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THE ACADEMIC CHALLENGES OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS  
WITHIN A FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTION

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business  
Department of Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Maribel Magallanes

May 2020

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

\_\_\_\_\_  
MASTER'S THESIS  
\_\_\_\_\_

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Maribel Magallanes

entitled

The Academic Challenges of First-Generation College Students  
Within a Four-Year Institution

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
in Higher Education and Student Development

May 2020

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Kimberly Case, Ph.D.      Date  
Thesis Supervisor

---

\_\_\_\_\_  
Drew Moser, Ph.D.      Date  
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

---

\_\_\_\_\_  
Kelly Yordy, Ph.D.      Date  
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

---

\_\_\_\_\_  
Tim Herrmann, Ph.D.      Date  
Director, M.A. in Higher Education and Student Development

## Abstract

Existing literature affirms an increase of first-generation college students (FGCS) attending a four-year institution and their lack of academic preparation to graduate on time. The purpose of this study was to better understand the academic challenges FGCS experience in a four-year institution and how those challenges contribute to their overall academic experience. To capture the unique experiences and academic challenges of FGCS, the study engaged in a qualitative narrative research design. The study involved one-on-one interviews with FGCS attending a four-year institution. Written biographies and a number of common themes that contributed to understanding the academic challenges of FGCS are acknowledged. The results of the study revealed factors that contribute to academic challenges in FGCS' lives. The increase of schoolwork causes FGCS to struggle with time-management. In addition, the lack of financial resources causes stress among FGCS and distracts them from working effectively on their schoolwork. Family support in the lives of FGCS is crucial for their emotional stability. The absence of family in college leads FGCS to lean on their friends as their new source of emotional support during college. Several FGCS feel academically prepared to be in college. Despite the challenges FGCS face in college, many of them have a strong sense of determination to graduate. Ultimately, acknowledging FGCS' academic struggles and understanding their experiences in college will help four-year institutions attend to the needs of these students and set them up for academic success.

## Acknowledgements

*Success isn't just about what you accomplish in your life;  
it's about what you inspire others to do.*

-Anonymous-

As a Latina, first-generation college student, a wife, and a mother of three kids, completing this thesis has been one of the most challenging but also rewarding things I have accomplished in life. I have learned through the process that, despite the obstacles I stumble through, with God, I am capable of so much more. To all the first-generation students going to college, I hope my accomplishment inspires you to dream big, work hard, and focus on your goal and not the obstacles that cross your path. You will succeed.

God: You teach me to walk in faith; you are my helper, my right hand. My accomplishments I devote back to you. May this thesis be a testimony of your Word alive in me: *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me - Philippians 4:13 (NKJV)*

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*My Daddy (Ponciano Magallanes)*



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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

“Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.”

Psalm 127:1 (NIV)

Imagine being the first one in your entire family to have the privilege of going to college. Joy and pride arise from having the opportunity to be the first and make family proud. The end of senior year in high school is around the corner, and suddenly the struggle of the unknown college process brings feelings of confusion, fear, and despair. Would you even make it through college? The first semester of college begins, and the college expectations and the campus environment feel like a stranger entering through your door with new challenges that could destroy your once beautiful ambition to become the first in your family’s line to graduate from college. Such is the story of first-generation college students (FGCS).

### **Characteristics of First-Generation College Students**

First-generation college students (FGCS) are defined as college students who are the first in their families to attend a four-year institution. Neither of their parents have earned a college degree, allowing the student to be the first in his or her family to earn a higher degree (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Bermeo, Engle, & O’Brien, 2006; Engle, 2007; McConnell, 2000). In addition, “the term ‘first-generation’ implies the possibility that a student may lack the critical cultural capital necessary for college success because their

parents did not attend college” (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017, para. 5). As of 2015-2016, the Center for First-Generation Student Success (2018) reported that 56% of undergraduates nationally were first-generation college students (neither parent had a bachelor’s degree), and 59% of these students were the first of their siblings to attend college. Currently, FGCS make up a third of college students. Among the third attending college, only 27% of these students graduate within four years (Whitford, 2018). Such demographics reflect an increase of FGCS attending a four-year institution. Furthermore, studies showed that the majority of FGCS who attend college more likely attend a two-year institution rather than a four-year institution (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Engle, 2007). The majority of FGCS belong to ethnic minorities and are usually females. Furthermore, the most common minority groups among FGCS are African American and Latino (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, & Pierce, 2012; Bermeo et al., 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Strand, 2013).

### **FGCS Limitations to Academic Success**

First-generation college students generally come from a lower socio-economic background (Berkner, & Chavez, 1997; Bermeo et al., 2006; Engle, 2007; Strand, 2013). As a result, the majority of these students lack some of the resources necessary for college success. Furthermore, many FGCS contend with the responsibility of parenthood while attending school and being full-time employees (Payne, 2007; Strand, 2013). First-generation college students’ lack of resources before and during college challenges their ability to succeed academically (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke, 2011). Upon their arrival to college, FGCS are confronted with financial, social, and

emotional challenges that often hinder their ability to successfully obtain a college degree.

Research indicates that FGCS lack family support to guide them through their process of entering college (Borrero, 2011; Engle, 2007). As a result, many FGCS struggle to understand the expectations of being a college student. Many FGCS are also less academically prepared than non-first-generation students. Their lack of academic preparation compared to non-first-generation college students is reflected in their lower standardized test score results and lower high school GPAs (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Borrero, 2011; Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; Strand, 2013). The increased academic workload also becomes a stressful time-management challenge they must learn how to overcome (Conley & Hamlin, 2009). Such disadvantages challenge FGCS to succeed in their academic studies.

FGCS also encounter social and financial challenges that limit their involvement in campus and further affect their studies (Borrero, 2011; Engle, 2007; Payne, 2007). A lack of financial resources works to the disadvantage of FGCS and adds to their academic concerns. Most of them have to spend the majority of their time working outside of classes to pay for their education and help their families be financially stable. Work and other responsibilities limit their ability to study effectively for tests and their ability to be involved in college life (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Payne, 2007). In addition, financial limitations have hindered many FGCS from reaching their goal of graduating from college. Some temporarily take a break from higher education to earn enough money for college and other life expenses. Others have no choice but to drop out and work full-time to support their families (Payne, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Without

support from their institutions, obstacles like these will decrease FGCS' retention rates and hinder their academic success (Engle, 2007; Soria & Stableton, 2012; Strand, 2013).

### **Purpose of This Study**

Leaders of colleges and universities are concerned for the well-being and academic success of all students. In response to the unique needs of FGCS, many institutions develop first-generation programs and intentional strategies to provide better support for this group of college learners (Engle, 2007; Strand, 2013). To assist colleges and universities to better serve FGCS, this study sought to identify some of the key challenges of this group of college students. Specifically, this study investigated the factors that contribute to the academic challenges of FGCS in a four-year institution, what those academic challenges are, and how those challenges impact the overall college experience of students. This study sought to address these concerns through an examination of the literature on FGCS' academic struggles and best practices used to promote academic success among these students. Furthermore, the study utilized a qualitative narrative research design that will study in depth the FGCS' academic challenges and experiences. Ultimately, the purpose of this study was to find the key to the academic success of FGCS. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What academic challenges do first-generation college students face at a four-year institution?
2. How do these academic challenges impact the overall academic experience of first-generation college students at a four-year institution?

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Research studies indicate that first-generation college students (FGCS) face many challenges before and after entering college. More recently, an increasing number of studies on strategies and best practices are available to support first-generation students. However, it is important to note a large gap of literature on White FGCS' experiences. The majority of existing literature is focused on FGCS with a racial minority background. This review of the literature focuses on common struggles of FGCS as well as best practices institutions can apply to help students succeed academically.

#### **Common Struggles FGCS Face and the Impact on Their Academic Success**

**Academic struggles.** Prior research indicates that FGCS struggle to succeed academically. Payne (2007) found that, for FGCS, attending college is usually a step outside of their comfort zone. The first academic challenge many FGCS face in their transition to college is a lack of tangible resources. For example, all FGCS female participants in Conley and Hamlin's (2009) study indicated they did not have access to a computer at home to do homework. Finding a ride to school or the library was also a common issue. Despite these challenges, students never spoke about their lack of resources or asked for help to the university (Conley & Hamlin, 2009).

A number of FGCS also lack time management skills, and they struggle to balance their time between their academic studies and work. Studies have found that



FGCS generally work 20 or more hours per week (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; McConnell, 2000). Conley and Hamlin's (2009) study found that FGCS lack time management skills to balance studies with their responsibilities of work. Regardless of their struggle to balance a time for work and a time for their academic studies, many FGCS expressed feelings of being privileged to even be in college (Conley & Hamlin, 2009).

Furthermore, studies indicated that many FGCS with a low socio-economic background attend under-performing high schools (Borrero, 2011; Engle, 2007; Strand, 2013). By the time they reach college, their poor education results in them being less academically prepared to succeed in college (Engle, 2007). First-generation college students' high school GPA and standardized test scores have been found to be lower than non-first-generation students (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Chen, 2005; Engle, 2007; Lohfink & Paulson, 2005; Payne, 2007; Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; Strand, 2013). In addition, FGCS also report lower math and reading skills within their college admissions tests (Payne, 2007).

Borrero's (2011) study revealed that FGCS fear being unable to succeed in college due to a lack of academic preparation. Regardless of this fear, the eight first-generation Latino student participants in the study exhibited a determination to make a difference within their community and their family. Specific counselors and family members in their lives who kept them motivated to graduate from high school and to pursue a college degree (Borrero, 2011).

