utilize the capital of a network of “trusting, supportive adults” (Hagler, 2018, p.154 & Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016).
Building upon this notion of agency, the next section will demonstrate how the majority of the participants viewed EOF as a resource that filled the gaps of support existent in their networks, making their use of the program and its capital, purposeful and dependent on their specific needs and goals.

**EOF: A Piece of the Puzzle**

Despite having the accessibility and availability to form resource rich relationships in the office like those described by David, Martin, Iris, James, and Jennifer, many of the students in this study primarily relied on EOF, particularly their counselor, to help them obtain the capital they felt they needed to navigate college. That is for Simba, Riley, Sienna, Hope, Ava, Danielle, Bella, Keith, and KV, EOF was a significant aspect of, but not necessarily the only network these participants drew upon for help. These diverse systems of support contributed to this subgroup of students having varied proximity to the program, despite the fact that collectively, they perceived EOF as unifying piece of their network. These differences in proximity were due to the fact the support participants sought fell on a spectrum, an outcome of their upbringing and personalities that influenced their perception of what was needed to help them move through college. EOF then, fulfilled a specific set of needs participants had, whether it was emotional and/or informational in nature, to help them be successful in college.

Students within this group described the pockets of individuals or groups on and off campus that comprised their circle, with EOF providing the missing pieces of support within. For Bella, this included her family and boyfriend who provided emotional support, as well as peers and her academic advisor that helped her get through the rigors of the Nursing program. While Bella described her involvement in EOF as just “meeting the requirements,” meaning she only saw her counselor a few times a month, she still perceived the program, particularly her
counselor Mrs. C. whom she described like a “mom,” as a constant source of support—whether academic or personal, that she could draw upon.

This pattern was seen in the other participants as well, describing individuals both within and outside the university who each provided an important piece of capital throughout college, with EOF filling any gaps of support. Simba, for example, despite having a large network comprised of family, professors, and peers he met through his involvement in organizations on campus, still put EOF as “first and foremost” when describing the pieces of his college puzzle, describing it as “grounding” and reliable:

EOF has have always been there, no matter what time or day it is…. it's like a tool for us, you know, a tool and a place to stay grounded during the hard times of like classes or even outside of classes

Similarly, Riley, described in her interview how the Career Center where she had worked since she was a freshman, EOF, and the staff/peers of the school of Social Work all were “influencing” and “contributing” aspects to her college experience, all helping her to become the person who she is today. It was EOF though that she placed as her central pillar, describing the program like a “family” that she knew would always be there:

Just thinking back of the reasons why I'm here has kind of helped pull that out and knowing that I have the support, if I ever feel like I can't like I can't pull myself out of that. It's just nice knowing that you have that support to kind of back you up and guide you in the direction that you need to go so you don't quit.

For students within this “puzzle” group, the emotional and informational capital they utilized in the program, was found primarily within the relationship they had with their counselor, as it was personalized to meet their specific needs. Keith for example, described how
his counselor, Miss S., served as his resource for all things related to college since his family was unable to provide support in that area:

The BI weekly meeting with Miss S, it's really helpful in different ways. Like I said, in my family, I don't really get to talk about college a lot, but I can complain to her. The positive thing is, we get the reassurance that there are people that we can turn to if we have any problem, like Miss S, I have her number when I text her about something, she replies, not instantly, but she replies and I don't have to go look into the websites and you know, go through like countless pages reading to find something out, sometimes it could just be like something small, but it helps.

While being completely virtual throughout Keith’s first year of college helped to center the relationship with his counselor, this was not the case for the other 8 participants, who had created networks with adults and peers both on and off campus that made up their collective support system. While these other connections created a diverse network rich with capital they could draw upon throughout college, influencing their proximity to the EOF program, all these participants still pointed to their counselor as their principal source of school support. Whether it was calling to cry about a failed grade, supporting them as they navigated personal and family issues, or going to them for resources or information needed for classes, participants described choosing to utilize their counselors support in particular to help them navigate these experiences.

Hope for example had established a strong network within the Theatre community on campus, but it was clear that even with this additional resource, she derived a lot of her emotional capital as it related to her success in college from her counselor Mrs. C. This relationship developed quickly after her father died unexpectedly a week before her Summer Institute experience. Feeling emotionally fragile and overwhelmed, she described how Mrs. C,
stepped in “immediately,” creating a plan to work on “academics, friendship, and socializing” so she would “not be swallowed in her grief.” These actions established a trust that enabled her to be open to joining MSK her first semester, a female-only support group for first-year students that Mrs. C facilitated. Through weekly 1:1 and small group meetings, being part of MSK not only gave her an outlet that helped her out of her “depression” her first year, but also established an important connection to her counselor. It was evident how much Mrs. C’s support mattered to her when she described worrying that she wouldn’t think she was “strong enough” when she nearly failed her semester due to getting COVID:

> I was like, "I'm okay, I have Covid, it's fine." I made it into a not a big deal, where it was affecting me academically, mentally, physically and all that. And I just didn't wanna tell her that cause I didn't want her to see me go... I feel like I was back at the stage where I first came into the Summer Institute. When I told her that, she was like, "Well, you wouldn't be talking to me if you were in that position."

It was evident then that the emotional support and reassurance Mrs. C. provided Hope, was the capital she needed and therefore sought out from EOF to help her navigate college. Similarly, 3 of the participants within this middle group, KV, Danielle, and Sienna, described how growing up in environments that were devoid of stability, trust, or emotional support, contributed to a preference of having smaller, more selective circles comprised of individuals they could depend on. Sienna an Asian female, described how she was often “oppressed” in her household, unable to make her own decisions even on “small things” contributing to the “anger issues” she struggles with presently. It was clear that these experiences contributed to the way in which she constructed her network in college:
I just feel like, you really don't need like, you don't need a huge group of support, you don't need, like 100 friends, I just feel like you would work better if you just had those few people who supported you. Because I know a lot of people tend to think oh just because you don't have a lot of friends, you're alone, or something's wrong with you or something. But most of the time, just from what I learned, you just need that one or two, who always keeps you accountable, who you just vibe with, and not fake or anything.

For Sienna, her struggles with trust influenced the characteristics of her support network, opting for a smaller group of reliable confidants comprised of her counselor Mrs. C, a few friends she made within EOF, and her boyfriend. Similarly, Danielle, described how growing up in an abusive household made her “safety” a number one priority, reflecting on how this has greatly influenced her life—particularly who she allows within her inner circle:

Still to this day... although I'm an adult... my safety comes first before anything because of how much stuff I've seen. And it's... I don't really know how to describe it, but I know that me being a woman and me being African-American does play a big part in my life, but my safety. And if I'm not safe then I can't... I won't even socialize. I'll literally go somewhere else and make myself feel comfortable, 'cause when I'm not comfortable it's just not good.

While Danielle described her willingness to “use and abuse” any resources available to her to succeed, it was evident that the small group of individuals she cited within her interview --EOF, specifically her relationship with her counselor Dr. C and a few students, her boyfriend, and her aunt --also served as important pillars of support as she moved through college. The care these individuals demonstrated during her times of need established a feeling of trust and safety that Danielle needed to be receptive to their support. In fact, it was her feeling of “comfort” within
EOF that she described as stopping her from transferring out after her first year, an outcome of the supportive relationship she established with her counselor, Dr. C., early on.

