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First-Generation Women Students' Perceptions of Support While Enrolled in Higher Education Institutions: A Phenomenological Study

Erin Blankenship Messmer
East Tennessee State University

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by

Erin Blankenship Messmer

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Dr. Jill Channing, Chair

Dr. Hal Knight

Dr. James Lampley

Dr. Carla Warner

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ABSTRACT

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This phenomenological study used qualitative research methods to explore the perceptions of support first-generation women students enrolled in college have. Eleven first-generation women students who were enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs across the United States completed one-on-one interviews with the researcher. The participants explained the support they felt from family, friends, and members of their college or university, as well as areas where further support could be given. In these interviews, key themes emerged, such as the roles of mentorship and emotional support, the need for financial assistance, the role of family in support and providing cultural capital, the roles of intersectional factors such as race and motherhood, and the offering of support during a crisis, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings from this study can be used to further institutional practice of guiding and supporting first-generation women students.

DEDICATION

I have never doubted the strength of women. I credit that to the three most important women in my life, to whom this work is dedicated.

My grandmother, Janice, whose courage and optimism endure through the hardest of times.

My grandmother, Barbara, who led a life of grace, dignity, and unfailing love for her family.

And my mother, Monica, whose resiliency, kind heart, and enduring love are the strengths that lift me.

These beautiful, wise, wonderous women are my guideposts.

I love you all. Thank you for everything. I will carry you with me forever.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Among the large number of students attending college in the United States of America is a unique group known as first-generation students. These students have been described as students whose parents had no more than a high-school education (Ward et al., 2012). They have also been defined as students whose parents may have begun college but never completed their baccalaureate degree (Ward et al., 2012). Whether their parents have limited or no higher education experience, first-generation students are generally viewed as a group in need of support (Ward et al., 2012).

First-generation students are more likely than their peers to have poor academic preparation for college, limited knowledge about college curriculum, and fewer available finances (Ward et al., 2012). Chatelain (2018) argued that first-generation students are guided on how to achieve good grades and to be admitted to a university, but they are not given guidance on how to navigate the world of higher education once they get there. First-generation students are at a distinct disadvantage upon their college admittance.

One of the greatest disadvantages first-generation students face is a lack of social capital. Social capital is a resource that relies on relationships between individuals who can provide access to resources of different kinds (Ward et al., 2012). Generally, students with college-educated parents have a resource to assist them in making sound decisions regarding their education and how to proceed (Ward et al., 2012). Their parents provide them with a fountain of knowledge and assistance. Davis (2010) called this resource generational wisdom. Students whose parents completed college can learn about college culture from them (Davis, 2010). Their parents serve as guides, which Davis (2010) identified that first-generation students do not have.

First-generation students often do not have parental guidance in determining what academic and social decisions to make while in college (Ward et al., 2012). This puts them at a distinct social disadvantage after they arrive at college. They have limited resources to turn to for help.

The lack of social capital that first-generation students have is compounded further by their intersecting identities. The term intersectionality was introduced in the 1980s to describe the complex nature of differences and similarities between individuals, as it pertained to social-political movements and anti-discrimination practices (Cho et al., 2013). Carastathis (2014) noted that the theory originated out of Black feminist thought. As a feminist theory, intersectionality highlights the relationship between multiple aspects of people's identities and systems of oppression that exist in society (Carastathis, 2014).

First-generation students are characterized by intersecting identities. They are more likely to be ethnic or racial minorities, members of lower socioeconomic classes, and older than their peers (Sy et al., 2011). First-generation students are also more likely to be women (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Each of these identity groups face their own set of challenges when navigating the world of higher education.

For women, these challenges can be vast. Women may experience greater pressure from their families to serve as caretaker while attending school (Sy & Brittian, 2008). This caretaking can be in the form of contributing financially to the household, caring for family members, or simply spending time with the family (Sy & Brittian, 2008). This expectation is often associated with gender stereotypes and cultural expectations (Sy & Brittian, 2008). Women are also likely to experience stress in their academic and personal lives (Larson, 2006).

Institutional engagement with, and support of, first-generation students during their college career is crucial to their success (Ward et al., 2012). Student engagement practices benefit all students, regardless of background (Kuh, 2009). Kuh (2009) noted engagement by students who are academically underprepared can have positive effects on those students' grades and performance. However, Pascarella et al. (2004) indicated that first-generation college students have a more difficult time becoming involved in campus events and opportunities due to their heavy workloads and their tendency to live off-campus. Pascarella et al. also found that outside commitments, such as work, athletics, or volunteering, have a significantly more negative impact on the growth of first-generation students than of that of their peers. The outside commitments and lack of access to campus make it difficult for first-generation students to have social interactions with their peers outside of the classroom (Pascarella et al., 2004). The benefit of becoming involved with campus life is great, but first-generation students do not have as much ability to reap those benefits as their peers.

It is with this in mind that some institutions have taken steps to reach out to first-generation students. Florida Atlantic University, for example, opened an Office of First-Generation Student Success, which oversees individual programs that promote academic support, financial advisement and assistance, and degree completion (Piper, 2018). Meanwhile, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor offers the First-Generation Student Gateway, which is a space for students to ask questions about everyday university life (Piper, 2018). These types of offices are just one way that institutions are reaching out to first-generation students. Students' access to these resources and the ability to use them are points for further exploration.

Due to the large number of women and first-generation students enrolled in college, it is significant to study how first-generation students are supported on an institutional level. This dissertation is a phenomenological study, using interviews to learn how first-generation women students attending college perceive the support they receive while enrolled in higher education institutions. Using the critical feminist theory and a framework of intersectionality theory, I will explore the intersections of gender, race, and socioeconomic status as they pertain to first-generation women students and their perceptions of forms of support.

Statement of the Problem

With multiple barriers to face, many first-generation students need multiple types of support. The assistance of higher education entities can fulfill a critical role in the lives of these students. Ward et al. (2012) claimed that productive learning environments are focused on student learning and outcomes. Some colleges and universities have taken steps to achieve this focus, while others still have work to do (Ward et al., 2012). Studies also highlight the role of family support in first-generation and low-income students' academic journeys (Gofen, 2009; Roksa & Kinsley, 2019).

Considering intersectionality in the lives of first-generation students is critical to understanding how they experience institutional support. Race, gender, and socioeconomic class all play a role in the development of students' identities, as well as in creating and limiting possibilities for them. Pascarella et al. (2004) highlighted the challenge that first-generation students face when becoming active participants on their campus. Work and life obligations hinder their ability to get involved with their institutional community (Pascarella et al., 2004). Other aspects of the student's identity may assist in this interference. Therefore, it is important to examine how first-generation women students experience support amid their intersecting identities.

The problem addressed in this study is that first-generation women students may experience critical differences in the amount of support they receive on their educational journeys in comparison to their non-first-generation peers and that these differences may not be fully known to higher education administrators. The multiple intersections of their identities may contribute to the problem. Data for this study were collected through open-ended interviews with first-generation women students. Their narratives about their experiences shed light on this study's focus.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of first-generation college women as it pertains to the support they receive as students. In this study, support will be generally defined as any form of guidance, assistance, or mentorship offered by family, friends, or any branch of, or person working at, the higher education institution the student is attending. The study was conducted using participants from across the United States.

Research Questions

This qualitative research study was driven by the following questions:

1. What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about their academic and emotional needs?
2. What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about their perceptions of forms of support?
3. What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about the role that identity intersectionality plays in today's higher education environment?
4. What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about the ways crises are handled by higher education institutions?

Significance of the Study

This study has several implications on regional and national levels. First, Cataldi et al. (2018) for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Institute of Education Sciences (IES) found that one-third of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the United States were first-generation. This is a significant percentage of students facing challenges in today's higher education environment. Such a large group is worthy of study, and it is worthwhile to know more about them.

This study also has implications for filling a gap in the literature regarding first-generation students. While the literature on first-generation college students is vast, literature specifically targeted on first-generation women students is an emerging arena. This study can provide more voices to the ever-growing story of first-generation women students.

Finally, this study has the potential to provide higher education practitioners with a greater understanding of how to support first-generation women. Patton (2015) identified that qualitative research has the potential to shine a light on systemic issues and possible solutions. By analyzing the results of this study, practitioners can learn more about how to support and mentor first-generation women students so they succeed as students.

Definition of Terms

The following terms will be defined as listed below:

- *First-generation college student-* A student whose parents did not attend college or a student whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree (Ward et al., 2012). Both definitions have been used over the years and can both change how research is analyzed (Ward et al., 2012). For the purposes of this study, first-generation college students will refer to students whose parents or single-parent do not have a four-year college degree.

- *Woman/Women-* Broadly, the term refers to “an adult human female” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Typically used to reference biology, today’s definition of woman/women is more encompassing. This study will use woman/women to refer to anyone who identifies as such, either cisgender or transgender.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study is limited by its participants. It is assumed that participants will be honest and forthcoming in their experiences. However, responses will be the expressed perspectives and perceptions of the participants specifically. The perspectives gathered in this study may not be those of other first-generation women students across the country or the world. As such, the results of the study are another limitation. Data collected cannot be generalized to the entire population of first-generation women students because of the qualitative lens being used to conduct the study. Rather, this data may be transferable to readers who find similarities between their own experience and that of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) also refer to this as fittingness, which they define as “the degree of congruence between sending and receiving contexts” (p. 124). If the context of the research data and that of a reader are similar, the transferability of perspectives may be present (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher cannot make a data transfer happen (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rather, they can provide rich and thick description to an audience that may be able to cause a transfer to occur (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Furthermore, the phenomenon explored in this study serves as a limitation. It is assumed that definitions of women and first-generation students are clear and that consistent meaning is held in the research. It is further assumed that participants will understand what support means as it pertains to them and their experiences.

This study is delimited by the geographic location of its participants. As previously mentioned, women are more likely to experience familial pressure to serve as caretakers than men are, due to gender stereotypes and cultural expectations. Previous research has indicated that the southern United States is a more conservative region of the country, but that some stereotypes and views are beginning to change (Kaufman, 2005). Although this study is not centered in the Southeastern United States, some participants may be from this region. This may limit the support experiences that some first-generation women students have had.

This study is further delimited by the definitions used within it. The definition of first-generation students varies among literature. The results of this study will only be telling the perspective of one definition of first-generation students. Furthermore, participants may have different understandings of what support is or how it pertains to their lived experiences. As such, their responses may not speak to anticipated responses, nor have much overlap with one another.

Overview of the Study

This study comprises of five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the topics of focus, provides a statement of the problem being examined, highlights the purpose statement, describes the significance of the study, addresses the research questions which guide the study, provides definitions of key terms, and limitations and delimitations to the study. Chapter 2 presents a collection of literature relevant to the study, including pertinent information about the issues facing first-generation students and women on college campuses. Chapter 3 explains the design of the study, including an overview of research questions, the data collection method, ethical considerations, population sampling, and trustworthiness. Chapter 4 provides research results. Finally, chapter 5 discusses the research results, implications for higher education practice, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2. Review of Literature

Years of literature show disagreements on how to define first-generation college students (Ward et al., 2012). Definitions include “a student for whom neither parent attended college” and “a student for whom neither parent attained a baccalaureate degree” (Ward et al., 2012). Both definitions present first-generation students as being the children of parents with limited or no background in higher education. The decision of which definition to use influences an institution’s final headcount of how many first-generation students they serve (Ward et al., 2012). The decision also influences how much service the institution needs to provide, seeing as how students whose parents have some educational background have an advantage over students whose parents have none (Ward et al., 2012).

First-generation students break the intergenerational inheritance mold (Gofen, 2009). Gofen (2009) suggested that children inherit their parents’ educational level, which makes first-generation students an abnormality. By attending college, first-generation students are going against the grain. They are diverging from their familial norms. As such, first-generation students may encounter stress when navigating college (Sy et al., 2011). The environment is new to them and to their families and places them in a position of having a “cultural mismatch” (Sy et al., 2011).

The differences between first-generation students and their peers are apparent upon their enrollment in college. High school preparation plays a critical role in a student's college performance. High school students who complete a rigorous curriculum are likely to have strong levels of persistence during their college careers (Warburton et al., 2001). Persistence “...can be defined as the collective actions and behaviors taken by students that result in the acquisition of a degree" (Hagedorn et al., 2002). Persistence is not equivalent to retention (Hagedon et al., 2002). Rather, persistence leads to retention (Hagedon et al., 2002).

Unfortunately, first-generation students are less likely than their continuing-generation peers to partake in rigorous high school curriculums (Warburton et al., 2001). This makes the transition to college specifically difficult for first-generation students. College requires students to use a more advanced skill set than they did in high school and pits the demands of management of one's resources and the demand of working against one another (Larson, 2006). This can negatively influence the academic performance of first-generation students. Furthermore, first-generation students are less likely to take standardized tests for college entry and are more likely to perform poorly on such exams (Warburton et al., 2001) They are also less likely to complete Advanced Placement courses than their peers (Warburton et al., 2001). These facts make it seem that the deck is stacked against first-generation students.

During college, first-generation students are more likely to live off-campus, work full-time, and take classes part-time (Tinto & Engle, 2008). They are also more likely to attend public universities (Warburton et al., 2001). Many first-generation students are likely to take a remedial course during their first year of college (Warburton et al., 2001). Inman and Mayes (1996) noted that first-generation students entering community colleges have more personal income and fewer family members than their non-first-generation peers. However, in comparison to their non-first-generation peers, first-generation students in community colleges come from lower-income families and have more people in their lives who are financially dependent on them (Inman & Mayes, 1996). Furthermore, these first-generation community college students are more likely to be women with families who are beginning college during the middle of their lives as opposed to immediately out of high-school (Inman & Mayes, 1996).

The differences between first-generation students and their peers continue as they work towards graduation. First-generation students are less likely to graduate in their fourth or fifth year of college attendance than their peers (Ishitani, 2006). Among first-generation students, women are more likely to graduate within a four-year period than their male counterparts (Ishitani, 2006). Furthermore, the rate of graduating Hispanic and Black first-generation students is significantly lower than the rate of White first-generation students (Ishitani, 2006).

Demetriou et al. (2017) discovered that students who described themselves as undergraduates often felt like imposters when beginning their college journey (p. 30). Positive thoughts and self-messages were important to these students in order to shake off that imposter feeling (Demetriou et al., 2017). Being open to change, feeling independent, viewing challenges as a chance for growth, and being willing to take risks were identified as important characteristics for first-generation students to have to be successful in college (Demetriou et al., 2017). First-generation students entering community colleges noted that they relied on their personal grit and time management skills to achieve their academic goals (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Life experiences and family motivations have a greater impact on first-generation students feeling prepared for college than academic experiences (Byrd & MacDonald, 2001). Students felt these factors gave them the focus, time management skills, and ability to advocate for themselves that they need to succeed in college (Byrd & MacDonald, 2001).

First-generation students are comprised of many characteristics. Most first-generation students are women (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). First-generation students are also likely to come from a minority background, be non-native English speakers, and be financially independent of their parents (Tinto & Engle, 2008). They are also at greater risk of dropping out of college than their peers (Ishitani, 2016). The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2020) furthered Ishitani's (2016) finding. Participants noted that they were more likely than their non-first-generation peers to drop out of classes or college due to working full time, caring for dependents, being academically underprepared, or lacking finances (Community College Survey of Student Engagement [CCSSE], 2020). However, first-generation students were less likely to drop-out of community college or classes due to transferring to a four-year institution, while their non-first-generation peers were more likely to leave for that reason (CCSSE, 2020).

Women in Higher Education

As previously noted, first-generation students are more likely to be women (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). The history of women in higher education is one of great growth. Despite being excluded from formal education efforts at the inception of universities, women found a place at institutions that were crafted specifically for them (Morris, 2011). The Georgia Female College of Macon (now Wesleyan College) and Oberlin College admitted women in the 1830s, two hundred years after Harvard University had admitted its first class of men (Morris, 2011). In the years that followed, Vassar, Wellesley, Smith, and Bryn Mawr were created, providing more educational opportunities to women (Morris, 2011). As time progressed, more women were granted the opportunity to enroll at public and private institutions across the United States (Morris, 2011).

As higher education progressed, the role of women in academia grew. Pike and Kuh (2005) noted that women had outnumbered male students for over fifteen years in higher education. However, the obstacles that women face have transformed since the 1800s. Women are more likely than men to enroll part-time at an institution (Hagedon et al., 2002). Adair (2001) wrote, "Prior to welfare reform in 1996, tens of thousands of poor single mothers quietly accessed postsecondary education …" (p. 219), but that many of these women left college soon after due to the welfare reform restrictions of 1996 and a lack of educators willing to adapt to their needs. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) reported that men first-generation students are 9.4% more likely to persist towards completing college than women first-generation students are (p. 415).

Regardless of their enrollment status, women are often predominantly in charge of or responsible for childcare, domestic tasks at home, and are employed alongside being enrolled in college (Hagedon et al., 2002). This is especially true for community college students. In their research study, Inman and Mayes (1996) found that first-generation students at community colleges tend to be women with families to provide for and who are entering college at a later point in their lives than the traditional-aged student. Persisting through college requires outstanding time management abilities (Hagedon et al., 2002). The highest sources of stress for college women connect to their academic success and their development of multiple relationships (Larson, 2006). Eitel and Martin (2009) offered insight into the financial literacy support that first-generation female students have. The authors indicated that this population needs financial literacy education, specifically students of color (Eitel & Martin, 2009). Part of what makes first-generation students unique is the intersection of their identities, as noted by Piper (2018).

Women also face challenges in how their male counterparts perceive them. Kaufman (2005) explored college students' perspectives on gender roles in a heterosexual marriage and learned that women anticipate doing more housework than their husbands, while men anticipate being at work for longer hours than their wives (p. 68). Furthermore, although both men and women had expectations for their spouses working outside of the home, more men hoped that their wives would eventually stay at home than women who wanted to do so (Kaufman, 2005).