In general, low academic preparation and an increased academic workload in college situates FGCS to be at risk to succeed academically. Lack of time management skills, such as struggling to manage their time working and studying, also hinders their

ability to succeed academically in college (Payne, 2007; Strand, 2013). These factors have contributed to an increase in the college dropout rate for FGCS, making it a major concern for today's colleges and universities (Balemian, & Feng, 2013; Soria & Stableton, 2012; Strand, 2013).

**Financial barriers.** A lack of financial resources is the most common challenge FGCS face that impact their overall academic studies in college. Because most FGCS come from low socio-economic backgrounds, these students are continuously in a tight financial situation, making it difficult to pay for college. Financial aid is what allows most of these FGCS to attend and graduate from college. (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Borrero, 2011; Engle, 2007; Payne, 2007; Strand, 2013).

Frequently, these financial limitations affect the retention rates of FGCS. Not knowing how to pay for tuition produces anxiety, fear, and worries within the students' lives, making it difficult for FGCS to concentrate on their academic studies (Potter, Jayne, & Britt, 2020). First-generation college students unable to pay for tuition are often forced to drop out of college. Consequently, financial limitations have shown to increase FGCS drop-out rates (Payne, 2007; Soria & Stableton, 2012; Strand, 2013).

Being able to help their family financially in the future and make a name for their family has been found to motivate FGCS to persist in college. By contrast, non-first-generation students are most likely to attend college to live on their own and away from their parents (Aspelmeier et al., 2012). These financial challenges overall impact FGCS' academic experience and ultimately their prospects of graduating from college.

**Social struggles.** Research also indicates many FGCS experience social challenges that interfere with their academic success in college. For instance, some

FGCS lack family guidance before and during college. Even though their relatives may have attempted to go to college, they were unsuccessful. Lack of knowledge on the overall higher education process limits their family's ability to walk them through the college process (Borrero, 2011; Engle, 2007). Furthermore, some FGCS never receive assistance from their high school guidance counselors. Their lack of guidance support in the college-going process leaves them with no college expectations and unclear educational goals. These social challenges make it difficult for FGCS to adjust to the college environment and limits their pursuit of a career most fitting to their personality and dreams (Engle, 2007; Payne, 2007; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002).

Most FGCS live off campus, making it more difficult for them to actively engage with their campus and extracurricular activities (Aspelmeier et al., 2012). Furthermore, their engagement with collegiate peers and faculty is rare (Payne, 2007). In Conley and Hamlin's (2009) study, four of the five FGCS participants were not involved in extracurricular activities due to outside commitments at home and with work. The disconnection FGCS experience of being away from their campus community and activities also impacts their adjustment to the college environment. Ultimately, research suggests that poor adjustment in college can hinder students' academic success by increasing FGCS drop-out rates (Aspelmeier et al., 2012).

**Emotional challenges.** First-generation students often experience mixed feelings when they decide to go to college. According to Conley and Hamlin (2009), FGCS's transition into college means they leave home for the unknown and "enter an alien physical and social environment that they, their family, and their peers have never

experienced” (p. 48). Their transition to an unknown world results in fear of being unsuccessful in college (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002).

Borrero’s (2011) study indicated FGCS experience the tension of wanting to make the family proud but not wanting to leave home. For these students, college is the opportunity to give back to their parents and make them proud (Borrero, 2011; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002). For example, in Demetriou’s (2007) study, Natasha, a first-generation student, ties her emotional college struggles with her family’s expectations. Her biggest fear revolved around failing her family’s expectation of seeing her succeed in college (Demetriou, 2007).

First-generation college students may also experience guilt for their family’s inability to receive a higher degree (Wiggins, 2011). Housel’s (2012) study indicated FGCS fear that behaving in a new professional manner will make them come across as arrogant in their family’s eyes. This fear often develops into guilt when FGCS return from college and begin to dress, communicate, and carry themselves differently from the rest of their family members (Engle, 2007; Housel, 2012; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002). In a study by Wiggins (2011), other FGCS struggled with guilt for pursuing a higher degree while being conscious of their family’s struggles to survive on a day-to-day basis. These types of emotional struggles disconnect many FGCS from the rest of their campus and make it difficult for them to establish the professional and academic appearance in and outside of college.

### **Programs and Best Practices to Help FGCS Succeed Academically**

Universities and colleges are becoming familiar with FGCS’s struggles that impact their academic success in a higher education. As a result, the schools are

implementing first-generation programs and strategies to provide additional support to these students (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Engle, 2007; Strand, 2013). Best practices to support FGCS include first-generation programs, assessment testing, mentoring opportunities, educating faculty on FGCS struggles, and social justice curriculum for FGCS (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Strand, 2013). Overall, institutions desiring to see their FGCS succeed academically should seek to implement first-generation programs and establish FGCS best practices within their institution.

**First-generation programs.** Many universities have added a first-generation program to their student affairs department. The purpose of first-generation programs is to help FGCS before and during college (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Engle, 2007; Strand, 2013; Whitford, 2018). First-generation programs generally provide mentoring opportunities to FGCS and their parents, as well as special training for the faculty and staff who work with these students on a daily basis. The schools also focus their programs on assisting FGCS with their college application process and professional resumes and helping them grow in other professional activities (Engle, 2007; Strand, 2013; Whitford, 2018).

Several colleges and universities, such as Chapman University (2020), provide FGCS with opportunities to participate in first-generation events, study sessions, and social outings to help them develop holistically and succeed in college. Housel (2012) indicated that social outings for FGCS are helpful to introduce them to new college experiences. Creating events for FGCS can help them learn professional expectations such as what to do in a formal dinner and what to expect from job interviews (Housel,

2012). Providing various resources within a first-generation program ultimately helps FGCS grow professionally and succeed academically.

Some universities provide special websites highlighting their first-generation program. On these websites, students and their parents learn about available resources and how to navigate the college process. For example, Chapman University's (2020) website introduces FGCS to the new student orientation, provides information on available campus resources, and gives tips on time management and keeping a balance between academics, family, and social outings. Making this resource available to FGCS online initiates a successful college journey for these students.

Another example is the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (2020) first-generation program, Carolina First. About 20% of their undergraduate student population are first-generation students. The program seeks to accept and orient FGCS through the college experience (University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 2020). This program also provides mentorship opportunities for FGCS. During graduation, all FGCS have the opportunity to demonstrate pride in their success by wearing a special "first" pin on their gown. Students involved with the Carolina First program have also expressed deep appreciation for the program (University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 2020). Honoring FGCS for their success as the Carolina First program does is a best practice other universities and colleges could implement within their first-generation program.

Other universities have seen the financial struggles FGCS experience and have centered their first-generation programs on meeting those needs through the provision of scholarships (Engle, 20007; Strand, 2013). For example, Missouri Baptist University (2020) has the Excel First-Generation Initiative scholarship. Each first-generation

recipient is required to have a 3.0 GPA or higher and an ACT score of 20 or higher in order to receive a \$13,000 minimum award per year. Texas Christian University (2020) offers the Community Scholars Program to urban minority students, many of whom are FGCS. Full tuition is provided to 30 FGCS from low-income backgrounds (Texas Christian University, 2020). These types of scholarship programs initiated by universities help increase FGCS college enrollment as well as their retention rates in college.

**Partnering with outside first-generation programs.** Partnering with established first-generation programs outside of the institution is also a best practice to support first-generation students (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Engle, 2007). For example, more than 25% of Kansas State University's student population are first-generation students with a low-income background. These students currently benefit from scholarships provided by the First Scholars program (Dandaneau, 2014). In 2013, the First Scholars program awarded the university \$850,000 for scholarships directed towards their FGCS. In 2014, an additional \$62,500 award was given by the same program to support more FGCS. Each year, new recipients are given a scholarship from this program (Dandaneau, 2014).

The First Scholars program allows Kansas State University to connect their freshmen with the campus, optimize the college experience for their sophomores, expand career opportunities for their juniors, and help their seniors to transition into the future successfully (Kansas State University, 2020). The First Scholars program is operating successfully in many other universities, such as the University of Kentucky, the University of Alabama, and Washington State University. Overall, the First Scholars

program is improving graduation rates among FGCS through the multiple resources they provide to FGCS in college (The Suder Foundaton, 2020).

A partnership with the Walmart Foundation is another way to increase financial support for FGCS (Doubleday, 2013; Lipka, 2010; Strand, 2013). Margaret A. McKenna, president of the Walmart Foundation and a former FGCS at Lesley University, saw the need to provide financial assistance to FGCS. As a result, she gave \$10 million to colleges to help them increase the FGCS retention rates. About \$5.3 million went to the Council of Independent Colleges to assists 20 FGCS yearly, and \$4.2 million was given to the Institute for Higher Education Policy. In addition, the Walmart Foundation has a website of its own with various advising tips to strengthen first-generation programs. The Walmart Foundation goal is to eliminate the financial barriers many FGCS face in college and see more of them earn a post-secondary degree (Doubleday, 2013; Lipka, 2010; Strand, 2013).

Programs like the First Scholars, Talent Search, the Student Support Service, McNair Scholars, the Gear Up, and the TRIO programs also focus on helping FGCS within universities. The federal government funds these programs to help universities provide a variety of resources to FGCS and improve their retention rates (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Engle, 2007; The Suder Foundation, 2020).