For KV, being put in foster care at age 15, was an experience she described as “scary,” and one that made her “grow up faster.” Identifying only her girlfriend, a few friends, and some DYFS workers as her support system, she described feeling like she did not have “anybody” in her home network to give her the emotional and informational resources she needed. Instead, she discussed calling on Miss. S, her counselor, whom she calls “amazing,” in a way that “other students don’t” for support, viewing this relationship not only the center of her EOF experience but “everything” in getting through school:

I feel like if someone were to ask me how was your first year of college, I'd be like, well, it's hard as shit. It’s a lot of mental and emotional things. But, it was good, because of EOF. I like I feel like when I graduate college it’s gonna be because of EOF and because of Miss S. Miss S. just knows everything about me. Like, I if I'm going through something Miss S knows. Miss S supports me. It's just like her herself is, EOF and her will be why I graduate college.

It was evident in the narratives of these 9 participants that the difference in proximity to EOF wasn’t due to the lack of connection or immersion within the program, rather, it was that these students viewed the program as fulfilling specific gaps in support missing elsewhere in their network.

**EOF as a Touchpoint**

There were three participants – Kay, X, and Carter, who were notably more detached from the program, in that while they all spoke of EOF as being significant to them, it was the way they described their interactions with the program in relation to their overall college experience that
set them apart from the other participants. Rather than framing the program as a consistent resource that was ever present throughout their journey in college, they treated EOF as more of a touchpoint, or a source of guidance they could call on and utilize when needed.

This perception of EOF as a touchpoint was very visible in Kay, and as the only one who openly described negative feelings towards a counselor, her experience was unique to the rest of the participants. While not all interactions were necessarily bad, making a point to say her counselor was “helpful” to her, providing Kay guidance when needed, it was her “borderline disrespectful” approach to her during times of need that caused recurring tension in their relationship:

Um, at times where I was like, like struggling and stressed, it didn't help that like my counselor wasn't being helpful and was being like, just a bit rude like her vibe and attitude just wasn't helpful at certain times when I needed someone to be there.

It was clear these interactions influenced the way in which Kay utilized support broadly in the EOF program. In general, Kay spoke more about programmatic aspects of EOF than anything else, how the SI and the workshops were impactful, providing her guidance, information, and resources, a “shoulder to lean on.” In particular, the perception that her counselor was not always supportive led Kay to utilize their relationship for more “informational” purposes, such as “directing” her where she needed to go, or “suggesting” job opportunities, (Raposa & Hurd, 2018, p.7). While these components were obviously helpful, it was apparent that the lack of emotional connection between Kay and her counselor contributed to her loose proximity to the program, ultimately confining the depth of capital she received.

For X and Carter, it wasn’t their relationships with their EOF counselor that prevented them from being more immersed in the program, but rather it was their propensity to navigate
their experiences in college largely on their own. Both presented themselves in our conversation as “inward” individuals, living in their own “realities,” focused on what they need to do in order to be successful. Having each experienced significant challenges in their childhood--Carter losing his brother to gang violence and his father right before school, X living on his friend’s couch for two years of HS.-- left both participants feeling equipped enough to persevere and deal with any obstacles independently. For example, X, described how he “limits” himself “mentally” out of fear of looking like a person who “constantly needs help,” preferring to “preserve” his resources until it’s absolutely necessary:

I don't like being handheld, I thrive in an independent environment, like I thrive in environments where I am by myself when I'm forced to work and having like people who are like Dr. C and Mr. T, I have had both of them as like my EOF counselors. They were both two laid back gentlemen and they were guys who would talk to me on like, they won't talk down to me nor would they try to, like, overtalk me or something like that they would just, they would tell me how it is. And they would give me, give me straight forward advice to put me on the path that I needed to be on to get the results I wanted. While X recognized that his “pride” could be a detriment at times in this regard, in his view, he profited simply by being embedded within a “community” that wanted to see him succeed:

Dr. J, he is important. He's a guy who tells me he's rooting for me and he’s always looking for ways to help, like I said I don't use my resources often, but when I do, they helped me out in a big way so having worked for him and him having told me that I appreciate it. Like it doesn’t even stop with him.. almost everyone in that EOF, on that floor has helped like helped me out in some way and like that's what I mean by EOF is a community of people and like there are all rooting for you to win.
Having taken a year off between high school and college to work to help support his mom, Carter spoke about the struggles of shifting his priorities so he could commit to doing well in college. Having Mr. T as a counselor was something Carter explained that he “thanked God” for, describing how he was “proud” to have a fellow Black male guiding him and showing him it was “possible” to work in a suit and tie and be “comfortable.” Additionally, it was their “off-the-record conversations,” in which Mr. T. discussed his similar “struggles” at Carter’s age, like having to pull himself away from a desire to just keep “hustling and “making money” and not go to school. It was within these “real” moments that let Carter know that even if he was doing “dumb stuff” around campus, Mr. T would always be there to “snap” him back and talk his “ear off like a dad.” Knowing that he had this support available, both with his counselor and in EOF generally, was something he described as being “enough” to push him:

I really thank God again that I am in the EOF Program because if I didn't go to the program, pshhh I think I would have been like I can't do this, seriously. Because EOF they give you the help, they give you the tools and what you need. You know, even I wasn't really a person that was always around you guys, like always in the office. I was like, okay, I know that they are there. So, it really pushed me you know

Whether it was because they preferred to navigate college on their own like X and Carter, or because of a lack of closeness with their counselor like Kay, EOF was more of a source of guidance or a touchpoint rather than a present fixture in these students’ experiences. Knowing that they had a place they could turn to help guide them when they had questions, concerns or issues was all the support these three students reported needing from the program to feel fulfilled.
Conclusion

The conversations with the 18 participants in this research study demonstrated the ways in which first-generation, low-income college students purposefully draw upon different networks to help them enter, navigate, and persist in higher education. Often framed as deterrents to their success, these participants' families and backgrounds played integral roles in their transition into and persistence throughout college, providing capital in the form of motivation, resources, and support. As these participants moved into the university, they extended their base networks to include staff, faculty, and peers that could provide them with the necessary social capital—in the form of resources, information, and support to help them be successful in college.

Much of this capital was centered within EOF, with a majority of the participants citing how their participation in the program helped them to establish important relationships, particularly with their counselor, that provided them not only with essential information and resources, but also served as an anchor of support they could draw upon as they moved through the ups and downs of college. How participants mobilized the capital within EOF and incorporated it overall into their support network varied however, reflecting how numerous factors influence how social capital is mobilized by individuals, dependent on the person and what they perceive to be beneficial or necessary for their intended outcomes (Lin, 2005; Pena-Lopez & Sanchez-Santos, 2017).

Overall, it was evident within the stories of the 18 participants that they were ultimately the agents of their own success, it was their determination to be successful in college that motivated them to use the resources available to them in their homes, within EOF, and the university in general so they could fulfill their dreams of obtaining a degree.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

I have younger nephews and nieces. So when they see me, you know, with the school stuff around the house, they kind of pick that up, because that's what I always wanted, you know. You'll see families with college graduation pictures and stuff all around the house. We never had that. No, we have regular big pictures, family pictures, stuff like that. To have something college, scholarship wise that is something I really want to have for this family. I'm breaking that curse. I don't know how much longer my mom got to live. But it's one thing I can say, my mom can say she has a college son, a college student as her son that is one thing I'm proud to, you know, have her say. (Carter, 19, sophomore)

In a May 2021 published report, the Pew Research Center indicated that while 70% of continuing-generation adults ages 22 to 59 had completed a bachelor’s degree, only 26% of their first-generation peers had done the same. Scholars have pointed to how much of the research on first generation students tends to be deficit-oriented, focused primarily on what these students lack that contributes to their lower persistence and retention rates, such as limited access to the “appropriate” forms of social and cultural capital to navigate the university (Calahan et al., 2019; Cataldi, et al., 2018; Duggan, 2001; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). As a result of this dominant narrative, universities have instituted specialized programs for first-generation college students (FGCS), such as EOF, in order to provide them with the opportunity to build connections with faculty, staff, and peers that will provide them with “suitable” forms of institutional capital to enable their success in higher education environments (Chaney 2010; Conefrey, 2018; Clauss-
Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Schwartz et al., 2018; Smith, 2007; Zeisher, Chan, Heuer, & Cominole, 2015).