Intersectionality

As authors of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE, 2020) noted, first-generation students face challenges that non-first-generation students do not. To better understand first-generation students and the differences they experience, it is critical to view their identities through an intersectional lens. Intersectionality provides a lens for viewing how the world is constructed through multiple intersections of identity (Crenshaw, 1991). The concept of intersectionality was first explored by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991). In her article, Crenshaw used intersectionality to explain the overlapping identities of Black women to understand violence directed at them. Crenshaw argued that racism and sexism were both at hand in creating this violence, something that prior feminist and anti-racist discourse had not considered (p. 1243). Carastathis (2014) furthered this explanation, offering that intersectionality posits "that oppression is not a singular process or a binary political relation, but is better understood as constituted by multiple, converging, or interwoven systems…" (p. 304). Essentially, intersectional theorists argue that understanding the connection of multiple identities is essential to understanding how an individual is treated in society.

Today, intersectionality is commonly used to refer to the many ways people identify, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality (Cooper et al., 2017). However, some scholars insist that the term be used the way Crenshaw originally intended, "to foreground the interacting and interlocking nature of systems of power on marginalized communities, particularly Black women" (Cooper et al. 2017). Knowing that first-generation students are more likely to be women, minorities, and lower-class, intersectionality is a great way to explore the systems of oppression facing first-generation students in their attainment of higher education. For example, in her study on the transition from high school to college made by White and Black first-generation men, Wilkens (2014) found that white men had an easier time establishing their identities on campus than Black men did. Identity scripts that were met in high school either helped or hurt the men when they began college (Wilkens, 2014). White men learned how to be the “normal guy” (p. 185) in high school and were thus able to continue doing so in college (Wilkens, 2014). Black men, however, had learned how to be “the cool black friend” (p. 185) in high school, an identity that did not transfer into their college identity (Wilkens, 2014). The Black men in Wilkens’ (2014) study often saw themselves as hard-working, professional students, but their peers challenged that identity, expecting the Black students to fit into a stereotypical role of Black masculinity and adulthood (p. 186). This expectation created challenges for Black first-generation men when they attempted to create meaningful relationships in their new environment (Wilkens, 2014).

Another discussion of the impact of intersectionality on first-generation students can be found in Arch and Gilman’s 2019 study. They wrote that first-generation students “… are not a homogenous group for whom a single set of services will address all needs at every institution” (p. 997). They explained that the struggles first-generation students experience are not only influenced by their first-generation status, but also by identifying factors such as race and gender (Arch & Gilman, 2019). Arch and Gilman sought ways for libraries to better assist first-generation students and “… not reinforcing an academic culture that unfairly places these students at a disadvantage” (p. 998). They recommended such practices as locating other academic support services, such as tutoring centers, within the library and incorporating diversity within library staffing and the creation of library spaces (Arch & Gilman, 2019).

Research also highlights the role of intersectionality in first-generation women students. Jobe (2013) identified that Black, first-generation, single mothers described not receiving college coaching or preparation prior to beginning college. However, they worked through any problems they faced and felt that the lessons they learned while problem-solving were valuable (Jobe, 2013). They also described prioritizing family responsibilities, such as caretaking and serving as the head of household, over their academic work (Jobe, 2013). Kouzoukas (2017) found that the college experience has significant influence on the identity development of first-generation women students. Participants in Kouzoukas's study recognized their intersecting identities of race, gender, first-generation status, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation and the privileges and discriminations they faced because of those intersections. By recognizing all intersections of their identities, first-generation women students had a clearer self-concept (Kouzoukas, 2017).

Kuh's (2009) exploration into student engagement practices by institutions demonstrated how intersectionality can be considered in alignment with high-impact practices. Kuh et al. (2008) noted the compensatory effect of engagement, writing that "…although exposure to effective educational practices generally benefits all students, the effects on first-year grades and persistence are even greater for lower ability students and students of color compared with White students" (p. 688). Cruce et al. (2006) explained that although good practices benefit all students, they are especially beneficial to students who begin college with little privilege (p. 379). However, these students are the least likely group to participate in high-impact student engagement practices, such as diversity experiences and service learning (Kuh, 2009).

Intersectionality also matters in assessing assistance offered to first-generation students. Assistance is often given by institutional agents. An institutional agent is "an individual who occupies one or more hierarchical positions of relatively high-status and authority" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). The role of an institutional agent is assumed when a valuable resource, such as information about college, is transmitted from the agent to a receiver (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Essentially, institutional agents hold valuable information about college and are in a position to pass it along to students. Class, as a form of identity, offers an opportunity for some students. If students are members of a higher socioeconomic class, they are more likely to belong to social networks consisting of institutional agents than their lower-class peers (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Identifying as a first-generation student is not a large component of the identity-formation of students who have privileges in other intersections of their identity (Orbe, 2004). For example, students who identify as White, traditional-aged, male, European American, or middle/upper class are not as likely to place importance on their first-generation status (Orbe, 2004). The privilege they have in their other identities takes precedence, and they do not feel the need to consider their first-generation status while attending college (Orbe, 2004).

Mean and Pyne (2017) suggested, “Student affairs and academic affairs personnel should consider how to integrate equity and social justice into their curriculum and strategic plans in order to develop programs, services, and policies that enhance sense of belonging for all students, specifically low-income, first-generation college students and Students of Color” (p. 922). The authors recommended practices such as incorporating diversity and social justice training in residence halls and educating student organization leaders about how intersectionality may hinder some student’s ability to participate in such organizations fully (Mean & Pyne, 2017).

Havlik et al. (2020) explored the experiences of first-generation students at a private, predominantly White institution (PWI). They found that participants reported a feeling of otherness, or a feeling of being left out or misunderstood, in regard to their status as first-generation students, their socioeconomic status, and their race or ethnicity (Havlick et al., 2020).

The intersectionality of multiple identities furthered the feelings of otherness first-generation students felt from peers and faculty members (Havlick et al., 2020).

Comparing First-Generation and Non-First-Generation Students

Aside from the previously mentioned differences, first-generation students and their peers experience college in various ways. First-generation students are more likely than their peers to begin their higher education at a two-year institution (Chen, 2005). Many non-first-generation students report viewing community college as a place to improve their academic standing before transferring to a four-year institution (Inman & Mayes, 1996). First-generation students, however, enroll in community colleges with the intention of earning a degree and remaining enrolled until degree completion (Inman & Mayes, 1996).

First-generation students have different expectations and preparation for higher education than their non-first-generation peers do (Ward et al., 2012). As such, many difficulties can occur when they begin college. Chen and Carroll (2005) noted that first-generation students have a more difficult time choosing a major than their peers do (p. v). When comparing first-generation students to peers whose parents had some college experience and peers whose parents had college degrees, majors in the business and social sciences fields were most popular for all three groups (Chen & Carroll, 2005). However, further analysis showed that first-generation students tend to veer towards majors focused on technical or vocational practices, unlike their peers who choose more advanced academic degrees (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Chen and Carroll (2005) suggested that many factors contribute to this decision-making process, such as weak academic preparation or the perception that a major will provide low-paying job opportunities (p. v).

First-generation students take longer to complete their degrees than their peers do (Cataldi et al., 2018). A review of data found that within six years of beginning college in 2003-

2004, first-generation students were 56% less likely to earn degree credentials or remain enrolled than their peers at

- private four-year institutions;
- public four-year institutions;
- two-year institutions (p. 9).

First-generation students are also more likely to drop out of college than their peers, particularly during their second year (Ishitani, 2007).

The differences between first-generation students and their non-first-generation peers extend beyond academics. First-generation students are not as engaged with their institution as their peers are (Pike & Kuh, 2005). They are less likely to try a variety of experiences while enrolled (Pike & Kuh, 2005). These characteristics are particularly true of first-generation students with limited educational goals and those who live off-campus (Pike & Kuh, 2005). First-generation students may not understand how important it is to be engaged with their college because their parents do not have the background experience to share with them (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Despite the challenges facing them, first-generation students do not allow those disadvantages to impact them in significant cognitive or noncognitive ways (Pascarella et al., 2004). When first-generation students persist, they academically differ from their peers in trivial ways (Pascarella et al., 2004). For example, first-generation students in Pascarella et al.'s (2004) study displayed slightly lower levels of scientific reasoning and learning for self-understanding than their non-first-generation peers at the end of their second year (p. 277). The authors of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2019) found that first-generation students who identified as seniors were less likely to participate in high-impact practices, such as study abroad, internships, or conducting research with faculty members (p. 15). However, first-generation students are more likely to attend class, be prepared for class, and find their exams more challenging than their peers (CCSSE, 2005). The most noticeable academic difference between the two groups is in their plans for furthering their education (Pascarella et al., 2004). Students whose parents have high levels of education make larger increases in their future degree planning than first-generation students do (Pascarella et al., 2004). Furthermore, Roksa and Kinsley (2019) discovered that non-first-generation students benefit more from financial support from their family than first-generation students do.

Canning et al. (2020) examined the impact that competition in STEM field classrooms had on first-generation students. Their study found that "…the direct effect of perceived classroom competition on daily experiences of feeling like an imposter and the indirect effects of these psychological experiences on course outcomes were 2-3 times larger among FG [first-generation] students compared to CG [continuing-generation] students" (Canning et al., 2020). The authors noted that competition and imposter feelings in first-generation students may be linked because of the cultural mismatch between their values and the values of the classroom (Canning et al., 2020). Essentially, first-generation students are motivated to attend college because of group values, such as being able to help others with their degree, while non-first-generation students are motivated by their own independence and personal gain (Canning et al., 2020). Therefore, first-generation students were more likely to be concerned with being identified as an imposter in STEM courses that were believed to be competitive (Canning et al., 2020).

The Role of Family

The role of family members in the lives of college students adds a dimension to how they experience college. This is particularly true for first-generation students, in both positive and negative ways. First-generation students who attend college may have parents and other close individuals in their lives who are not supportive of their decision (Ward et al., 2012). This may create conflict and cause the student to re-analyze their relationship with that friend or family member (Ward et al., 2012). Furthermore, first-generation students who have a job may believe that they have a responsibility to help provide for their family financially (Ward et al., 2012).

First-generation students entering community college claimed that the support from their family members came in the forms of emotional and financial support (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). First-generation students receive less parental support than their peers (Sy et al., 2011). However, families can be a benefit and effective resource for first-generation students (Gofen, 2009). Research indicated that first-generation students are encouraged by their parents to choose a different path than they did and that their parents are encouraging and have a firm belief in their children's abilities (Gofen, 2009). Sometimes, being away from home reminds students of the impact their parents' support has had on their lives (Wang, 2014). It also indicates to them how important the support will be throughout their college career (Wang, 2014). When parents send memorable messages of support to their children, they let their children know that they will be available to support them during their transition from high school to college (Wang, 2014). When students feel confident that they will have family support, they are able to commit fully to their role as a college student (Wang, 2014). Roksa and Kinsley (2019) further found that low-income students, which first-generation students traditionally are, benefit from emotional support from their families. Palbusa and Gauvin (2017) further supported this finding, stating that first-generation "…students benefit from parents' emotional support as they prepare for college" (p.

111). Alternately, Palbusa and Gauvin (2017) found discussions with parents about grades were more helpful to non-first-generation students than they were to first-generation students, although there was no difference in the frequency of these conversations between the two groups.

Regardless of support offered, parents play a critical role in first-generation students' college decisions. Gibbons and Woodside (2014) explored the different roles that mothers and fathers played in the lives of their male and female children. Both sexes reported feeling inspired by their fathers to work towards a career that they would enjoy and be respected in (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). Some fathers told their children that a college education was not necessary, while others implored their children to attend, particularly their sons (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014).

Studies have found that parents may be cautious of their children's decision to attend college (Wang, 2014). Parents may feel that their children's priorities have changed from their family to their studies (Wang, 2014). As a result, they may ask their children to re-prioritize (Wang, 2014). First-generation students make their own determination of which priority takes precedence (Wang, 2014). Parents want their children to find a balance of prioritizing school and family (Wang, 2014). They also want their children to serve as role models for their community and may expect them to return home for regular visits (Wang, 2014).

When first-generation students attend college, they experience a cultural shift (Gofen, 2009). No longer are they in a world centered around their parents' way of living (Gofen, 2009). Rather, they are exposed to new ideas, people, and experiences (Gofen, 2009). Gofen (2009) noted that the families of first-generation students can be a great resource to them (p. 114). In Gofen's study, family members wanted their children to succeed in school and believed in their abilities to do so (p. 116). Bradbury and Mather's (2011) study on first-generation students in the Appalachian region discovered that a close connection to family offers a sense of identity and security, but also hinders students from fully participating in campus life (p. 275). Surprisingly, family expectations do not have as much influence on ethnic minority first-generation students' college motivations as factors like personal motivation and curiosity (Dennis et al., 2005). These students' ability to adjust and persist during college is more closely related to their personal motivations than to their family motivations (p. 233).

Kilgo et al. (2018) explored the role that parental education levels played in first-generation students' critical thinking gains during college. The authors reported, "Students whose parents attended some college (less than a 2-year degree) had significantly higher critical thinking gains over 4 years of college than their peers whose parents had a 2-year degree or higher" (p. 759). Similarly, students whose parents had a 2-year college degree had greater gains than students whose parents had a 4-year degree (Kilgo et al., 2018). Although first-generation students begin college with critical thinking deficits and lower standardized test scores than their non-first-generation peers, they show more growth in their critical thinking skills during their four years of college (Kilgo et al., 2018).

Cultural Capital

A critical role that parents play in the lives of their children is assisting them in developing cultural capital. A theoretical perspective originated from Bourdieu, cultural capital posits that educational outcomes will differ among students depending on their socioeconomic status (Ward et al., 2012). When students have cultural capital, they have knowledge about the college environment (Rice et al., 2017). Children learn how to be students and how to navigate the higher education system due to their parents' experience (Ward et al., 2012). Ward et al.

(2012) wrote, “Navigating campus culture, understanding the language of the college campus, knowing the value of engagement, and having a catalog of educational coping skills passed down from one generation to the next are important ingredients in student success that are often lacking for first-generation students” (p.106). These are forms of cultural capital that first-generation students do not have (Ward et al., 2012). Nichols and Isalas (2016) found that first-generation students in premedical fields had low levels of social capital pertaining to their hopeful career, and lacked the relationships that their non-first-generation peers had with medical professionals. Dumais and Ward (2010) discovered that cultural capital serves as a barrier to first-generation students upon initial entry to college (p. 262). Dumais and Ward reported that identifying as a first-generation student serves as more of a barrier to college entry than it does college performance (p. 262). After enrolling, cultural capital has minimal influence on first-generation students’ grade point averages or graduation rates (Dumais & Ward, 2010).

Social Capital

Another significant resource students utilize while navigating college is social capital. Social capital is defined as relationships with people who have experienced college and earned a college-degree (Rice et al., 2017). First-generation students' lack of understanding of the inner workings of higher education puts them at a distinct disadvantage in building networking skills and beneficial relationships (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). When their parents have limited or no educational knowledge, first-generation students are lacking another social relationship that could provide them with capital. Rice et al. (2017) noted that all participants in their qualitative study indicated they lacked information about navigating college when they began and that their parents had not been able to provide them with much if any (p. 431).

As previously noted, Engle and Tinto (2008) described first-generation students as being likely to

- live off-campus;
- work full-time;
- take classes part-time (p. 3).

These characteristics make it difficult for first-generation students to be engaged with members of their campus community (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation students are less likely to engage with people who can expand their social capital, whether it be professors, administrators, or classmates (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Nichols and Islas (2016) supported this claim, finding that first-generation students in premedical fields avoided interacting with their professors. However, developing relationships with institutional agents, people who play critical roles in the operation of the institution and support of its students, is key to creating college networks (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). These agents have information that is crucial to student success (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Developing networks with them can lift a student's social capital status, providing them with the tools necessary to navigate their institutional experience (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015).

Stephens et al. (2014) found that when given the chance to learn about cultural differences, the achievement-gap between freshman first-generation students and their continuing-generation peers closed by 63% (p. 949). When students heard success stories from their senior peers, they felt that it was possible for them to also succeed during their college years (Stephens et al., 2014). They understood that background differences matter, and providing an intervention gave them the tools needed to determine how to navigate college despite those differences (Stephens et al., 2014). Another way to provide social capital to first-generation students is through formal advising (Schwartz et al., 2018). In a study conducted by Demetriou et al. (2017), all interview participants described at least one important relationship in their college journey from a peer or academic mentor with experience of the college system. In Gibbons and Woodside's (2014) study, women reported that mentoring relationships were critical to their college experience (p. 30).

Havlik et al. (2020) discussed the theme of social capital in their research study. Participants in their study expressed their lack of social capital in comparison to their non-first-generation peers, such as not knowing what the bursar's office is and not being able to ask their parents about it (Havlik et al., 2020). Participants also described feeling unprepared to participate in their classes because they couldn't receive help from their parents (Havlick et al., 2020).

Institutional Participation

Institutional relationships and institutional participation matter in the journey of first-generation students. Demetriou et al. (2017) explored the activities, roles, and relationships displayed by successful first-generation students, using Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model of human development. The model relies on microsystems, patterns of activities, social roles, and relationships that impact a person (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Demetriou et al. (2017) found that first-generation students who were within a semester of graduating college after four years had been influenced by a variety of microsystems. Many of the first-generation students who were interviewed described positive and meaningful experiences when studying abroad, researching alongside faculty members, and participating in student organizations (Demetriou et al., 2017).

The positive impact of the compensatory effect can be seen in Pelco et al.'s (2014) study, where they explored the effect that service-learning had on the academic and professional growth of first-generation and non-first-generation college students. Women from both groups reported a similar amount of growth, while first-generation men reported more growth than non-first-generation men (Pelco et al., 2014). High-impact practices offered by the institution can have a notable influence on the experience of all students, including first-generation students (Kuh, 2009).