**Mentoring opportunities.** An additional best practice revolves around the idea of providing FGCS with mentorship opportunities. Reid and Moore (2008) indicated that FGCS do not have family members they can ask questions of regarding college assignments or expectations. A peer to peer and/or faculty/staff program is a resource



FGCS can use to find answers to their questions in college (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Housel, 2012; McConnell, 2000; Strand, 2013).

According to Housel (2012), peer-to-peer mentoring works best because it allows FGCS to feel less intimidated to ask questions. Garrison and Gardner's (2012) study however, also echoed the importance of providing faculty/staff mentorship programs to FGCS. An example of a good faculty/staff mentorship program is found at Chapman University (2020) with their Promising Futures Program. Within this program, university faculty and staff members partner with FGCS for a mentoring course. Students in the program are required to maintain contact with their mentors on a regular basis and use them as a resource to succeed academically in college (Chapman University, 2020).

Many studies suggest that mentoring FGCS family members on the college admission process can also help provide additional support services to these students and enhance their development in college (Bermeo et al., 2006; Engle, 2007; Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Strand, 2013). Chapman University's (2020) FGCS website provides mentoring opportunities to FGCS parents. This website includes advising tips that help FGCS' parents have a greater understanding on how they can support their child while in college (Chapman University, 2020). Overall, providing peer-to-peer or faculty/staff mentorship opportunities to FGCS and their parents can enhance FGCS resources to succeed academically in college (Bermeo et al., 2006; Engle, 2007).

**Educating faculty on FGCS struggles.** Training faculty on FGCS common struggles and their institution's support systems is another way to increase FGCS access and awareness to the resources available on campus (Bermeo et al., 2006; Garrison & Gardner, 2012). Specific campus resources in which faculty and staff can be trained

include financial aid, campus employment, tutoring services, and counseling services. Often, the only way FGCS have access to any of these campus resources is through their academic advisors (Bermeo et al., 2006). According to Cannon (2013), academic advisors are encouraged to use intrusive advising, a form of enhancing “the advising relationship while also encouraging student responsibility and participation.” (para. 1). Educating the university’s faculty and staff to provide intrusive advising to FGCS not only makes campus resources available to these students but also encourages and enhances academic success in college ((Bermeo et al., 2006; Payne, 2007).

**Inventory assessments.** Garrison and Gardner’s (2012) study found that providing inventory assessments for FGCSs at the beginning of their college experience can potentially help them perform better throughout their years in college. These forms of assessment allow FGCS to gain awareness of their personal strengths and assets and to use these to their advantage in leadership developments and academic courses. The Strengths Finder and the Enneagram Test are examples of assessments FGCS can take to help them recognize their personal strengths, assets, and leadership abilities. Gaining personal knowledge of leadership abilities and strengths encourages students to work harder, practice leadership skills, and be successful in college (Garrison & Gardner, 2012).

**Engagement with social and cultural capital.** An additional best practice to support FGCS in their academic pursuits is to leverage social and cultural capital. Carolan-Silva’s (2012) study found that students need access to their school’s social and cultural capital in order to engage with their campus and succeed academically. Carolan-Silva (2012) noted, “High-achieving students benefit from resources they acquire from

peers in advanced classes, individual relationships with teachers and counselors, connections with college admissions counselors and participation in college preparation programs” (p. 2). Most of the resources students can gain through social capital include support for their college application process, assistance with coursework, and increased knowledge of pro-academic and college-going norms. In the same way, students who have access to cultural capital acquire skills such as English language skills, individual motivation, leadership skills, and participation in extracurricular activities (Carolan-Silva, 2012). If social and cultural capital enhances students’ ability to succeed in college, then increasing access to these forms of capital will help to increase the academic success of FGCS in higher education.

**Developing a justice learning curriculum for FGCS.** The Conley and Hamlin (2009) research study promoted a justice-learning curriculum as a way to increase academic success and engagement among FGCS. Conley and Hamlin (2009) interviewed five FGCS females of color enrolled in a justice-learning course. The course emphasized community service learning as a form of gaining respect, personal civic engagement, and social awareness. By the end of the course, the students’ perspective on social justices and issues of equity had changed. Lena, one of the females interviewed, stated, “My personal awareness changed from being one of those individuals who stood back and watched things happen, to an educated individual determined to make a change” (Conley & Hamlin, 2009, p. 56). Soon, she became actively engaged in her campus and improved her academics.

Ultimately, this type of course allows students to engage with power, privilege, and difference, which then leads them to reframe their dreams, believe in themselves, and

take the opportunity to take power and make a difference (Conley & Hamlin, 2009). This study showed that engaging FGCS in such forms of curriculum can help them “foster social awareness and commitment” to their campus and community (Conley & Hamlin, 2009, p. 48). The social justice course is, therefore, a way to help FGCS acknowledge the privilege and power they hold to make a difference in their communities.

### **Summary on Literature of FGCS**

It is no longer enough to just get FGCS through the doors of a four-year university; more support systems and resources are necessary to help meet the needs of these students. Prior research has demonstrated that these students face many challenges before and during their college years. The lack of social, financial, and academic support FGCS face contribute to their failure to persist in college. These challenges affect FGCS’s academic experiences and also decrease their retention (Mehta et al., 2011).

Developing first-generation programs that incorporate financial assistance, mentoring opportunities, and awareness on available campus resources can make the difference for many FGCS and their experience in college (Engle, 2007; Strand, 2013; Whitford, 2018). Intentional implementation of first-generation programs and strategies could help FGCS succeed and increase their retention rates in college. Therefore, this study focused on identifying academic challenges FGCS may face at a four-year institution and contributes to the growing body of literature on different means of supporting this group of college learners.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This study utilized a qualitative method with a narrative research design to answer these questions: “What academic challenges do first-generation college students (FGCS) face at a four-year institution?” and “How do these academic challenges impact the overall academic experience of FGCS at a four-year institution?” The highlighted narrative research design is a written biography of FGCS’ academic experiences.

Narrative research uses individuals’ stories to identify and understand the past, present, and future experiences of these individuals within an educational setting (Creswell, 2008). Retelling individuals’ stories and highlighting specific themes that continuously emerged through each story was used to better understand these individuals’ experiences. This study sought to better understand the overall challenges FGCS encounter in college. Using a biography narrative research design allowed FGCS to express and identify the academic college experiences they faced through their own stories (Creswell, 2008).

According to Creswell, (2008), theoretical lenses are “a guiding perspective or ideology that provides structure for advocating for groups or individuals” (p. 515).

Narrative research designs use theoretical lenses within a written report to advocate for groups being represented by interviewed individuals. Therefore, theoretical lenses were used through a written biography of each participant to advocate and provide a voice for

FGCS and their academic experiences in college. Ultimately, this design provides a holistic approach and better understanding of the academic challenges students face before and after college through the individual stories and experiences they each offered (Creswell, 2008).

### **Context**

The research study was conducted in a small private faith-based liberal arts university in the Midwest that has predominantly white students. The institution has a population of approximately 2,000 residential students. The institution's undergraduate student body as of 2019 consisted of 16.2% ethnic minorities and about 83.8% White (S. Dayton, personal communication, May 4, 2020). The institution currently does not have any data on the percentage of students identified as first-generation.

### **Sample and Methods**

**Participants.** This study explored the different academic challenges FGCS experienced in a predominantly white institution. Nine first-generation students participated in a one-on-one interview process. The student sample consisted of students between the ages of 18-24, all of whom were undergraduate students.

**Table 1**

#### *Demographics of Study Participants*

	SAMUEL	MEEK	YEQIAN	MELISSA	VICTOR	DIEGO	LESLIE	LAURA	AIMEE
<b>ETHNICITY</b>	White	Chinese	Burmese	Mexican	Mexican	Mexican	Mexican	White	Mexican
<b>AGE</b>	20	21	21	19	20	18	22	19	20
<b>YEAR</b>	Junior	Junior	Freshmen	Freshmen	Sophomore	Freshmen	Senior	Freshmen	Sophomore
<b>GENDER</b>	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female

To maintain anonymity for all nine FGCS participants, the following pseudonyms were used: Samuel, Meek, Yeqian, Melissa, Victor, Diego, Leslie, Laura, and Aimee.

**Procedure and instruments.** This study followed a one-on-one interview procedure, which is common within a narrative research study (Creswell, 2008). Nine students each participated in a one-on-one interview that took place within a conference room on campus. The study utilized convenience sampling. A general invitation was sent through campus announcements, inviting students who fit the criteria of being a first-generation student—the first in their family to attend college—to participate in an interview for the study. The first nine FGCS students who responded were included in the study. At the beginning of the interview, participants completed a consent form. This form provided participants with information on their rights and the confidentiality terms of the study (see Appendix A).

In order to maintain the narrative design and for each participant's voice to be heard throughout, a wide range of each participant's quotes was used in the analysis and reporting sections of this study. Adding participants' quotes ultimately helped to give voice to their personal experiences as FGCS. In addition, collaboration with each participant existed throughout the interview process. For example, probes and active listening skills, such as rephrasing, were used during the interview process in order to make sure each participant's experience was fully understood. This form of collaboration increased credibility and validity throughout the process.

The length of each interview ranged from 15 to 25 minutes. During the interviews, participants were asked opened-ended questions (see Appendix B). Using open ended questions allowed each participant to tell a story that ultimately identified

their academic challenges in college (Creswell, 2008). Participants were also asked demographic questions to identify their age, gender, grade, and ethnicity.

To maintain confidentiality, the researcher personally recorded and transcribed each interview. This information was kept confidential in the researcher's password-protected computer. Most importantly, before collecting data, the researcher made sure that the methods of this study received IRB approval.

