

8-1-2020

## First in College: A Qualitative Exploration of Experiences of First-Generation Students

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### Recommended Citation

Evans, R., Stansberry, D., Bullington, K. E., & Burnett, D. (2020). First in College: A Qualitative Exploration of Experiences of First-Generation Students. *Inquiry: The Journal of the Virginia Community Colleges*, 23 (1). Retrieved from <https://commons.vccs.edu/inquiry/vol23/iss1/5>

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# FIRST IN COLLEGE: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

REBECCA EVANS, DON STANSBERRY, KIM E. BULLINGTON, & DANA BURNETT

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate first-generation students' perceptions of how their lived experiences have impacted their academic and non-academic success. We utilized focus groups consisting of first-generation students who attended a rural community college and a large, public, metropolitan, research university, and compared their lived experiences. Our findings confirmed some past research that found that a lack of social capital, academic preparation, financial resources, and family support challenge this population of students in their transition to college. However, some of our results contradict past findings which have concluded that part-time enrollment increases the risk of first-generation student attrition. Most of our findings were consistent between the two groups of participants. Findings related to awareness of the availability of support services differed between the two samples.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

There is a significant gap in enrollment of first-generation students compared with peers with at least one parent who has attained a bachelor's degree (continuing-generation students). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the rate of postsecondary attendance for the first-generation student cohort who were high school sophomores in 2002 was 24% versus 42% for continuing-generation peers (Redford, Hoyer & Ralph, 2017). First-generation students also demonstrate a

higher probability of attrition than continuing-generation students (Gibson & Slate, 2010). NCES reports that for the same cohort of high school students, a lower percentage of first-generation college students than continuing generation peers had obtained a bachelor's degree by 2012 (20 vs. 42%).

Our qualitative research, conducted in two separate studies employing an identical research design, utilized focus groups to explore the experiences of first-generation college students enrolled at a large, public, research university and a small, public, rural community college. Both institutions are located in the Southeastern United States. Guiding questions used by focus group moderators targeted those experiences which students perceived had impacted academic and non-academic college success. Findings from these two separate investigations are compared along with those in the research literature from which the above profile has been drawn. The following research questions guided these studies:

- (1) What are the perceptions of first-generation college students enrolled at a public, rural community college and at a large, public research university of experiences that may impact their academic success?
  - (a) Do the perceptions of the two groups of students differ?
- 2) What are the perceptions of first-generation students enrolled at a public, rural community college, and at a large, public research university of experiences that may impact their nonacademic success?
  - a) Do the perceptions of the two groups of students differ?
- 3) What perceived challenges impacting their academic and non-academic success are identified by first-generation students enrolled at a public, rural community college and a large, public research university?
- 4) What personal factors do first-generation students attending a rural

community college and a large, public research university perceive may impact their college success?

- (a) Do the perceptions of the two groups differ?

### **FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS – DEFINED**

First-generation college students are defined in many ways. For example, one of the definitions used is that neither parent has completed a college degree (Choy, 2001; Gofen, 2009; McConnell, 2000; Pelco, Ball, & Lockeman, 2014). Others define the term as a situation in which one parent, but not both, graduated (Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). For the purpose of this article, to qualify as first-generation, neither parent nor guardian of a participant in our study had continued their education beyond high school. We use the term “continuing-generation” to identify students with at least one parent who attended postsecondary education.

### **FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS – CHARACTERISTICS**

Several characteristics distinguish students who are the first in their family to attend college from their continuing-generation peers. For example, first-generation students are more likely to come from low-income families, have work responsibilities (Garcia, 2010), have lower educational aspirations, and are more likely to be more financially independent than their non-first-generation peers (Bui, 2002; Davis, 2010; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). They are also more likely to encounter academic difficulty, financial hardships, and emotional challenges as compared to the experiences of their peers whose parents attended college (Housel, 2012). Students who are first in their immediate families to attend college are also more likely to come from groups of underrepresented minorities

(Martin Lohfink, & Paulsen, 2005).