Institutional Needs

During their first year, many students are searching for ways to ensure they made the right institutional decision (Ishitani, 2014). Many American institutions promote a middle-class ideal of independence, an ideal noted as a factor for many students in attending college (Stephens et al., 2012). The concept of being independent and separate from their parents is appealing for many students (Stephens et al., 2012). However, independence is not as prominent as a motivating factor for first-generation students (Stephens et al., 2012). In fact, first-generation students are more likely to attend college with a set of interdependent motives, such as giving back to their community (Stephens et al., 2012). Stephens et al. (2012) found that when universities shift from an independent to an interdependent focus, first-generation students perform better and find more success (p. 1193).

Some first-generation students find little support from their college environment and do not feel they are making as much intellectual progress as their peers when they live off-campus (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Living on-campus positively impacts the learning experience of these students (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Doing so places students in close proximity with others who have different values and ways of life, thus diversifying the college experience (Pike & Kuh, 2005). However, living on-campus may not be a possibility for all first-generation students. Therefore, geography is an essential factor in first-generation students' decision-making of where to attend college (Inman & Mayes, 1996). First-generation students place more importance on being able to take the classes they want at night than their peers do (Inman & Mayes, 1996). Furthermore, Allan et al. (2016) argued that institutions should recognize the classism that is embedded in their practices. Being a first-generation student does not guarantee that the student will be low-income (Allan et al., 2016). However, when students who face financial barriers, including first-generation students, seek services and opportunities, institutions should help them attain those (Allan et al., 2016). In their study, Arch and Gilman (2019) surveyed college counselors and academic libraries across the United States. Counselors indicated that they believed first-generation students would have a difficult time navigating college and with handling the financial cost (Arch & Gilman, 2019).

Institutional Support

Institutional support is helpful at the high school and college levels. Programs that begin in high school may assist in creating positive higher education experiences for first-generation students (Choy, 2001). Programs that encourage these students to complete a challenging high school course load and that provide college guidance to them and their parents may provide more opportunity and assistance to first-generation students (Choy, 2001). Gist-Mackey et al. (2018) used House's typology of social support to explore the support that first-generation students need when beginning college. This typology includes an informational, emotional, appraisal, and instrumental support (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018). The authors indicated that beginning first-generation college students can benefit from mentorship with older first-generation college students (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018). They also wrote that universities should showcase the first-generation experience by inviting speakers and alumni to campus who were first-generation students (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018).

Institutional agents can provide strong outreach to first-generation students (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). They can provide orientations, evening workshops, and literature that highlights the needs of first-generation students (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). When institutional outreach efforts make first-generation students feel supported and understood by the institution, the likelihood of students participating in the outreach activities increases (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). Some research has found that first-generation students feel substantial levels of institutional support. Rice et al. (2017) reported that first-generation students described high-levels of institutional support as an advantage of their first-generation status (p. 431). This support included programming targeted towards first-generation students, and increased scholarship opportunities (Rice et al., 2017).

Community college students reported that more support, such as guides and more help during the registration process, would have been helpful during their transition from high school to higher education (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). These students stated that communication between offices in the institution was lacking, which made it confusing for them to learn helpful information (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). When students lack social capital, such confusing institutional processes cause more challenges for them and make them feel lost and hopeless about the college process (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015).

Schwartz et al. (2017) discovered that the Connected Scholars Program (CSP) has a significant opportunity to increase the social capital of first-generation students when they arrive on campus (p. 175). The CSP uses a series of group-lessons to teach first-generation students the skills needed to interact and build connections with faculty and staff on campus (Schwartz et al. 2017). The program ends with a networking event, giving students the opportunity to put the skills they have learned to use (Schwartz et al., 2017). The results of Schwartz et al.'s (2017) study showed that students who participated in the CSP were likely to understand the importance of social capital, as well as to seek intentional relationships that could build their social capital up (p. 175). The intervention Schwartz et al. (2017) provided for their study indicated that CSP has a positive influence on student grade point average as well (p. 175). When students are engaged with their institutions, they are more likely to persist through their remaining college years (Kinzie et al., 2008). However, first-generation students are more positively impacted by institutional engagement than their peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). Being involved in extracurricular activities positively impacts areas such as student's critical thinking skills and their ability to take responsibility for their academic success (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Counseling can be another helpful form of support. Because fathers have an impact on their children's academic and career choices, academic advisors and counselors may want to encourage first-generation students to understand how their fathers have shaped their educational choices (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). Acknowledging this influence can help students better understand their choice of major or career (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). Furthermore, students who choose a path different from their fathers' desires may feel guilty for doing so, which can interfere with their career-making decisions (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014).

Using her own experiences as a first-generation student, Ortega (2018) noted five ways that institutions can better support the first-generation population. Ortega wrote that institutions should

- encourage students to interact in student and professional organizations;
- motivate students to partake in service learning opportunities and internships;
- build networks for student engagement;
- validate the experience of students as mentees;

- stay open-minded and ready to assist in the unique challenges that first-generation students face (p. 494).

Institutional focus is mostly on first-year classes (Ishitani, 2014). Therefore, few studies have been conducted during students' second year of college, when many first-generation students are susceptible to dropping out (Ishitani, 2014).

Means and Pyne (2017) followed 10 first-generation students from the completion of a college access program through their first year of college, assessing their perceptions of institutional support. Specifically, the authors sought to discover what institutional support made these students feel like they belonged in college and helped them navigate their ways at the institutions (Means & Pyne, 2017). They discovered that as students received institutional support, their overall sense of belonging increased (Means & Pyne, 2017). Study participants identified some of those support structures as faculty with good attitudes and a willingness to help students learn, student affairs leaders who provided support, and institutional need-based scholarship programs that created a space for them to connect with their peers (Means & Pyne, 2017).

Holcombe and Kezar (2020) studied the effectiveness of integrated programs, which combine elements such as tutoring, advising, and research opportunities, in supporting students from underrepresented populations, including first-generation, in STEM fields. Such programs create a community support system for these students (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020).

First-Generation-Centered Services

History has seen the creation of multiple programs centered on first-generation and disadvantaged students. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964 (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). This act led to the creation of the Office of Economic

Opportunity, and the Special Programs for Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Today, these programs are referred to as TRIO (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). The United States Congress mandated that two-thirds of the population served by TRIO consist of low-income, first-generation students (Balz & Esten, 1998). Students that are specifically targeted are those whose families make less than $24,000 annually, and those whose parents did not attend college (Balz & Esten, 1998).

The first TRIO program was Upward Bound (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Then, in 1965, the Higher Education Act was signed into effect, leading to the creation of the TRIO program Talent Search (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). The Higher Education Act's reauthorization in 1968 lead to the creation of the TRIO program Student Support Services (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). It was during this time that the three TRIO programs were transferred to the Office of Higher Education Programs (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Under another reauthorization in 1972, the Higher Education Act brought about a fourth TRIO program, Educational Opportunity Centers (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). In 1972, the TRIO Staff and Leadership Training Authority were formed, and in 1986, the fifth TRIO program, the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, was created (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). In 1990, the Upward Bound Math/ Science program was added to the TRIO list (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Today's institutions still employ these programs as a way to aid disadvantaged students.

The creation of the TRIO programs was a significant step in offering educational opportunities to Americans from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Kinzie et al., 2004). TRIO programs aid students in overcoming the social and cultural barriers that face them in higher education (Balz & Esthen, 1998). By intervening at critical times in educational careers, and providing students with mentoring relationships, TRIO has proven to be a successful tool in the world of higher education (Balz & Esten, 1998).

Upward Bound, for example, provides academic instruction and accessibility to high school students, thus giving them more information about college and piquing their interest in enrolling after graduation (Kinzie et al., 2004). Summer Upward Programs are rigorous and rigid (Graham, 2011). Students are able to live on a college campus while taking classes, accessing certain buildings such as the cafeteria and library (Graham, 2011). They participate in events outside of the classroom with their peers, thus being exposed to new experiences and people (Graham, 2011). Students are also assisted in ACT preparation, and in filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (Graham, 2011). Participation in Upward Bound assists students in feeling less stressed and less uncertain about beginning college than their peers who did not experience the program (Graham, 2011).

Student Support Services aides students from disadvantaged backgrounds in completing academic courses and goals (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). The Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program assists first-generation students in completing their undergraduate careers in preparing for and applying to graduate programs (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). The breadth of the TRIO programs demonstrates assistance at all levels, from high school, undergraduate programs, and graduate degrees.

Support During COVID-19

In the early months of 2020, the world was changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Businesses closed, face masks became a necessity, and schools of all types transitioned to remote learning. The closing of college campuses resulted in feelings of insecurity for disadvantaged students such as low-income and first-generation students (Fischer, 2020). For these students, college can be "…a provider of hot meals and health care and a place to sleep" (Fischer, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic increased some students' risk of physical and mental health problems and put their academic careers in jeopardy (Lederer et al., 2020). Students felt unfulfilled because so many crucial college experiences, such as internships and study abroad trips, were canceled (Lederer et al., 2020). Some colleges were able to aid students through the transition. Berea College, a small institution in Kentucky, paid students who had campus jobs through the end of the semester (Fischer, 2020). Trinity Washington University opted to finish their semester early because their students would not have reliable access to the internet or electronic devices to connect to remote learning (Fischer, 2020).

As it progressed, the pandemic's effects on students could not be ignored. Cohen et al. (2020) conducted a study to assess the experiences and perspectives of college students regarding COVID-19. They discovered that financial aid recipients were more worried about the monetary and emotional impacts the pandemic would have for them than their peers (Cohen et al., 2020). They also found that stress among students was high, that students with jobs prior to the pandemic either lost them or had their wages cut after, and that Asian American students expressed experiencing racism (Cohen et al., 2020).

As the pandemic continued into 2021, recommendations for how to support students were developed. Lederer et al. (2020) suggested that colleges keep students informed on the changing information about COVID-19 by using "…frequent, consistent, clear, reliable, and compassionate communication to students and the rest of the campus community, particularly through the channels that they utilize most readily" (p. 17). McCarthy (2020) furthered this notion, arguing that universities should use all communication methods possible to reach out to students and should find ways to make student services visible so they could be utilized effectively. This communication is necessary for current students to not fall behind (McCarthy, 2020). Furthermore, equitable treatment of all student groups should be given, faculty should be used as resources to advocate for students suffering from mental health episodes, and student support offices that focus on marginalized groups should maintain their funding as universities cut budgets so they can continue to serve students (Lederer et al., 2020). McCarthy (2020) highlighted the importance of student affairs administrators not assuming they know students' needs. Instead, McCarthy recommended that student affairs officers reach out to students through surveys and phone calls to determine their needs.

Summary

This review of pertinent literature illustrates the variety of issues faced by first-generation students. Clearly, first-generation students face challenges not experienced by their peers. They do not have as many choices as their peers when choosing which institutions to attend, nor do they have the same experiences as their peers while enrolled in college (Pascarella et al., 2004). Ward et al. (2012) argued for the importance of all higher education employees helping first-generation students remove the cultural capital barriers that block them from a full educational experience. First-generation students are more likely to have intersecting oppressions in race, gender, and class (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). With these facts in mind, I intended to learn more about the ways that first-generation women students experience support while enrolled in college.

Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter presents the research method that was used to explore the perceptions of support that first-generation women students feel during their time at college. Included in this chapter are an overview of the qualitative research method used in the study, a review of research questions, an explanation of the my role as a researcher, a description of participant selection methods that were used, an explanation of the data collection method that was employed, a description of the data analysis method used in the study, a review of the concepts of trustworthiness and credibility as they apply to the study, and a summary of ethical considerations I made. A summary of the information will close the chapter.

Qualitative Methods

Broadly, qualitative research's aims to provide explanations and understanding of phenomena and experiences that cannot be observed by the naked eye (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Qualitative research can contribute to understanding the lived experience of a group of people and provide insights into problems that exist in a current system (Patton, 2015). This study aims to do both of those things. Specifically, a phenomenological research design has been chosen for this study. Creswell (2014) identified phenomenological research as a design in which the researcher details the lived experiences of participants, pertaining to a phenomenon that they face. In this study, being a first-generation woman enrolled in college is considered a phenomenon, one that can only be learned about through the lived experiences of those women.

Phenomenology is a concept rooted in the fields of philosophy and psychology (Creswell, 2014). Central to phenomenology is the concept of intentionality (Sokolowski, 2000). In the phenomenological tradition, intentionality refers to a persons' ability to be conscious of the things they do and the objects around them (Sokolowski, 2000). Phenomenological research aims to understand how participants view and make sense of a specific situation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). How participants understand their situations will be rooted in their intentionality, or awareness, of their lived experience. Phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of lived experiences, making them available for analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Moran (2000) noted that "… phenomenology is concerned with meanings, but its real focus is on the a priori manner in which those meanings are related together and the structural nature of all kinds of acts, including acts of perception, imagining, and so on" (p. 101). Patton (2015) argued that meaning-making is at the heart of the human experience and that an individual's experience can only be learned when researchers are able to experience the phenomenon for themselves. Therefore, Patton (2015) noted that in-depth interviewing gives researchers the opportunity to experience the reality of research participants. The rationale for choosing to complete a phenomenological study is the depth of knowledge that it provides. Understanding the perspectives of first-generation women students requires their stories, filled with details of their thoughts and experiences.

Research Questions

Cypress (2018) noted that research questions are where the study's design begins. These questions are asked to drive the study and to help researchers achieve the study's goals (Cypress, 2018). This study's research questions were crafted with the study's purpose in mind, which is to understand how first-generation women students perceive support during their college experience. To fully understand support as it pertains to these women, the research questions center around the key concepts of academic and emotional needs, institutional support, and intersectionality.

1. What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about their academic and emotional needs?
2. What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about their perceptions of forms of support?
3. What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about the role that identity intersectionality plays in today's higher education environment?
4. What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about the ways crises are handled by higher education institutions?

Researcher's Role

Qualitative researchers use the concept of reflexivity to establish the credibility of themselves and their study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described reflexivity as "… rigorous self-scrutiny by the researcher throughout the entire process" (p. 332). Reflexivity acknowledges that the researcher cannot be a neutral voice in the research process and takes human subjectivity into account when conducting research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Creswell (2014) furthered this notion, writing that reflexivity requires the researcher to examine how their own background and experiences may influence their interpretations of collected data. "This aspect of the methods is more than merely advancing biases and values in the study, but how the background of the researchers actually may shape the direction of the study" (Creswell, 2014). The reflexivity of a study can be enhanced by using multiple strategies.

First, acknowledging ethical dilemmas and making strategic choices so they do not impede the investigation can bolster reflexivity (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). My was that of a partial participant. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) identify a partial participant as someone who participates to an extent in the setting they are conducting research in or population which the research is coming from. While I do not identify as a first-generation student, I do identify as a woman. Furthermore, as a college instructor, I have my own perceptions of what quality support for students looks like. These characteristics were potential barriers to my expectations or analysis of some participants' responses. By acknowledging my role as a partial participant, I made strategic choices in my sampling, question-asking, and data analysis that increased the reflexivity of my study. Bracketing, or putting aside prejudgments about the phenomenon during the phenomenological research process, can also assist in enhancing the reflexivity of the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Keeping a reflex journal to track decisions made during the research process is another tactic a researcher can use to increase reflexivity (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). I used bracketing and kept a reflex journal to avoid letting bias slip into the final data analysis.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) noted that audibility is another effective way to enhance reflexivity. Researchers create audibility when they keep a detailed record of how they made decisions and managed data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). A record of the codes used and themes discovered provides readers with the ability to inspect how the data were assessed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). I kept a record of each step I took in the data analysis process.

Population

The population for this study were students who identify as female and who identify as first-generation. For the purposes of this study, first-generation was defined as students whose parents or single parent did not have a four-year college degree. All participants were 18 years of age or older and had completed at least one full year of college, enhancing their opportunity to interact with students, faculty, and administrators on campus, and experience types of support.

Participants were recruited via social media, email, and snowball sampling. Eleven women from across the United States participated in the study. Of the 11 women, five were undergraduate students and six were graduate students.

Data Collection Methods

Patton (2015) noted that qualitative research, particularly interviewing, allows for the exploration of what cannot be observed. In this case, the perceptions and experiences of first-generation women students could not be observed. Rather, they had to be discussed. This made interviewing an appropriate data collection method. Interviews offer the opportunity for a dialogue between researchers and participants and provide participants with as much time as they need to share their experiences.

Furthermore, this study was conducted using what Patton (2015) called a standardized open-ended interview. Patton (2015) described this interview as one where each interviewee is asked a standardized set of open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allow participants to provide answers that they deem truthful and appropriate. By using this method, responses to each question were obtained from each interviewee, allowing for a clearer examination of themes when the data were analyzed. Follow-up questions for clarification were asked as necessary.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) identify five phases of collecting qualitative data. The first phase, planning, requires the researcher to obtain site permission and find study participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). After receiving the necessary permissions from the Institutional Review Board, participants were collected through emails and social media. Several of my colleagues from across the country were encouraged to pass the information about the study on to women they knew who met the participant criteria. These collection methods created the opportunity for a good sample to be gathered.

The second phase, beginning data collection, is when the researcher begins the interview process, building rapport with participants and adjusting interview practices as need be (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Because of restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted over Zoom, a web-based video conference system. This provided both the participants and I the ability to participate in the interview in a space in which we were comfortable.

Phase three, basic data collection, is when the researcher begins a tentative data analysis, taking notes on initial descriptions to review at a later date (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). As interviews were conducted, I noted common themes and phrases heard across multiple interviews. I also searched for patterns among how the women's stories were told, assessing the commonalities and differences in their narratives. These elements were examined more thoroughly during the final data analysis.

Fourth, the phase of closing data collection requires a researcher to conduct their last interview, which indicates that they have collected a rich set of data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Data were collected from 11 participants, and was finished when I felt I had achieved saturation. Saturation is reached when enough data have been collected and no new important information for the study can be obtained (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Creswell (2014) wrote that in his review of qualitative research, most phenomenological studies include three to 10 participants. Because I used 11 participants, the detailed responses of those participants provided me with saturated data to analyze.