Recently however, scholars have begun to shift their focus to better understand the experiences of first-generation students as they navigate college. This reframing allows for a more accurate depiction of the ways in which various factors such as home supports, pre-college experiences, and identities influence FGCS experiences within the higher education environment (Becker et al., 2017; Covarrubius et al., 2019; Hebert, 2018; Means & Pyne, 2017; Moreno, 2021). Further, the use of qualitative methods in these studies provides space for students to discuss in their own words, the forms of social capital or support they find to be helpful in college, including how they draw upon their families or backgrounds as motivation to help them achieve their goal of a college degree (Azmitia, Sumabat-Estrada, Cheong, & Covarrubias, 2018; Garriott, 2020; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006).

The present research builds on these recent efforts by examining the experiences of 18 first-generation, low-income college students who are participants of the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program at a four-year public research university. The intention of this study was to inform how EOF and other targeted support programs provide social capital to first-generation students by exploring:

1. The experiences of first-generation students as they navigate the college environment, as well as the types of social capital they perceive as contributing to sense of belonging and persistence

2. Student’s experiences and perceptions of the social capital EOF provides, and how it influences the types of supports they utilize in college
Lin’s (2000, 2008, 2017), conceptualization of social capital as an outcome of both accessibility and mobility was purposefully used as the overarching framework in this study as it allowed me to expand the notions of what sources of social capital are considered valuable for FGCS success in higher education, as well as critically examine the factors that influenced how these students mobilized the resources available to them in EOF. The next sections of this chapter will present the three major themes or take-aways that emerged from these participants’ stories and how they challenge the dominant narratives related to first-generation student success. Implications for practice and future research, as well as limitations will also be discussed.

**Major Take-Aways**

While much can be learned from the stories of the participants in this study, it was evident when looking across all 18 interviews, that there were three main themes that kept resurfacing that have important implications for future research and practice. Two of these ideas help to reframe the dominant narrative surrounding first-generation student outcomes, by highlighting not only the integral roles their families/backgrounds play, but also the agency student themselves use in their college experiences. The third theme emphasizes the foundational role EOF played in students’ college experiences, and in particular, the importance of the relationships they built with counselors and staff in their mobilization of the social capital in the program.

**“More Than a Statistic”- The Assets and Agency of First-Gen Students**

Research related to first-generation college students has often focused on how their individual characteristics and backgrounds—such as their propensity to be from lower income households, and have parents who are unable to provide them with relevant school capital,
contribute to their lower degree and persistence rates (Calahan et al., 2019, Garriott, 2020; & Schelbe et al., 2019). Indeed, the narratives of these 18 participants highlighted how their circumstances were a significant aspect of their college experiences, but instead of always being a hindrance, students’ backgrounds also acted as a source of strength. The following paragraphs will demonstrate the ways in which participants utilized their families and background experiences as sources of motivation, while also taking charge of their college experiences by building networks of support to meet their needs.

First-Gen: “Like a Badge of Honor”

Researchers (Bowman & Felix, 2017), have documented how one’s social identities, such as race, gender, class, and in this case, first-generation status, are fluid and intersecting. Individuals’ perceptions and experiences are influenced by these multiple understandings of themselves in relation to their environment, with some identities becoming more salient or centered depending on the context. In our conversations together, it was clear that for participants their first-generation status was a key aspect of their identities. How participants understood their status as first-generation was rooted within their family and backgrounds, particularly in the messages they received about education. This finding is important considering that many supports aimed at supporting FGCS, including EOF, are grounded in research that emphasizes that these students lack and therefore need, to be filled with particular forms of capital to help them to assimilate and be successful in higher education environments because they come from families who have no experience with college (Collier & Morgan, 2007; Darling & Smith, 2007; Thayer, 2000). This framework, while not necessarily meant to be deficit oriented, unfortunately can create a narrative that these students, their families and backgrounds, are devoid of capital (Garriott, 2020).
Instead of being a disadvantage, many of the participants presented their backgrounds as being a source of motivation they utilized in college. This finding aligns with Yosso’s (2005), model of community cultural wealth, in which she asserts that students from marginalized communities have forms of capital that can be utilized as assets in higher education to assist with persistence and retention. In particular, aspirational and familial capital were present when participants discussed their families and backgrounds, pointing to the ways in which they maintained their hopes and dreams of getting their degree despite any obstacles they may have faced, often relying on their bonds with their family and/or community as sources of motivation or strength during times of struggle (Yosso, 2005, p.77-78).

For half of the participants, being first-generation was a source of motivation, a reminder that they were going to college not only to better themselves but to do better for their families and communities as well. This responsibility had its challenges, with nearly all of the same participants discussing the frustration of navigating the college application process largely on their own, the tension they experienced with family members who did not know how to support them, and the pressure they felt to be successful. However, despite the stresses they experienced, the majority of the participants credited their families in helping them to be successful throughout their higher education journey. This assistance included not only embedding the importance of higher education early on, or the purposeful actions some families took to ensure their pathway into college, but also the forms of emotional support and reassurance they provided that helped them to feel they belonged in college and would be successful in obtaining their degree.

The significant role of participants’ families and backgrounds in their college experiences reflects the notion that social capital can exist outside of relationships with those of power, and
within community/familial based networks where individuals perceive these resources as important to mobilize to meet their needs (Lin, 2000, 2008). In fact, the participants’ narratives highlight how first-generation students are not deficient in resources when they come into the university, instead emphasizing how their backgrounds and families are a critical source of social capital that not only help them get to college, but also serve as sources of motivation and pride to assist them to persist in times of doubt (Hebert, 2018; Yosso, 2005).

**Agents of their Experience**

I can leave anytime I want to, so like at the end of the day, it comes down to like, I'm here because I want to be here like that has to be the case because if not then, what am I doing here besides wasting time? –(X, 20, junior)

It wasn’t just the integral role of student’s families and backgrounds in this study that shifts the perception of who first-generation students are and what they bring into higher education, but it was also the agency they exhibited over their college experiences and successes. Indeed, all the participants in this study can be defined as successful, actively pursuing a college degree despite adversity they have faced, with 10 of these students achieving their dream and graduating in May 2021. While for sure, having access to supports like EOF could be considered an important factor in their success, it was these participants use of navigational capital that helped them to persist. As X discussed in the above quote, the ability of these participants to persevere in college was an outcome of their desire to be successful- drawing on their internal motivations and resiliencies to work through challenges, all while building a network of capital to support themselves as they navigated the structures of higher education (Hands, 2020; Yosso, 2005).

The agency of study participants was particularly evident in how they constructed their networks and mobilized the capital within them, especially EOF. As students moved on from SI
and through their college experiences—they all stayed connected to the program, but utilized the resources differently to achieve their educational goals. A number of factors, including their backgrounds and other networks of support influenced the capital students chose to mobilize in EOF, but none more so than their perceptions of what they felt was necessary for their success. Specifically, students described various sources, including their circumstances, family, peers, and campus agents that they drew capital from to help them as they moved through college. Depending on what these networks of support looked like then, influenced what type of capital—emotional, informational, navigational—they mobilized within EOF.