Many first-generation students struggle to live in two worlds (Hsiao, 1992) the world of college and the world of family responsibilities. A large percentage of this group is somewhat older than their continuing-generation peers, they live off-campus, and they may have families to support (Hodges-Payne, 2006). They are more likely not to attend college full-time and to work a high number of hours (Chen, 2005; Ishitani, 2006; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). First-generation students generally work more and study less than their non- first-generation peers (Bryant, 2001; Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2003). Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) found that because first-generation students work more hours than their continuing-generation peers the likelihood of attrition increases.

First-generation students tend to lack an accurate understanding of the realities of post-secondary education, of the family income and support needed to attend college, of academic expectations for college-level study, and of what constitutes adequate college readiness (Pascarella et al., 2004). For example, Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, (1996) found that first-generation students tended to lack preparation in basic math and English and had less involvement with their peers and teachers in high school. They also entered college with lower GPAs, lower standardized admission test scores, and less confidence that they will experience academic success, persist, and graduate (Jehangir, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996).

#### **FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS – ROLE OF PARENTS**

Parents of first-generation students lack the social capital gained through the college experience, which is in contrast with parents of continuing- generation students who will often encourage their children to attend college and to persist once enrolled

(Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle, Bermeo, O'Brien, & Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, 2006; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2011). According to Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012), parents who did not attend college are generally less prepared to provide guidance, intervention, and appropriate support necessary for success in meeting the challenges of the pre-college and the college experience. For example, collectively, first-generation students tend to enroll in less selective institutions than do their peers whose parents attended college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

First-generation students are nearly four times more likely to drop out of college than their continuing-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This appears to be related, at least partially, to the lack of parental college experience (Engle et al., 2006; Garcia, 2010; Gofen, 2009; Horn & Nunez, 2000). Some researchers have explored whether first-generation college students underperform because family norms are mismatched with those of the university culture. Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, and Covarrubias (2012) found that the independence provided by the college culture negatively impacted first-generation students' likelihood of success. Conversely, this same study found that interdependence (being part of a community) was positively related to success.

Many parents of first-generation students may not understand the need for college (McConnell, 2000). Some may fear that their children will move away from home, may not be able to help with household responsibilities, or will undergo personal change while attending college (Gofen, 2009; McConnell, 2000; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Smith Morest (2013) found that parents of first-generation students are apprehensive about the cost of higher education and, as a result, often refrain from encouraging their children to pursue college. In particular, low-income families of first-generation students struggle to understand the benefits of any post-secondary education

(McConnell, 2000; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007).

### **FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS – ENGAGEMENT**

Through an analysis of the 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement data (NSSE), Pike, Kuh, and Massa-McKinley (2009) examined the relationship between “employment, engagement, and academic achievement” (p. 1) for first-generation students. They concluded that first-generation students were less engaged overall and less likely to participate in diverse college experiences. First-generation students also perceived the college environment as less supportive and reported making less progress in their learning and intellectual development. Additionally, first-generation students experienced more difficulty with their transition to college than their peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). These findings are consistent with much of the other research in this area.

Since many first-generation students work full-time or nearly full-time while attending college, the ability of many of these students to engage in social activities on campus is limited (D’Amico & Dika, 2013; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Lack of social connection with the college and peers results in less involvement in student organizations and extracurricular activities. This lack of social integration also results in first-time-in-college students feeling more isolated than their peers (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Conversely, the research of Fischer (2007) and Gibson and Slate (2010) confirm the strong correlation between first-year, first-generation student engagement with faculty and staff, and the motivation to persist in college.

### **METHODOLOGY**

An examination of the literature related to first-generation students revealed that most of the studies conducted to date have used a quantitative research design. Quantitative research provides useful generalities about students' experiences, but we

were interested in how first-generation students encounter their respective college experiences. We, therefore, decided to utilize a qualitative approach through a phenomenological lens utilizing focus group interviews. According to Patton (2002), “phenomenological analysis seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people” (p. 482). In doing so, we considered each student experience uniquely while looking for commonalities among the participants.

The importance of context in qualitative research refers to understanding “how participants create and give meaning to social experience” (Hayes & Singh, 2012, p. 6). We used focus groups to encourage open dialog within a safe setting.