Finally, the completion phase creates "meaningful ways to present the data" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Data analysis of each theme discovered in the interviews was conducted. Data analysis methods are discussed below.

Data Analysis Methods

Data were analyzed using an inductive reasoning process. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described this process as one "…of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns and relationships among the categories" (p.367). During the interviews, I took memos for later reflection. Creswell (2014) outlined the process of qualitative data analysis as having seven steps. After gathering the raw data and organizing the data transcripts, data should be read thoroughly, and then coded by hand, computer, or both (Creswell, 2014). Themes and descriptions should be coded based on trends and outliers in participants' responses (Creswell, 2014). Themes and descriptions that are interrelated should be assessed, and their meaning interpreted (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, transcriptions and codes should be re-examined by the researcher to ensure mistakes have not been made during the process (Creswell, 2014).

I began the coding process by reading each interview, highlighting key phrases and quotations. Notes were made in the margins to indicate a theme that the key phrases identified. After this initial phase was completed for all 11 interviews, I began to organize the themes to identify which ones were the most prominent. I wrote each research question on a piece of paper and wrote notes under them regarding which themes emerged that best answered each question. Next, I numbered each quotation from the interviews that corresponded with the prominent themes. I made notecards with the corresponding numbers and used them to organize an outline of presentation of the data.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) wrote that understanding the trustworthiness, or credibility, of a study is based on understanding how a researcher can convince audiences that the research findings are worthy of acknowledgment and understanding. Rejecting traditional research concepts such as validity and consistency in qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed several ways that trustworthiness can be met by a researcher. Of those methods, triangulation and member checking were used in this study.

Researchers use triangulation to justify discovered themes when examining multiple data sources (Creswell, 2014). Lincoln and Guba (1985) provided an example of triangulation, writing that a researcher may consult the minutes of a board meeting to verify a participant's recollection of the meeting. In this study, I searched for common themes among multiple participant responses and used institutional resources, such as university websites, to compare to the responses. Member checking was also utilized. Creswell (2014) described this process as allowing participants to review the final report, descriptions, or themes to determine if they find them to be accurate representations of their responses. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified member checking as "…the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). Member checking can occur during the interview, simply by playing back part of a recording to the participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or by rephrasing a topic or digging deeper into a participant's response to ensure that proper meaning has been collected by the researcher (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In this study, each participant reviewed the transcript of their interview to approve its accuracy.

Other methods were used alongside triangulation and member checking to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. I used language during the interviews that was at a level that the participants could clearly understand, rather than using social science terminology (McMillan &

Schumacher, 2010). Data were recorded to ensure that participant descriptions were reported in a low-inference manner, and a back-up recording was made to ensure that data were collected. This ensured that all descriptions were as concrete and literal as to how the interviewees presented them (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Data was reported in a rich manner, providing as much detail as possible to the audience (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, the participants were first-generation women students, thus meeting the criteria for the study and being able to give responses that provided me with their personal truth. I used that truth to explore the research questions. I tried to remain unbiased in my collection and examination of the data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were given throughout the data collection process. Permission to conduct the study was obtained through the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of East Tennessee State University. All participants signed an informed consent form. The informed consent form was read to them prior to the interview and all participants gave verbal consent before being interviewed. They also had the ability to ask me questions prior to the interview. Because all interviews were conducted online via Zoom, I was in an isolated space to maintain the privacy of interviewees. All interviews were recorded using audio and video technology. Participants were assured that all efforts to maintain their privacy would be taken. Participant names were omitted from this research publication, as well as any identifiable information. Each participant was asked to create a pseudonym for themselves that is used in the final report. Risks were minimal for this study. The research did not put participants in a position to be physically harmed.

Summary

This study was conducted using a qualitative research method, in order to learn the lived experiences of first-generation women students. A phenomenological approach provided a good lens for research design. The reflexivity, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations of the study have been reviewed, and descriptions of participant selection, data collection, and data analysis methods have also been provided. The next chapter will detail the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of support that first-generation women students enrolled in college have. This purpose was explored through the use of four research questions. Interviews were conducted with research participants. After each interview was transcribed, member checking was utilized to ensure the credibility of the study. The women's responses informed the following analysis. This analysis identifies themes that emerged from the data that addressed the research questions.

Data Collection

Data was collected for this study using in-depth, one-on-one interviews. Eleven women were interviewed for this study. Each interview took place over Zoom, a virtual meeting platform. Interviews were conducted between June 24 and July 31 of 2020. Each woman was asked questions from a predetermined interview protocol that can be found in the Appendix. Follow-up questions or questions for further elaboration may have been asked, depending on each participant's responses to the questions. Zoom created an initial transcription of each interview, which I then edited for accuracy.. Each participant reviewed and approved their interview transcript. After participant approval was granted, I searched each transcript for key themes.

Participant Profiles

Data for this study was collected from interviews with 11 women. All women identified as first-generation students whose parents or single parent did not have a college degree from a four-year institution. Furthermore, all women were enrolled in college in the United States at the time of the interviews. Five of the women were undergraduate students and six were graduate students. Only three of the women identified as a race other than White. Each study participant selected a pseudonym for herself to be used during this report. The women are referred to by their pseudonyms in the reporting: Anna, Kauni, Alexis, Christina, Michaela, Katie, Michelle, Carol, Georgia, Lucy, and Isabel.

Anna is an undergraduate student at a small private university in the Midwest. Only 20 years old, she is a junior with two majors and one minor. Her parents dropped out of high school and eventually started their own business.

Kauni is a non-traditional undergraduate student at a mid-size public university in the Southeast. She began college immediately after high school but dropped out and has returned to school at the age of 36. Her father did not graduate high school and her mother earned an associate's degree later in life. Her parents divorced when Kauni was a child. Kauni identifies as White.

Alexis is an undergraduate student at a small private university in the Southeast. She is a senior at the age of 20. Alexis was raised by her aunt and considers her aunt to be her mother. Her aunt stopped attending college after a year. Alexis identifies as Black.

Christina is a graduate student earning a doctorate at a mid-size public university in the Southeast. At the age of 35, she has a bachelor's degree as well as two master's degrees. Her father did not complete high school, but her mother did. Christina is now a mother herself. She identifies as White.

Michaela is an undergraduate student at a mid-size public university in the Southeast. She is 21 years old and in her senior year of college. Her parents both have high school degrees. They married after Michaela's mother graduated.

Katie is a graduate student earning a doctorate at a mid-size public university in the Southeast. At the age of 44, she has earned a bachelor’s, master’s, and a specialist degree. Her parents both graduated from high school. Her mom attended a college class but did not pursue it any further. Katie is a mother, having her first child while she was an undergraduate student.

Michelle is a graduate student earning a doctorate at a mid-size public university in the Southeast. She is 45 years old and has a bachelor’s and a master’s degree. Her parents are both high school educated. Michelle is the mother of two children. She and her children are enrolled in college at the same time.

Carol is a graduate student earning a doctorate at a large public university in the Midwest. She earned her bachelor’s degree, took a small break from school, and returned for her doctorate. She is 25 years old. Carol’s parents have high school degrees and immigrated to the United States when Carol was young. She identifies as Asian American.

Georgia is a graduate student earning a doctorate at a mid-size public university in the Southeast. At 52 years old, she has an associate’s, a bachelor’s, and a master’s degree. Her parents have high school degrees. Georgia has sacrificed her education over the years due to family experiences. She was married while in her undergraduate program and chose not to pursue a doctorate degree for a time because her family was more important to her. She is a mother and grandmother. Georgia identifies as White.

Lucy is an undergraduate student at a large public university in the Midwest. She is 21 years old and a senior with one major and one minor. Her mom is currently working on her associate’s degree, so she and Lucy are enrolled in college at the same time.

Isabel is a graduate student earning a doctorate at a large public university in the Midwest. She is 25 years old and has a bachelor’s degree. Her mother and stepfather have high school degrees and her biological father has a GED. Isabel's stepfather briefly attended college, but never completed a degree program. Isabel identifies as Hispanic.

Interview Results

The data collected for this phenomenological study was coded and grouped into prominent themes to address each of the four research questions. Direct quotations from the research participants are provided below as supporting evidence to each research questions' answers. An analysis of the data, as well as my recommendations for future research, is provided in Chapter 5.

Research Question 1

What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about their academic and emotional needs?

The first research question is centered on how first-generation women students feel their academic and emotional needs are supported. The participants in this study expressed a variety of needs they desired from institutional offices, faculty, and their family members. Below are the key themes that emerged in answering this research question.

Mentorship Matters. Mentorship plays a significant role in the lives of first-generation college students. Strong mentoring relationships increase the possibility of gap reduction between first-generation students and their peers (Wang, 2012). Mentors can improve the academic goals and retention numbers of first-generation students, making them comparable to their peers (Fruiht & Chan, 2018). A key point addressed by several participants was the role of mentors in their academic lives. Whether good, bad, or nonexistent, these mentorships, or lack thereof, had an impact on participants.

Good Interactions are Memorable. Mentorship for students can come from many sources, including family, friends, and faculty members (Fruiht & Chan, 2018). Faculty members play a particularly important role in student mentorship. Students who feel faculty members are approachable and respectful are more likely to feel motivated and confidant in their academic potential (Komarraju et al., 2010). When students feel that faculty members respect them, it can increase their levels of motivation and self-confidence (Komarraju et al., 2010). Certainly, this was the case for Kauni. When speaking about her decision to come back to college as a non-traditional student, Kauni mentioned a professor who serves as her mentor. She said, “My professor, who is my mentor … Her view of me is way better than what I see.” Throughout the interview, Kauni praised her mentor for her levels of assistance. Kauni’s motivation to perform well and earn her degree was connected to the strong mentorship she received.

This level of support from faculty was also expressed by Isabel. As an undergraduate student, Isabel had an advisor who supported her. She indicated that his support made a significant impact on her ability to earn her degree.

> …I think the transition to undergrad, where I had this really supportive advisor … he was amazing. He … helped me during my second year and then continued throughout the rest of my bachelor’s … He even said to … me and my friend … he was like, ‘I see you guys as my daughters. I just want you to succeed.’ So … having that support system made me finish.

Georgia also expressed gratitude for her mentor.

> I had a wonderful mentor … in my master’s program who really, I think, made a huge difference in opening some doors for me … Having that mentor made a huge difference for me. Like, I am a strong advocate of mentoring programs because I think that for first-

> generation students in particular, that can be very helpful, when you don't have other people that can help you navigate that.

Such positive impacts from faculty members, like the ones felt by Isabel and Georgia, can increase the amount of social capital that first-generation students have (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Connection with institutional agents is critical to first-generation students building a social network (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). With this level of support from a person who understands the inner workings of college life, first-generation students can be successful in their academic endeavors. Providing positive messages about college, the college experience, and increasing future potential are ways that mentors can impact first-generation students (Wang, 2012). The messages that participants received from their mentors were supportive and encouraging, leading the women toward completion of their college degrees.

Bad Interactions are Impactful. Some women noted that bad interactions with professors and guidance counselors have been impactful as well. Indeed, first-generation students whose professors are offensive and mean are likely to have their transitions into college hindered (Wang, 2014a). These negative instances have made a lasting impact on some of the participants, causing them to doubt their abilities. Kauni dropped out of college because of a bad interaction with a professor. She continues to feel the impacts of the interaction today.

> I loved writing when I was younger. I wrote poems and stories … I loved English and I loved writing, and I wrote my very first paper for my English class and I got an F and she told me my writing was absolutely atrocious and that I needed to reconsider being in school. I dropped out. I got an email from her after she found out I dropped out and she apologized, but damage was done … I didn't actually write after that … It took me probably a good, 5, 6, 7 years maybe before I even started writing again and even to this

> day I struggle … I'll send my papers to different people and have them proofread them now because … I don't have the confidence that … I mean, you would think that was back when I was 19 years old … that would go away, but it hasn't. My confidence, it's really shattered … That one paper.

When first-generation students encounter negative professors, they may lose interest in the class or respect for the professor's teaching skills (Wang, 2014a). In Kauni's case, she lost interest and self-confidence, and dropped out of college as a result. Now enrolled as an undergraduate student at a different institution, Kauni continues to notice the way professors treat her. She said, "I'm kind of animated a little bit and I had a professor who told me my personality absolutely blew. [laughter] Yeah. I almost dropped out …" This professor teaches in the department Kauni studies in. She was considering attending graduate school at the institution but has changed her mind, partly due to her interaction with the professor, saying, "…I can't go to grad school here, because she … would be the professor I would need to mentor me, so I can't stay here." Again, a negative interaction has impacted Kauni's decision-making. By negatively speaking to Kauni, her professor led Kauni to lose respect for her, and lost a potential graduate student (Wang, 2014a).

It is not just college professors who can negatively impact students. In several cases, participants indicated that their lack of mentorship began in high school with their guidance counselors. Providing support to first-generation students in high school may encourage them to go to college and to perform well while there (Fruit & Chan, 2018). Without that support, first-generation students may not aspire to reach future academic goals. Michelle noted that no one motivated her in high school. An average student, she had no intention of going to college. When her employer encouraged her to go to college in order to advance at her current workplace, she reached out to her guidance counselor.

> …I called my guidance counselor, who readily informed me that I was not college material and did not need to be doing this, but I was insistent because I didn't want to not work there. And so … I took algebra one and algebra two, I took college-bound English, and then I worked in the afternoons my senior year and made all A's, so …[laughter] somebody didn't motivate me in high school, because if I could do that … and get into college, then I could have done it all along.

Georgia experienced a similar lack of encouragement from her guidance counselor. However, she is unsure why that lack of encouragement existed.

> …I made really good grades in school, but unfortunately, I wasn't really encouraged by my guidance counselor to go to college. In fact, she told me that I should probably work on my typing skills and become a secretary … [laughter] which was quite interesting … I don't know if she thought that my family would not be able to afford to send me … I mean, she knew … my dad was disabled … We lived in a very poor neighborhood … I guess she probably knew. Neither of my parents had a college degree. I don't know if she knew that or not … It's really perplexing because I made, like, one B all the way through high school … So, it's really perplexing to me, even now, when I reflect back on it, why she said that I should not consider going … to college.

High school faculty and staff members are essential for first-generation students' advancement to college. Research indicates that high school programs can assist first-generation students in having a positive higher-education experience (Choy, 2001). For first-generation students, high school teachers can close the gap and serve as a role model, encouraging the students to attend college (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Furthermore, high school counselors can and should provide assistance to first-generation students by gathering college entrance information, addressing the students' barriers, and monitoring their attendance at college fairs (Bryant & Nicolas, 2011). As the participants indicated, their guidance counselors and high school teachers rarely pushed them to strive for more, resulting in impactful memories that made college-life challenging. Isabel also expressed a lack of support from her high school regarding her hopes to attend college.

> … the school that I went to … they didn't really treat me like I was … smart enough to get the degree. Um … And they were just very, like, 'Can [you] even afford it?' Like, you … They basically gave us this, like, ultimatum, like, 'If you don't get … An athletic scholarship, then there's no way that you can afford college.' Um … And they even, like, called my mom in to have this talk with me. Like, the dean of the school, she called, and they were arguing back and forth, and they like … My mom was like, 'Oh. Who, who are you to tell me what I can and can't afford?' And, I mean, the harsh reality is, like, it's not like my mom could afford it, but it was just the constant … 'Oh, well, you're not gonna amount to anything' was a constant experience in my high school.

High school guidance counselors are encouraged to work with the families of first-generation students to address concerns about the student attending college (Bryant & Nicolas, 2011). For example, if first-generation students express ambivalence about going to college and the counselor suspects their parents are at the root of that ambivalence, they may set up a group event to address any concerns held by parents (Bryant & Nicolas, 2011). Group settings may offer "…additional therapeutic factors…" and thus may be more effective (Bryant & Nicolas, 2011). Addressing concerns in an individual setting, such as a phone call, could lead to problematic communication like that between Isabel’s guidance counselor and mother. Empathetic communication would have been more helpful in that situation.

Mentorship is Desired. Women note that relationships with mentors play a crucial role in their college experience (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). First-generation students lack the cultural capital needed to navigate college, largely because their families do not have the knowledge to assist them (Ward et al., 2012). Faculty can fill this role and provide first-generation women students with the mentorship they desire. For some of the women interviewed, this desire existed. Christina noted that she needed support from people who understood what the college experience was like.

> … I think maybe professors and people who work at the university could give more support because they have the background. My immediate family had no idea what it was like to go to college, so they couldn’t really help me in that way.

This sentiment was further shared by Georgia. Now in her doctoral program, Georgia longs for a mentor to help guide her.

> I feel … that some of the people in my cohort … knew the ropes much better than me because either they’d had family members who had done … doctoral studies, or they were married to someone who had a doctoral degree. And so, I often felt like I was trying to play catch up … So, I think … to had [sic] a mentor would have been helpful…

Because first-generation students may not have people in their lives, such as parents, who can guide them through college, mentorship can be particularly valuable to them (Fruiht & Chan, 2018). Christina and Georgia expressed that their families had no idea how to help them traverse the college landscape. Meanwhile, as Georgia said, the participants’ non-first-generation peers had a greater understanding of what to expect and how to perform. Mentors are crucial in making academic outcomes and retention of first-generation students comparable to that of their peers (Fruiht & Chan, 2018). Mentorship would have assisted Christiana and Georgia in navigating their college experience.

Emotional Support Makes a Difference. The other theme that emerged in response to the first research question was emotional support. The phrase "emotional support" was used by multiple participants and the notions of mentality and emotional state were presented several times.

Imposter Syndrome and Mentality. One of the greatest ways that this theme was expressed was in discussion about imposter syndrome, or the fear of not belonging. Students with imposter syndrome may feel that they are a fraud who does not belong in the college setting (Ramsey & Brown, 2017). While imposter syndrome can limit a student's sense of belonging and academic resilience, it can be overcome with persistence and support (Ramsey & Brown, 2017). Michelle described feeling like an imposter and the incident she experienced during her first week of school that changed that.