The agency these students displayed supports previous research that recognizes the assets first-generation students bring with them to college that enable their success, particularly the ways in which they navigate unfamiliar structures and are resilient in the face of obstacles in order to achieve their goals (Garriott, 2020; Hands, 2020; Yosso, 2005). Further, the various ways that students built and utilized their networks of support emphasizes that first-generation students are not a homogenous group nor are they passive agents in their college experiences. Instead, these participants’ narratives displayed how first-generations students have diverse experiences that contribute to their purposefulness in how they mobilize capital to meet their perceived needs and goals.

**Relationships in EOF: The Foundation of Capital**

It's the backbone in the sense that I just feel like I was always there, always sitting in the offices talking to someone, or if I wasn't sure about something, I came there, I was sad about something, I went there, if I was ecstatic about the news I got, I went there. I feel like EOF set the groundwork and the basis for just me having such a good college experience. It allowed me to transition into college and know where my classes are and
know what the resources that are available on campus are, and it just set me up for so much success (David, 22, senior)

This study was interested in understanding how participation in the EOF program mediated these students college experiences, particularly as it related to their acquisition of social capital. Through my discussions with participants, it was evident that whether they viewed EOF as their “home” on campus like David, or a touchpoint they could turn to when necessary, all students portrayed the program as a type of anchor that undergirded their college experiences.

Through its various programs and services, EOF offers several avenues in which students can obtain different forms of capital to support their success in college. While many participants spoke of the beneficial resources, information and tips they received through the SI for example, it was clear they derived the most social capital through the 1:1 interactions they had with institutional agents in the program, particularly their counselor. This was true regardless of the characteristics of their relationship, whether it was more emotional or familial like for KV, or more informational like for Kay, having a reliable individual who they could utilize to obtain resources when needed was acknowledged by all the participants as impactful. In particular, it was within these relationships with their counselor, where students were able to seek out and utilize specific resources that were tailored to them and their specific needs, helping to keep them connected to the program overall.

In Lin’s (2000, 2008), framework, social capital is not just defined by the level of access one has within their network, but more importantly, their mobilization of these resources. So while it is true that all participants had access to capital through the connections they established with their counselors or other program staff, they did not all mobilize, and therefore benefit from, the resources within these relationships in the same way. To be sure, while the activation of this
capital was also an outcome of student agency, in that participants in this study specifically sought and utilized resources based on what they felt they needed to be successful, mobilization was also related to the characteristics and depth of their relationships.

The relationships participants formed within EOF, particularly with their counselor, were a critical influence in not only how they felt in college overall, but also the social capital they mobilized within the program generally. In particular, the more personally or emotionally connected participants felt to their counselor or a staff member, the more they interacted with this individual, thereby creating more opportunities for them to benefit from the capital within these relationships. Some participants like James and David for example, developed multiple relationships within the program or EOF office suite, creating several sources of capital for them to draw upon or benefit from as they moved throughout college. Others solely relied on their EOF counselor for support, varying in how often and in what ways they utilized this relationship to garner resources as they moved throughout college.

While the goal of EOF is for all students to be as engaged and immersed as James or David so they too can benefit from this type of capital, ultimately, the characteristics of participants’ relationships with staff proved to be a critical influence in the types of capital they were able to mobilize. Echoing previous research that emphasizes the role of positive relationships with institutional agents in supporting first-generation student success (Means & Pyne, 2017; Schelbe et al., 2019; Soria & Stebleton, 2013), this theme also illustrates that students are active participants in these relationships, as it is their perceptions and actions that ultimately dictate the types of capital they choose to benefit from.
Implications and Suggestions for Practice

There is a dominant narrative in the research literature that FGCS need to have access to bridging forms of social capital (i.e. faculty, staff, mentors) that provide them with the right information, resources, and skills to be able to navigate college successfully (Schwartz et al., 2018; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Thayer, 2000). As a practitioner I have seen, and also heard in the stories of the participants in this study, the positive impact on FGCS when institutional agents utilize their position to support and advocate for their success. However, what was made clear in these participants narratives, was the integral roles they themselves play in their success in college, both through the assets they possess from their families and backgrounds that help them to persist, and the agency they exhibit in how they build and utilize networks of support. As such, important consideration should be given to the ways in which EOF structures its supports, and more importantly, if these efforts are recognizing and capitalizing on the strengths students bring with them to college. Specifically, a critical examination of the services that EOF provides is important to ensure that we are actually meeting the needs of all our first-generation students and their lived experiences.

In the paragraphs that follow, I will discuss the steps EOF has already taken, as well as suggest future strategies that are informed by the findings of this study to ensure our supports are inclusive of the diversities of our first-generation students experiences, and that we are creating opportunities for students to mobilize capital through relationships within the program. Taken together, my recommendations suggest that we continue to reframe student’s role within EOF-placing them less as a passive recipient in need of support and more of a co-constructor of their experience.

Understanding Not Assuming: Supporting First Gen Students
For practitioners and researchers like myself who are committed to first-generation student success, it is critical we are cognizant of the framework which we use to support this population. In particular, we must avoid utilizing interventions or creating programs that are rooted in a deficit perspective by assuming that one; these students lack capital, and two that their first-generation status alone is the root of their challenges within the institution, and not “attributed to another identity or multiple identities, differentially shaped by context and time” (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018, p. 161). Rather, higher education practitioners should make every effort to understand how students’ backgrounds, families, and multiple identities all serve to influence their transition into, and experiences within the university, in order to create appropriate support services. As the findings of this study suggest, part of this work must involve intentional efforts to recognize and utilize the strengths that first-generation students bring with them into college—including the way they utilize their backgrounds as sources of motivation, resiliency, and support as they move through college. As Hands (2020), succinctly states, “Proactive and resourceful individuals, FGCS possess social and navigational capital honed from years of dealing with institutions in their personal lives” (p.613). Therefore, in order to best serve our first-generation students, EOF administrators and higher education personnel must first make the effort to understand who FGCS in EOF are, the strengths and struggles they bring, and what they wish to achieve so that as practitioners we create support systems that truly meet their needs.

To better appreciate who our incoming first-year students are, as well as the strengths and struggles they bring with them into college, a number of new initiatives has been introduced to the EOF program at Camden over the past few years. First, prior to the start of the SI, all incoming students are required to write a narrative essay describing their purpose for being in
college, the goals they would like to achieve and the supports they have within their home network. This essay serves as an important introduction to students for counselors, providing a glimpse into their perceptions of what they need to be successful as they start their college journey. In addition to this initial essay, Raptor 101 has been purposefully restructured over the last few years to provide opportunities for students to constantly reflect (through group discussions, projects and journal reflections), about who they are as they move into college. These activities provide students’ counselors with another avenue in which they are able to get to know their students and utilize this information to formulate an action plan that meets their needs and goals. Lastly, this past year, all first-year students completed the Clifton Strengths Assessment (Gallup, About, n.d.), a tool that helps students to identify, understand, and maximize their strengths. The purpose of implementing this assessment was for their counselor to use these results to only get to know their students better, but also help the students be more aware of who they are as they transition into college and the assets they bring with them that can be utilized for their success.

In addition to these recent initiatives, the findings of this study indicate that first-generation students are not a homogenous group, instead, their experiences in college, including what supports they perceive as necessary to their success, are influenced by their individual backgrounds. As such, I believe more can be done to help EOF move away from an assumptive framework about who our first-generation students are, the types of capital they possess, and their needs when it comes to college.