### **Data Analysis**

A final biography on each participant was written to highlight the individual's personal academic experience. Creswell's (2008) three stage process for narrative research designs was used in this study. To transcribe each participant's stories—known within a narrative research design as field text—raw data was collected through an audio recorder in the interview process. Key elements of each story such as the time, place, plot, and scene were highlighted within a first column to retell each participant's story. A second process followed as the researcher re-transcribed the raw data by identifying additional key elements within each story such as setting, characters, feelings, actions, problem, and resolution within a second column. Finally, in a third column, the researcher organized the key elements into a sequence that helped in retelling each participant's story in a written biography (Creswell, 2008).

In addition, a final report was written analyzing the common themes found within the stories of all nine participants. The interviews were analyzed in five different categories: College Entry Experiences of FGCS, FGCS' Level of Academic Preparation for College, Academic Challenges Experienced in College, Lack of Resources, and Additional Challenges That Impact FGCS' Academic Success. After retelling each



participant's stories, reoccurring themes within each of these categories in the participants' stories were taken into consideration if they emerged in two or more individual stories. Ultimately, by identifying the recurring themes found within the participants' stories, the voices of FGCS are heard and the academic challenges and experiences they face are better understood (Creswell, 2008).

### **Benefits**

The benefit of using a narrative research approach is that it allows an individual's story to be retold in a biography format, which helps to give a broader scope of the most common academic challenges seen among FGCS (Creswell, 2008). In addition, drawing from nine different interviews and identifying common themes within those individuals' stories provided a general voice for FGCS' academic experiences. Ultimately, this methodology allowed the purpose of this study to be fulfilled by identifying the common academic challenges for FGCS and the impact on these students' academic experiences in college.

## Chapter 4

### Results

The following chapter highlights the results from the conducted interviews. This section includes a written biography of each participant's personal academic experience. To maintain anonymity for all participants, pseudonyms are used. Participants are referred to as Samuel, Meek, Yeqian, Melissa, Victor, Diego, Leslie, Laura, and Aimee. Common themes found throughout the interviews are also highlighted within this section. Those themes are divided into five sections to better understand first-generation college students' (FGCS) experiences in college. In addition, quotes are used to provide a space for students' voices to be heard. The written biographies and the common themes identified in this study provide an understanding of the academic challenges FGCS face and how those challenges impact their academic experiences in college.

#### Biographies

**Participant 1 (Samuel).** The first participant identified as a white male, 20 years old, and a junior in college. Samuel's biggest obstacle upon entering college was the lack of financial resources. Before college, he attended two high schools, both private. One of the high schools he attended was predominately white. As a result, he felt his high school prepared him in the social context for college. Samuel stated, "[my institution] is predominantly white, and so I feel like my second high school really prepared me for

this, um even though it still wasn't what I was expecting.” Samuel’s mother and teachers were the biggest influencers for him to attend college.

Samuel found college to be socially difficult in the beginning. The lack of social support negatively impacted his academics until he found friends. He noted that, after making friends, “it really helped me . . . allowing me to be more focused on my studies.” Samuel also struggled emotionally from not having his family nearby. When he did not do well in class, he felt “pretty disappointed” with himself. Working in group settings was also an academic challenge for him; he described himself as “a perfectionist,” a “much more of do it yourself and just top through it” type of person.

As a junior, he had already conducted an internship and a practicum within his field. Both experiences helped him understand the future areas within his field that he would enjoy working in and the ones he would not. He aspired to go to medical school, have a family, and do missionary work. Samuel believed tutoring services are very helpful and needed for FGCS.

**Participant 2 (Meek).** Meek identified as a female 21-year old junior in college with a Chinese nationality. Meek struggled with lack of guidance, not knowing what to expect or do upon her entrance to college. Finding the right resources was also hard for her. Before college, she attended a public high school with a diverse student body. She felt that her high school prepared her with learning how to reach out to make friends. Her parents were her biggest motivators to attend college. She desired to make her parents’ life struggles worth it by attending college. When asked about who motivated her to attend college, Meek responded,

I think just my parents, even though they didn't attend college, that was the biggest motivator for me because they came to this country so that I could receive higher education. And so that was, I just wanted to make their experiences and other struggles just worth it by going to college.

In college, Meek indicated that she was having a good social experience because of the friends she has made. When she struggled academically, she reached out to her friends for help. On the flip side, Meek struggled emotionally with not having her family around. The lack of emotional family support nearby created anxiety in her, caused her to procrastinate in her academics, and not to do well in certain classes. Meek said, "I wish that there was some emotional support because my grade reflected that." She also struggled to reach out for help from her professors and felt hesitant to ask them questions. She stated that the lack of connection she had with her professors created in her a fear of being seen as unintelligent if she asked questions when she did not understand the material. Meek believed her non-FGCS peers did not struggle with the same challenges as she did because they had more resources, more guidance for classes through their parents, and more connections with professors prior to entering college. For Meek, the workload also felt heavier in college. Meek identified as a perfectionist, and, as a result, she did not like working on group projects.

Even though Meek was a junior, she had not had any internships related to her major. Her aspiration was to help "immigrants become US citizens." She believed that the best ways to continue to support FGCS is by communicating the available resources to them, reaching out, and mentoring them before and during college. Meek also stated that universities should have a FGCS group that provides emotional and social support.

**Participant 3 (Yeqian).** The third participant identified as a male 21-year-old Burmese freshman in college. Yeqian found his transition to college different in every setting; the way classes were taught and the information required for classes was all new to him. In his interview, he stated, “From transitioning into high school to college, it’s like it’s really different for me. I didn’t really have like AP classes. . . . it’s so much easier in high school, college it’s like triple double.” Despite not being familiar with college, Yeqian motivated himself to pursue an education through the books he read. His mom and grandma also played a role in motivating him to pursue a higher degree.

At the time of the interview, Yeqian had had a positive social experience in college. He loved being surrounded by a Christian college community and felt welcomed. His primary academic challenge was learning how to navigate time-management with his classes, homework, and music practice, all while maintaining good grades. In the interview, he stated, “I practice a lot of music. . . . I have to balance my other classes. . . . I need to do my homework, my general courses to have that good to maintain my good grades.” He also felt that the weight of responsibility and personal accountability for completing assignments increased in college. When he struggled academically, his primary source for help was his textbooks, then his friends, and lastly his professors. He valued working in groups because he believed they were beneficial for learning how to work with others as one would do in the real world.

At the time of this study, Yeqian had not had any internship experiences, but he was looking to be in leadership roles during his time in college. His future goals consisted of returning to his home country, Burma, to serve his community by providing jobs for people. He also wanted to own his personal studio and be a worship pastor

missionary that served in different churches. Yeqian recommended providing mentors to FGCS for guidance in navigating college.

**Participant 4 (Melissa).** The fourth participant identified as a Mexican female, 19 years old, and a freshman in college. Upon entering college, she lacked guidance on college applications and the FAFSA. She also struggled with the lack of financial resources for college. Melissa attended a military high school, which prepared her to adapt easily to change and to take orders. However, she felt that her high school did not prepare her to encounter emotional and social challenges in college. As she stated in her interview, “I don’t think it prepared me in a way when it came down to like emotional things for college, or just social difficulties.” Her parents’ struggles of migrating to the USA for a better lifestyle were her biggest motivation for attending college. Her brother succeeding in college (at the time of the interview) also influenced her to go to college.

In college, Melissa encountered emotional struggles. Being away from family was hard for her, as she stated, “I’m a huge family person, so being away from home was huge.” In addition, as a FGCS Mexican American female attending a predominantly white institution, she struggled to feel socially accepted. Melissa said, “Socially, it’s hard to be accepted by white culture.” In addition, she faced academic challenges for not waking up to attend class and having her grades drop. As a result, she said she “set a bunch of alarms to even get to class.” In addition, she struggled with time-management. She used a planner to help balance her time. Melissa also felt the college workload was heavier than high school, and she found it harder to retain the information she was given in class. She spent multiple hours studying in the library and often asked her professors for their notes to make sure she understood all the information taught in class.

Melissa believed her peers did not experience the same challenges because they had the financial resources to be in college and could therefore redo courses when they messed up. On the other end, she felt like she only got one chance to make it work and succeed in college. Melissa did not like working in group settings because she felt the work distribution was never equal. In her interview, she stated, “I've never liked working with a group just because I feel like levels of responsibility are not equal. . . . I don't like to pick up people's slack.” She considered herself a hard worker, and having to work in a group setting with others who might not put forth the same effort frustrated her.

At the time of the interview, Melissa had not had an internship or any work experience related to her major. However, her future aspirations consisted of becoming a child or youth counselor within a hospital or school. She also wished to pursue a master's and PhD degree to teach in a school setting. Melissa did not mention if she had a mentor, but she did comment on her belief that having a mentor for guidance can be very helpful to FGCS. In addition, she highlighted the importance of communicating the available resources within the university to FGCS.

**Participant 5 (Victor).** The fifth participant identified as a Mexican male, 20 years old, and a sophomore in college. According to his responses, his process felt like entering into a new territory blind. He did not know what to expect, and his family was unable to help him with the process. He quickly learned that college was about being self-sufficient and independent. Victor attended a small preparatory academy high school. In terms of how his high school prepared him, Victor stated,

One thing I remember that I took from high school was that in the first days of school, they did give us a syllabus. So that was something that I was used to smarting up what was expected and just due dates.

In the end, his parents' dream for him to "continue and pursue a higher education... tak[ing] advantage of being in the States" was what motivated him to go to college.