> I didn't think I belonged there [college], but on my very first day … attending there, I had an English class … and I was sitting there thinking, 'I don't belong here. I'm not gonna be here long. I'm gonna flunk out. I don't belong here.' That was a lot of what was going on in my mind, because I was very shy back then. And … he [the teacher] happened to mention during that very first lecture that being in college was not about just sitting there and just taking the information, that we needed to start analyzing, thinking, and he said, you know, that … we didn't know a lot of things that were true, and one of the things he referenced was Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, 'How I Love Thee,' and that she didn't write it. Well, that happened to be one of my favorite poems, so for whatever

reason, little, shy me marched over to the library … Had no idea what I was doing and had no idea about this college library … He [the librarian] taught me the card catalog and went and got the book, and I marched back over there … I have no idea why I did this … And I knocked on his [the teacher's] door … And I held out the book and he said, 'Can you bring that to class for me on Wednesday?'… And so, I brought it to class … and I'm sitting there and still thinking, 'I don't belong here. I'm gonna flunk out,' and he [the teacher] said, 'There's only one person so far that I think is actually gonna graduate," and he said, "Because if you're gonna roguely [sic] accept what everybody says and not question it, then you're not gonna make it.' And I still didn't know he was talking about me [laughter] and then he was like, '… Can you please hold up the book, or hand me the book?' and then I got it and I was like, 'Holy crap!' So had that not happened, I have no idea how it would have turned out, but … that's what kept me there. That's what motivated me. And after that … it started a fire … because I was challenging everything.

Michelle's teacher engaged in behavior that lessened her feelings of imposter syndrome. It is recommended that faculty address any negative thoughts that first-generation students have that may limit their confidence and self-esteem levels (Davis, 2010). By using Michelle's initiative as an example for other students, her professor made her feel like less of an imposter and helped her gain confidence in her abilities. Carol also claimed to have a sense of imposter syndrome entering her undergraduate years.

"… I also went through some, like, pretty bad imposter syndrome because I was, like, very good at my high school and then at [college], I was, like, very below average, and that was a very weird switch for me to no longer be, like, one of the most achieved people in the room … I still did pretty well in school, bit then I did have trouble, like I said,

> adjusting to being below average all of a sudden … I kind of wish they had prepared us for that, because when people talk about adjusting to college, they talk about, like, time management and, like, evening out which days your classes are on sort of thing, but they don't really talk to you about, like, the mental adjustment … And, like, maybe, like, your view of yourself and how that might change. And so that's an area where I wish that we would have gotten more support too.

When asked how her view of herself changed during that time, Carol elaborated:

> It took a downturn … because, like I said, I had pretty bad imposter syndrome, so I was like, 'Why am I even here? Like, what am I doing?'… And so, just sort of, like, really doubting myself and that fact that I was, like, at such a, sort of, prestigious school … That negatively impacted me for probably, like, a year or so.

The feelings Carol experienced are not new for first-generation students. First-generation students who attend prestigious schools may feel that they took the spot of a more-deserving student (Davis, 2010). They may also believe that their comments in class aren't warranted and that any praise given by professors is disingenuous (Davis, 2010). Feeling like an imposter made Carol second-guess herself and her place at her institution. Georgia recalled learning about imposter syndrome as a doctoral student.

> … I remember the first time in my doctoral program learning about imposter syndrome, and it was just like this light went on and I was like, 'Why didn't somebody tell me about this, like, a few years ago?' because I'd really struggled with it, you know? ... And I don't know that that's something necessarily that's just even for first-generation college students, but I think we definitely, um, probably have an element of that that's a little bit different from other folks' imposter syndrome … There's an additional element there for

> a first-generation college student that's probably a little bit different from folks who grew up … with a family who was higher education savvy and kind of knew the ropes and could help you walk through that.

Georgia's belief that first-generation students experience imposter syndrome more than non-first-generation students is rooted in an understanding of the differences both groups face in their educational careers. Parents' experience informs students' entry knowledge of higher education (Ward et al., 2012). Without the cultural capital of parents who went to college, first-generation students lack the knowledge of college navigation that can help them succeed (Ward et al., 2012). This lack of knowledge can lead to increased feelings of imposter syndrome among first-generation students.

Family Plays a Role. Georgia's comments about feeling like an imposter were identified in opposition to her peers whose families had a higher education background. The theme of family support came up for each participant but was addressed in different ways. First-generation students are less likely to receive emotional support from their parents than their non-first-generation peers (Sy et al., 2011). However, when parents provide emotional support to their first-generation children, it helps alleviate the student's levels of stress more than parental emotional support of non-first-generation students does (Sy et al., 2011). Some interview participants acknowledged the role that their families played in emotionally supporting them where possible, in comparison to their peers who may have different types of support. Michaela addressed the ways that her parents support her.

> So, my family's always been really supportive of me, pretty much telling me, you know, 'You can do what you want to do,' you know, '… we'll help you where we can.' So, they weren't able to help me a lot with, like, FAFSA and stuff, because they had never done it,

> because they had never been to college, so, they didn't know how to do that. But as far as, like, supporting me, you know, helping me move to campus and get the things I need and things like that was really helpful for me in my transition to college, and them, you know, always encouraging me to do what I wanted to do.

Carol also described her parents' support.

> … I think my parents … They didn't play a role in financially helping me … They don't speak fluent English so they really couldn't help me in the side of, you know, homework or anything, but, like, they did show emotional support by coming up monthly and bringing me food, um, things like that.

Both Michaela and Carol's responses bring up the notion that first-generation women students' families can only offer support in particular ways, such as emotionally. In some instances, the parents of first-generation students can act as a hindrance by placing unnecessary stress on the lives of their children (Davis, 2010). Alternatively, families can be an effective resource for first-generation students (Gofen, 2009). In Michaela and Carol's responses, they indicated the latter to be true. They felt the emotional support their parents provided them was helpful. Sometimes, however, that support may not be enough. Georgia addressed longing to have people in her life who understood the struggle of being in college.

> … But I think, just emotionally, it's just … It's hard not having folks in your life that really understand what you're going through. Like, until my husband started his bachelor's [later in life], you know, all through my bachelor's and my master's program, he just didn't get it. He didn't get the struggle. He didn't get why it took so long to do homework … So just, you know, not having that … Not having folks in your life that really understand what it's like or, or being able to help you to figure out what you need

> to do differently. Like, I wonder if there might have been scholarships available that I could have taken advantage of when I was a college freshman and my folks just didn't know anything about it, and we didn't … And I didn't have the support of a guidance counselor either, because she thought I should be a secretary somewhere. So … just not being able to navigate the system, I think, and having that emotional and social support to be able to do that … was hard.

Georgia's response is indicative of the challenges first-generation women students face when seeking emotional support. Parents can play a role in emotionally supporting their first-generation children. However, first-generation students receive less parental support than their peers do (Sy et al., 2011). Since the parents of first-generation students did not go to college, they cannot provide them with the cultural capital needed to navigate college life (Ward et al., 2012). As such, first-generation students may feel like their parents' support is not enough to adequately assist them. Carol addressed not being able to find emotional support from other outlets.

Research Question 2

What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about their perceptions of types of support?

The research data indicated that first-generation college women are very perceptive about what is and is not given to them and how they are treated by others. Based on participant answers to the interview questions, the following themes were identified.

Financial Support is Needed. A large theme that developed over the course of the study was financial support. First-generation students are more likely to borrow funding for college frequently and in larger amounts than their non-first-generation peers (Furquim et al., 2017). The decisions they make when borrowing money, such as which types of loans to take out, are based on multiple factors, including their knowledge of financial aid and their family's resources (Furquim et al., 2017). All eleven participants mentioned finances during their interviews. For most participants, the conversation centered around needing help financially to attend or complete college.

Navigating Financial Aid. Several women identified needing assistance navigating the financial aid process. Because of their parents' lack of knowledge of college processes, first-generation students are at a disadvantage when accessing information about financial aid (Furquim et al. 2017). For these students, institutional assistance can be helpful. Anna stated that her institution gave her that support during her freshman year, but that it has dwindled through the years.

> … When I was applying and, like, my first year of school, I feel like yes, there were so many resources and things to do, because I had absolutely no clue. I didn't even know how to apply for FAFSA and stuff like that. And they definitely walked me through all of that and applying for scholarships through campus and everything. But, as the years go on, I feel like they realized that I'm learning now. So, it's kind of, like, on my own. And if I need help, I have to go seek it. It's not so, like, thrown at me.

For Anna, receiving institutional help was crucial to being able to complete her FAFSA application when she began college. However, not all first-generation students are given such institutional support. Many first-generation women students find the financial aid process to be complex, filled with unreasonable requirements and unwritten rules (Eitel & Martin, 2009). Some research participants highlighted this notion. Michaela described the difficulty she has encountered completing FAFSA.

> … I feel like first-generation students are definitely students that need help with financial aid stuff, because their parents don't know how to do it, and they don't know how to do it … I didn't have anyone that knew how to do the FAFSA. So, we [my family] just had to figure it out. And I feel like that's something that there can definitely be more support in, is the financial aid from, like, the federal standpoint.

Isabel also detailed her struggles of navigating the system. When asked what areas of being a student she needed the most support, she answered:

> … Yeah, it was mostly, like, financial help, which was, like, what I needed the most and, like, just … Not even just, like, having money, just like, navigating financial aid and … Like dates to pay things by, payment plans, and taking out a loan. I didn't take out a loan until my last year. Like, nobody told me how to take out a loan. I learned that myself.

The participants' responses support pertinent literature findings regarding financial support. First-generation students do not benefit financially from their families in the same way that their non-first-generation peers do (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). Furthermore, they do not have the same knowledge of college life as their peers. This is due to the difference in cultural capital between first-generation and non-first-generation students. With cultural capital, students have knowledge of the college environment (Rice et al., 2017). Their parents' prior college experience helps them navigate this (Ward et al., 2012). Without cultural capital, first-generation students are at a disadvantage in navigating institutional financial practices. When students face financial barriers and seek assistance to overcome them, institutions should provide help (Allan et al., 2016).

Need Money Outside of Tuition. Another sub-theme that was addressed was the need for money to pay for things outside of tuition. Carol described having to make a difficult decision about her education due to financial circumstances.

… Some people, from the art school perspective, many first-gens left because we couldn't afford the supplies, 'cause they're very expensive. Um, things like that which other, I'm sure, first-gen students who come from wealthy backgrounds didn't have to go through … Like, oil paints are, like, $20-30, like, a tube. So, if you need, like, ten colors, that's $200 out of pocket … Um, and that could go to rent and food … That's part of the reason why I, I dropped out of art school. Like, another friend dropped out too, who was also a first-gen.

Lucy described feeling similarly about having to pay out-of-pocket expenses.

… Coming from a low-income background … I did get, like, grant money for that … So, I do have more, like official support from them [the university], but then when it comes down to, like, the individual level, like leadership and everything, it feels like they're very … Sort of ignorant about other lifestyles … Teachers, for example, like, expect us to do … projects that will sometimes take money, which is, like, not really fair to do. Like, they'll … require us to go see a performance sort of thing, but then not, like, pay for the tickets and … So, that can get sort of frustrating.

First-generation students are more likely than their peers to drop out of classes or college due to a lack of finances (CCSSE, 2020). Even something as simple as an art project or class assignment can put first-generation students, who may lack the funding for such things, at a disadvantage. As seen in Carol's narrative, her lack of finances led her to drop out of an art program. Faculty members may not understand the ways their requests put first-generation students in an unequal position to their peers.

Isabel's financial experience was different from the other participants. A child of a low-income family, she stated, "I send money home." Research indicates that first-generation students in community college are more likely to have people in their lives who are financially dependent on them (Inman & Mayes, 1996). Isabel's narrative indicates that this role can also be seen in students at four-year institutions. She described having to work outside of her graduate fellowship, despite school regulations.

> … The job thing? I'm not even supposed to work. Like, I was working … I think 25-hour shifts on top of grad school and you're only supposed to work a maximum of ten hours if you're on fellowship. If you GSI, which is graduate, like, a TA, graduate student instructor, you're supposed to work twenty hours max and even beyond that you can't work more than ten hours. So, I was already violating that … Because then the problem is, like, they'll ask you …'Oh, well, why are you working?' 'Cause I need money.' 'Okay, well, we'll give you, like, this little bit of $300 and that's going to suffice for the rest …' It's not gonna suffice. I need money … It's not a problem that just goes away.

Prior research indicated that college counselors across the United States believed first-generation students would find the financial cost of college challenging (Arch & Gilman, 2009). The participants in this study further expand on this research finding. First-generation students are more likely to work full-time while enrolled in classes (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Work study and outside jobs were mentioned by several participants, indicating that first-generation women students need to make money to support their lives both in and outside of the classroom. As indicated by Isabel, first-generation women students may also take on the responsibility of financially assisting their family (Ward et al., 2012).

Money as a Motivator. For several participants, money was a motivating factor in their decision to attend college. First-generation students do not always identify as low-income students (Allan et al., 2016). However, it is believed that first-generation students have a more difficult time handling the financial cost of college (Arch & Gilman, 2019). For low-income students, attending college is how they believe they can escape poverty (Davis, 2010). Christina expressed how she was inspired to attend college thanks to their financial experience growing up.

> … So, my family growing up, we were really poor … I always had the understanding that if I wanted to go to college, I would have to work really hard in school. And I'm very fortunate because school was very easy for me growing up … So, around high school, junior high, I knew, like, 'Okay, I need to get to college, I need to get a good job,' and I just knew that in order to not be poor … Like, I didn't like being poor. No one likes being poor. I knew in order to get out of that, that I needed to get to college.

Kauni described her experience growing up as motivation for attending college the first time.

> … My parents divorced when I was … four or five … My father paid very, very, very little in child support for three children … So, we grew up extremely dirt poor … And there was a part of time as a child who … I admired my mom for her strength, but I always told myself I refused to be like her. And when I graduated high school … I was so excited to go to college.

Both Christina and Kauni pushed themselves to attend college and break a family cycle of poverty. For low-income students like them, observing their surroundings plays a role in directing them towards college (Davis, 2010). Both women grew up seeing poverty in their homes. Taking notice of family members who choose to not pursue education and live in impoverished circumstances can serve as motivation for low-income students to attend college (Davis, 2010). They may see college as the only way to leave those circumstances (Davis, 2010).

Leaving poverty is not the only motivating factor for first-generation students to attend college. Financial incentives can also play a role. When asked what influenced her decision to stay in college, Christina responded:

> So, for my undergrad I got a scholarship to go that was free … I mean, essentially, the four years were free. So, that was always motivation to keep grades high, just because you had to keep the scholarship. The first two years of undergrad, I just kept going, just because I … it was what I needed to do.

Katie was also motivated by financial incentives. When asked why she went back to college after earning her bachelor's degree, she responded, "This may sound shallow, but one thing is because I worked at [place of employment], you know, they would reimburse the degrees and … I felt I needed to take advantage of that." Carol described financial assistance being a motivating factor for her as well. "…The only way I was able to afford it was I got a huge hefty financial aid scholarship, which … I don't have any student loans, which I'm grateful for … Yeah, so … that's the only reason why I went … It was free … It was a free education."

Financial incentives are important for students who identify as low-income, as some first-generation students do. Changes to federal financial aid programs and the use of merit-based-aid as recruitment tools have made it more difficult for first-generation, low-income students to receive financial support (Ward et al., 2012). College students are likely to take advantage of funding opportunities, selecting majors that provide them with financial incentives (Denning & Turley, 2017). In the case of first-generation students, having funding available also made them more likely to attend college. Participants noted that they simply could not pass up a free education.

Money as a Critical Resource. For some participants, financial assistance wasn't only something that was appreciated. It was a critical resource for them to be able to attend college and participate in institutional activities. Without financial assistance, several participants stated they would not be able to afford college. Georgia described:

> … I wouldn't be in the doctoral program if it weren't for … having the tuition reimbursement through [my employer], because we [my family] just wouldn't be able … Like, my husband is getting his reimbursed through his employer too, or neither one of us would be … He's also a first-generation college student. Neither of us would be going to college if it weren't for employer assistance programs … just because of the financial impact.

Employers may provide tuition reimbursement programs to their employees because they exhibit levels of productivity above market value (Capelli, 2004). Employer tuition assistance is the leading non-loan source of tuition payment for graduate school (Gilpin & Kofoed, 2020). When balancing a home life with school like Georgia, any amount of financial assistance is appreciated. This is particularly true for first-generation students, such as Georgia and her husband, who are more likely to be financially independent of their parents (Tinto & Engle, 2008).

Socioeconomic status and financial resources can also impact the access first-generation students have to on-campus events. First-generation students are more likely to work and earn money than to participate in campus activities and organizations (Davis, 2010). Sometimes, their lack of finances plays a role in limiting their participation. Lucy explained:

> I had a really hard time adjusting to [my institution] because, like, my family comes from, like, a very low SES [socio-economic status] background, and [my institution] is,

> like … Some really big percentage of our students are from, like, the top ten percent of income sort of thing. And so, because that's the majority, [my institution] has this sort of culture that expects you to be able to participate in that kind of lifestyle, and I can't… That was something that was very hard for me to get adjusted to. It was hard to sort of make friends.

Georgia described having a similar feeling during her undergraduate years. She explained, "… I went to sorority rush my first year of college, but there was no way I could afford it, so that was off the table." She continued:

> … I think that for students who have a lot of financial … hardships, that their opportunities in college are more limited … Definitely being able to join fraternities and sororities allows for some networking that students who can't afford to do that are not able to … bring about in other ways, I think.