Instituting assessments such as the Clifton Strengths for example is a great starting point to begin these conversations with our students. However, we must also ensure that we are regularly providing opportunities, both 1:1 with their counselor and in workshops, for students to
share their lived experiences and reflect on the ways in which it influences how they move through college (Jehangir, 2010). In particular, giving space to students to share their perspectives and stories, can provide a gateway for practitioners to identify and explain to students the ways in which their identities, families, and backgrounds serve as assets, and can be utilized to achieve success in higher education. As previous research has shown (Garriott, 2020; Hands, 2020; Saenz, Garcia-Louis, Drake, & Guida, 2018; Yosso, 2005), first-generation students, particularly those who are racial minorities, possess several forms of capital related to years of navigating institutions of power and overcoming obstacles related to issues of class and privilege. Providing opportunities for students to regularly recognize and reflect on the ways in which their various backgrounds and identities influence their experiences can help them to not only feel validated in the college environment, but also be able to better draw on their cultural wealth to navigate challenges they face within the institution (Jehangir, 2010; Yosso, 2005).

Further, providing spaces for students to regularly share their lived experiences helps “brings their stories into the learning process…and allows students to be co-teachers and participants in knowledge construction” (Jehangir, 2010, p. 549).

As practitioners who support first-generation students, it’s imperative that we regularly identify and celebrate the assets of our students as well as work with them to further develop these strengths in ways that can be utilized to achieve their personal, academic, and career goals. This will help not only us better understand our students, but also enable them to feel that their experiences and perceptions are valued and considered in our efforts to support their success. These links between students strengths and their success in college, should start immediately in the Summer Institute-by structuring reflection assignments (journals, essays), and discussions (1:1 with their counselor and in Raptor 101), that enable students to pinpoint how their identities
and backgrounds have contributed to their ability to navigate challenges in the past. Additionally, EOF should also ensure that counselors are regularly initiating conversations (both 1:1 and in workshops), that help students to recognize and tap into their individual assets as they navigate college. Taken together, inviting students to identify and reflect on the ways in which they can and might draw on their backgrounds and identities can help us as practitioners to create systems of support that better meet the needs of our first-generation students, as well as recognize and encourage them to be active agents in these supports throughout their college journey.

**Capital and the Centrality of Relationships**

As outlined by Lin (2000, 2008), a number of factors influence a student’s propensity to activate the capital available to them in their networks, including proximity of relationship to individuals, perceived benefits or needs, goals, as well as expected outcomes, all demonstrated by these participants as affecting how they used the program’s supports. As practitioners, we are unable to control students’ agency or how they perceive or ultimately choose, to utilize the capital programs like EOF provide. However, it is clear that relationships with staff are central in enabling and empowering students to take advantage of the resources programs like EOF offer. Therefore, it is critical we continue to provide opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships and connections within the program to ensure more students can benefit from the various forms of capital available. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss some strategies EOF has already taken in the past few years to help build and strengthen relationships within the program—both with counselors and peers, as well as provide suggestions on further steps we can take to continue this work.

**EOF Initiatives**
Building the counseling relationship. In the past few years, EOF has instituted frameworks to guide counselors in their meetings with students, with the intention that these initiatives would help better develop and strengthen these relationships. First, in 2016, the EOF program created an Educational Plan to be completed by all students during the first year in college. Rooted in developmental advising theory, the plan is structured to recognize students as equal partners in the relationship, in that, advisor and student work together to identify their particular needs, challenges, and motivations so they can develop and institute a shared plan that will help them to achieve their goals (Creamer & Creamer, 1994; Kramer, 1999). EOF Counselors follow this model with first-year students by working in partnership to identify and set targeted goals in their Educational Plan starting in the SI and moving throughout their first year of college, with the hope that working together in this process will help to develop a trusting relationship between them and the student.

Additionally, to build off the co-partnership between students and counselor initiated in the Educational Plan, a “Thrive Guide” for sophomores was also introduced in the last few years. While less intensive than the Educational Plan, the purpose of this guide is to keep students engaged in their educational process, working in partnership with their counselor to develop professional soft skills, explore academic interests and career options, as well as build their network on campus with faculty and staff. Together, both of these guides are meant to help strengthen the relationship between student and counselor by having students be active, rather than passive participants in the types of support they receive.

Given the centrality of relationships in the ways participants perceived and utilized the capital within EOF in this study, I believe further steps can be taken to construct relationships with counselors that support the diversity of our students experiences throughout college.
Specifically, participants experience in this study suggested that the characteristics of the counseling relationship, including their counselor’s approach in providing support, was a critical influence on students proximity to the EOF program. Therefore, it is recommended that we institute program wide assessments of student perceptions of their counseling experience. In particular, surveys and focus groups should be utilized to better understand, from students directly, what aspects of these relationships, and specifically what efforts made by their counselor, helped students feel their needs are being addressed, as well as enable them to feel comfortable and empowered to utilize the capital they offer.

Additionally, no formal assessments have been done on either the Educational Plan or Thrive Guide and its impact on students. As such, as part of these assessment efforts, it is recommended that focus groups or interviews should be conducted with freshman and sophomores about their experiences using these respective guides. In particular, questions should focus on if these documents helped students feel more purposeful in their actions as it related to their educational ambitions, and more importantly, if they felt more connected to and engaged within, the relationship with their counselor as they worked together to achieve their goals.

Further, given the inevitable constant change that will occur, both within EOF (staff turnover and program restructuring), and in the institution generally (policies and practices), these assessments should be offered every 2-3 years to ensure we are consistently capturing the changing needs of our population of students.

The feedback provided by students can be used to implement program changes in EOF - such as additional training for counselors, and changes to the Educational Plan and/or Thrive Guide to ensure that our approaches best support our students and their needs. Additionally, these assessments will be critical in understanding if our approaches are helping students feel
they are an equal partner within these counseling relationships, have agency over the types of support they receive, as well as feel empowered to utilize the capital available within the program.

Creating community with peers. Outside of their counselors or other staff, it was the connections individuals formed with peers that they described as the most helpful aspect of their participation in EOF. Research has established that peer relationships can serve as a critical asset in helping students from marginalized backgrounds develop a sense of belonging and comfort in higher education spaces where their identities may not be reflected in the larger community (Gray et al., 2018; Thelamour & Mwangi, 2019). Further, scholars have posited, that for some, peers become the “most important source of support” during college, helping to inform student’s identity development as well as provide other avenues in which students can seek help (Brouwer, Jansen, Flache, & Hofman, 2016, p.115). Indeed within this study, having a community of students with similar identities, backgrounds, and experiences helped to create important bonds and friendships among participants that ultimately became a critical aspect of their support network.

As such, steps have been taken over the years in EOF to help facilitate these connections among students. For example, within the SI, care is taken to ensure that students have the opportunity to consistently interact with one another throughout the 5-week experience, particularly within Raptor 101 seminar or in the dorms through RA programming, with the goal that these intentional efforts and forced proximity will create a community of support. Further, in the past four years, we have re-structured the program to reflect a cohort model, where students attend workshops each semester with their class year until graduation, with the aim that these repeated interactions will help to sustain the initial connections and relationships they formed in
SI over the long-term. Lastly, EOF intentionally hires upperclassmen EOF students to serve as RA’s and/or peer coaches in the SI to help serve as guides and mentors to first-year students. The goal of these efforts is to not only help students build a community of support among their peers to help them as they move through college, but also keep students connected to the EOF program over their 4 or so years in college.

However, given the importance of peer connections within the program in establishing feelings of community and belonging, I recommend that we build on our efforts to intentionally provide opportunities for students to build these connections. For example, in workshops, we can be mindful in how we structure the delivery of content, finding time for students to regularly participate in targeted discussions and group work. Additionally, we can offer more program wide events that are structured to be fun and engaging, providing space for students to get to know one another and feel a sense of community. Additionally, I believe we can really capitalize on our highly engaged students who act as peer coaches or leaders to help us find creative ways in which to draw out students who may be less connected to the program. This includes having them facilitate meetings or surveys that solicit student feedback on the type of supports EOF can offer to best meet their needs that can be used to restructure services, as well as run peer led social events to capture a wider range of students who may be disengaged from their counselor.