In college, the intentional community that is valued in his institution allowed for Victor to have a positive social experience. He highlighted his friends as his biggest social support. Unlike his peers, which he believed receive guidance from their parents with college work, he learned to do things on his own. The lack of guidance and the push for him to proceed alone caused him to struggle with asking for help when he needed it. He especially struggled to ask his professors questions. Victor stated,

When I was in high school, I had to rely on myself to do a lot of things. So I don't know if me doing that all by myself is why I struggle with asking questions just because I never really asked my parents questions because most of the time they do whatever they could, but they just couldn't help me. . . . And that affected me because I would shy away from asking questions.

Working in a group setting was also a challenge because he struggled to speak up and ask for help in general. In addition, he also said he "really do[es]n't do good with time management."

As of the interview, Victor had not had any internships. However, his future goals consisted of going to grad school and working as a physical therapist. He also hoped to move out of the country and work in a place with minimum resources. Victor recommended for universities to teach FGCS on how to practice good time management



skills by providing planners. In addition, he suggested the university should intentionally reach out to FGCS to help. If possible, he would have liked to see more academic guidance through mentors and social support to grow through intentional communities. Victor wished to tell the universities to “have a lot of patience with us. It’s not easy. . . . at times I feel like I have no idea what I’m doing. But definitely provide that support and that intentional community keeping that up just because it definitely helped me.”

**Participant 6 (Diego).** Participant 6 identified as a Mexican male, 18 years old, and a freshman in college. For Diego, the process of going to college felt very lonely because he did not have his family to guide him the process. Having to seek out his own support made it stressful. When asked about his process to college, he responded, “I would say my process that coming in college was like a roller coaster up and down hills... there’ll be times where I be stressed.” He attended a public high school that was predominantly white. Diego felt his high school really prepared him for “learning how to get ready for college by AP classes” and being an honors student. His parents’ hard work and dream to change the trajectory of their family upon coming to this country was his motivation for pursuing a higher degree. Diego stated, “The whole purpose of them coming here was not so they could get a better lifestyle, more opportunities, but that their family, their children, such as me and my older siblings were able to continue the education path.” His parents’ spiritual mentor also helped him to see the value of college.

Diego felt that he had a good transition into college, primarily because of the Christian community and group of friends he found within his institution. However, he struggled with the increase of workload in college. In addition, he felt that college was

making him more self-reliant and responsible to work hard and complete things on his own. Diego said “having to set my own schedule . . . be on track and be more independent and keeping up [my] grades” was difficult. Diego felt determined to push past the struggles he encountered. Writing papers was another academic challenge of his. He also felt very comfortable working in groups and with asking his professors for help. Diego indicated that his peers, whose parents attended college, had an upper hand in jobs, school choice, network connections, and preparation for college through tutors and financial resources. He felt that, unlike his peers, he only had one shot to succeed and could mess it up.

As of his interview, Diego had had one internship experience, and it helped to reassure the career he chose. His future goals were to go to veterinary school, get his veterinarian license, open a veterinarian office in the US and in Mexico, and adopt animals. Diego believed that having summer programs or internships available for FGCS could help to give these students a deeper insight into the career goals they wish to pursue in college. Diego said an internship “gives you a lot of insight into the profession that you’re trying to go into, and summer programs as well, it gives you the extra benefit [of] the upper hand of learning more things.” In addition, he suggested that universities could provide genuine care for FGCS and help them out by providing more financial resources.

**Participant 7 (Leslie).** Participant 7 identified as a Mexican female, 22 years old, and a senior in college. In her process to attend college, she was undecided on which colleges she should submit an application to. She also struggled with the idea of leaving home because that was not normal within her family. Lacking financial resources was another obstacle she encountered. Leslie attended a public high school that helped her

engage with different types of people. Leslie stated, “My dad was probably like the biggest influencer; he was always someone who’s pushing me to like pursue further education. . . . he was the one that was just like trying to make anything work . . . to continue to pay for schooling.” Her dad working hard to make it financially possible for her to go to college became her biggest influence to continue on with school.

In college, she struggled emotionally and socially. Having to adjust to an unfamiliar setting and trying to adapt in order to fit in socially was difficult for Leslie. Not having family around also made it difficult because she felt lost without them. Leslie stated,

So when I came to college, it was different because . . . my family was no longer there and they were a lot of my identity. So when I came to college it was just like the identity is gone. I don’t know what I’m doing.

Leslie also struggled emotionally and socially through difficult conversations with her peers pertaining to race differences and her culture, which have negatively impacted her academics. She has found herself “consumed” with the conversations, making it difficult for her to focus on assignments. Leslie’s greatest academic challenge was time-management. The amount of workload she received in college also felt heavier for her than high school. Leslie believed her non-FGCS peers had the advantage of having someone to seek advice from regarding classes and financial aid. She felt that not having anyone to help her made her “more self-reliant . . . to figure things out” on her own. Leslie enjoyed working in groups for class; she saw it as an opportunity to bounce ideas off of each other, and most of her classes often required multiple group projects.

Over the summer prior to her interview, she completed an internship with youth services and management and loved it. The internship helped reassure her passions and her career with management. Her future goal was to find a corporate job that would help her pay off loans. Leslie also looked forward to moving back home: “I want to be around my family more.” At last, Leslie wanted to see universities provide FGCS with a social support group that consists of peer mentors. She also believed that having a FGCS support group could help them feel less alienated with their college struggles.

**Participant 8 (Laura).** The eighth participant identified as a white female, 19 years old, and a freshman in college. Upon entering college, Laura explained she “really didn’t know what to expect or didn’t really know much of the process going into it.” She lacked guidance in the process, had multiple questions, and did a lot of research to figure out the college process. She went to a small public high school with a predominantly white population. She felt that the finances classes she took in high school prepared her for some courses in college. Laura stated that no one motivated her to go to college. She said, “I don’t really know that anyone really influenced me, I kind of just knew that I wanted to pursue . . . a career in education.”

In college, she struggled emotionally with the transition of leaving her family behind. When she spoke about having to leave her family to go to college, she said, “It was really hard for me and I struggled a lot emotionally.” She also experienced academic challenges such as time-management and learning to become self-reliant. Having longer classes with more workload was also a challenge for Laura. She indicated that college had a quicker pace, and her professors’ expectations for her to grasp information quicker was a challenge. Laura did not like to ask her professor questions because she was

“worried of looking stupid or something” in front of them. Despite these challenges, Laura enjoyed working in small groups because they taught her collaboration skills.

Laura had an internship and related experiences to her major, which helped to reassure the career she chose. In the future, she hoped to obtain a good paying job teaching. She aspired to rely on God to open opportunities for her to help others. Laura suggested FGCS need to take more advantage of staff support, learn to ask questions, and seek guidance “because those people are there to help you . . . and [she] feel[s] like that’s one thing that [she] didn’t really do.” She also believed it would help FGCS to provide more guidance to their families. Laura offered two options. The first one was that universities should offer special college visit days geared towards FGCS. The second was to offer FGCS workshops, informational booths, and Q&A panels during Welcome Weekend.

**Participant 9 (Aimee).** The last participant identified as a 20-year-old Mexican American female who was a sophomore in college. Aimee lacked guidance on the process of applying for college and the FAFSA. She specified she “had to do everything on [her] own” and it was very hard for her to do so. Aimee attended a public high school and felt well prepared: “My high school was ranked ninth in the nation, so I feel like I have had a good preparation and because [of] that I had a good GPA, I was in honors and AP classes.” Her primary motivation to attend college was her parents. She wished to repay them for all their hard work to make it possible for her to go to college.

The biggest social challenge for Aimee was being away from her family. She leaned on her friends for social support and academic guidance. Her academic “challenge for [Aimee was] just being able to manage [her] time and knowing how to say

no.” In addition, she struggled with a language barrier limiting her in her academic studies. Aimee explained that she often had to reread class material multiple times in order to grasp the information she needed, and that frustrated her. She also disliked working in group settings because she often felt her peers underestimate her ability to complete the job. She stated, “I’m underestimated when we begin to do group work. . . . I feel like they underestimate my capabilities to answer properly or to do the work.” She also believed her peers had the advantage of being able to have conversations with their parents about class and have them understand class expectations or what was needed to have good grades. According to Aimee, she was not able to engage in those types of conversations with her parents “because they wouldn’t understand.” Despite these challenges, Aimee stressed the fact that she was a hard worker and would continue to work hard in order to succeed.

As of her interview, Aimee had had multiple internships and work-related experiences that helped encourage her to continue on the career path she had chosen. Her future aspirations consisted of going to medical school and becoming a pediatrician. Aimee suggested that colleges seek out FGCS before their entrance to college to provide guidance and clear expectations on “how to approach things differently” while in college. In addition, she believed it was important to educate FGCS on practicing good time-management skills and how to ask professors good questions. Finally, Aimee recommended that universities provide a class or FGCS support group to open up space for them to discuss their common struggles and receive the emotional and social support they need to succeed in college.

## **Common Themes**

The following themes emerged from the narrative stories of all nine participants. The themes were placed in five different categories to provide insight into FGCS experiences before, during, and after college. These categories also emphasize the academic challenges generally faced by FGCS.