First-generation students do not benefit from family financial assistance as much as their non-first-generation peers do (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). As participants explained, a lack of financial resources can be detrimental to their college experience. Student groups that accept certain types of students, such as fraternities and sororities, can be exclusionary towards first-generation students who may come from a lower socioeconomic class (Davis, 2010). Lucy described participation in such groups as an expectation for students, which she could not meet because of her lack of finances. Institutions should remove exclusionary barriers from student groups, thus making them an experience that all students can participate in (Davis, 2010).

Institutional Efforts Could be Better. Institutional agents have the ability to provide strong outreach to first-generation students through means such as orientations, evening workshops, and literature (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). Therefore, interview question four centered on institutional support. The researcher sought to know what areas of being a student the participants felt they needed the most support in. She further asked them if they felt their institutions had provided that support to them. Below are some of the primary sub-themes that were identified.

Searching for Support. Several participants described feeling like they had to seek out support from their institution when they needed help. This is in contrast to the institution directly offering support. For example, Alexis said, "I don't know if they [my institution] know I'm first-generation, and I think when it comes to that, usually you have to communicate with them that you're in need as a first-generation…," indicating that first-generation women students need to express their first-generation status if they need help.

Support for first-generation students may exist on a campus, but first-generation students may have difficulty finding it. To find support, students often turn to the institution's website (Lamoreaux, 2016). Students expect for necessary information to be available and easily accessible (Lamoreaux, 2016). However, whether searching on a website or on campus, this may not always be the case. Isabel explained that she had to look for the support she needed. She said, "… I didn't get career support until I was in my later years. Like, I'm just getting support now … and that's because I had to go look for it. If I didn't look for it, I would still not have it." Carol described students receiving financial assistance from her institution needing to find a work study job. She said, "… Like, that's out there for you, but being able to find the job that you need to use that work study fund was all on your own."

Institutional support is critical to the success of first-generation students. As participants indicated, it is more helpful when the support is clear and easily accessible. Research shows that students who feel that communication is lacking between offices at the institution will feel confused and hopeless when it comes to understanding college processes (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Participant responses indicate that the same is true for a lack of communication from the institution to them. First-generation women students want clarity and readily available help to navigate college life.

Unwritten Rules of College. College life comprises of unwritten rules for success (Berrett, 2015). Some students are uncertain of what to expect and need explicit information about the learning process (Berrett, 2015). First-generation students, lacking the cultural capital of their peers, fall into this category. Because they are unaware of basic college expectations, first-generation students may encounter negative experiences with institutional members. For example, Isabel emphasized that faculty should "… [sigh] Realize that there are ways that they can support us by, like … Like, simple things, like not making us feel dumb for asking questions …," an experience that non-first-generation students may have. Christina further addressed the unwritten rules of being a college student that she thinks first-generation students would benefit from knowing.

> … I think it would be awesome if a university published, like, first-generation college FAQs [frequently asked questions]. Like, "Should I meet with friends? Yes, you should do this often. Should I go to office hours? Yes, your professors are there to talk to you and they want to talk to you about it. This does not mean you're stupid. This does not mean you did not do your homework. This does not mean any of those negative things that you might have in your brain."

Some institutions have implemented programs that aid in the dissemination of the unwritten rules (Davis, 2010). For example, Sonoma State University created a Summer Bridge Program for first-generation low-income students (Davis, 2010). Students who participated in the program reported that the program benefitted them in understanding how to be successful in college (Davis, 2010). Providing more resources like this to first-generation students could close the cultural capital gap between first-generation students and the peers.

Family Support is Appreciated or Desired. Because first-generation women students are the first in their families to attend college, being in the higher education environment can create a "cultural mismatch" for them (Sy et al., 2011). Family members range of support provides their first-generation children with positive and negative feelings about being in college. All eleven participants were asked if they felt supported by their families during their college journeys. The responses varied and yielded several sub-themes. Overwhelmingly, participants indicated that they wanted and valued support from their families.

Feeling Limited Support. For some of the participants, support from their family was limited or nonexistent. When family members are not supportive of their first-generation child's decision to go to college, it can create conflict and lead the student to reanalyze their relationship with the family member (Ward et al., 2012). This was the case for Kauni. She explained:

> Oh, my dad is upset with me for being in college. My dad thinks it's a waste of time and he does not understand why, after I get my four-year degree, why I will not go and start making money. He thinks that with your four-year degree, you should be able to make a crap ton of money. And I've tried to explain to him … as a four-year degree psychology student, I'm not a psychologist yet, I will not make any more money than I was making before. I have to explain that to him and he doesn't understand that. Again, when you talk to somebody who's not educated much past high school, it's very difficult …

Kauni described her relationship with her father as strained. He left her family when she was a child and was not supportive of her college aspirations. As research indicates, fathers play a particular role in speaking to their first-generation children about college (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). Some fathers tell their children that a college education is not necessary, as was the case for Kauni (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014).

Some parents may be hesitant for their children to attend college because they fear it will shift their priorities away from their family (Wang, 2014b). Michelle experienced this with her mother, who believed she should start a family of her own instead of going to college. She explained that her mother grew up during an era when it was uncommon for women to achieve higher education.

> … She didn't even approve of my going to college. She just thought that wasn't a good idea. Yeah, [laughter] she was during the housewife era … I was in a serious relationship [during high school] and she thought I should get married and have babies. I worked in an office already, so she thought that I had achieved those goals already.

When asked what role her mother played in her decision to go to college, Michelle responded:

> … Well, she didn't like it. [laughter] And she didn't pay for it. She did let me have her financial information after a lot of arguing … to get financial aid, but … she didn't think it was the right path … She didn't go when I got my master's. She didn't even go to my graduation …

Parents may be wary of their first-generation children attending college because they believe the child's priorities are shifting away from their family (Wang, 2014). In Michelle's case, her mother believed that her priority after high school should be to create a family of her own. This perspective led to a tenuous relationship, full of arguments and limited support.

Katie expressed that her family seemed indifferent to her educational aspirations. When asked if she perceived that her family and friends support her, she said:

> To be honest, I don't know. It's like, with the more degrees I get, the less support I seem to get. [laughter] And I don't … I may sound strange, but it's just like, 'Really? Another degree?' is kind of the attitude I get … from some people … This is sounding terrible, but when I went to get my master's, my sister was like, 'Why are you getting a master's?' you know, and so it's just been kind of spotty, I guess, the support.

Katie explained what her family could do to make her feel more supported:

> … Though my mom will ask about it every now and then, it may be just asking more about it and, you know, really listening and asking questions when I'm talking about it. That might make me feel a little more supported … or trying to encourage me and, you know, how this degree will help me, you know, just kind of being positive about it. That would be good.

Families of first-generation students can be a significant resource in their college success (Gofen, 2009). Parental emotional support provided to first-generation students impacts the students' levels of stress (Sy et al., 2011). Sy et al. (2011) hypothesized that this connection could be related to students balancing school and their families. When first-generation students feel their parents emotionally support them, it could lower stress levels (Sy et al., 2011). As Katie explained, conversations about college and encouragement through difficult times could aid in her success.

Support Unequal to Peers. A more common response among participants about their family's support was that it was given but limited in comparison to their non-first-generation peers. Since the parents of first-generation students do not have a college degree, they lack knowledge to pass onto their children about college life (Ward et al., 2012). This means that they are unable give their children cultural capital, leaving first-generation students without a type of support held by their peers (Ward et al., 2012). For study participants, family support took a different shape then it might for non-first-generation students. In some cases, families were uncertain how to support the participants. Michaela explained:

> I feel like, for me, like, my parents don't understand necessarily what college courses and things are like, so they just kind of, you know, listen to my experience and they don't really have experience to add to it, so they don't have that input, you know, maybe my friends do have that … But, I think that, you know, friends with a similar family structure to mine, they still receive the same level of support, it's just a little bit different. They've actually, you know, taken the college coursework and stuff, so they're like, "Oh, this class was hard. You're going to need to take a lot of notes in this course," or something like that, but I think the same general level of support's been pretty similar.

Michaela's experience highlights the way that cultural capital benefits her non-first-generation peers. When parents are able to pass on knowledge about college to their children, it can help them navigate and cope with the college environment (Ward et al., 2012). Michaela felt supported by her parents but recognized that support was limited. Her parents were not able to talk with her about classwork the same way that her peers' parents could.

Other participants expressed similar narratives. Georgia expressed feeling that her family did not understand "… just how hard that it really is to be working full-time and trying to do a dissertation in the midst of a pandemic [laughter]." Lucy expressed a similar sentiment, saying that her parents were uncertain of how to help her and play more of "… a quiet role …" in her life. Isabel also explained the difference between her family's support and that of the families of her non-first-generation peers.

Um … Me and my other first-gen friends, we always joke about that … So, when I was, like, making that joke, that I ain't got … I ain't got no professor parent … It's like, there's a lot of people in my program, they got, like, professors, doctors as they parents. I was like, 'Wow.' I was like, 'You actually have people at home that can help you with the … with the financial aid, the applications and stuff like that.' Like, they have those people. My parents … I love them, but they don't know … They don't know how it is to pay for school when school take all your money, or all this applications and all this book work. Like, my parents stopped … They stopped going to school, like, over twenty years ago … The other students that, like … They have more higher income parents and stuff … Like, they can go to their parents for these things. I can't. I have to learn it by myself … I wish I had my mom to do that, but I kind of just … I use my mom just to vent … Uh, tell her, like some stressful stuff that's … will go on, but even that I have to break down because they don't have the same education level … Which I'm very much aware of that, like, gives me privilege … Um, I have to break down certain things that are happening in my job, in my education, that my parents don't understand. So, I have to spend extra time to do that … I'm pretty sure, like, if they [my peers] went to they parents, like, their parents will know what they talking about automatically … and then can offer them, like, support or suggestions. My mom's just like, "I can't believe they did that shit!" Like … It's just different. It's more, like, empathy and then, like the other people's parents, it's, like, empathy and then, like, actual, like, helpful advice…Their parents also help them out a lot financially … But I can't ask nobody for help. I send money home, so it … Their [my peers] parents are, like, financial help, academic help, and emotional help. I get, like, emotional help from my parents. That's about it.

These participant narratives highlight the role that cultural capital plays in the lives of college students. First-generation students lack the cultural capital of their peers. As research indicates, first-generation students experience familial support emotionally and perhaps financially (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). However, their parents are not able to share wisdom about navigating college life with them due to their lack of experience (Ward et al., 2012). By acknowledging the differences among support received, the participants identified a disadvantage that they face in comparison to their non-first-generation peers.

Despite support being limited, participants acknowledged the ways their families helped them, particularly in reaching college. Such is the case for many first-generation students, who recognize that their parents are supportive, but lack the knowledge to assist their children (Irlbeck et al., 2014). Several participants stated that they did not feel pressure to attend college. Rather, their parents assisted them in whatever ways they could. Lucy provided a clear example of this. She elaborated on her experience talking to her mother about college. When asked if they had conversations about Lucy attending college, she said:

> Not really. It was more, just sort of like, it's be mentioned in passing … Well, I guess when I was looking at colleges, then we started having conversations about it … but it was more just, like, her asking questions about it and, like, money was a really big concern, so of course she was asking a lot about that. Um, she did take me on college visits, which was a big surprise. I didn't think I'd get to do any of those … Looking back, I think that she definitely, like, wanted to be more involved with it, but didn't really know how to engage with it, if that makes sense.

When asked how she was able to tell that, Lucy said:

> Because she [my mother] showed a lot of interest and, um … Also, the whole college visits was a really big deal because I never thought I'd be able to go because of money, but she, like, had some money saved and when I expressed interest, she was like, 'Yeah, let's do it.' And so, I know that that was, like, a big sacrifice in itself … Especially because I was like, 'Let's fly across the country to look at schools.' [laughter] … And so, just sort of that, like … When it did come up, there was that engagement and it was never, like, 'No, don't do it.' It was always like, 'Yeah, sure,' even though she didn't really know, like, what to talk about when it came to it.

For Lucy, her interactions with her mother made the possibility of going to college a tangible goal. When first-generation students work with their parents to construct college plans, students feel that earning their degree is feasible (Wang & Nuru, 2017). Lucy's perception of her mother's support made going to college less of a dream and more of a reality. Some first-generation students express hesitancy about going to college because of financial constraints and may question their ability to perform well in college because of them (Wang & Nuru, 2017). Lucy acknowledged that her mother was concerned about the financial cost but did not let that stop Lucy from fulfilling her goal of enrolling in college.

Research Question 3

What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about the role that identity intersectionality plays in today's higher education environment?

In this study, the researcher sought to know more about how the intersections of gender, race, socio-economic status, and other identities impact first-generation women students. Two identities came to the forefront during the participant interviews.

Motherhood. Women who carry the roles of student and mother face multiple risks, including a lack of financial resources, a lack of quality childcare, and the possibility of college attrition (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018). Of the eleven interviewees, four identified as being mothers. They spoke about the challenges they encountered balancing both roles.

Help with Childcare. Simultaneously being a mother and a student presents unique challenges. Mothers identify that receiving social and emotional forms of support is a greater benefit to them on their education journeys than receiving financial support is (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018). Georgia described having support from her family in the form of childcare. Christina also addressed the importance of childcare. Now in a doctoral program, Christina is a new mother. She addressed what motherhood might have been like for her as an undergraduate student.

> The one thing I do think about though is that now that I'm a mother, if I had been a mother during undergrad … Wow. I mean, those women really have it tough. And so, I think that [my institution], like I said, does a good job because I think there are some options. I know [my former institution] has a childcare program, so they have part of the early childhood program, the professors can bring their kids there … But I don't know if students can. So, I think being a woman, the support that a lot of women would need that I didn't necessarily need before, but it's really the help with children, because that responsibility really even today falls on women. So, it's much harder to be a woman working toward your bachelor's degree or your master's degree or anything when you have a child. So, I think the more universities can give support in that way, I think that would make a huge difference to women completing their … degrees."

Christina continued:

> I just think I'm a really fortunate example. But like I said, I think that for women, completing their undergrad, the kids, children … Women with children, that's such a huge factor and I wish that universities and workplaces did more … to support women in that way, because we still live in a world where women take care of the kids. And I feel like women can be … Could really go further in their careers and their education if more support were given just to that, that family structure. I mean, women, for the most part, don't want to give up having kids in order to get their education or in order to do well in their career. I mean, women want to have a strong career and a family … I didn't say this before, but I taught for a lot of years as an adjunct at [my prior institution]. I do now as well, but I do the classes online, but I hadn't … There were many years where I went to the university at night and I had so many female students email me and say, "I'm so sorry I'm missing class tonight, but my babysitter canceled," or, "I'm so sorry but I … there's no one to take care of the baby." And [the institution], their policy is that children cannot come to class. And so, I think that's something that really affects … I never had a woman ask … If she had, I probably would have said, "Yes … bring the kid, because I think … your education is very important, and kids are fine. Kids are everywhere. They can come to class." [laughter] … But that's something I'm really passionate about that I wish universities and employers would do a better job of supporting women with.

Christina and Georgia were two of four study participants who identified as mothers. Their narratives are indicative of the research that states women are largely responsible for childcare in their households (Hagedon et al., 2002). As Christiana stated, institutional policies that ban children from the classroom hurt mothers and put them at a disadvantage to their non-parent peers. Finding a balance between being a student and a mother can be challenging and first-generation students may need assistance to achieve it. Evidence suggests a relationship between the academic performance of mothers and childcare (Brown & Amankwaa, 2007). It is necessary, then, for institutions to consider how they can help students who are mothers succeed academically by providing access to childcare.

Struggle to Balance and Mother's Guilt. Because women are primarily responsible for child rearing (Hagedon et al., 2002), they face multiple challenges to balancing their mothering and education. Katie discussed her experience of simultaneously being pregnant and a student. When asked what influenced her decision to stay in college once she started, she said:

> Must be some kind of internal drive that I have. I mean, I just can't not finish something, you know, and when I got my undergraduate, I actually was pregnant at the time, and it was really hard to finish the fall semester, but, you know, I just … I wanted to see it through to completion.

Despite her drive, Katie had to change her education plans due to her role as a mother. She said, "The last year, the Ed.S. would have had to be an unpaid internship, and I just couldn't do that. I mean, I have a family, and there was no way I could do that." Katie expressed a high level of commitment to her education and her family. However, as Katie indicated, mothers may have to make a choice between the two. Research indicates that despite the challenges a woman may face, she will always love her child (Brown & Amankwaa, 2007). This strong love can lead women to choose their family over their education if necessary. Doing so can put mothers at a disadvantage to their peers, preventing them from advancing in the degree programs.

When asked what it was like balancing motherhood and college throughout her whole college career, Georgia explained:

> Um, it's been tough. Like, there's been a lot of time I've looked back from a mother's standpoint and felt really guilty because I took time away from my kids. And it made it more challenging. I mean, I think … it was physically harder on me because I probably went a lot more without sleep and things like that to be able to complete assignments and stuff, because I would try to wait until I got my kids in bed … and then I would be up … sometimes all night long. I mean, I remember as a bachelor's student, I was up sometimes two or three days at a time, and I don't even know how I did that now, 'cause I can't go one day without sleep. But, I think physically, it probably took a toll on me … And still, you know, I still look back and wonder if it was worth it all sometimes … I guess I feel like I missed some of my kids' childhood.

Katie and Georgia's experiences speak to the emotional and financial impact that school can have on family life. Both women made choices on their educational journeys that placed value on their families. They lost opportunities or halted degree progress because their families came first in their eyes. Feelings of guilt are part of the role conflict that mothers face when deciding between their education and their children (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018). When education negatively impacts family dynamics, guilt can creep into the woman's life and make her question if her education was worth the time and effort.

Children as Peers. Because first-generation students are more likely to be older than their non-first-generation peers (Sy et al., 2011), some of them may be parents to grown children. This means that some first-generation students may be enrolled in college at the same time as their children. Michelle recalled her experience as mother to and peer of her children.