Creating spaces in which EOF students are able to continuously form connections with fellow peers is critical in not only helping to establish feelings of belonging and community, but is also an important engagement and retention tool for the program. Specifically, providing opportunities for students to develop strong peer relationships that can be integrated into their networks of support, can help further develop a perception of EOF as a critical source of capital
to draw upon, thus helping to keep students connected to the program long-term as they move through college.

**Beyond EOF**

In line with the focus of this study, the recommendations offered thus far have been concentrated on changes EOF program/administrators can make to better support their first-generation, low-income students. However, it’s critical that these efforts on campus should not be limited to targeted programs like EOF or TRIO because much of what our students experience in college happens outside the walls of these offices. For example in this study, it was evident that participants’ satisfaction with the campus was influenced by their experiences with professors in the classroom and with other support staff/offices. In particular, and as noted by other scholars (Costello et al., 2018; Means & Pyne, 2017), instances where faculty or staff showed interest in students well-being or took actions that helped support their personal or academic success, contributed to participants’ feelings of belonging as well as perceptions of the campus as inclusive and welcoming. As research has established sense of belonging and social connectedness as critical factors that influence persistence and retention, especially for first-generation and other marginalized students (Costello et al. 2019; Ezeofor et al., 2019; Flett et al., 2019; Means & Pyne, 2017), institutions have a responsibility then to create an environment that recognizes and supports these students experiences and backgrounds in ways that help to feel like they matter on campus.

The role of faculty is particularly critical, as literature has emphasized the significance of faculty and student connection in helping to promote campus engagement and persistence for first-generation students (Terenzini et al., 1996; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Specifically, when faculty are willing to help, communicate, and provide encouragement/positive feedback, first-
generation students are more likely to see them as possible sources of support in their success and thus leverage these relationships (Schademan & Thompson, 2016). Therefore, one step that institutions can take is to provide professional development (PD) and resources to faculty that will help them better connect with and support students, especially those who come from marginalized backgrounds such as first-generation students. This PD includes time for faculty to review their curriculum to ensure it resonates with the diverse backgrounds of their students as well as restructure their teaching methods/approaches to be more interactive, helping students to regularly connect course content with their lived experiences (Wynants & Dennis, 2018). Allowing students, particularly those who have been “marginalized and silenced,” to bring their stories into the learning process can help them not only feel validated/understood, but also encourage their engagement by creating spaces for them to be more active partners in their knowledge construction (Jehangir, 2010, p. 549).

Additionally, it has been noted that there is a decisive lack of training related to knowledge and practices when it comes to advising for faculty, despite often serving as advisors-formally or informally, to their students (Vespia, Freis, & Arrowood, 2018). As such, universities should make an effort to engage faculty in learning opportunities that will help them be more informed in their advising or mentoring approaches with students. This includes providing resources/literature on advising methods, as well as spaces for them to connect with professional academic and career advisors on campus to discuss students’ needs and support, especially for underrepresented populations like first-generation, low-income students. Overall, these efforts can help faculty “improve their cultural competence and awareness of the challenges” that first-generation/low-income students often face (Means & Pyne, 2017, p.921),
in order to build better connections and relationships with students that encourage engagement and increase perceptions of support and overall satisfaction with their campus experiences.

Lastly, institutions should make efforts to provide spaces on campus in which first-generation students identities are recognized and supported, especially in the absence of targeted programs like EOF or TRIO. This includes providing information and resources to these students and their families that break down college processes and expectations as they enter the university to help ease their transition and navigation of college life. Regular campus events that recognize and celebrate the lived experiences of first-generation students can help increase feelings of mattering in students, as well as help students to connect with one another and create a supportive community on campus. Lastly, committees comprised of faculty and staff that identify as first-generation or are committed to these students success, can be formed to guide university practices and policies to ensure that the needs of these students are being addressed on campus.

Taken together, these efforts can help institutions provide support to first-generation/low-income students outside of targeted programs like EOF, by creating an overall campus environment that is welcoming and supportive of their needs and experiences, encouraging feelings of belonging that in turn, help students desire to persist as they navigate their college journey.

**Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research**

The narratives of these 18 participants shine an important light on ways the EOF program at Rutgers Camden can better support our students as they move through college. However, this study is limited in several ways.
First, it is recognized that these participants did not experience their first-generation identity in isolation, having other intersecting aspects of their selves that overlapped and influenced their overall experience in college. As a whole, EOF is predominantly comprised of students who identify as racial minorities, with about 70% of students identifying as either Black or Hispanic, and 14% identifying as Asian. While the participants in this study I believe were a good representation of the EOF population in terms of demographics, this study only explored two aspects of their identities in depth—being first-generation and low-income. While care was taken in the interview protocol to recognize and provide space for participants to discuss how other aspects of their identity—such as race, ability, gender, and sexuality, served to influence their experiences as first-generation students, it did not do a deep enough dive to really understand the intricacies of these constructs or the relations between them as they are lived.

For example, while the majority (13) of the participants indicated they could not recall an experience on campus where they were made aware of their identities in a negative way, five participants did describe instances in which a member of the campus community made them feel uncomfortable, or said an offensive comment or a tasteless joke in relation to their race or disability. While these students suggested that these instances did not have a lasting impact on their overall perception of the university, it would have been worthwhile to explore the ways in which these incidents are internalized, and more importantly, if and how the support of EOF helped to mitigate the impact of these experiences.

Similarly, while the 18 participants who took part in this study represented a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives, their narratives were not reflective of those who are effectively disengaged from the program or how this disengagement might be tied/shaped/etc. by their identities and contexts.
Additional research should be conducted to better understand how these different, but yet intricately tied aspects of first-generation student identities, interact with one another to produce inequality within systems of power and privilege—such as on college campuses (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). In particular, it would be beneficial to conduct further studies about the experiences of first-generation students within EOF by different sub-populations, such as gender (male vs. female), and race/ethnicity (Black, Hispanic, Asian, White), to truly understand if EOF is recognizing and supporting the experiences of these students and their whole selves. These targeted, smaller studies could hopefully help capture those students who are less engaged in the program, providing insight on the factors that contribute to their lack of proximity, and helping us to restructure our supports to better address all members of the EOF student population.

A second limitation of this study concerns the decision to rely on interviewing as the main source of data. While restricted to data collection approaches that worked with the COVID-19 pandemic, this study would have benefitted from collecting multiple sources of data to better understand the student experience. For example, observations of student interactions within different program components—such as the SI, workshops, and within 1:1 counseling appointments—would have provided an important perspective in understanding how students organically interact within different spaces of the program. Additionally, focus groups, particularly with different subpopulations of students such as by race/ethnicity, gender, or class-year, would provide insight from students if program components are more or less impactful dependent on different aspects of their identity.

Despite these limitations, this research represents one of the few studies that not only elevates the voices of first-generation, low-income students but examines how they build and utilize various networks as social capital to navigate the structures of higher education. For
support programs such as EOF, this study provides an opportunity for practitioners to utilize students' voices to better understand what forms of social capital are perceived by them as beneficial for their retention and persistence. Further, these students experiences provide an opportunity for practitioners to critically examine the framework in which they approach and support first-generation students.