Although the study was conducted at a four-year, predominantly white private faith-based institution, the majority of the FGCS participants were Hispanic with a Mexican decent. Two participants were Asian, and two identified as White. Six participants were underclassmen, and three were upperclassmen: four freshmen, two sophomores, two juniors, and one senior. Four participants were male, and five were female. The participant demographics from this study were partially consistent with research. According to research, the majority of FGCS identify as ethnic minorities and are usually female (Aspelmeier et al., 2012; Bermeo et al., 2006; Strand, 2013). Seven of the participants from this study were ethnic minorities, and over half were female. Research, however, also indicates that the most common minority groups among FGCS are African American and Hispanic (Aspelmeier et al., 2012; Bermeo et al., 2006; Strand, 2013). Even though over half of the participants were Hispanic, there were no African Americans. It is important to note that the sample of this study was small and that the institution was predominantly White. Both factors could have created potential outliers in the study's results.

**College entry experiences of FGCS.** Participants were asked to talk about their experiences entering college. Most participants found the process to be an unfamiliar setting they had to learn to navigate. For example, Victor said,

I'd say coming in somewhat blind, just because I didn't have any family member that did go to college. So being [the] first one at a university like it was a whole new territory to me. I didn't know what to expect.

In addition, words such as *different*, *blind*, *hard*, *no guidance*, and *a rollercoaster* were used by the participants to describe their college process. The responses revealed a number of feelings they experienced, such as loneliness and stress. Diego said, "I felt like I was alone." Afterwards, he stated, "You know, there'll be times where I'll be very stressed because I wouldn't be knowing what to do."

Another general experience for FGCS when they enter college revolved around their family. Parents seemed to be the biggest inspiration for FGCS choosing to attend college. Eight participants said their biggest motivation to go to college, despite the challenges they were facing, was their parents. They highlighted a desire to repay their parents for their hard work by going to college. Aimee said, "I want to be able to repay my parents a little bit of everything they've done for me." Similarly, Melissa stated,

My parents are my main reason why I'm in college. They, their lifestyle, and how we've gone from nothing to having everything we have. . . . growing up I would see the family struggles we would have and therefore I knew that [for] the lifestyle that I wanted my future from my kids, I need to go to school.

In addition to their parents, four participants highlighted a second person as an influence on them going to college. A teacher, grandma, a brother, and a spiritual mentor from church were the second people the students reported. Two students indicated they motivated themselves to be in college. For instance, Yeqian said, "I find myself [I] really



want to get more educat[ed]. . . . And the books that I read they were encourage[ing] to me to invest in education.”

The emotional struggle to leave family was mentioned by six of the participants. The individual stories of the majority of the participants demonstrated lack of expectations, guidance, and resources to attend college, but in the end encouragement from their parents and family was highlighted as a source of motivation to push forward and attend college.

**FGCS’ level of academic preparation for college.** Students were also asked about the high school they attended and how prepared they felt for college. Despite their lack of support and resources, all participants acknowledged their high school had prepared them for college in various ways. Taking AP courses, being surrounded by a particular group of people, and using a syllabus for class were the most common ways participants felt their high school prepared them for college. Laura said, “I feel like it prepared me for coming to college just because I did take a lot of classes that were either about like finances or like economic classes or those types of classes . . . helped a lot coming in.” On a different note, Yeqian felt his high school teachers prepared him for how to ask for help. He said, “Some of my teachers . . . they would say when you get to college you have to depend on your friends, or your textbook, then go to your friends, and go to your professors if you still can’t figure [it]out.” However, none of the participants actually indicated their high school helped them prepare in the admissions process to enter college.

**Academic challenges experienced in college.** Several open-ended questions were asked to identify the participants’ academic challenges in college. The most

repeated academic challenge participants emphasized revolved around time-management. Having a bigger workload for classes, in addition to spending time with their peers, made it challenging to keep up with time. Leslie said, “I guess, time management wise, that's been the biggest challenge as far as academics go, just because there's never enough time and there's always 97 things to do on campus, and you can't make all of them.”

Similarly, two students highlighted their struggle with procrastination in their homework.

According to six students, the excessive amount of schoolwork and the depth of the assignments were also a different experience than what they were used to in high school, and that made it academically challenging for them. More so, it made it difficult for them to manage their time and get everything completed on time as expected by their professors. Melissa responded, “Another thing is the workload. I need to prioritize my time in a manner that I will be able to still have a life into homework.” Three participants also underlined their academic challenges with their classes being extremely hard.

Feelings of disappointment and frustration were expressed in the participants' responses.

For half of the participants, having to work in group settings was also an academic challenge. Participants demonstrated feelings of being overwhelmed when required to work in group setting. They pointed out their personal characteristic of being a perfectionist and the feeling of having to prove themselves to their peers during group work. For example, Meek said, “I'm not a big fan of group projects because I ended up doing everything. That's just because I'm a “perfectionist . . .”

Another common theme was that college requires more responsibility, self-reliance, and accountability to complete assignments alone and on time. Victor stated that “the biggest challenge just getting used to being self-sufficient, independent, [and]

getting things done by yourself.” Six participants felt they needed to be more individually responsible with their college schoolwork compared to their high school experience. Completing assignments on time and staying up-to-date with classes was something they had to learn to do on their own.

Many participants also expressed the inability, or fear, to ask for help when they struggled academically. Six participants said they asked their peers for help first instead of reaching out to their professors. Victor stated that he “struggle[s] with asking questions . . . just because I wasn’t used to it.” Meek said it is “hard for me to talk to them because I feel they might think I’m dumb.” Aimee suggested FGCS need to learn to “talk to professors” in order to succeed.

**Lack of resources.** Lack of resources is common among FGCS. Eight participants revealed their lack of resources before and during college. Five participants specifically highlighted the lack of financial resources and their struggles to understand the FAFSA process. Seven participants specified the lack of family support and understanding of college expectations for students. Three students described a lack of social support in college. Several students also noted the lack of emotional support and the negative effect that was having on their academics. For instance, Meek said,

I really wish I had the support, like emotional support from my family. But I also understand the circumstances. At times, I felt like giving up on academics just because it was a lot to deal with. I struggle with like, general anxiety.

When FGCS are compared to students whose parents did attend college, the lack of resources is more evident. Six participants pointed out that their peers had a support system to help them navigate through class assignments, leadership opportunities, and

network connections. According to the participants, having tutors to prepare for college and having financial means were also common resources their peers with parents who attended college had. Diego said,

They've almost had the benefit of having the upper hand, like some friends in high school, their parents have gone to big 10 schools where their parents are doctors. . . . they [have] the upper hand them almost getting to be able to know the college experience from an early age where they see their parents already being more strict on them. They had more opportunities, they had the finances and the extra help, such as tutors, where they had to be paid [by] their parents where they would get help, and they'll get more educational health.

Two students commented on their peers' privilege to connect with professors and the school before entering college. Melissa believed her peers with parents who had attended college had the ability to even slack off in classes:

I think an academic challenge is like we can't, we can't walk away. We have to like, continue doing good in school and making sure that our GPA is at a certain standard for our scholarships. . . . And I think that parents who did go to college have those resources for their students who are not in college, to redo and remake and continue until their students [are] done. That's not a privilege that I have, so I need to make sure that everything is done correctly the first time.

The participants' expressions of their peers' experience in college differing from what they themselves encountered demonstrated the lack of resources common among FGCS.

**Additional challenges that impact FGCS' academic success.** Finally, the participants were asked about their social and emotional challenges and how these

impacted their academics. All of the participants expressed some level of emotional struggle with not having family nearby. Aimee said, “. . . the first few weeks, I struggled a lot just because I was so used to always being with my family. So being away was really hard. And sometimes I would cry every single day.” In addition, two participants acknowledged that their social and emotional experiences had a negative impact on their studies. For instance, Meek talked about how the lack of emotional support from family affected her academics with anxiety and procrastination. The social challenges Leslie was confronted with also took a toll on her academics:

. . . just having a lot of interesting conversations, I've taken a toll a little bit emotionally and seeing how narrow minded and skewed some people can view things, has maybe impacted me negatively. . . . there's been times when like, I can't bring myself to like do my homework because I'm like so consumed with whatever has like happened, whether it was like really difficult conversation with someone.

In the end, when asked how universities could help FGCS, four of the participants specifically responded with providing more emotional and social support to them.

### **Summary on the Results of This Study**

This chapter highlighted the results of the interviews that were conducted. Written biographies of each participant's academic challenges and experience were reported. Common themes that were consistent throughout the interviews were also distinguished within the following categories: College Entry Experiences of FGCS, FGCS' Level of Academic Preparation for College, Academic Challenges Experienced in College, Lack of Resources, and Additional Challenges that Impact FGCS' Academic

Success. Exemplary quotes were used to maintain the narrative research approach and give more weight to the participants' stories. The discussion in Chapter 5 makes further connections between the results of this study and the literature on FGCS in order to answer the thesis questions: "What academic challenges FGCS face?" and "How do these academic challenges impact the overall experiences of FGCS in a four-year institution?"

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

This study sought to identify and understand the academic challenges of first-generation college students (FGCS) at a four-year institution and how those challenges impact their overall academic experiences in college. One-on-one interviews were used to conduct a narrative research study that highlighted the stories of nine FGCS attending a private four-year institution. The discussion of the study below includes a summary of the key findings, similarities and differences between the common themes that emerged and the existing literature on academic challenges of FGCS, and ways in which the study contributed to existing research on FGCS. In support of institutions who seek to increase the academic success of FGCS, implications for practice are provided. The chapter concludes with implications for future research and limitations of the study. Ultimately, an enlarged understanding of the academic challenges of FGCS can assist universities to improve support services and increase student success among FGCS.