Focus group participants were drawn from a purposeful sample of first-generation sophomore and (at the university only) senior students 18 years of age or older, and enrolled either at a public, metropolitan, research institution, or a rural community college. Both institutions were located in the Southeastern United States. We did not include transfer or international students in the sample.

Prospective focus group participants were contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. Potential participants were asked to respond to the email stating interest in the study and to provide their availability to aid in the scheduling of focus groups. Criteria used to identify students as first- generation for purposes of each of the studies was as follows:

- a) participants must be the age of 18 or older,
- b) parent may not have continued their education beyond high school,
- c) participants may not be transfer or international students.

After ensuring that the respondents met the criteria for inclusion in the study, students were invited to participate and confirm the date and time of their assigned focus group. Two



days prior to the scheduled focus group, a reminder email was sent to study participants to confirm time and location. The day before the scheduled focused group, participants were contacted by phone to remind them of the scheduled focus group meeting.

Qualitative data analysis is viewed as a cyclical process of reducing data, displaying data, drawing conclusions, and verification (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Transcripts from the focus groups were reviewed, bracketed, and coded into general meanings. The categories of general meanings were reviewed to highlight the common themes and subthemes that emerged. Following the completion of the coding process, the process of member checking ensured the themes and observations that emerged from the focus group interviews were accurate.

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#### **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UNIVERSITY FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS**

Sixteen males (seven sophomores, nine seniors) and 15 females (eight sophomores, seven seniors) shared their experiences in the university focus groups. Sophomore participants ranged in age from 19 to 21 years; 40% of the sophomores had attained the age of 20 years old (n=6). Participants identified their ethnicity as either Black (n=6) or White (n=8). The seniors ranged in age from 21 to 24 years old and

identified their ethnicity as either Black (n=7) or White (n=6).

Table 1 describes participants’ self-reported combined family income which ranged from under \$10,000.00 to \$50,000.00, with the majority of the participants having a combined family income of under \$30,000.00. Table 2 presents the student-described occupations of their parents.

Table 1

Combined Family Income of University Focus Group Participants

	Sophomores			Seniors		
			Cumulative			Cumulative
< \$10,000	2	13	13	3	19	19
\$10,000 to < \$15,000	3	20	33	2	12	31
\$15,000 to < \$20,000	3	20	53	2	12	43
\$20,000 to < \$30,000	3	20	73	3	19	62
\$30,000 to < \$40,000	4	27	100	6	38	100
\$40,000 to < \$50,000	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$50,000 to < Unreported	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 2

*Parent Occupations of University Focus Group Participants*

Occupation	<u>Sophomores</u>		<u>Seniors</u>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Father’s Occupation				
Administrative	1	7	0	0

Staff

Executive	0	0	0	0
Homemaker	0	0	0	0
Manager	1	7	1	6
Not Applicable	0	0	2	13
Officer/Enlisted	2	13	5	31
Retired/Disabled	2	13	1	6
Semiskilled	3	20	1	6
Manual				
Skilled Manual	5	33	4	25

Mother's Occupation

Administrative Staff	3	21	3	19
Executive	0	0	0	0
Homemaker	2	13	1	6
Manager	2	13	4	25
Not Applicable	0	0	0	0
Officer/Enlisted	2	13	2	13
Retired/Disabled	0	0	1	6
Semiskilled	2	13	3	19
Skilled Manual	2	13	1	6

**CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS**

Participants from the community college included a total of four males (two first-year, two second-year) and 17 females (six first-year, 11 second-year). First-year participants ranged in age from 18 to 45, and second-year participants ranged in age from 19 to 60. Participants identified their ethnicity as White ( $n = 14$ ), Hispanic ( $n = 4$ ), or Black ( $n = 3$ ). The marital status of first-year students included single ( $n = 5$ ), married ( $n = 1$ ), separated ( $n = 1$ ), and divorced ( $n = 1$ ). The marital status of second-year students included single ( $n = 10$ ) and married ( $n = 3$ ). Three first-year and five second-year students reported being parents. Forty-three percent of participants ( $n = 9$ ) were enrolled in a university transfer program. Table 3 depicts the community college

focus group participants' self-reported family income.