**Conclusion**

The entirety of my higher education career has been working with first-generation, low-income students in different capacities, and always with the aim of providing the best supports possible to ensure their success in higher education. As an administrator for the past 5 years I have not had the opportunity to really interact with students the way I used to as an EOF counselor. As always, I am humbled and in awe of the ways in which EOF students, like the participants in this study, exhibit strength and tenacity in their pursuits of a higher education degree, despite the fact that many experience incomprehensible hardships by the time they are 18. These students’ narratives have re-invigorated my passion for this work and have been my source of ideas and inspiration over the past years in restructuring program supports. As I close out this chapter and this study, I would like to leave you with something David said to me in our interview. While simple, I believe it encapsulates what drives myself and others dedicated to these students’ success, to keep pushing even when we are unsure of our reach:

I keep saying this, but it’s like a family, you accept me as I am, and you wanna help me not because I am David who has had amazing grades, but because you guys actually care about who I am, and you care about me getting the best help possible. So I just feel like all my successes, the basis for that, was set by you guys.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Volunteers Wanted for a Research Study:

"The Social Capital First-Generation Students use to Succeed in College; A Qualitative Investigation of the Educational Opportunity Fund Program"

The purpose of this research is to understand the college experiences of first-generation students within the EOF Program. The researcher wants to hear about what support systems you have utilized to navigate the college environment, and your perceptions and experiences both within the EOF program and at Rutgers-Camden.

To participate you must:

✓ Be a current EOF student
✓ Entered the university as a freshman
✓ Participated in the EOF Summer Institute
✓ Be willing to sit for one 60 minute interview

Participants will receive a $10.00 gift card and EOF workshop credit

If you are interested in participating or have any questions please contact Ms. Randi Ferguson at rf344@camden.rutgers.edu or 860-550-5136
Appendix B: Recruitment Email

Greetings!

I hope you are well!

I am reaching out to inform you of an exciting opportunity to participate in a research study about your experiences as a first-generation student in college!

This study is interested in understanding the experiences of first-generation, low-income EOF students who entered into Rutgers-Camden as a first-year student. Participation in this study will involve you committing to an interview via zoom for approximately 60 minutes. For your participation, you will receive a $10.00 gift card and EOF workshop credit. Any information you share will be kept confidential and would only be used for the purposes of this study.

If you are interested in participating, please contact the principal investigator for the study, Ms. Randi Ferguson at: rf344@camden.rutgers.edu or: 860-550-5136.

Thank you in advance for your help!
Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Opening Statement:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of, and use of support by first-generation, low-income students within the EOF Program at Rutgers-Camden as they navigate college. This interview is part of my dissertation study for the Education, Culture, and Society Doctoral Program at Rutgers University.

You are being asked to participate in one interview in which I will ask you questions related to your experiences within the EOF program and on the Rutgers-Camden campus. Your interview will help me better understand how first-generation, low-income students perceive their college experiences, the support they use, and in what ways being a part of support programs like EOF impact their experiences. I encourage you to be as open and honest in your responses as I want to make sure that I am capturing your perceptions, feelings, and experiences as accurately as possible. There are no right or wrong answers, and no matter what you say, your status in the EOF program will not be impacted.

I would like to ask to record this interview in order to ensure accuracy for my research and that I captured your words authentically. What is discussed in these interviews are purely for research purposes only, your name will not be identified or associated with any information/data within the study, and will not be shared with anyone. Instead, a pseudonym will be used to make any references to information you shared.

Do you agree for me to record this interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?
(If the participant has no questions and does not object to being recorded, the researcher will proceed with the questions below).

Questions

So first, I would like to start off by learning a little bit about you and how you got to Rutgers-Camden.

1. Since I have been in this role, I have seen students with all different types of backgrounds, can you tell me a little about yours?
   1. So, if someone asked who you are, how would you describe yourself?
   2. Are there certain aspects of your identity that are more important to how you define or see yourself in general? So for example, even though I am white- I wouldn’t consider this something I am aware of all the time because of the privilege that is afforded to it- I don’t have to think about it. Where my identity as female is something that I think about or am confronted with so to speak very often.
   3. What is your family like? Who would you consider family?
   4. Did any of them go to college?

2. Tell me a little about where you grew up and the community you grew up in
   1. How would you describe the people who live there?
   2. What was it like growing up or being in that community?
   3. Were you involved in any community organizations, like churches, sports, etc.?

3. Tell me a little about the schools you went to?
   1. In the schools you went to, do you feel like they helped you prepare for college?
   2. Can you tell me a bit more about why you feel this way?
4. Can you tell me when you first started thinking about college?

5. What or maybe who inspired you to go to college?
   
   1. Tell me a little more about this, so what about this person or experience specifically inspired you to really think about college?

6. Can you tell me who helped you with the process of getting into college? So, you know, getting into college requires a lot of paperwork and requirements to complete. Who did you turn to help you with the applications, or when you had questions or concerns about anything?

**So now, I want to talk more about your experiences in college generally.**

7. So, off the top of your head, in a few sentences, how would you sum up your overall experience in college so far?
   
   1. Can you tell me why you chose those word(s) to describe your experiences? So, what memories or feelings popped into your mind when you were asked that question?

8. So research has talked a lot about how students do better in college if they feel like they belong on the campus. When you think about your overall experiences so far, how would you describe feeling when you are at Rutgers? So this could have been times you were physically on campus, or maybe classes you have been in, or interactions you have had.

9. Okay, so building off that, let's talk more specifically about the positive experiences you have had since you have been in college, can you think of a few examples? This could be on campus, within a classroom, with an individual, etc.
1. Okay, can you take me back to one of these experiences and provide more
details? So who was there? When did this happen? What about this experience
specifically made you feel positive?

10. Now, similar to the last question, since you have been in college, can you think of a few
examples of any negative experiences you have had, or obstacles you have faced? This could be
on campus, within a classroom, with an individual, etc.

1. Okay, can you walk me through one of these experiences so I can better picture
how this made you feel? So, maybe tell me more about when this took place?
Who was involved? What specifically about this incident do you think made you
feel negative?

2. Have you had any negative experiences on campus that you felt were due to your
race, gender, or class?

11. So now I want to talk for a minute about your views of being a first-generation college
student and how they possibly impacted the experiences you have described.

1. So, do you think that being the first in your family to attend college has
influenced how you have perceived or experienced college?

2. Can you tell me a little bit more about why you feel this way?

12. In addition to being first-generation, what other aspects of your identity-so for example
your race or your gender, do you think may have impacted your experiences on campus?

1. Can you provide an example of an experience in which you felt either your race
or gender or class was highlighted or made apparent to you?

So, let’s talk specifically for a bit about your experiences as an EOF student

13. If someone asked you to describe what the EOF program does, what would you say?
1. Tell me more about the different aspects of the program you mentioned. So, how have you personally used these services within your college experiences so far?

2. Why do you think you find these particular services helpful? Can you provide an example?

3. Are there supports or services that you wish EOF offered that would be helpful for your experiences in college so far? Or in the future?

14. In thinking about your time in the EOF program so far, can you provide some examples of positive or helpful experiences you have had?

1. Can you walk me through one of these experiences? So think back to that moment or exchange, what about it particularly left a positive impact on you?

15. Similarly, in thinking about your time in the EOF program so far, what are some examples of not so helpful or positive experiences you have had?

1. So, similar to before-tell me a little bit more about one of these experiences so I can better understand what happened and how you felt.

16. So I want to specifically talk about your counselor within the EOF Program for a minute. Overall, if someone asked you to describe your relationship with them, what would you say?

1. Tell me more about this, are there examples you can give that you feel best demonstrates your interactions with them?

17. So I want to get a better understanding of how being an EOF student fits into the rest of your college experience. So, let's take a moment and imagine the different aspects of your college experience as almost like a puzzle. The bigger pieces represent more important or influential aspects, and the small pieces are less significant or notable for you. Take a minute or
two to think about what pieces you imagine making up your college puzzle. You are welcome to write it down as well.