### **Discussion**

Several key findings emerged in the study that revealed similarities but also differences between the study's common themes and the existing literature on academic challenges of FGCS. The similarities in the common themes and existing literature were as follows: FGCS academic struggles with time-management and an increase of workload, financial struggles causing stress among FGCS, and FGCS determination to

succeed. Two differences that were distinguished among the common themes from this study and the existing literature on FGCS academic challenges centered on family and peers providing emotional stability to FGCS and the academic level of preparation felt by FGCS upon entering college.

**Struggling with time management and increase of workload.** Prior studies have found that FGCS experience multiple academic struggles in college, including the increased workload and a lack of time management skills (Conley & Hamlin, 2009). In the same way, one of the common academic challenges participants within this study highlighted was an increase of workload and their struggles with managing time. For example, Laura said,

I feel like just having to adjust to that as opposed to high school where I barely had like any homework. And so I feel like just adjusting to making sure that I'm getting everything done, making sure that I'm doing my assignments . . . and just making sure that I'm making time for my homework.

Similarly, Victor said college was “a little bit more challenging because you have to be able to manage your own time, which I struggled with and I really don’t do good at time management.” Prior research also showed that FGCS struggle with time management skills because they come from a lower income household and have to work more hours while studying to pay for college than a non-first-generation student (Payne, 2007; Strand, 2013). While this may be true for many FGCS, within this particular study, no participants highlighted a struggle to manage time from working extra hours and studying. All of the participants who mentioned their struggles with time management connected it to the increase of assignments and having to study more while also trying to



cultivate a social life with friends. It is important to note that the socioeconomic demographics of these participants were not revealed, making it difficult to determine if this contributed to the struggle.

**Financial struggles cause stress among FGCS.** Another common theme from the literature and the stories of the participants was the financial concerns FGCS have in college. The financial limitations of FGCS increase concerns and anxiety; these feelings impact their academic focus and productivity (Engle, 2007; Potter et al., 2020). Leslie mentioned that her parents were small business owners and therefore struggled financially to pay for her college education. According to Leslie, her biggest obstacle to get through were financial limitations. Samuel also said money was a problem for him. Five of the nine participants in this study mentioned concerns for financial aid and a lack of guidance in applying for the FAFSA. Thus, making financial aid resources available to FGCS can help increase their chances of attending and graduating from college while also diminishing the anxiety that impacts their academic efficiency in college (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Borrero, 2011; Engle, 2007; Payne, 2007; Potter et al., 2020; Strand, 2013).

**Family and peers provide emotional stability to FGCS.** Previous studies have shown FGCS struggle to engage socially in college because the majority of them live off campus (Aspelmeier et al., 2012). The results found in this study differed slightly. In contrast to the literature, all of the participants in this study lived on campus and have the opportunity to engage socially in college. However, due to the fact that their families were unfamiliar with the college experience and were also far away, FGCS had to learn to navigate through college without their family support (Borrero, 2011; Engle, 2007).

Aimee said, “So I kind of had to do everything on my own. . . . Yes, I have my parents support, but it’s not the same as them being able to help me step by step.” The findings from this study revealed that FGCS’ inability to have family nearby by shifts their family support towards peers support. Six participants identified their friends as their new primary social support. For instance, the participants indicated that, when they faced academic challenges, they asked their friends for help instead of asking faculty. Meek stated, “But now, I try to ask people who've already taken the class and what I can do, usually my friends. Like, I don't like talking to the professors, because I'm not close with all professors.” Different from the literature, this study revealed that FGCS living on campus rely on friends as their social support to succeed in their academics.

On the other end, the inability for FGCS to have family nearby and living away from home still raises emotional instability for them in college. For instance, Samuel stated that he always wondered what his college experience would have been like if he had chosen to go to a university closer to home or lived at home while attending college. He believed that, if he would have done that, he would have had family social support. According to Samuel, not having family nearby as a social support caused him to be emotionally unstable in college. He sought to rely on his peers to fill that gap of emotional and social support to get through college.

The lack of emotional family support nearby caused instability for many of these FGCS. However, also for many FGCS, their peers become the intermediate support filling the gap of family support to remain emotionally stable in college. In keeping with previous research and the common themes throughout this study, having social support

from family or lacking family support is a key concept among FGCS that often determines their emotional stability in college.

**FGCS academic preparation level.** Prior research has demonstrated that FGCS are less academically prepared than non-FGCS. Their lack of preparation is revealed in their GPAs and standardized test scores (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Borrero, 2011; Chen, 2005; Engle, 2007; Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; Strand, 2013). Research has also indicated that many FGCS come from underperforming high schools affecting their academics (Borrero, 2011; Engle, 2007; Strand, 2013). In this study, participants were asked how their high school experience prepared them for college. Although the participants affirmed they lacked guidance, resources, and emotional support, all of them indicated their high school did prepare them for college in some way. For instance, Diego mentioned his high school prepared him “how to get ready for college by [taking] AP classes.” Unfortunately, this particular study did not have a way to determine whether or not the participants’ GPAs and standardized test scores upon entering college reflected a lack of their preparation for college.

**Many FGCS have determination to become successful.** The final similarity reflected in the literature and the findings of this study was the determination of FGCS to succeed in the future and to help their family. They demonstrated determination despite the challenges they encountered while in college. Many of the participants also commented about how hard they work to succeed. Aimee stated, “I was always a hard worker in high school and that has helped me now because I continue to do that. I try my best in all my classes.” Furthermore, five of the participants hoped to attend graduate school in the near future. Six students indicated they hoped to use their degree to work

within social services and give back to their community. Borrero's (2011) study also supported FGCS' determination to succeed in college. Additionally, Conley and Hamlin's (2009) study highlighted FGCS' feelings of gratitude and privilege in attending college despite all the challenges they face. Ultimately, the determination to succeed is a quality FGCS rely on to help them overcome the challenges they encounter in college.

**Final discussion thoughts.** Research has shown that academic challenges and limited emotional and social support contribute to FGCS dropping out of school, hindering the institution's retention rate and the overall academic success of these students (Aspelmeier et al., 2012; Engle, 2007; Payne, 2017). The connections between literature and the results of this study underscore the academic challenges FGCS face before and during college. Despite the challenges, many FGCS are determined to push through any struggle and succeed. In the same way, universities should be determined to care for FGCS by taking note of their academic struggles and by taking intentional action to increase success for these students.

### **Implications for Practice**

**Identifying FGCS students in the institution.** The first implication for practice that can help universities to better care for FGCS is to have a list of all the FGCS within their institution. Unfortunately, not all universities have a system in place that identifies the FGCS in their campus. For instance, finding participants for this particular study was a challenge because the institution where this research was conducted did not have a list of their FGCS. Research shows FGCS lack many resources and support, limiting their academic success in college. It also shows that, despite the academic challenges FGCS encounter, they rarely seek out help or mention their needs and lack of resources to the

university (Conley & Hamlin, 2009). Thus, identifying the FGCS within an institution will allow for higher education professionals to know who these students are, reach out to them, and offer them support to succeed in college.

Participants within this study were asked about the ways universities could support FGCS and what resources would help them be successful in college. Participants indicated they needed more awareness of the available resources of the universities. These resources included tutoring services, career services, academic enrichment centers, writing center, and counseling services. For example, Melissa stated,

I'd say make it more known that they're helpful. . . . I think it's very intimidating walking into [an institution] and like not knowing anything you just shut down and choose not even ask. Because they're not vocal about being able to help you.

It is difficult to offer these services specifically to FGCS if the institution does not have a way of identifying who these students are. Thus, identifying the FGCS within an institution is the first practice universities can implement to demonstrate care for these students. By taking this first step, student development personnel and faculty can reach out directly to FGCS on campus through email and, if possible, schedule a one-on-one meeting to make sure they receive the resources and support they need to succeed in college.

**Providing additional scholarships and financial aid to FGCS.** According to research and findings from this study, FGCS sometimes struggle academically because they are stressed with financial concerns to pay for college (Potter et al., 2020). Some of the FGCS are also not able to graduate because they lack the financial resources to pay for their entire four years of college (Payne, 2007; Soria & Stableton, 2012; Strand,

2013). Providing more scholarships and financial aid is a means of promoting academic success among FGCS. Increasing financial resources to these students can help alleviate some of that stress and help them concentrate in their studies.

Previous studies have revealed best practices for universities to provide more scholarships and financial aid to FGCS (Engle, 2007; Strand, 2013). A best practice would be for the university to partner with first-generation programs such as the First Scholars Program, the Trio Program, or the Walmart Foundation. These programs help universities fund scholarships for FGCS, and many of them also provide additional support to the students during their time in college (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Doubleday, 2013; Engle, 2007; Lipka, 2010; Strand, 2013). Many of these programs are offered to FGCS during their senior year of high school. Therefore, working alongside the Admissions Office to identify some of these programs available within the recruitment regions of the university is a way to initiate possible future partnerships with those programs and increase the financial resources to FGCS. Another best practice to provide more financial support to FGCS would be to work with the advancement department of the university to search for grants geared to FGCS. Ultimately, providing more financial support to FGCS will help to decrease the level of anxiety many of them face with finances and allow them to concentrate more on their academics.

**Developing a FGCS program.** Another implication for practice would be providing a more inclusive environment to FGCS by developing a FGCS program within the Student Affairs department. The benefit of developing a FGCS program is to provide different types of support to FGCS, including emotional, social, professional, and academic support. Several participants in this study mentioned that adding a FGCS

program to the university could help provide the social and emotional support they need and increase their chances of academic success. Four participants stated that a FGCS program could help provide FGCS with inclusion, a sense of belonging, and a feeling of not being alone in the process. Aimee commented how encouraging it would be to share common struggles with other FGCS. In addition, Leslie indicated that not knowing about other FGCS can make them feel alienated or like they “stick out.” A first-generation group could help eliminate those feelings and replace them with feelings of belonging. Thus, developing a FGCS program will not only provide emotional and social support to FGCS but also a safe space for them to express their struggles and feel a sense of belonging to the institution, which can ultimately reflect positively in their academics.