> And then I decided when my two children were juniors in high school … They both dual enrolled at the college, so I started back one year after my son was dual enrolling at [the

> college], and then my daughter, also. So, we're all three in college, kind of, together [laughter]. Yeah. So, completely different experience as to what, what you're talking about and what I had when, you know, I didn't have a parent in college, and she had no idea what I was doing or how hard it was or any of that.

She further explained the roles that she and her children play in each other's lives:

> We all sit around in the living room, and during the quarantine it was, you know … And we'll read each other's stuff and we're almost peers, so it's, it's pretty cool.

The experience of being a peer of and mother to children is unique to non-traditional students. First-generation and non-traditional student status are sometimes intersecting identities. Research shows, for example, that first-generation students at community college tend to be women with families to provide for who are entering college later than traditional-aged students (Inman & Mayes, 1996). This may lead to circumstances like Michelle's, where a mother and her children are college students at the same time. This dynamic can cause first-generation women students to provide the cultural capital to their children that their parents were not able to give them.

Race. First-generation women students recognize the intersections of their identities and the roles of those intersections in creating privileges and discriminations (Kouzoukas, 2017). This was certainly true of the three women of color who participated in this study. The responses relayed below explore the perceptions of the role of race in the educational experiences of both White students and students of color.

White Privilege. The women who identified as White did not feel that their race or ethnicity influenced the support they receive from their institutions, or they did not acknowledge them as influential factors. Christina acknowledged the privilege that her race provides her:

> No, I mean, I've never felt that my race mattered. I'm lucky because I'm White. So, I've never had any … You know, I know people say white is the default, so you don't think about races often, which I think is true. I never thought about it. It's probably more difficult if you're a person of color, but I haven't had that experience.

When asked if she perceived her race or ethnicity had influence the support her institution provided her, Georgia said:

> Um … I don't guess I had thought about it at the time, but I'm sure somewhere along the way with having gone to school in the 80's, that probably there was some privilege there, uh, from being a White person that maybe I was granted that I never recognized. I don't know.

Race was often not addressed among White participants in this study. When it was, as in the cases of Christina and Georgia, it was not identified as a contributing factor in the levels of support they felt from their universities. Wilkens (2014) identified that White men have an easier time establishing their identities on campus than Black men. The responses that the White participants in this study had to questions about race and support indicate that the same might be true for White women.

Racism and Challenges. For the three women of color who participated in this study, their race has contributed to their college experience. The white participants had little to say regarding the role of race in their lives. A few of them indicated that they perceived all students were treated equally at their institution. Such views may stem from ideals of a post-racial society. Keels (2019) stated that arguments about a post-racial society are connected to arguments that society must be racially indifferent, also known as being colorblind. However, ignoring racial identity of students denies the existence of their experiences and themselves

(Keels, 2019). The three participants who did not identify as white described experiences they had during college that they perceived to be influenced by their race. Alexis had a bad experience with a roommate that she perceived was influenced by her race.

> Now, that was a time where I almost felt like my university wasn't supporting me the way they should. Yeah, that was a time I almost felt that because it was a situation of, like, different cultures mixing, being that I attend a PWI [predominantly White institution]. So, my roommate was Caucasian and I'm a Black girl, and we conveyed through email … Yeah, so I didn't say to her, 'I am an African-American' or anything like that. You know, so all she knew was my name … I noticed that when she moved in, she didn't even never greet me. We never … For the two months that I lived there before I had to move out, we never had a conversation … And then in that case, I knew it wasn't, it wasn't my university's fault that I had been put with a bad roommate, but I do feel like I was the one that was told to move because they saw that I was a peacemaker in this situation.

Alexis perceived that she faced discrimination from her roommate because of her race. Racism can hinder students from finding a sense of belonging in their residence halls (Means & Pyne, 2017). This sense of belonging is important for first-generation women students to have. Furthermore, Alexis felt that her university did not support her in the situation, asking her to move instead of her roommate. This policy decision did not provide an equitable resolution, something that institutional policies should have to enhance the sense of belonging first-generation students of color feel at their colleges (Means & Pyne, 2017).

As expressed earlier, first-generation women students are perceptive to how they are treated by professors and other institutional members. Carol took notice of how professors at her institution treated students of color. She explained:

> Um … Yeah, I think that … Since I have a foreign name, [Carol's name], and, um, though it's pronounced [Carol's name], um, a lot of the professors, when I talk to them first, they don't expect me to have this, like, Midwestern accent, fluent English kind of thing. So, they're kind of taken aback by that … Sometimes I see from afar, how white professors talk to international students, and it's kind of aggressive, and they just talk at them … And I don't let that happen to me.

First-generation women students who understand their personal intersectionality develop a strong sense of self-concept (Kouzoukas, 2017). This sense of self can be seen in Carol's ability to stand up for herself. By not letting professors speak to her in an aggressive way, she takes ownership of her intersectional identity. When speaking about interacting with her advisor, Isabel described her as not being "hands-on." She explained:

> Um, but my advisor that I had was, like, very racist. Um … Always … A lot of microaggressions, which, you know, I felt a little bit targeted, you know. I would … I didn't want to believe it because I don't want to think that, like, I was being targeted because I was Hispanic, but, I mean, I was [the] only minority in the lab and I basically … She, like, wasn't supportive, she always put me down, and I was just like, 'Well, what's the point of me coming here if I'm just gonna go through this shit and there's, like, no support system?'

When asked if she perceived whether other parts of her identity, such as race and ethnicity, influenced the support her institution provided her, Isabel explained:

> Um … I mean, that's the thing. Like, before I came here, I didn't really think about my race as much 'cause, like, I was around Latinos and everybody else. Um … It's weird. Like, I felt isolated a lot of the times, because there's, like, less than 4% Hispanic on campus, like … We're, like, one of the lower minority groups … Like, racial minority groups. Um … There's not much that they do that make [sic] us feel welcome.

The role of intersectionality in these participants' experiences is evident. While intersectionality is often used today to refer to the crossing of multiple identities, some scholars encourage the definition to reflect Kimberlé Crenshaw's original intent (Cooper et al., 2017). Crenshaw's original definition of intersectionality included understanding how systems of power create levels of oppression for marginalized communities, particularly for Black women (Cooper et al., 2017). The experiences Alexis, Carol, and Isabel had are indicative of these levels of oppression within higher education. When faculty act on microaggressions and try to box students into preconceived stereotypes, they and the institution are contributing to systematic oppression. These actions do not contribute to a supportive learning environment for first-generation students.

Isabel was the only participant who spoke about her racial community's view of higher education. She spoke about her family's perception of themselves, saying that her cousins told her going into the military was her only career option, and that they didn't have other choices because, "we're not going to amount to anything." When asked why she thought that mentality existed in her family, she said:

> I mean … Part of me is, like, I'm a woman, so I think the common narrative among all women, not just, like, Hispanic women, is that, like, we're meant to be, you know, popping out kids and, uh, cooking and cleaning and being there for our husband if we're,

> like … You know, if we're, like, straight. But any other narrative besides that is, like, confusing to, like, a lot of the older generation. Um, I mean, specifically for me, even though I think Hispanics don't like to admit it, or at least in higher education, it's like … [sigh] … They keep saying … Like, systematic white oppression of people of color that tells us that, like, we're not gonna do anything. I mean, there's part of that, but personally, I feel that in the Hispanic community, that we don't talk about school. Like, it's not a thing for us. Um, and I think, by not acknowledging that our own community doesn't always constantly, like, push us to do better, is part of the reason why, like, we don't …

When students begin college, their academic and family identities can compete with one another (Keels, 2019). This is especially true for first-generation students, whose decision to attend college may deviate from their family's expectations (Keels, 2019). As Isabel indicated, her racial community's limited discussion of higher education set an expectation that she would build and serve a family rather than attend college. While Isabel acknowledges that oppression from systems of power exists (Cooper et al., 2017), she addressed an interesting notion that a first-generation woman's own racial or ethnic community may contribute to their views of higher education.

Research Question 4

What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about the ways crises are handled by institutions?

In March of 2020, COVID-19 developed into a global pandemic, impacting all facets of life, including higher education. The pandemic forced college campuses to close and transition to remote learning, putting disadvantaged students at risk of losing critical resources, such as homes, food, and healthcare (Fischer, 2020). As the pandemic has continued over the past year, research has been conducted to determine the best ways to support students during this unprecedented time. The researcher added research question four a few months after the pandemic began to learn more about the support first-generation women students felt from their institutions during this unprecedented time.

Greater Support than Normal. The task facing higher education institutions to continue their educational mission during a public health crisis has been "herculean" (Lederer et al., 2020). Recommendations for best practices of supporting students were made as 2020 progressed (Cohen et al., 2020; Lederer at al., 2020; McCarthy, 2020). Many of the women interviewed for this study explained the ways their institutions supported them during COVID-19. They described positive experiences with their institutions and professors during the beginning months of the pandemic, saying that the support was greater than normal. Isabel described the financial and emotional support she received.

> Um … I think the [department she belongs to], which is a smaller department of the two that I'm in, um … They gave us a little bit extra money over the summer. So, over the summer, we get a … 25% pay cut … Or more … 20 to 20% pay cut … 'Cause they're like. "We're [graduate students] not as productive as we are during the year. So, we're gonna give you a pay cut." Um, had [the department] not given me, like, the extra income … And even this … Even if it's, like, $1000, you know, that's still a lot of money for some people … They gave us extra money and they were, like, trying to help us the best way that they can … But, I would say that they definitely, like, went the extra mile to ask us how we're doing … And, they even had, like, emotional support hours where, like, our graduate coordinator reached out to us … They helped a lot. [The other department] …

The people who are in just [that department] … They didn't get any extra income. The only reason why I got the extra money was because I was in [the first department]. Um, so they [graduate students in the second department] still got the 25-30% pay cut. I mean, I got a little bit less pay cut, but it helped …

Carol also explained the financial support she was given by her institution. She said:

Yeah … And then, I think, working from home has been a big transition for all of us. So, they were able to support, like financial means of, like getting you a desk or a chair … A monitor for things like that.

For graduate students like Isabel and Carol, their graduate stipend is their primary source of income. When classes were canceled or moved online in March 2020, many students experienced stress over the financial ramifications of the pandemic (Cohen et al., 2020). Students with jobs prior to the pandemic either lost those jobs or had their salaries cut because of the financial strains COVID-19 placed on businesses (Cohen et al., 2020). Graduate programs like Isabel's and Carol's provided a critical resource when they offered financial assistance, such as a reduced pay cut or purchasing necessary materials for working from home. Doing so made them feel more financially secure.

Georgia felt that more support had been given to her as a student during the start of the pandemic.

I think, you know, it's been great that the university has, you know, sent out surveys and stuff, asking students how they're doing. Um, that's not something that I ever got before. Um, it's [her program] not been a whole lot different, really, because it's online anyway, as a student. Um, so actually, that's probably more support than we got in the past. Like, there was nobody reaching out before COVID hit and saying, 'Hey, are you okay?' …

> Um, but I do think in an online class, it would be good to have that regardless … That somebody's checking in on you from time-to-time to see how you're doing. So, I would actually feel like it's almost been more support than we had before COVID hit.

Michelle also elaborated on the effort she saw from her university.

> I mean, what I was seeing out of [my institution] … I mean, I saw so much … Um, they even called, I think Monday, Tuesday … So, I think they're starting to call their students. I think they've assigned different students to different advisors and they're actually just calling to say, 'Hey, you doing okay?' So, I think … that's good measures to, to do.

Georgia and Michelle's narratives address a recommendation for student support groups during the pandemic. Institutions are encouraged to use clear communication methods and to reach out to students often (Lederer et al., 2020). Constant communication ensures that students stay on track academically and that they are able to access support resources when necessary (McCarthy, 2020). Georgia and Michelle appreciated the communication their institutions provided. Consistent check-ins, like the ones they received, can increase students' sense of being supported by their institutions, which is particularly helpful for first-generation students.

Michelle described the flexibility that her professors demonstrated to her, saying that two of them "… said, you know, 'If something's wrong, if you need time, whatever it may be, just let me know and we'll adjust.'" She also described one of her professor's actions as soon as the pandemic hit, saying he "… Eliminated the due dates and said … 'This is the final date of the course, and you need to have it done by this date,' um, but he didn't enforce, you know, 'You've got to have it in by midnight or I'm docking five points,' kind of stuff. He did not do that."

Christina experienced flexibility from her professors as well. As a member of an online program, she drove to her university's campus to meet with her cohort four times a semester. Once COVID hit, she was scared to travel. She explained:

> … We had two professors for that class, and both were amazingly flexible and understanding and did everything they could to make sure that I would have the learning experience more remotely. So, they let me do a Zoom call for the meetings. I got to feel like I was in the room a little bit with everyone else.

Research shows that first-generation students feel an increased sense of belonging when they receive institutional support, such as faculty who express willingness to help students learn (Means & Pyne, 2017). During the pandemic, the ways that students learn shifted, and students expressed feeling great amounts of stress (Cohen et al., 2020). When professors provide flexibility, such as Michelle's and Christina's did, it increases the level of belonging and decreases the level of stress students experience.

Racist and xenophobic attacks against the Asian American community began to rise when then-President Donald Trump blamed the COVID-19 virus and its global expansion on China (Abdollah & Hughes, 2021). The hateful rhetoric and harassment continued to expand in the early months of 2021 (Abdollah & Hughes, 2021). Carol elaborated on the support her school showed to international students.

> I think … Once the COVID … Pandemic started spreading, in probably early March, there were [sic] a lot of news coming out of how Asian-Americans were being targeted because it's from China. Um, and then our school sent out goodie bags to the Chinese international students to showing [sic] them support because of this.

Research found that Asian American students expressed experiencing COVID-19-related racism at the beginning of the pandemic (Cohen et al., 2020). It is the responsibility of academic institutions to ensure the safety of their students where possible. Providing goodie bags, like Carol's college did, is a small show of support, but can increase Asian American students' sense of belonging to and support from the institution.

Kauni described some disappointments that came with COVID, but how her advisor helped her overcome them.

> You know, the end of the semester wasn't any different for me aside of moving all my courses online. The only problem that I have was I wasn't able to obtain an internship for grad school because of COVID, so that makes me nervous. So, I'm hoping that's not going to hinder me. The other thing that makes me nervous is I was going to present at [a conference] and I was also going to present in Georgia, I think it was, come the fall, and then, I think it was either the end of the fall or the beginning spring next semester, I would have gone to Texas to present as well. And with the current rise still of COVID, that's not going to happen. So, that's stuff that I can't put on my degree. However, again, [my advisor] has saved my heinie. She has a study that she needed help with … coding and so over the summer … so I'm coding research. So, I guess it's been like a give and a take.

Kauni's concern for missing out on critical college experiences was felt by students across the country. Students who could no longer complete internships and study abroad trips due to the pandemic were left feeling unfulfilled (Fischer, 2020). It is in these moments that university leaders and faculty should step in to assist. Kauni's faculty advisor played a key role in helping her gain the experience that she was missing out on by not having an internship. Being flexible and finding non-traditional ways to provide students with learning experiences is helpful in such uncertain times (McCarthy, 2020).

More Types of Support Needed. Despite feeling strong support from some areas of their institutions, participants acknowledged needing more support in other ways. As McCarthy (2020) indicated, first-generation students felt the impacts of COVID-19 differently than their peers. Participants identified some of these differences. Carol described needing more understanding from her professor in terms of teaching during the pandemic.

> So, um … So, I decided to stay at home with my parents for the fall semester … But I told the professor of the class I'm teaching, 'My parents are older and I do not want to be in a room full of …' I'm teaching a senior design course … 'I do not want to be in a room full of seniors who are going to be partying all weekend and bringing their germs in on Monday.' But then, he emailed me back saying that, 'You should prepare to teach mostly in class.'… Um, but then I got advice from another female professor who said, 'You should have the right to choose to teach it online or in person.' … So, I'm trying to fight with him right now.

The pandemic created a many issues for students, including considering the health of their family members. Many students who moved back home at the beginning of the pandemic took on the role of caregiver to older and younger family members (Lederer et al., 2020). Many students also indicated that they experienced stress regarding their family's health (Cohen et al., 2020). Concerns about family health, such as Carol's, are valid and should be considered on the institutional level. Faculty and administrators should aim to lessen the stress levels of their students rather than increase them.

Consistent and clear communication with students has been necessary during the pandemic (Lederer et al., 2020). It is the best way to ensure that students do not fall behind in their education (McCarthy, 2020). A couple of participants identified places where clearer communication was needed. Anna described the difficulty she experienced trying to get in touch with people on-campus at the beginning of the pandemic.

> Yeah … I feel like it's a lot harder to find people on campus or, like, when I call or something to ask a question a lot of people aren't on campus, which is understandable, but a lot of them don't have, like, their phones hooked up to, to like their office or something. So, I kind of just have to send an email and wait a couple days. But, recently we traveled to Ireland right before the pandemic or while it was all happening, and I broke my leg over there … That was whole thing and … the director of international travel. He was been hard to reach. He never responded to my emails or anything like that. So, I think it really just depends on the division of who is making the strides to, like, be there, especially during COVID, because I realized, like, there's some people that I tried to talk to you that are never in their office. So, I get their cell phone numbers, and there's some people, like financial aid is … Somebody's in there every day. So, it really just depends on where they're working, I think.

Michaela explained the difficulties she faced while trying to obtain financial aid at the beginning of the pandemic.

> As far as first-generation, as I mentioned with being pulled for verification, that happened after I came back home. So, I was having to find these documents at home, and because I couldn't take them to … I live an hour and a half from campus. I couldn't really take them to the financial aid office, and even if I could, they were probably closed, so I had

> to scan them in. My scanner wasn't working. I had to put them in a dropbox, it's a personal dropbox that I, like, just put something in or on D2L [Desire 2 Learn platform]. This was, like, something that they sent me. If I didn't use it in a certain amount of time, it expired and locked up and stuff. So, like, not only was I having to get this paperwork together, I was having to scan it in. I didn't know, like, if … I didn't want to scan the whole big packet of papers in and stuff, so, I think, you know, that goes back to first-generation, low-income students more commonly getting pulled for verification. I got pulled for verification. It was after I was already home. Because of COVID, because I lived on campus and campus housing closed unless there was, like, extenuating circumstances that you applied to stay, and so, I had to figure that paperwork out at home with the only access being by phone call, and, like I said, I called about something and didn't receive a whole lot of help. So, from a general campus standpoint, yes, I've received support. From that first-generation student standpoint and dealing with the FAFSA and stuff, I feel like I didn't receive a lot of support because I really needed to talk to someone face-to-face so they could tell me what they really needed.