1. Can you describe what the biggest pieces of this puzzle were for you? Why do these pieces stand out to you?

2. So, now, can you tell me how being in the EOF program fits into this overall puzzle? How big or small of a piece would you describe it to be?

**Okay, so we have talked a lot about the different aspects of your experiences in college thus far—both generally and in EOF. So now I want to get a better understanding of how you feel these experiences have impacted you in your desire to keep pursuing your degree at different points and the support you have used.**

18. So think back to some of the challenging moments you had thus far. In those times have you ever thought about dropping out of college?

   1. Tell me more about how you felt in those moments. What events or experiences contributed to these feelings?

   2. What or who has helped you stay in college or to keep moving forward during these moments?

**So let’s talk specifically more about your sources of support or the people in your life that have been significant since you have been in college.**

19. In general, what kinds of support do you feel has been most helpful for you to keep persisting in college, even in the face of obstacles?
1. Who, or what have been your sources of support since you have been in college?
   
   This can be both on or off-campus.

2. Can you describe or provide examples of how they have provided support?

20. Can you tell me about a time you used your “home” network-so your friends or family to help you while you have been in college?

   1. In general, how have these individuals from home-friends, family, provided support to you in college? So, what are these people your “go-to’s” for?

   2. Why do you feel like they are the best people to support you in the ways you have described?

21. Okay, can you now tell me how you used people within the university-so staff, faculty, or friends to help you as you have been in college?

   1. Can you tell me more about some of these individuals more, so how did you come to form relationships with them?

   2. Can you provide me an example of a time when you needed help, or advice, or just some support and went to one of these individuals? What did they do or say that you felt was helpful?

So to wrap it up, I just want to make sure I have covered all my bases so I can have an accurate picture of your college experience and the support you have used.

22. Are there any other individuals, events, or anything else that you think has been an important aspect of your college experience that we have not discussed today?
Closing: I appreciate you taking the time to participate and offer your experiences and perspectives for my research. If you have any questions or concerns about anything related to the interview moving forward, please feel free to reach out to me.
Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire for Dissertation Study
Directions: Please fill out questionnaire below. Your answers will be used as part of the data analysis for this study

1.) Pseudonym (First Name)- please identify how you would like to be identified in the study; this should not be your actual name: ________________

2.) Age: ______

3.) Race/Ethnicity: __________

4.) Gender: __________

5.) Are you or will you be the first in your family to graduate with a 2-year of 4-year college degree? (Yes or No): __________

6.) Number of credits currently enrolled: __________

7.) Major: __________

8.) Do you live on or off campus? If off, please indicate if at home or in own residence: __________

9.) Current cumulative GPA: __________

10.) What year did you enter the EOF Program? __________

11.) Please indicate any clubs, sports, or student organizations you are currently involved in: ____________________________________________
Appendix E: IRB Consent Form

CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE OF STUDY: The Social Capital First-Generation Students use to Succeed in College; A Qualitative Investigation of the Educational Opportunity Fund Program

Principal Investigator: Randi Ferguson, M.S.

This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. It is your choice to take part or not. After all of your questions have been answered and you wish to take part in the research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. You will be given a copy of the signed form to keep. Your alternative to taking part in the research is not to take part in it.

Who is conducting this research study and what is it about?
You are being asked to take part in research being conducted by Randi Ferguson who is a Doctoral Student in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University and Assistant Director of the EOF Program at Rutgers-Camden. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of first-generation students within the EOF Program at Rutgers-Camden, and the supports they use as they navigate college.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?
The interview will take about 1 hour to complete. We anticipate 20 subjects will take part in the study. In order to ensure accuracy for my research and that I capture your words authentically, I would like to ask permission to audio record this interview. [https://orr.rutgers.edu/formsandtemplates.rbr].

What are the risks and/or discomforts I might experience if I take part in the study?
As the questions in this study are asking you to reflect and discuss about your experiences as it relates to college, it is possible that depending on your experience you may feel uncomfortable at points in the interview. Additionally, breach of confidentiality is a risk of harm but a data security plan is in place to minimize such a risk. Also, some questions may make you feel uncomfortable. If that happens, you can skip those questions or withdraw from the study altogether. If you decide to quit the interview your responses will NOT be saved.

Are there any benefits to me if I choose to take part in this study?
By taking part in this research you will receive a $10.00 gift card and EOF workshop credit for your participation. You will be contributing to knowledge about how first-generation college students perceive and utilize support services, and how being a part of support programs like EOF impact these experiences.

Will I be paid to take part in this study?
You will receive a $10.00 gift card for your participation.

How will information about me be kept private or confidential?
All efforts will be made to keep your responses confidential, but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.
- We will not collect any information that can identify you or other subjects. Interview notes will be stored in a locked cabinet controlled by the investigator. Responses may be converted to digital format and stored on a password-protected computer that can only be accessed by the study team. Paper copies will then be destroyed. There is no plan to delete the responses. We plan to study the data for some time.

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No information that can identify you will appear in any professional presentation or publication.

What will happen to information I provide in the research after the study is over?
- The information collected about you for this research will not be used by or distributed to investigators for other research.
- What will happen if I do not want to take part or decide later not to stay in the study?
  Your participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part now, you may change your mind and withdraw later. In addition, you can choose to skip interview questions that you are not comfortable answering or stop the interview at any time. However, once the interview is over and we part ways, you can no longer withdraw your responses as we will not know which ones are yours.

Who can I call if I have questions?
If you have questions about taking part in this study, you can contact the Principal Investigator: Randi Ferguson
EOF Department, Rutgers University-Camden
860-550-5136
You can also contact my faculty advisor: Dr. Sharon Ryan, 848-932-0808

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you can contact the IRB Director at: New Brunswick/Piscataway Arts and Sciences IRB (732) 238-2866 or the Rutgers Human Subjects Protection Program at (973) 972-1149 or email us at humansubjects@ced.rutgers.edu.

Please keep this consent form if you would like a copy of it for your files.

**AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE**

1. **Subject consent:**
   I have read this entire consent form, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed. All of my questions about this form and this study have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

   Subject Name (printed): ________________________________

   Subject Signature: ___________________________ Date: __________

2. **Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:**
   To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed all the important details about the study including all of the information contained in this consent form.

   Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent (printed): __________

   Signature: ___________________________ Date: __________
ADDENDUM: CONSENT TO AUDIO-/VISUALLY
RECORD OR PHOTOGRAPH SUBJECTS

You have already agreed to take part in a research study entitled: An Interview Study of How First Generation, Low-Income Students Experience Social Capital in a Support Program at a Four-Year University, conducted by Randi Ferguson. We are asking your consent to allow us to audiotape you as part of the research. You do not have to consent to be recorded in order to take part in the main research.

The audio recording will be used to authentically capture your voice and experiences, as well as to be used for analysis by the research team when reviewing the data.

Depending on the information you identify within the audio recording, such as specific names referencing yourself or someone else, this information may identify you. However, when transcribing the audio of this study, your real name will not be used and instead you will be given a pseudonym so your information remains as unidentifiable as possible.

The audio and transcript of the audio recording will be uploaded and stored into the password protected computer of the principal investigator, who is the only person that has access to the data. All hard copies of data will be subsequently destroyed after completion of the study.

The audio recordings will not be used by us or distributed to investigators for other research.

Your signature on this form permits the investigator named above 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 consent.

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<th>AGREEMENT TO BE RECORDED</th>
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Subject Name (Print):__________________________________________

Subject Signature ___________________________ Date ________________

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent Name (Printed):________________________

Signature ___________________________ Date ________________

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