**Table 3**

*Combined Family Income of Community College Focus Group Participants*

	First-year			Second-year		
		Cumulative			Cumulative	
< \$10,000	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$10,000 to < \$15,000	1	12.5	12.5	1	8	8
\$15,000 to < \$20,000	0	0	0	1	8	16
\$20,000 to < \$30,000	1	12.5	25	4	30	46
\$30,000 to < \$40,000	1	12.5	37.5	0	0	0
\$40,000 to < \$50,000	1	12.5	40	3	24	70
\$50,000 to <	1	12.5	52.5	4	30	100
Unreported	3	37.5	100	0	0	0

Table 4

*Parents' Occupations of Community College Focus Group Participants*

Occupation	<u>First-year</u>		<u>Second-Year</u>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Father's Occupation				
Computer Repair	1	12.5	0	0
Construction	1	25	2	15
Farming	0	0	2	30
Electrician	1	37.5	0	0
Sales	0	0	1	38
Semiskilled Manual	0	0	4	69
Skilled Manual	2	62.5	2	84
Truck Driver	1	75	0	0
Unreported	2	100	2	100
Mother's Occupation				
Administrative Staff	1	12.5	1	8
Bank Teller	2	37.5	0	0
Childcare Provider	0	0	1	16
Homemaker	0	0	2	32
Cook	1	50	0	0
Dental Assistant	1	62.5	0	0
Homemaker	1	75	3	54
Laborer	0	0	1	62
Postal Worker	0	0	1	70
Self-Employed	1	87.5	1	78
Unemployed	1	100	1	86
Unreported	0	0	2	100

## RESULTS

Through analysis and collection of focus group data, three major themes emerged:

1. What experiences focus group first-generation college students perceived impacted their academic success?
2. What non-cognitive experiences aided first-generation students through their college experience, and
3. How self-efficacy and commitment to goals aided first-generation student success.

Within each theme, sub-themes also merged which highlighted the differences in perception between the two groups of students studied, first-generation students enrolled at a public, rural community college, and first-generation students attending a large, public research university.

### **THEME ONE: PERCEPTIONS OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS THAT MAY IMPACT THEIR ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

Support services were noted by both samples of students as a remedy for missing social capital. However, the experiences of university students differed from what was experienced by the community college students. University focus group participants expressed that they wished they would have known more about career choices, scholarships, options of majors, and more details about the courses required for specific majors. There was a high level of frustration related to course scheduling and references were made to making the wrong class choices as they determined their program path. One student shared, “they do not tell you what you need to know and we do not know the requirements.” Many participants were unaware of the available

resources and how to access them. “Institutions tell you they have resources but they do not tell you how to use the resources,” explained one student. Findings from other studies have concluded that first-generation students are less likely to use student support systems on campus (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1996). These findings from previous research were supported by the focus group participants enrolled at the university site.

Conversely, first-generation students enrolled at the community college frequently credited the support services and resources available to them as being reasons they have succeeded. Among the most noted services were academic advising, financial aid, career services, and peer tutoring. Repeatedly, academic advisors were noted to motivate first-generation students to persist. During her focus group, a traditional-aged first-year student shared her experience with an advisor.

*She’s just such an encouragement. I go in and she builds me up and praises [sic] the accomplishment [sic] that I’ve done. I think that’s been a real encouragement when I don’t know which direction to go or what class to choose. She’s really great.*

The positive experiences of community college participants with helpful support staff included financial aid advisors. As finances were cited as a constant source of stress for students, the assistance provided by the financial aid advisors helped students remain enrolled. Both community college and four-year first-generation students expressed significant concern both about how to pay for college and the process of applying for financial aid. One university student said, “I didn’t know anything about the financial aid process and how to get available scholarships.” Another student expressed a significant level of financial concern by stating, “It is crippling when you think about the level of debt you have.” A community college focus group participant echoed these

same worrisome concerns.