Students like Michaela who receive financial aid were already concerned about the emotional and economic impacts of COVID-19 (Cohen et al., 2020). Without clear communication from university offices, such as financial aid and international travel, the stress levels Michaela and Anna experienced were likely to increase. When asked if there were any other things that could have been done differently to make her feel more supported, Michaela said:

> I think definitely, you know … And I know that the university was in a struggle with, you know, 'What do we do next?' and stuff. I just, I felt like through this whole process, and even still now, I've been in a constant state of uncertainty. And though they're

> communicating with us, it's in lengthy, wordy emails that contain a lot of information that just all kind of gets lost in each other. So, I feel like there's got to be a better way to make students feel less uncertain and unstable about what's going on. So, I think that's definitely something that could have been done differently.

While overcommunication was recommended by McCarthy (2020), it is worthwhile to consider how that communication looks and sounds. The researcher remembers the early stages of the pandemic feeling like unchartered waters. There was a high level of uncertainty and anxiety not only in higher education, but across the globe. Students and faculty were experiencing that uncertainty, but so were university administrators. Now a year into the pandemic, institutions can learn from the earlier mistakes they made. Michaela's perspective that the communication her university provided was too lengthy indicates that simplicity and conciseness may be key for institutional effectiveness.

Chapter Summary

The above data expressed how the 11 research participants perceive feelings of support as first-generation women students. Four research questions were formed prior to participant interviews. Once all interviews were complete in July of 2020, I began to code the interviews. Chapter 4 explores how the interviews addressed each of the four research questions. In Chapter 5, I will provide discussion of the data and implications for future research.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of first-generation college women as it pertained to the support they receive as students. In chapters 1, 2, and 3 of this study, I stated the problem this study sought to explore, addressed the research questions that led the study, provided the significance of the study, defined the key terms used, addressed the limitations and delimitations of the study, reviewed pertinent literature, and discussed the qualitative methodology used in the study. My role as the researcher, the population, the data collection methods, data analysis methods, credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations of the study were also discussed. In chapter 4, I explored key themes that addressed the four research questions and identified data from participant interviews that expressed those themes. In this chapter, the problem will be restated, conclusions and findings from the research will be discussed, and implications for practice and further research will be given.

Statement of Problem

The problem addressed in this study was that first-generation women students may experience critical differences in the amount of support they receive on their educational journeys in comparison to their non-first-generation peers and that these differences may not be fully known to higher education administrators. The phenomena of being a first-generation woman student was the basis of this study's exploration. Because of the unique nature of being a first-generation student and of being a woman, I sought to learn more about the support that they feel they are or are not given by family, friends, and members of their college institutions.

Discussion

This phenomenological study was completed by conducting one-on-one interviews with 11 first-generation women students from across the United States. My analysis of each interview, as well as my examination of my reflex journal, informed my identification of themes from the interviews. These themes provided key answers to the four research questions that guided the study. The findings of this study could inform future practice for higher education faculty and administrators on how to better understand and assist first-generation women students. The findings could also lead to further research in particular assistance measures for first-generation women students.

Research Question 1

What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about their academic and emotional needs?

First-generation women students have a love of and a desire to learn but need emotional support during the process. Mentorship from academic faculty and advisors is crucial and starts as early as high school. High school assistance programs can assist in creating positive college experiences for first-generation students (Choy, 2001). Furthermore, helpful college faculty and administrators can help first-generation students feel a greater sense of belonging (Means & Pyne, 2017). Mentorships such as these have a significant impact on the emotional development of women as they attend college.

Michelle, Georgia, and Isabel described having high school guidance counselors who put them down and demonstrated little to no support for their educational futures. These experiences were memorable for the women. Kauni’s experience of being put down by an undergraduate professor was impactful enough to cause her to drop out of school. That experience carries over into Kauni's current undergraduate life, causing her to question the work she submits as a returning student.

Anna, Kauni, Alexis, Christina, Michaela, Katie, Michelle, Carol, and Isabel expressed having high school and college faculty or staff members who provided them with academic or emotional support. Of particular notice were Michaela and Isabel's mentions of their involvement in TRIO related programs. The establishment of TRIO programs at American colleges and universities was instrumental in offering educational opportunities to students of multiple intersecting identities (Kinzie et al., 2004). The first-generation women students who participated in this study claimed multiple identities, such as their gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Michaela felt supported in high school as a member of Upward Bound, while Isabel credited the McNair Program with her ability to be accepted to graduate school. Kauni, Isabel, and Michelle described specific instances when faculty members made them feel appreciated and supported. In their cases, TRIO programs were helpful in providing them with support.

The theme of emotional support emerged as the participants expressed their feelings of worth and belonging. While several participants mentioned their families being supportive or proud, only Michaela and Carol expressed that their families provide them with emotional support. Michelle, Georgia, Lucy, and Isabel described experiencing imposter syndrome while enrolled in college. Furthermore, several of the women identified having feelings of stress or mental anxiety during college. Georgia stated the need for emotional and social support, stressing that it is important to have people who understand the college lifestyle around. Many of the feelings the women expressed can be linked to their lack of cultural capital. Without their parents' college experience to rely on, first-generation women students lack the educational coping skills their non-first-generation peers have (Ward et al., 2012).

Research Question 2

What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about their perceptions of forms of support?

First-generation women students perceive a greater need of financial support from family and institutions. Several participants expressed facing financial hardships while enrolled in college. They stated they were not able to participate in campus events, had to drop out of academic programs because they could not afford the necessary supplies, or had to change academic plans because of a lack of money. Prior research supports these sentiments. The CCSSE (2020) reported that first-generation students are more likely to drop of college or classes due to a lack of finance (p. 15).

Carol, Georgia, and Isabel referenced the role that finances played in their families during college. Of particular notice was Isabel's statement that she sends money back home as a graduate student and had to break departmental policy by getting a second job to be able to support herself and her family members. This is in line with reports that first-generation students are more likely to work full-time and to care for dependents than their non-first-generation peers are (CCSSE, 2020). Christina, Michaela, Katie, Carol, and Lucy explained how much financial aid had helped them be able to attend college. In some cases, scholarships and other financial assistance were motivating factors for the women to attend school. Kauni, Michaela, and Isabel expressed the difficulties they face finding financial aid opportunities and navigating the financial aid system.

Another theme that emerged from the research is that the participants wanted more institutional support that is specific to them as first-generation women students. Participants felt that institutional support is minimal at best. Stemming from the first research question, several women indicated that more financial assistance from their universities should be provided. Anna, Alexis, Carol, and Isabel stated that they have to ask for or seek out assistance from their institution. Christina specifically referenced the unwritten rules of college and argued that they should be published somewhere for all incoming students. She mentioned an example of this being that she did not know she could form a study group with her classmates until a professor told her it was a good idea. She believed that it was cheating until that conversation. Not knowing that this kind of academic strategy can be used is a prime example of the lack of cultural capital that first-generation students have in comparison to their non-first-generation peers.

Another example of first-generation students lacking cultural capital is the role of their families in comparison to their non-first-generation peers. Several of the participants indicated that their parents did not know how to support them in college. Christina, Michaela, Katie, Georgia, Carol, and Isabel explained this sentiment further. A few of them indicated that their parents offered various levels of emotional support. However, the overarching theme was that parents were often unsure of how to support their daughters and were not able to give them input about college. The role of parents as motivation differed among participants. Some women said that their parents pushed them to do more with their lives, while others said that their parents did not provide them with any support. In the cases of Kauni and Michelle, they each have a parent who was upset that they chose to attend college. These responses correspond to previous findings about parents' responses to their first-generation children attending college, and range from supportive to dismissive (Gofen, 2009; Wang, 2014).

Research Question 3

What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about the role that identity intersectionality plays in today's higher education environment?

The largest themes to emerge in reference to intersectionality were motherhood and race. Three of the eleven participants identified as a race other than white. None of the white participants felt that their race had influenced the support they were given while in college. Christina and Georgia specifically acknowledged having white privilege. Meanwhile, Alexis, Carol, and Isabel, the three students of color, described having experiences that were influenced by their race. Specifically, participants mentioned experiencing microaggressions from professors and advisors. Carol described the importance of having other people of color present to share her experience with. She stated that she avoids attending therapy at her university because there is not a person of color on staff. Carol stated that this is important to her because another person of color can relate to her identity struggles. The participant interviews highlighted the role that race plays in college students' experiences. Considering the definition of Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality and Carastathis's (2014) further explanation of it, the stories of first-generation women students explain how the intersection of their race with their womanhood and first-generation status play into levels of power and oppression they feel at the university level.

Four of the participants identified as mothers. Christina, Katie, Michelle, and Georgia described different experiences and challenges they faced as mothers and college students. Christina mentioned how difficult it would have been to be a mother as an undergraduate student and explained that she saw a need for more childcare assistance at universities. Indeed, the CCSSE (2020) reported that first-generation students are more likely to find childcare services provided by their institutions very important in comparison to their peers (p. 12). Michelle described her experience of her children being her college peers, all of them attending at the same time. Georgia expressed feeling guilt for the time she had missed with her children and grandchildren while earning her degrees. The intersection of motherhood, womanhood, and being a college student offers unique challenges to first-generation women students.

Research Question 4

What do the lived experiences of first-generation women students tell us about the ways crises are handled by higher education institutions?

This research study took place as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded across the globe. Participant interviews were conducted several months after colleges and universities transitioned to remote learning. The largest theme that participants addressed was that they felt greater levels of support than usual during the pandemic, particularly from their professors. Participants indicated that they felt flexibility from faculty and enjoyed periodic check-ins from their professors and other institutional members. Such frequent communication has been recommended to assist students during the pandemic (Lederer et al., 2020).

There were, however, mentions from participants of places where more support could have been offered. Anna and Michaela identified that it was difficult to reach people on campus because some employees were working from home. Michaela also stressed the importance of her institution providing more certainty to the university community in a very uncertain time. Carol specified needing teaching support, nervous that she would have to teach classes in-person during the pandemic. Isabel indicated that university administrators and faculty needed to ask first-generation students what assistance they needed.

The levels of support that were and were not provided to the women during the start of the pandemic align with what first-generation students need when they begin college. Gist-Mackey et al. (2018) identified these supports as informational, emotional, appraisal, and instrumental. Participants in this study indicated needing support in all of those ways during the pandemic.

Implications for Practice

Based on the research findings, the researcher recommends several areas of improvement for future practice.

- Bridging the cultural gaps between first-generation and non-first-generation students
- Providing resources for first-generation students in a clear, accessible manner
- Supporting students who are mothers in ways that will help them reach their educational goals
- Providing the families of first-generation students with specialized information and resources for assisting their children towards a successful completion of college

First, there is a need for institutional support in bridging the cultural capital gaps between first-generation and non-first-generation students. First-generation women students feel imposter syndrome while attending college. The "unwritten rules" are difficult for these women to ascertain when they do not have personal resources, such as parents, to show or tell them what to do or expect. It is the responsibility of higher education administrators and faculty members to find ways to assist first-generation students in learning about the norms they do not know or have access to.

Second, institutions need to more clearly provide resources for first-generation students. These resources range from financial assistance to emotional and academic support. The women interviewed for this study were highly motivated and driven. They need specific resources to assist them in achieving their goals. Institutional leaders should identify areas where they can improve access to first-generation women students, such as assistance with FAFSA and other financial aid or first-generation campus initiatives where first-generation students have the opportunity to connect with their first-generation peers.

Third, institutions need to better support students who are mothers. The researcher noticed during the study that in most instances, women will choose their family over school when the balance between the two becomes too difficult to maintain. Colleges and universities should recognize the need for childcare assistance on their campuses. It is difficult for students with children to attend class when childcare is unavailable, or institutions enact policies banning children from the classroom. Students with children should be given equal opportunities to attend classes. Institutions should find ways to provide this much needed resource on campus.

Finally, institutions should provide assistance to the families of first-generation students. Many participants expressed their family members being supportive of their college journeys, but not knowing how to support them. Furthermore, family members lacked the knowledge to help their children navigate particular college experiences, like applying for financial aid or speaking to professors. Institutions should consider offering an orientation directed towards the parents of first-generation students. At these orientations, institutions could provide parents with pamphlets and trainings that share resources specific to them and their first-generation children.

This way, institutional agents could explain key processes in an educational way and could provide parents with information that is unique to theirs and their children's experience.

Implications for Future Research

During the course of this study, the researcher noticed several areas for future research to be conducted.

- Future studies about first-generation women students' perceptions of support as the COVID-19 pandemic continues
- Research on the role of families as motivation for first-generation women students
- More research on the role of intersectionality in first-generation women students' decisions to attend and stay in college
- Research on the roles of TRIO programs in first-generation women students' lives
- Research on the challenges faced by first-generation women students who are mothers

First, the interviews for this study took place after the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants had completed part of their spring 2020 semester online and were preparing for the uncertainty of the upcoming fall term. Now in the spring semester of 2021, the state of the pandemic is ever-changing. Future research could be done to assess if first-generation women students perceived any changes to the levels of support they felt as the pandemic continued into 2021.

There is room for research on the family of first-generation women students as a motivation to attend college. Several women in this study expressed a desire to support their families, whether it be their parents or their children. The researcher was not able to further explore these statements in this study, but believes them worthy of future examination. Another point addressed by Isabel was the cultural expectations she faced as a Hispanic woman. This study had only three participants of color. Further research on a greater population of first-generation women students of color could be done to understand the impact cultural implications have on first-generation women students and their decision to attend and stay in college. The role of intersectionality in first-generation women students is worth further exploration.

Isabel and Michaela both mentioned being a part of TRIO programs, such as the Ronald McNair program and Upward Bound. They felt the impact was significant in helping them achieve their educational goals. More research could be done to understand the roles of these programs in the lives of first-generation women students. Additionally, more research could be done to understand the impact that motherhood has on the decision to attend and remain in college. It was apparent during the study that the women who were mothers faced challenges that those who were not mothers did not face, such as mother's guilt and access to childcare. More attention should be paid to the experiences of college students who are mothers.

Conclusions

This phenomenological study sought to explore the perceptions that first-generation women enrolled in college have of the support that is offered to them. Chapter 1 introduced the phenomenon of first-generation women and support. It stated the problem being studied, presented the research questions that would guide the study, explored the significance of the study, defined pertinent terms, and presented limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 explored the literature surrounding first-generation women. Topics covered included women in higher education, intersectionality, comparisons of first-generation and non-first-generation students, the role of family, cultural and social capital, the institutional participation and needs of first-generation students, the role of institutional support, and first-generation centered services. Chapter 3 outlined the methods used in the study. It presented explanations of qualitative methods, the research questions used, the role of the researcher in the study, the population, data collection and analysis methods, credibility and trustworthiness of the researcher, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presented the data I collected through interviews. This chapter provided an explanation of data collection, a breakdown of participant profiles, and the interview results as they pertained to each research question. Chapter 5 summarized the findings of the study. The remainder of Chapter 5 will provide implications for practice and for future research.

As demonstrated in this dissertation, first-generation students are a vibrant and critical part of the college and university population. The women of this group are determined, intelligent, and motivated to achieve their academic goals. The challenges that they face are unique. They deserve institutional support and guidance to ease the impact of those challenges and make their journey in higher education a more equitable one.

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APPENDIX: Interview Protocol

First-Generation Women's Perceptions of Support While Enrolled in College: A Phenomenological Study

Erin Messmer

Doctoral Candidate

Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(Adults 18 years and older)

1. Can you please tell me your age, year in school, major and/or minor in school, and hometown?
2. What is your parent's education background?
3. What influenced your decision to go to college? What has influenced your decision to stay in college?
4. What role have/do your family and friends play in your decision to be a college student? Do you feel that they play a different role in your life at college than the family and friends of your peers? Do you perceive that your family and friends support you as a college student? If yes, how so? If not, what could they do differently to support you?
5. In what areas of being a student do you feel you have needed the most support? Do you feel that your institution has provided you with that support? If yes, how so? If not, what could the institution do differently to make you feel supported?
6. Are you a member of any college/university activities or student clubs? If yes, do those groups provide support to you? If yes, how so? If those groups do not provide support to you, how could they do so?
7. Do you have a job outside of school? If yes, do you feel supported by your employer and co-workers? If yes, how so? If you do not feel supported by them, how could they do so?
8. Do you perceive that your gender influences the support your institution provides you? If so, how? If not, do you perceive that all students are equally supported by your institution? Do you perceive that any other part of your identity, such as race or ethnicity, has influenced the support your institution provides you?
9. Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed any of the support that you have or have not been given previously? If yes, how so? If not, could anything have been done differently to make you feel more supported?

- These questions are opening probes. Follow-up questions may be asked, but will stay within the bounds of minimal risk.

VITA

ERIN BLANKENSHIP MESSMER

Education: Ed.D. Educational Leadership, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2021

M.A. Communication Studies, The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 2012

B.A. Communication and Information Sciences, The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 2010

Professional Experience: Senior Lecturer, East Tennessee State University; Johnson City, Tennessee, 2018-Present

Lecturer, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2012-2018

Adjunct, Northeast State Community College, Blountville, Tennessee, 2016-2017

Publications: Adinolfi, Leah. *Experiencing 100: A Celebration of Senses to Honor Kingsport's Centennial Year.* Edited by Don Armstrong, Erin Blankenship, and Cynthia Woodmansee. Junior League of Kingsport. 2017.