Through a FGCS program, universities can provide coaching and mentoring opportunities by peers and faculty, which the participants of this study also suggested. For example, Melissa stated, “Having someone who you can go to anytime of the day sit next to you, and kind of like guide you in the process of your first semester . . . is something that we should be given as a resource.” In the same way, when asked about what resources he wished he could have in college, Yeqian responded, “Reference me to someone who would, who they know are trustworthy . . . [that] will help me a lot.” Prior studies have revealed that students with a mentor are more successful (Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Housel 2012). Research and the stories of the FGCS in this study also showed that FGCS lack guidance and mentors in their lives (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Housel, 2012; Strand, 2013). Six participants in the study expressed a desire to have mentorship either from older classmates or their professors to guide them before and during their time in college. The findings of this study also revealed that FGCS were

finding support through their peers. In addition, the findings revealed that FGCS sometimes struggle to ask for help from their faculty. Thus, initiating a peer training could be helpful. Training faculty to be mentors for FGCS could help to build the trust between these students and their professors. This may be a necessary step to overcome the perceived barriers between FGCS and their faculty.

In addition, through a FGCS program, events and workshops can be created to help meet the needs of these students. For instance, this study highlighted many of the FGCS struggled with good time-management skills. Victor stated,

I would have loved to [have] known how to use more of the planners. I'm getting into the habit of writing everything that I need to do. I wish I would have known how to do it better. How to manage my time better . . .

Given this knowledge, planning workshops on how to incorporate good time-management skills and how to use a planner to stay organized in college can help FGCS by providing them with the tools to succeed.

Thus, developing a FGCS program under the Student Affairs Department will increase emotional, social, professional, and academic support to FGCS. In such a program, FGCS could receive a mentor who guides them in their four years of college, experience a safe space to connect and share their struggles with other FGCS, and have programming experiences that meet their needs to help them grow academically.

**Developing workshops and events for the families of FGCS.** Prior studies and the findings from this study revealed the lack of guidance families of FGCS offer in the college admissions process and completing FAFSA. A final implication for practice would be to develop special workshops or events for the families of FGCS to learn more



about the college admissions process and how to complete the FAFSA. Three participants conveyed that information and guidance for their families would be helpful.

Laura stated,

Maybe setting up like an informational booth . . . or even just like a meeting that way they can, like, hear people speak that way if they have questions or questions that they're afraid to ask, they can still, like, get information on what . . . to expect.

The workshops and special events would provide FGCS and their families the opportunity to ask questions, seek guidance, and find out about the resources available to them (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Housel, 2012; McConnell, 2000; Strand, 2013). This practice can also help increase the emotional support and guidance given by families to the students before and during college. Creating workshops and events for the families of FGCS would provide a clearer picture of what to expect in college and aid in navigating the processes needed to progress through the college years.

Collectively, these implications for practice can result in making the college experience for FGCS more positive and successful. This level of intentionality also has the potential to increase their academic success and retention rates in college.

### **Implications for Future Research**

One of the recurring themes in this study was FGCS feeling like they have “one shot” to succeed and make their families proud. A study of the factors that contribute to FGCS feeling this way can help higher education professionals understand how to offer a support system that would minimize the feeling of being alone in their college process.

This study also revealed that FGCS struggle to seek help and ask questions in the classroom setting. Doing further research on why FGCS struggle to ask questions or seek help from professors can reveal the sources of this disconnect to inform and provide direction on how to best convey to FGCS that their contributions matter and that it is a positive thing to ask questions. Faculty can also be instrumental in providing a safer space for these students to feel more comfortable to ask for help when they need it.

Conducting a qualitative study on FGCS satisfaction with and expectations for residence halls could help student affairs professionals understand more deeply the social and emotional challenges FGCS face in their time at college. Learning about who FGCS reach out to for social and emotional support can help resident directors make sure these students receive the social and emotional support in the residence halls that they need to succeed. The ultimate goal would be to improved academic success and completion rates among FGCS.

Finally, many of the participants demonstrated an attitude of determination to succeed and a desire to reward their families through their success. Conducting research on how to build upon the quality of determination in FGCS could be leveraged as a tool to empower these students for success.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations of this study focused on identifying the academic challenges of FGCS. The first one was the absence of any systematic way for the university to identify the FGCS within their institution. This limitation made it necessary to utilize convenience sampling rather than selecting a representative sample for the study. A general invitation was sent through campus announcements, inviting students to

volunteer for the study if they fit the first-generation criteria of the study. Additionally, this limitation prevented the researcher from focusing on academically struggling students exclusively, which may have enriched the key findings. Despite this limitation, nine students participated in the study, yielding useful data for analysis.

An additional limitation was the ethnic diversity of the student body population. The institution's undergraduate student population as of 2019 consisted of 16.2% students from ethnically minority groups and 83.8% White (S. Dayton, personal communication, May 4, 2020). Prior studies have shown that the majority of FGCS are minority groups from African American and Latino American descent. While the majority of the participants within this study were Latinos, no African American students participated (Aspelmeier et al., 2012; Bermeo et al., 2006; Engle, 2007; Strand, 2013). Having these voices represented in the study would have added to the richness of the study's findings. Overall, the institution's lack of identifying their FGCS and the overall student body demographics limited the study from obtaining deeper information on the academic struggles and experiences of FGCS in a four-year institution.

## **Conclusion**

Currently, one third of college students are FGCS. However, from that third, only 27% graduate in four years (Whitford, 2018; Whitley, Benson, & Wesaw, 2018). Multiple studies identify the challenges of FGCS and the negative effect these challenges have on these students and their ability to complete their college degree. This study answered the following questions: "What academic challenges do first-generation college students face at a private four-year faith-based institution? How do these academic

challenges impact the overall academic experience of first-generation college students at a four-year institution?”

As a Latina FGCS, the researcher acknowledges the limitation of personal bias in giving more weight to certain FGCS struggles than others. However, the researcher views her identity of a Latina FGCS as an asset throughout the study because she could identify with the participants’ stories. The researcher’s positionality allowed her to better understand the academic challenges of FGCS in college. In summary, the study identified the common academic challenges of FGCS, the factors that contribute to those challenges, and implications for universities to move towards improving the academic success rate for FGCS.

Remember the feelings of joy and pride in Chapter 1 of this study when asked to identify as a FGCS who was making history within one’s family for going to college? Those feelings and the motivation to succeed can continue to be a reality in the lives of FGCS if universities make institutional changes to intentionally care for these students before and during college. The question should no longer be “Are FGCS academically prepared to succeed in college?” but rather, “Are four-year universities ready to create pathways to academic success by being attentive to the unique needs of FGCS and cultivating the determination that already exist in many of these students?”

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

#### Demographic Questions

- What is your ethnicity?
- What is your age?
- What year are you in college?
- What is your gender?

#### Open Ended Questions

- Tell me about your process and any obstacles you may have faced in coming to college.
- Tell me about the type of high school you attended before coming to college. In what ways did your high school experience prepare you for college?
- Tell me about any individuals whom influenced your decision to attend college.
- Tell me about your social and emotional experience thus far in college. How have these experiences positively or negatively impacted your academic studies?
- Tell me about any academic challenges you have been faced with in college. How have you handled each situation?
- Compared to your peers whose parents attended college, what academic challenges have you encountered?
- Tell me about your experience with classroom expectations and assignments in comparison to high school. What do you do when you encounter difficulties in understanding class content or an assignment?
- Tell me about your experience in working with groups to complete assignments. How do you generally feel about working with a group to complete an assignment?
- Tell me about any internships or work experiences related to your major you've had.
- Tell me about any future aspirations after college.
- Knowing what you know now, what resources would help you to be successful in college? What could this university do to help first-generations students be successful?

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent

To \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Maribel Magallanes and I am a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Higher Education & Student Development program at Taylor University. I am currently conducting a qualitative research study on first-generation students and the academic challenges they face in college. This study includes an interview procedure and I am hoping you will be willing to be interviewed. The interview will take approximately 15 to 30 minutes.

If you agree to participate in the interview I want to confirm that:

- I have received IRB approval to conduct this research study.
- If you accept, your interview will be conducted at a time and place most convenient to you.
- If you accept, the interview will be recorded.
- Your identity will be kept in confidential terms at all times and your name will not be used, nor will any specific information that may disclose your identity be shared to others at any time.
- A copy of the research findings will be emailed to you.
- If you wish to withdraw from this research study at any time you are free to do so.

After reading this invitation, I truly hope that you are able to help me with my research study. If you have any questions regarding this study and/or the interview process please contact me at maribel\_magallanes@taylor.edu. You can also contact my thesis supervisor Kim Case, at kmcase@taylor.edu. For any questions regarding your rights and confidentiality terms, please contact the Institutional Review Board at 765-998-4315.

Finally, if you agree to participate in this research study and be interviewed, please read and sign below. Thank you for taking into consideration my request and I look forward to your reply.

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I have read the invitation form to participate in this research study and I accept to participate in an interview process. I am also aware of my rights and the confidentiality

terms for this research study, and I give my permission to use my transcript in Maribel Magallanes thesis.

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_, Date \_\_\_\_\_.