*It was really, really overwhelming. Extremely overwhelming. Obviously, my parents were like, you should go to college, you really should, you need to go. But then they were like; we're not paying for it. You go get a job and you go pay for it yourself. That was scary when you're coming out of high school and you have a little itty-bitty paying job. You get your gas in your car and that's about it. That was kind of worrisome like I guess I'm taking one class because that's what I can afford. Until I saw the grants and the scholarships. That helped out tremendously. But yeah, man, that first semester I felt like I was in water drowning, because I had no clue what was going on, and my parents could not help because they were clueless too. They had no clue.*

One second-year, community college, non-traditional student and single mother of three young children, provided multiple examples of how the financial aid advisors provided resources that helped her succeed against what she cited as great odds.

*I only applied, you know, thinking I was going to get one scholarship and they gave me two. Like now I have enough money where if I need to pay somebody for some extra study time, I have that instead of trying to bribe my kids to go to bed at 6:30. I have that. She also went out of her way to tell me about, you know, resources out there that would help you, like this Early Head Start Program.*

By becoming this student's champion, the financial aid staff offered this low-income single mother the opportunity to succeed academically, reduced her stress significantly, and allowed her to earn a degree in nursing.



## THEME TWO: PERCEPTIONS OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS OF NON-COGNITIVE EXPERIENCES THAT RELATE TO THEIR SUCCESS

**Parents and families.** University students consistently mentioned parents and families as having an impact on their experience and were noted as supporters and motivators. Since 1971, the number of first-generation college students who have reported that the reason they attend college is that their parents want them to has doubled (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Ishitani (2006) reported that family support and encouragement positively impact a student's ability to be successful during their college journey. The findings from our study support the results in the Ishitani (2006) study. A sophomore shared, "my parents have always supported me. They are blindly supporting me now. They trust me to do what's right, but, they do not know what I am going through."

Although the family, mostly defined as parents, was consistently identified as playing an important role for first-generation students, parents and families were often described as lacking the knowledge and understanding of the college experience. One student said, "It's hard to do this on your own. There is no one to tell you the little secrets or loopholes." Another student expressed, "They [parents] have no idea what I am doing, so I have to figure it out on my own." The majority of the university participants did not seek help or advice from anyone such as a parent, teacher, or guidance counselor in dealing with the issues that arose during the application process or once enrolled. Choy (2001) concurs that first-generation students have less support concerning preparation for college from parents who did not attend college.

The participants indicated that they felt pressure as a first-generation student to make their families proud. All of the focus groups consistently had a theme of family encouragement and support as an important contributor to the college experience. A

senior excitedly shared her story of going home for breaks, “whenever I go home, I tell my story and brag about everything I have learned. They don’t fully understand, but it makes them proud.” A sense of pride and accomplishment as the first in the family to graduate emerged as a reason for the students’ drive for graduation.

Although many of the participants felt a deep sense of pride in being first in the family to attend college, many of them perceived themselves as normal college students and had not thought about being a first-generation student. Their participation in the focus group process was noted as the first time for many of the participants to take the time to think about their experiences through the lens of a first-generation student. Throughout the discussions, they identified more similarities than differences with their continuing-generation peers and were challenged to identify differences in their experiences.

Contrasted with the parental support and motivation to attend and succeed in college described by students enrolled at the university, community college participants did not seem to sense the same parental enthusiasm for college attendance. This seemed to result in self-motivation as the primary ingredient to their success.

A first-year community college student discussed how his family’s non-support of his plan to earn a college degree motivated him to succeed “for me, it’s a sense of pride because I’m the youngest in my family and there’s nobody else that went to college.” First-generation students are proud of the fact that they are the first and are succeeding in doing something no one in their family has done before. Another second-year community college student shared,

*I think we might end up taking things less for granted than someone whose parents had gone to college and it’s just the thing to do. For us, we’re pushing*

*ourselves over and above what the previous generations did. We realize that what we're getting, we're working for it.*

Pride in being a first-generation student and a role model for other family members motivated one second-year community college student to complete her degree “I have a little cousin. When we all get together, my little cousin who's 22, and is now talking about going to college is like, ‘I'm going to beat you in college.’ ” While another first-year student also found she had become a role model for her sister which had motivated her. She states “she's seen me doing it and now she's like, I don't see how you do it with three kids. If you can do it with three kids, I know that I can do it.”

Repeatedly, students shared that although some family members did not support the students' pursuit of a college education, the family was a driving force for the majority of study participants.

**Self-efficacy.** Many university participants described themselves as having a high sense of independence and self-motivation. Participants were used to the challenges of being self-sufficient, working, and balancing school with other commitments. They explained how their success depended on their abilities and how they held themselves accountable for their actions. Participants also explained that they encouraged themselves to be successful and were self-driven to attend college and complete a degree. Overall, they defined themselves as achievers. They acknowledged the barriers (social, economic, or cultural) that they faced getting into and navigating college. “We should be proud of where we are. Others are not here. Just being here makes us successful,” shared one participant.

In the community college focus groups, we heard the same theme. Community college students spoke about determination, commitment to goals, stubbornness, and having a strong work ethic. For example, a second-year student

shared how she struggled to find a new balance in her life after separating from her husband and changing jobs while attending college. She comments that

*For me, it's a bit of stubbornness. I've been tempted to give up, especially this semester with everything in my personal life really upside down. I'm like, no, I've come too far, I've worked too hard, I've done too much to give up now. I can't quit now.*

This student's demonstration of self-efficacy and determination confirms previous research that determination and self-efficacy are important ingredients for every students' success. In many casesm these traits may be even more essential (Martin, 2002; Martin & Marsh, 2006). Academic resiliency is essential for motivation to succeed even when confronted with challenges and stress (Hansen, Trujillo, Boland, & MacKinnon, 2014).

A second-year community college student shared how he had to learn everything himself. After leaving college for a year and a half he returned when he felt more focused and in the right "head space". He credits his experiences learning the "system" to building his self-confidence. The student shared

*I kind of have to educate myself as I go about learning how all this works, how degrees work, how credits and all this stuff, this whole bureaucracy works. In terms of money, trying to find financial aid and things like that. I'm having to teach myself, find it myself because my parents really can't.*

Another second-year community college student shared how her struggle to start college allowed her to be more self-assured as a student. She shared how her experiences created a sense of pride in her accomplishments.

*I think it is because you come in not knowing, you come in blind. And you have no clue how to pay for it, you have no clue what you're going to do. You have no*

*clue what classes are going to be like. But then you succeed and you get to where you need to be and you turn around and then you go, I did that.*

Several community college students noted that managing their time helped them to succeed in their courses. Many focus group participants were parents juggling not only work and school, but also children and family responsibilities. They agreed that putting things off could result in failing their courses. One student shared her need for a routine in her life.

Getting a schedule going has been really helpful. You could always not do it, but I'm the type of person that's just like, "I've got to get my stuff done." So it does help me.

Self-efficacy, the ability to be self-sufficient, and balancing school with other commitments proved to be essential for first-generation student success. These students confirmed that their success was dependent on their ability to hold themselves accountable for their actions.

### **THEME THREE: COMMITMENT TO GOALS, STUBBORNNESS AND THE ABILITY TO PERSIST EVEN WHEN CHALLENGED WITH PERSONAL CONFLICTS RESULT IN FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT SUCCESS**

**Involvement.** Many university participants were involved in activities outside of the classroom including volunteering, playing football, participating in fraternities, clubs/organizations, club sports, and partying and just relaxing. One participant shared “I am paying for it so I want to take advantage of everything. I live my life.” Another participant shared, “life outside of work and school is boring unless you get involved.” Several of the university focus group participants agreed “finding clubs to join is very easy.” Campus involvement and social networking/“connectivity” were a great means for some and led to jobs and social opportunities on and offcampus. A senior participant

identified his biggest regret about his experience was related to his involvement, “my biggest regret is not getting fully involved.” Students repeatedly agreed that involvement in groups and activities outside of the classroom helped them feel that they belonged in college.

Not all community college focus group participants found the time to participate in on-campus activities, or student clubs and organizations. But those who did cite the benefit of building relationships with their peers as helping them to feel college was the right place to be. Other studies have described social integration as important to the success of first-year college students (Kuh et al., 2008; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Whitt, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora, 2001). By connecting students to the college through peer interaction and participation in student organizations, students begin to see their place in college as the correct place for them (Terenzini et al., 1996).

One second-year community college student shared how her involvement in a student organization had helped her gain confidence and to integrate into the campus environment.

*I've done so much through that group it really helped me grow as a person.*

*When I first came here I feel like I was very different than I am today.*

Not only did her involvement in a student organization result in her bonding with her peers and feeling more comfortable, but she also shared how involvement resulted in new skills development.

*I think they helped me in many different ways. I actually helped organize one of the events on campus last year. That was a totally new experience for me. It turned out really great and it gave me more confidence in myself.*

Another student shared how playing on the soccer team was one of his most memorable experiences in college. While this student struggled to maintain a passing

GPA, he found motivation and support through his involvement in this student organization.

*They've done quite a wonderful job. Most of us don't really have model figures it somewhat helps with school because the next day you want to come back.*

Student clubs and organizations were not the only conduits for students to build relationships with their peers. Several students noted how peer study groups helped them to succeed in their classes and build bonds with their classmates. One community college student, noted that when taking a class over the summer the number of students in the class was small. Although that class had a small number of students enrolled, they shared experiences, which resulted in friendships that extended after the end of the course.

*It was a smaller class. We just had the best time together, and we still keep in touch with each other.*

Another first-year student shared how study groups not only help community college students build relationships but also helped her to learn different study skills.

*I just had my A&P study group. It was nice because it was a group of students and when we were, you know, conversing about everything it was interesting to see how they remembered things compared to me.*

Repeatedly, first-generation students referenced the opportunity to discuss class material and study with their peers as a tool for success. A community college student majoring in Veterinarian Technology shared how a program-specific study lab aided in her success.

*We have a study lab strictly for the Veterinarian Technology program. A lot of us will go in there and study together or do projects, kind of talk through different things that we're having trouble with.*

General agreement was heard across all of the focus groups of how a strong sense of self-efficacy, pride in being the first to attend college, and relationships with peers aid first-generation students succeed in higher education.

**Financial issues.** Both community college and four-year first-generation students expressed significant concern both about how to pay for college and the process of applying for financial aid. One university student said, “I didn’t know anything about the financial aid process and how to get available scholarships.” Another student expressed a significant level of financial concern by stating, “It is crippling when you think about the level of debt you have.”

A community college focus group participant echoed these same worrisome concerns.

*It was really, really overwhelming. Extremely overwhelming. Obviously, my parents were like, you should go to college, you really should, you need to go. But then they were like; we're not paying for it. You go get a job and you go pay for it yourself. That was kind of worrisome like I guess I'm taking one class because that's what I can afford until I saw the grants and the scholarships. That helped out tremendously.*

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Findings gleaned from our study confirm past research. First- generation students, no matter what the size or type of their institution, reported that lack of social capital was the greatest challenge and risk to student retention. It is interesting to note that although study participants in each of the two studies shared many of the same experiences, there were some differences. These differences include the following:



- Community college students felt the size and type of institution were a good fit for their academic pursuits.
- The study completed at the larger urban university found students reporting that they struggled to locate the resources designed to provide help including support services.
- Social integration was noted by both student samples as being important to their academic success, however, the community college students were less likely than the university first-generation students to engage in student organizations and clubs. Social integration for these students was found mainly in the form of study groups and peer-to-peer networking.
- Determination and self-motivation were characteristics that our participants self-reported as important to their success.

Our research, which investigated the experiences of first-generation community college and university students, confirmed the need to create clear pathways into and throughout the college experience for all first-generation students.

The current study's findings confirm past research that specialized first-generation orientation programs are needed to fill the social capital gap (Tsai, 2012). We also suggest specialized programs for families of first-generation students, as well as academic and financial advising designed for the needs of first-generation students for all campuses. Marketing these tailored services to the first-generation student will help to fill the void of lack of social capital and parental involvement for this growing population of college students. Implementation of these specialized services and support resources should be monitored and assessed to determine whether these tools increase first-generation student retention and completion.

First-generation students are an important growing population of students

on college campuses. Additional research should focus on an assessment of support services designed to aid student success and longitudinal, cohort-based research. Research which will be especially valuable for continuing this preliminary look at the experiences of first-generation students in college

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